Crossing Bowen Street: Mapping Interventions in the Classed Subject

Kathryn Hegarty B.Ed., G.Dip.Arts, M.A.

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Communication and Creative Arts

Faculty of Arts

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CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis entitled Crossing Bowen Street: mapping interventions in the classed subject, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given. I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any other university or institution is identified in the text.

Full Name: Kathryn Rosemary Hegarty

Signed ..................................................................................

Date:
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Crossing Bowen Street

An abridged Novel

by

Kathryn Hegarty

Crossing Bowen Street is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

This novel is for my mothers, Dawn and Olive, who were denied.
Acknowledgments

I owe the greatest debt to my best friend, Kris Reichl, who has provided a light-metre reading for every nuance of my life for 25 years, since we met in Year Eight biology at Hurstbridge High School. I thank her for everything, especially for the home she shares with me in Francis Street, Yarraville, and for her art that adorns all my walls.

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I am indebted to my managers and colleagues at RMIT, in Academic Policy Branch, and in the Office of the (World’s Greatest) Academic Registrar. I am incredibly proud of the role we play collectively in our world-class University.

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I am conscious of the debt I owe Fiona Nolan, who twice provided me with the chance to ring kids in working-class suburbs and tell them they had obtained PhD scholarships. I got to listen while who they could
become cracked open in front of them. It doesn’t get sweeter than that, and it is right through this thesis. What a privilege.

Geoff Robinson believed that I could do a PhD and that I deserved it. He practically believed me into it. He set the benchmark gloriously high, leapt up there and extended his hand to me. Then he danced its glory with me. I learned from him how to take the first steps on the road to calling myself a scholar. What a time in our lives. Thank you, Geoffy.

As a child in a world that was frightened of aspiration, I dreamed of a certain kind of life. The generous tertiary education afforded me means I live beyond those dreams now. That education enabled me to find my heart’s desire; I want us to enshrine that chance for other kids. I was in the Sorbonne one winter’s day when it came to me that RMIT is where I can best do this; what a falling off was there. It is at RMIT that I learned I could most powerfully change life chances for others like me.

Bring it on.
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

PU: Philip University
MSC: Melbourne State College
PLC: Presbyterian Ladies College
ALP: Australian Labor Party
EAC: Education Action Collective
WTSN: Women TAFE Students' Network
NANTS: National Australian Network of Tertiary Students
LC: Left Caucus
FC: Feminist Collective
TDC: The Drinkers' Club
FMPC: Free Market Party Club
SRC: Students' Representative Council
WC: Women's Committee
LL: Labor Left
CU: Christian Union
OB: Office Bearer (SRC)
SU: student union
Trot: reference to a Trotskyist
MSS: Medical Students' Society
WSNAC: Women Students' National Action Collective
SUV: State University of Victoria
EPC: Equity Policy Committee
EAP: Equity Admissions Policy
VCAG: Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Group
CRC: Collaborative Research Centre
QU: Quality Unit
APA (I): Australian Postgraduate Award (Industry partnership)
PRC: Program Review Committee
EO: Executive Officer (Business Manager of a Faculty)
VC: Vice Chancellor
PVC: Pro Vice-Chancellor
DVC: Deputy Vice-Chancellor
TLMP: Teaching and Learning Management Plan
R&E: Research and Entrepreneurship Division
WIL: Women in Leadership
Fundo: Fundamentalist Christian
HOD/S: Head of Department/School
IR: Industrial Relations
Synopsis: Crossing Bowen Street

_Crossing Bowen Street_ is an extended novel set in Melbourne, Australia. The protagonist, Meg Flanagan, is accepted to teachers’ college. Meg is 24 years old and has worked, and lived out of home, since 17. Having completed her year 12 studies part time while working, she has applied to the Melbourne State College for a Bachelor of Education. Melbourne State College is subsequently ‘amalgamated’ into Philip University, the original 19th century sandstone institution which borders MSC.

Meg has worked as a medical secretary prior to commencing her studies. An only child, she is the first member of her family to go to university, indeed to finish high school. Tertiary study is exciting for Meg and the novel explores the psychic journey as well as the intellectual one, as Meg experiences challenges to the possibilities for her life and the trajectory along which she once assumed it would flow. The narrative is told through episodic and epistolary forms, with particular periods in Meg’s cultural and academic life forming the focus, picking up the integral elements of her journey and examining the psychic context and action.

Characters in the undergraduate chapters of the novel are somewhat transient, although very important to Meg’s rapidly developing, changing sense of herself. The constant ‘trying out’ of ways of being and even lifestyles sees Meg losing old ‘friendships’ and making new, even temporary, ones all the time. This allows the opportunity for Meg to explore her feelings about connecting to others and the nature of her relationships. The _Meg_ reflected back to her by others is of constant interest to her, particularly as she is frequently reminded that others see a very different Meg than she does.

The novel commences at the outset of Meg’s tertiary career, as she initially articulates the extent of her aspiration, of her sense of the possibility of her own life. Each vignette deals, chronologically, with an aspect of Meg’s expanding sense of possibility, socially, emotionally, intellectually. Certain vignettes explore her relations with friends and acquaintances in the course, which in turn provide

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^ In 1988, Federal Labor Minister for Education John Dawkins, devised a plan to end the streaming of Australian tertiary institutions and created what is called the Unified National System. This meant that colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology were either created universities in their own right, or more commonly, merged with an appropriate existing university. This process allows a fascinating insight into the class dimensions of hierarchies and stratifications. The need of universities and their members for status has been profoundly underscored.
the background and context for her sexual relationships. That aspect of her developing subjectivity provides a marked contrast, which Meg uses as leverage, when set against her sense of herself as a scholar and her growing notion of entitlement, which allows her to ‘choose’, where previously she believed she had no choice; the choice is a scholarly career. Within all this, Meg discovers and is deeply empowered by certain political left, and feminist, discourses within the university community. She is equally dismayed and alienated by other feminist practices; her growing engagement with her own agency sees her quickly abandoning feminist subject positions previously dear to her, which served a particular purpose and are now superseded. This notion of feeling betrayed by the promise of a value system (or rather, its practitioners) will recur throughout the action of the novel, as Meg moves into an academic role, first as doctoral student and then as academic, seeking to live her values as practice and to remain true to what her trajectory has taught her. This is crystallised in the novel as the role played by the place she came from, and how that informs, and complicates, who she becomes. The novel seeks to explore the fundamental contradictions in doing so, through Meg’s increasing awareness that the academy is not the harmonious, class aware institution she has idealised, but a world driven by status and hierarchies. This realisation must be reconciled in the light of Meg’s anxieties about her working-class background.

Meg’s doctoral training at an elite university underscores her developing sense of what constitutes excellence and the role played by highly influential conservative institutions in maintaining social arrangements. As her academic career unfolds, the holding of a Cambridge PhD allows Meg opportunities to make change as certain privileges are afforded her by virtue of her Cambridge status. Yet it is this very notion that she seeks to challenge. Her growing passion for the State University of Victoria, an institution developed for the education of working-class people, informs her activism within the academy. Why are excellence and equity polarised? Why does the institution matter more than the scholarship? Why is so much practice within universities contrary to the values scholars often claim?

These questions are explored through the dynamics of academic working life as student and later as a teacher at a university with an explicit equity agenda.

The Start of the End (2003): The action commences on a late Friday after at SUV, when the Department of Communication & Cultural Studies has just been advised of Meg’s promotion to Associate Professor. This vignette sees the initial soiree and celebrations and allows Meg to reflect on her experience. As her colleagues and friends are congratulating her, a particular student comes looking for Meg. It is clear that Angela Watson needs course advice particularly from Meg. Their discussion seems a straightforward one on the face of it, but it underscores many things; that Meg has come the full circle in her academic life, and what it is that her journey has really been about. The route to professorial appointment is considered, as is the source of Meg’s
greatest professional joy and fulfillment; is it scholarship, followed by leadership, in her discipline? It is knowing she has continued to speak and act to change the life chances of all students, wherever possible? Or is it the subtle distilling of both of these, along with the knowledge which emerges from the nexus of teaching and research. That scholarship, new knowledge, surely must be taking us somewhere specific in relation to others? The more we know, the more we can do…to what end? From this reflection, we see the action of the novel unfold. We return to this scene at the end of the novel, as Meg considers the trajectory of her life and its themes in her work. The novel ends as she is faced with the next challenge.

Arrival (1989): Acceptance sees Meg as she is attempting to transform her life and create a new one. She has just been advised of her admission to an undergraduate Bachelor of Education program, at the major Melbourne teachers' college. Meg shares her rented home with her high school best friend, Anna, and her fiancé, Jason, who appears to be superfluous in her life. Meg is aware he is a partner for who she used to be. We see Meg in her job as a medical secretary and this allows the mapping of Meg's sense of her own world, as she travels between home and work. This first stage of seeking her aspiration- to be an English teacher-evolves. As Meg considers the meaning of what she is about to do and how she knows it is right. This involves a consideration of what work means in our lives and how this is different for jobs according to how they are classed. Her relationship with the life she has known, the person she has been, is changing and this change is represented through her relationship with Jason. Meg's first day at teachers' college demonstrates that she is in a constant, often painful, dialogue with herself. The difficulties she encounters in making sense of the relation between her two 'lives' are thrown into sharp relief. The preparation for college sees Meg interrogating herself about how she can be different. Her initial experiences at the College resonate with her highest expectations of the life that awaits her, of the multiple possibilities currently being authored for her. Her first attendance at classes offers the opportunity to try out some of those possibilities, to test them against those she meets and to map the ways she could discover to ‘be’. There is much tension and fear, but also endless excitement and these conflicting emotional states parallel and marble each other. It is on this day that she meets Jennifer Wren, her first real friend at university, who offers so many challenges to Meg. Their friendship involves a constant exhausting shift of subject positions, which Meg is able to look back on with affection in years to come.

Going Bowling (1989): within a few weeks of commencing at university, Meg is socializing with some of her new friends, having neatly segmented her home and college lives. Meg has already realised that her friendships fall into separate groups; her friendship with Jennifer and the people Jennifer knows does not find its way into this group. They meet in the city to go bowling and have a meal. While Meg really enjoys these new people, already tensions are developing in relations between the group. Their unofficial leader, Rosemary Marshall, has a tendency to seek control and already resistance is showing. Rosemary particularly
does not like Jennifer. Meg is enjoying her flirtation with Pete Danville, whom she has assumed to be gay. His very flattering attention has already developed Meg’s confidence and stoked her ego, which has eroded in her stagnating relationship with Jason. Rosie has developed a crush on Pete and seems to take the flirtation with Meg personally. Dynamics in the group become slightly uncomfortable but Meg has grown quickly fond of her new friends, especially flamboyant Marina, another whom Rosemary seems to dislike. The discussions which occur during their evening deepen both the relationships and the tensions between them and draw lines which will determine the outcome of their various friendships.

The Ball (1990): In the third year of her degree, much has happened to Meg. She is married to Jason, although she omits him from much of her psychic (and practical) life. Meg and her friends attend the Faculty’s annual formal dinner dance. Meg has so far managed to balance the competitiveness which occurs between all of them, both academically and personally. The negotiation of her respective friendships with Jennifer and Marina requires a great deal of diplomacy; the subtext in this is very disturbing to Meg. What exactly is the conflict about? She can’t be sure why they don’t like each other; it could be Marina’s smoking, or Jennifer’s confidence to spare, but these things also annoy her, yet she does not fight with either girl as they do with each other. Rose has always insisted that the problem is Jennifer’s private school background, but Marina went to a catholic girls’ school, so what could the difference be? The ball is initially a happy occasion; the girls dress up and they dance and drink champagne together with the boys. But dynamics operating beneath the surface force their way up. Rosie is ready to force Pete to confront her continuing crush on him; Pete confronts Meg about their ongoing flirtation. Meg gives in and admits to herself for the first time that she does want to be with Pete. He is grown up and exciting and strong. He offers her something she has never had with Jason. Married less than a year, she pushes her husband out of her thoughts. The events of the ball force Meg to confront the differences between all her friends and the discomfort this affords everyone. Rosie’s continued need for control over the group is acknowledged.

Future Present (1991): Meg lives in Carlton with Pete. This is the busiest year thus far in her academic career and the financial, academic and emotional pressure is showing. This vignette gives us the range of Meg’s academic activities and the way her life has fallen since the events at the ball eight months earlier. We see Meg grappling with her own evaluation of the changes in her ‘way of being’; trying on different ways of living that she has idealised and finding them just as wanting as the last. Meg faces some key existential questions in this vignette and seeks answers which she finally discovers only she can give. Her relationship with Pete, the values and goals they share (and don’t share) are thrown into sharp relief and provide a touchstone for the clearer determination of Meg’s aspiration and future. Her relationship with various female friends is also revisited and this offers insight into Meg’s constant checking of herself against idealised female templates. There is a
crisis of identity and strength which constitutes an important fork in Meg’s road.

**Beyond (1992):** Beyond sees Meg determinedly seeking ways she can progress towards her goal, while still constantly checking against herself that postgraduate study (let alone a scholarly life) is available to her. We accompany Meg as she seeks and locates the academic path she wants; this is the backdrop for her further psychic exploration of the women who intimidate yet fascinate her, particularly Heloise Waul, who is a significant influence through Meg’s postgraduate career. The sites in which Meg’s personal struggles manifest are highlighted in this vignette, particularly in terms of dress and cultural pursuit. The conversations between Meg and Heloise also allow an exploration of the feminist politics of that milieu and the class tensions which operate tacitly within those politics.

**Bound to the Caucus (1992):** Meg has now nearly completed her undergraduate degree and has been active for some time in university life and student politics. Her feminist and socialist education is well advanced. Bound to the Caucus shows us Meg in her student politics world for the first time, where the segue of her activism and academic life have taken her. Meg has found female friends who understand that part of her which struggles with inadequacy, although at this point in the novel this common struggle is not well understood or articulated. It is in this vignette that Meg admits her growing attraction for a Liberal student activist, Stuart Noble; this proscribed liaison raises many questions about values and aspiration, as well as the dominant sexual politics of the time and place. Bound to the Caucus also offers insight into the student activism occurring at universities like Philip in the early 1990s.

**Divergence (1993):** Set in 1993, Meg is now in the early weeks of her honours program, although she has been at work on her thesis on the poet William Blake for some months. Living unhappily in a share household near the University, her relationship with Stuart Noble continues to develop, reaching a crisis point in this period. These events occur in the context of Meg’s activist career in the Student Left, particularly as she encounters issues of identity around her class, feminism and difference amongst Left women. While Meg fights these battles passionately in an intense milieu, she considers them emotionally in terms of her changing sense of herself. Meg is increasingly aware that the personal impact of her class is changing for her. Additionally, she explores her relation with a ‘boyfriend’ of right wing political affiliation; Meg comes to recognise that this relationship is undermining her sense of herself in a way that her relationships with women in the left previously did.

**Honour Roll (1993):** Meg is now undertaking honours and this vignette opens with Meg seeing the honours coordinator, Professor Michaela Moore, who approximates all those apparently middle-class traits to which Meg has such a push-pull relation. We see the return of a chapter of the honours thesis, discussion of the content and the constantly shifting subject positions these experiences
offer Meg. This vignette also directly introduces Agnes. Mia and Agnes meet Meg after her supervision and this conversation allows very distinct if tacit class themes to develop. Meg has warmed quickly to Agnes, who is unlike anyone she has known; they have much in common in relation to their work and this binds them. Mia continually presents a viewpoint which irritates Meg, in relation to entitlement: to academic life, to funding, even to questioning how these things are enabled. Honour Roll allows us to see Meg’s flourishing theoretical and intellectual life and its role in assisting her emotionally as she re-frames the same conundrums that previously constituted obstacles.

The Cusp (1993): Meg’s developing friendship with Agnes offers her enormous insights into difference and her developing sense of self and aspiration. While the girls come from diametrical backgrounds, they are united by their passion for their research and scholarly work. Meg is increasingly self-conscious through their discussions in terms of how she has seen herself and allowed herself to dream and seek. Cusp is set at the end of the honours year, prior to the release of results. Meg and Agnes explore their feelings about academia and this leads to discussions of purpose and the role of class within that. This vignette also documents Meg’s growing social confidence and those aspects of herself which have become so sure to her, that she no longer considers them at all.

Whom (1996): [Not included in this abridged edition]. Set at Cambridge, two thirds into Meg’s doctorate, Whom shows Meg in the mental space which will take her back to Melbourne and the State University of Victoria. Having risen to the challenge of doctoral study, she is confronted now by deeper demons, and the need to explore and challenge them in the ambivalent context of Cambridge, which so excites her still, but which has proved empty of the profoundly held higher ideals she expected to see reflected. Set in the midst of Meg’s doctoral study, this vignette is dramatically abridged in the submission novel. The importance of Whom lies in its concern with Meg’s rapidly shifting sense of herself and her own scholarly subjectivity and the changes to these that the culture of Cambridge has wrought. By the second year of her PhD Meg is crystal clear about her goals and decides to spend the long break at home, rather than travelling, because she wishes to ‘touch base’ with her future. The action described segues into that in Courting the Enemy. Whom describes Meg’s ambivalent and contradictory but passionate feelings about Cambridge. Whom demonstrates Meg’s increasing anger at the status and privilege to which her education now automatically admits her, and her need to find some sort of stasis and safety in her emotional life. In this vignette, Meg meets her life partner, Jeremy McCallum (I have intentionally reduced the attention in the novel to Meg’s romantic life as she matures into her career).

Courting the Enemy (late 1990s): By this time, Meg is a senior lecturer in English at the State University of Victoria, which was established in the nineteenth century as the Worker’s College. This vignette starts with Meg’s attendance at a University Committee
which is considering a transformation in relation to equity in admissions policy. Meg was drawn to SUV because of its transparent and determined commitment to educate the children of working-class people. An attack on the equity admission policy of her university galvanizes Meg and some of her colleagues. The action of the vignette considers the role of the scholar, and of such an institution as SUV, in the light of daily academic life. This vignette is primary in its demonstration of the themes of the novel. In the unabridged version, I took the opportunity to illustrate some of the vast range of administrative, intellectual and even physical demands on a senior scholar in the routine of academic life. In placing Meg in this context, I sought to highlight how a scholar of her values and commitment makes sense of the constantly shifting terrain of her working world and how this continually informs her practice. This vignette is also significant for its retrospective description of Meg’s employment at SUV some years earlier.

*Locus:* (1995). This piece of writing stands apart from the rest of the novel. I wished to write in a reflective voice, which might be from Meg’s journal, were it not in the (omniscient) third person, in order to consider the headspace and meaning-making which occurs as Meg settles into Cambridge, and the lifestyle her situation allows her. *Locus* is a deeper engagement with Meg’s sense of her identity. It considers the impact on her of the physical journeys she must make to match those of her psyche. These are thoughts too personal for a letter, even to Anna. Meg is exploring her ever shifting self and the growth in her self-belief allows her to explore what is rage; that she was bounded by illusions about her worth. *Locus* seeks to allow some context for Meg’s anger at the role Cambridge plays. I seek to create the space in which Meg’s dawning self understanding will lead her to her next, driven, purpose.

*Letters:* throughout the novel letters are used to reveal and inform Meg’s relationship with her family. This is an intentional device to distance the birth family in an attempt to blur and muddy an assessment of Meg’s class through traditional measures. The letters between Meg and Aunty Jean particularly reveal much of the classed emotional antecedents of Meg’s life. There are also letters exchanged with Meg’s high school best friend, Anna, who has moved to the country and a very different lifestyle. Meg writes to Anna often, using the acceptance she feels in the friendship and her sense that Anna understands her, to touchstone her own emotional growth. Formal letters from institutions ring changes in settings and mark significant points in the geographical and academic trajectory of the character. All the letters serve to introduce time and event changes consistent with the episodic style of the narrative.
The Start of the End

The light is long and the late afternoon sun floats over the lawn. Meg sits in the window of the Department common room.

“You’re not drinking, woman.”

David Stacey lands a smooth red in Meg’s glass.

“I am! I’m trying to absorb the euphoria before the alcohol hits…”

“Euphoria? Listen to this, Mick. Euphoria. Academic Level E- the E stands for euphoria. What’re you on, girl?"

Meg smiles gently at David’s teasing. She has always experienced this evaluation of her feelings. Attain a dream, express joy…others will comment. She used to think it was her. She was odd to have these feelings. She has learned she is merely odd to reveal them. But it’s fine. She can now sit, reveling in this latest validation, this sudden summit reached and claimed, and let her colleagues, affectionate, perplexed, envious, all suffused with wonder about the implications for themselves, tease her, comment on her. Still, she knows, this is good. There is no doubt. Just pure liquid satisfaction. When she got into uni. Remember that? When she became a teacher. When the honours marks came in. One long slice from then until the first glimpse of Proctor College. The PhD reports. Those first publications. Senior lecturer. Little driplets of euphoria, dammed into a flow that ends in that ancient title, Professor Flanagan. Endorsement.

“I’ve always been like this. Yeah, I’m euphoric. If scholarship is your raison d’etre, and it is mine, then this is huge. I’m happy.”

Meg slides out of the window seat and waltzes across the room, nearly crashing into Kate Llewellyn who has just arrived.

“Really, Professor Flanagan, drunk already? I am so disappointed. Why do senior scholars straight away get on the sauce?”
“The E’s for inebriated!” This from the Head of School, Mick Stapleton.

Kate pulls a face. “Oh, I thought this was Communication Studies! Where they know their assonance from their elbow. E for inebriated, Professor Stapleton?”

“You mean alliteration, you silly girl.”

Meg is laughing hysterically, the ribbing of her colleagues just enhancing the joy.

“Level E! Meg, you’re a role model. More mentor jobs for you with WIL, I’ll bet!”

Meg laughs. “That’s OK. Now I feel I have something to offer.” Kate snorts. “Truly, Katie. I think Ass Pro is easier in English. I think Philosophy is your problem. But you’re on track, darlin’.”

“You know the admin. will be nightmarish. All that discipline leadership. I ignore that stuff. How many committees are you on?”

“Well, not that many, and they’re all good ones: quality review, RAGS, Equity, Curriculum Advisory Board. Oh, and Courses Committee. I always forget that, it’s terrible….”

“Not many! I’m on two. That’s why I’m still slumming at D…”

“Get out. Academic Bloody Board…That counts for ten!”

“Oh, I haven’t written enough books yet..”

“I think maybe English is easier.”

“When I get to five, I’ll try again, so about age 62…”

“Katie!”

“Listen, Flanners,” David Stacey is pouring more Shiraz into their glasses, “stop saying English is easier. Aside from it being bloody untrue, the plods ‘round this joint will get all miffed with you…”
“Oh, they’re already miffed…”

“Yes, but be a bit politic, dammit, woman.”

Kate is nibbling on an artichoke heart. “Only in English. Never in philosophy will I suffer the indignity of being called woman. A trade off for not making Ass Pro by the age of 40!!”

Meg is red from laughing so hard.

“That’s such a crock, Llewellyn. You’re full of it. Besides, you’re younger than me.”

“Age is meaningless. Level E is the only phrase that resonates here.”

“Ah, Level E”, Agnes Haliday sails into the common room. “I’m so delighted for you, Professor Flanagan. Hearty congrats, Meg. So earned and deserved.”

Meg feels the depth of Agnes’ affection in the warm hug and the smooth cheek pressed against hers.

“Oh, Aggie. Thanks. We were just agreeing….the E is for euphoria.”

“So, Professor must be Level G?”

“Yes. G for God.”

“H for HoD. H is higher.”

“Ah, not necessarily… yes, Marilyn? Won’t you join us?”

David Stacey raises an enquiring brow at the Department Secretary, who has leaned in the Common Room door.

“Love to, but 3rd year essays are due today and there’s a stampede out there. Listen, Meg….”

“Professor Flanagan!!” a chorus replies.
“Bollocks!”, screams Meg, over Kate who is wobbily genuflecting. “What is it, Maz?”

“There’s a student out here you might want to see….”

“No, woman, go away. She’s Ass Pro now. Pesky students are a thing of the past. Can’t one of the sessionals do course advice, some unemployed PhD? Meg has publishers to interview….”

“Cab. Sav. to imbibe.”

“Ministers to advise….”

“Shoosh! Why, Maz? I’m half drunk anyway….?"

“Well, I wouldn’t bother you, but this student says…..I think….”

Meg is struck by Marilyn’s expression. Something passes between them. “OK, I see. I’m coming.”

“Oh, nose to the prottie work ethic…”

“Don’t you love the English way of mixing clichès?” Kate is swinging her glass in a wide arc.

“Drink on, people. I won’t be long.”

Marilyn has moved ahead of Meg and quietly indicates a young woman standing to the side of the office. A little older than the average undergraduate, she is immediately distinguished by her outfit: head to toe chambray denim. A tingle runs up Meg’s spine.

“Hi, are you looking for me? I’m Meg Flanagan.”

The girl turns suddenly, blushing fiercely and dropping her eyes. Meg has not seen her before.

“Um, thanks, hi. I’m… I was hoping to talk to you…”. The girl’s voice shakes.
“OK, no problem. I hope I make sense, I’ve had a few wines! I just got a promotion…”

Brief glance, but the eyes are quickly downcast.

“What's your name?”

“Angela. Angela Watson.”

They enter Meg’s office and she indicates the window seat with one hand. Angela sits.

Meg flops onto the chesterfield chair and hugs one leg to her body. She wears black elastane pants and little ankle boots. She is suddenly aware of Angela, sitting leadenly on the cushioned window seat. Middle-class girls always hug their legs or tuck them under themselves. Oh no, I’m doing it to her! Meg hastily straightens herself in the chair.

“So, what did you want to discuss?”

“Um, I’d like to do, um, honours. But I think…”

“Yes?”

“I…don’t know enough.”

Meg feels the spasm in her diaphragm.

“Oh, I think that’s a myth. Did you major in English?”

“Oh, yes.” A lighting up of the face. “I’ve overloaded in English.”

“What makes you anxious then?” As if I don’t know, thinks Meg.

“Well, I feel really strongly about my topic…”

“What’s that?”

“Spiritualism in Wordsworth?”
“Yes, great. So…?”

“But the theory…I just don’t have…. I don’t seem to have got the same, um, *training* as some of my…”

She hesitates. Can’t really call them friends?

“I mean, I know what I think. I feel sure, sort of…but I just don’t understand how it applies to my work…or how to do it…so, I guess, maybe, I can’t do honours?”

Meg draws a deep quiet breath.

“I can’t agree with that. Hunger and passion are what you need to do honours. You seem to be pretty hungry…”

Angela ducks her head.

“And you seem to have put some real thought into a topic. Invitations to do honours went out in September. Did you declare your interest?”

“No, but Professor Bennett said I could now…I wrote to the Honours Co-ordinator. I’ve got the …marks.” More blushes.

“So, how can I help?”

“I - would …would you supervise me?”

Meg’s heart sinks. The kid had to go so far out to ask that.

“I can’t offer you supervision on Wordsworth. I simply know very little about him. But I’d be happy to act in a supervision role more generally if that would help. I can help you with structure and provide academic support.”

Angela gives a small smile.

“That’d be great. David Stacey said he’d do it, but the two of you is beyond my dreams.”
Meg feels the old sense of possibility emanating from this girl. It rolls, like mercury, in little tight balls. Look where it can take you. Oh, I’m drunk, thinks Meg.

“OK, you’ll need to get your plan and proposal happening. The honours intake seminar is in a fortnight. I’ll want to see those documents before then. You’ll need to speak to David and confirm his availability. In the meantime, I’d read like a maniac! Once your assessment is in, of course!”

Angela waves this away, her face now split by a big grin.

“Oh, I’ve done all that! Yes, I’ll be in the Barry from dawn to dusk!”

Meg laughs. “Well, have a balance. Cliché, but it’s important.”

“Oh, yes.” Angela is clearly not persuaded.

“I have to get back, my dear. I’ve just made Associate Professor and my colleagues are wetting my head.”

Angela is not so downcast now.

“Oh”, the shiny beaming face is all admiration. “Wow. You’re so young, too. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’m not so young, by the way.”

“You seem it”, shyly. “Jennine told me you’d be great. She said you really understand.”

Angela is thanking her. Meg shakes her hand. The girl’s step as she descends the stairs is light and bouncy.

Jennine constantly sends students to Meg, in her capacity as Academic Counsellor. Meg is starting to realise that she is known. All these students who share some unspoken thing, understood by the Marilyns and the Jennines. Everyone cautions Meg against exhaustion. Would that I will be this way exhausted. Meg smiles to herself. Exhaustion has never been an issue. The opposite, really. She remembers Angela’s headspace like it
was a few short semesters ago. Talking to Aggie. Having supervision. That fierce trajectory that suddenly took on its own life. Possibility. Never ended. It just snowballed, into more possibility.
Arrival 1989

The Mercy Private Hospital is an elegant art deco building, fitting the streetscapes of East Melbourne which unfold around it. Meg enjoys her morning walk up Clarendon Street. The Fitzroy Gardens are soothing and the Victorian homes are so ...enticing. Meg ponders the kind of life she could live in each one.

Her morning is routine; she has done it now for two years. She enters the Mercy through the adjacent Maternity, buys the milk, walks past the Chapel through the foyer of the Mercy and takes the lift to the second floor. Walking through the wards of Constance wing, she greets various hospital staff. Of course, Meg could use the entrance to the consulting suites. But walking through the Hospital proper is a pleasure. She feels part of this community. She likes to talk to staff. Mr Madigan is much loved, and as his secretary Meg has a certain status. They are a team, she and Mr M. It is a source of joy to her. Efficiency is one of Meg's ideal personae.

Mr M arrives, requiring coffee and the paper. He does the crossword and Meg attempts to assist him. This is an important morning ritual also. The first patient appears promptly at 10. Meg is all warmth and efficiency. Her role is clear. Her doctors need a secretary who allows them to focus. Patients need someone who removes distracting details, who welcomes and supports. Meg is proud of her articulation of her role. She loves the patients. And Mr M watches with benevolent approval. Meg eats lunch over the Women's Weekly and they have coffee and petits fours over the cryptic crossword. Mr M gives Meg some phone calls to make and leaves for the day.

As Meg turns off the lights a feeling of sadness washes over her. She loves this job. She wants more, but it is a wonderful job in many ways. Mr M has given her opportunities and taught her a lot. He is happy for her to go to University but it is tinged with sadness for him, too. Meg learned here that there is something she doesn't have, which she wants to discover.

Aspiration is so difficult to articulate, even to understand. How are we drawn to be something? What does it mean for us? From a little girl, Meg
has loved words and the stories they convolute into. Stories can offer
escape. We can write it the way we would like it to be. As a child, Meg
made her own stories. But books, the craft of writing, soon became her
fascination. “Be an English teacher”, said her friends. Oh, sure. She dared
not believe that was really an option. Meg thought of journalism, PR,
secretarial, glamorous TV type careers, as far removed as was necessary
to make them safe. Fictions in which one is the main character: a
welcome narrative. The Meg in these stories is beautiful, perfectly
groomed, in control. She always has money in the bank, she always
knows what to say, curiously she can drive a manual car and walk
confidently in high heels. There are no crises of confidence, fears of
gaucheness, not knowing what to wear or how to wear it. No fears at all.
They vanish like mist. The stories are welcoming, forgiving, comforting.
They know what to hide, how to collude. They are always, partly, fiction.

But, to be an English teacher? That is not so far removed. That is real.
Meg can dream of her real self as an English teacher. It is not so unlikely
a role. She would be good at it. It is a much more basic doubt that impels
this fear. Could she become someone who does that? Could she become
that person? This idea has percolated for three years, throughout her
eyear 12 studies, so Meg filled out a change of preference card for just one
course; Arts Education at Melbourne State College. There was always a
lust for more and it has grown hungrier. It will come to fruition.

Meg catches a Victoria Parade tram to the City and changes to the No 1
at Swanston Street. She always has a something to read but sometimes
the tram crowd is just too interesting. First there is the city mob: a mixture
of the marginalised and the sleek modern. Then, in St Kilda Road, the
dancers and musicians jump on, outside the College of the Arts. The
dancers are all tiny, the hair dragged back from their pale, taut faces.
They never sit but stand, straight backs, legs form a “T” at the feet, or
they drape over each other like swans. They carry huge gym bags. The
musicians carry fascinating cases and odd shaped bags. Meg sees one
girl every day. She carries a cello. She has a huge backpack as well. She
wears thick jumpers, long corduroy skirts, a heavy duffel coat. She looks
hot and bothered. How stressful, thinks Meg. I hope the cello is worth
feeling like that and having to look at those dancers every morning and
night.
The perfect dancers annoy Meg. They look like little porcelain dolls, feminine and petite. Meg wears her white uniform, navy cardigan, navy court shoes. She is easily ruffled, as is the poor cellist. Hot and ruffled isn’t feminine. Meg wonders if the dancers had to learn to look that way. Some women just don’t sweat and go red and stumble and get flustered. Some women seem naturally graceful. Meg stares at such women. Such women never stare at anyone. Except possibly at a sweating, ruffled girl who is flustered. But they are not staring like Meg does, trying to suck in whatever they know that enables them to be that way.

In City Road, men in shiny navy suits get on the tram. They are boring but they look so clean and neat. Meg’s fiancé, Jason, never looks clean. He looks scruffy. Shaved and in a navy suit, he would just look uncomfortable. He never learned how to look that way, either. Meg’s heart sinks at the thought of Jason who will be waiting for her, as always, at home.

At Coventry Street, the city mob pours off the tram. The expensive shoes click off in all directions. A few elderly people get on. Market day: they get off again at the Ministry of Housing tower. Albert Park is all terrace houses and a few housing commission towers.

Meg looks out the window as the tram passes St Vincent's Place. When she was a child, her mother rented a tiny flat in a huge old mansion. Once this beautiful street was all flats and rooming houses. South Melbourne was a slum, a real working-class suburb. Only one or two were family homes. The grander ones were doctors’ rooms. Now, so many yuppy baby boomers have sent the prices soaring. It is still a beautiful place, but its edge has been smoothed and it is colder than it was.

Meg alights from the tram at Graham Street and buys a carton of Skinny milk. She notices another woman in the white and navy combination of the medical secretary. The other woman looks elegant; blinding white, sleek. Meg is very slim, yet she does not look elegant. Why not? Fuming, she examines her reflection in the window of a fish and chip shop. Her cardigan is higher at the back. Cheap and shoddy. Her hose are cheap. Her shoes are not at their best. But mostly it is her hair. Some of these women just seem to have effortless hair. Meg has never been one of them.
Meg is brought out of this despair by the sight of Jason purchasing fish and chips. Jason isn't working, is gaining weight while watching TV and reading sci fi novels. He dropped out of Uni and has never found a job. Meg got engaged to him, anyway. She tries not to think about why she did this.

He ducks when he sees her. Meg is overcome with the oppressive weight of some emotion she can't name. She waits until the intense negative feeling passes. As it recedes, she breathes deeply.

Jason follows, opening his parcel at the end like the seasoned chip eater he is. Anna has been home. The mail is on the mantelpiece. Meg cries out as she see the VUAC print out.

“I got in! I got in!”

Jason looks surprised. “Better wait 'til ya open it.”

“No, stupid, I only put one place on the change of preference. I got into teaching!!”

Whirling around the room, Meg rips open the serrated form. Sure enough, Melbourne State College, February 5, 10 am for course selection and enrolment. Meg throws back her head and screams with joy. It is happening. The wonder of it spills out of her.

Jason is happy for her joy, but consternation and confusion are written all over him. She smiles forgivingly at him. It doesn't matter. Meg rings her mother, who is smugly pleased, once again without a shred of understanding. Anna is the one. She knows what a dream is.

Meg lands on her friend as Anna and Bentley the dog appear in the door.

“I got in! I GOT IN! I’m gonna be an English teacher!”

Anna hugs her and Bentley demonstrates his delight by bouncing up and down and barking.

“That is so wonderful. Congratulations. Of course you got in!”

*******************************************************

“Why do you want to be an English teacher, exactly?”
It is late. Jason is in bed; he falls asleep past 10pm. Anna and Meg are having a last cuppa. Bentley sleeps on the rug in front of them.

“Exactly? Gosh!”, Meg ponders, “I guess... I love English. English was exciting. Still is”, she laughs. “And my English teachers changed me, made things happen for me. They really influenced me. I like that. I’d like to do that. I do care about kids. I think a teacher who cares can make a real difference...”

Anna nods emphatically.

“It’s a real job. I’d be doing it. Not just assisting somebody or typing it up, but actually doing it. I really want to see what I can do myself. It makes me sound selfish. But I want to show I can do it. I really think I’ll be a good teacher.”

Anna laughs heartily. “Me too, Meggie.”

“And Uni! I want to do Uni. I want to study and write. I want to know Shakespeare... .”

“You’ll have to, to teach it.”

“True, but I want to know it, just so I know it. I want to know poets and history and why things happened. I want to write essays....”

“Weirdo!”

“I’ve always been like that. That’s why I loved English. You can, I dunno, hide in there. Find something in books. Be any ‘you’, you wanna be. I wanna see how other writers did that, and know who all those poets were and the novels of Dickens....”

Anna laughs again, a very pleasant sound. “Oh, you will.”

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It would rain on the day of enrolment. Meg has anticipated this day with the unique hope of the Shiny New. But the Monday is slightly drizzly, in the way you would hardly notice, unless you were looking for portents.

“It’ll stop. Look at it, it’s practically sunny.”

“Or it could set in. And rain.”
“So, just take the brolly.”

“I don’t WANT to take the fucking umbrella! I don’t WANT to get WET. It’ll spoil it.”

Meg feels the hot physical tightening of anger she can’t explain. She always screams at Jason when a situation proves stressful. Why is she angry? She cannot wear the outfit she so carefully planned and this throws her into turmoil. She has to carry an umbrella, which is messy and hardly sophisticated- unless it is elegant and not in use. It feels like loss of control but Meg does not understand it. She does not know what she held which has now been snatched away. She does not know what it is that will be spoiled or how the weather spoils it. She only knows that her perfect parallel vision of herself enrolling at University is now marred. And it feels upsetting, because the rain is falling on the shiny, clean, newness.

Meg chooses jeans instead of a skirt and repacks her bag to protect the contents from the rain. She had planned to carry her books, to look like an American college student. That will have to wait for a sunny day. She wonders what American students do on wet days.

Meg is not happy with her outfit or appearance and the last strand of her excitement bottoms out to resentment. She takes extra care with makeup, which she then decides looks silly with jeans. By the time she leaves the house, most of the joy she was feeling has dispersed. Newness is the source of hope but once one’s self enters the Newness it is not New. It is the same. Suddenly, Meg feels savage with rage. Part of her is shocked by these feelings. Surely at Uni no-one will care what you wear?

The number of students on the tram is increasing. The universities are all enrolling first year students today and the range is broad. Obvious music, drama, dance and art students alight at VCA. Jeans and jean jackets, tights and floaty skirts, the Madonna look. Then there are the engineering and computer science guys. They don’t even seem to notice their clothes: how do they all happen to wear flannel shirts?

Meg watches a group of young women who get on at Flinders Street. They are friends, or maybe mere acquaintances who are bound for a common place. They wear jeans and sophisticated tops. They have pony tails and pearl studs. They speak and laugh like cut glass, occasionally
loudly, but mostly in modulated voices. They carry Country Road canvas bags and keep their money in their pockets. They don’t wear rings but their nails are manicured and perfect.

Meg has always been afraid of such women. They make it seem effortless. Perhaps it is? They don’t carry bags or wallets. Meg loves wallets. No jewellery except those tiny studs. Meg wears a number of rings, a bracelet, a necklace and dangling earrings. She likes jewellery. But those naturally beautiful girls rarely wear jewellery. Why not? What’s wrong with it? She listens to their conversation. It is all about Year 12 friends; who’s going where, going out with whom, who’s doing what course. They know a lot of people. They will have a ready-made group. Meg’s heart sinks. Surely there’ll be some students who didn’t come with others? Don’t people make their life long friends at Uni?

At Grattan Street, literally hundreds of students pour off a succession of trams. There is a steady buzz of chatter and movement. MSC has hung signs all over the campus showing the way to the enrolment hall. It is filling fast, but many students (mostly wearing jeans) spill out into the courtyard, talking, laughing, shrieking. What are they doing? Meg wonders. It would appear to be a secondary school reunion for many of them.

The President of the College appears and the buzz gradually recedes as people scramble for a seat. The hall doubles as an indoor gym; the polished floor is lined with the boundaries of a basketball court. On the stage, a smiling man in a grey tweed suit wishes them “Good Morning”. Mostly recent high school students, they immediately return the chant.

“Good Morning”.

The President and the staff on the platform laugh good naturedly. The President launches into his welcoming address.

“Welcome to 1988 at Melbourne State College. I am Dr Gerry Thompson, President of MSC. You arrive here today to declare your intention to become the teachers of the near future. That is a profound declaration, and carries with it a sacred responsibility. You have chosen wisely and well. This Institution has been training Victorian teachers for 100 years. This year is our Centenary.”
Meg feels liquid. Why should this move her so?

“No matter what discipline you embrace, where and when you teach, if at all, as a number of you won’t, you can rest assured that this College will instil values of equity, social justice and student-centred respect and dignity.”

“We, the Faculty of MSC, are committed to your professional development as intending teachers. That is why we have so many structures and services to assist you during study. And the MSC Student Association leads where we cannot tread.”

“I welcome each and every one of you to the next stage of your lives. We are in this together. Grab every chance, enjoy, get involved. This is an exciting, learning time in your life. You’ll always treasure it. Make the most of it, which is the theme of our Orientation Week.”

Meg loses count of the number of times she hears “Make the most of it”.

Dr Melinda Byrne takes the stage and the cacophony ceases instantly. Dr Byrne is young, slight and elegant. Her voice reminds Meg of polished wood. It is smooth, glossy, clipped. Dr Byrne is the Arts Course Adviser and she will assist them in the selection of subjects.

The Science and Business advisers are not nearly as appealing. Meg thinks happily that Dr Byrne reflects clearly that Arts was the right choice.

The students are given destinations pertaining to their alphabetical placement. They wait in queues. Large computer printouts are distributed with personal details. Meg sighs when she sees hers:

Ms Margaret Flanagan  
42 York Street  
Albert Park 3205  
Bachelor of Education (Arts: Secondary)

“Yes! That’s who I am now.”

Dr Byrne is smooth and business-like, turning a blasting smile on Meg.
“Sit down. Do you know what you want to study?”

“Oh, yes! I’ve known all along. I want to teach English and History.”

“Yes? And? You need four subjects.”

“Political Science and Philosophy.”

“You’ll be busy.”

“I’m used to that. This time it’s my choice. That’ll make it easier.”

Dr Byrne smiles warmly.

“How will you support yourself? You’re a bit older, I notice. 1964.”

“I’m 24. I’ll continue as a medical secretary 15 hours a week. I plan to get a weekend job.”

Dr Byrne lays down her pen.

“That’s impressive motivation. Beware of burnout. It’s a first year syndrome. You will have a heavy reading load and you will get very tired.”

“I’ll be organised. I’ll be OK.”

“There is help if you need it. Never be afraid to ask for it. Promise?”

“I promise. Thank you.”

“Now, sign up for an Orientation Week group; they’re really worthwhile. And take ALL the library tours—you’ll be much better off if you do. Go to the Library and sign up now.”

“OK. Thank you.”

“Good luck, Margaret.”
Meg floats down the hall of the Education Building. It is much like a high school inside as well. “I will be here for four years. I wonder how I’ll feel by the end?”

The Administration Building is strangely quiet. Meg pays her fee and has her photo taken. The laminated card shows her to be a university student. The photo shows a pale, anxious face under long blonde hair with far more dark re-growth than Meg had realised. The sight of her dark roots horrifies her. It is immortalised onto her student card. She resolves to buy hair dye on the way home.

Signing up for O-Week is a complicated procedure. The Student Association takes O-Week very seriously. Meg gives her phone number so she can be assigned to a group. “Many people make friends for life at O-Week”, she is earnestly advised.

Philip University Bookroom is a short, very pleasant stroll from the MSC campus. Meg prices all her textbooks. The combined cost of the impending textbooks is the best part of $200. It seems exorbitant to Meg. But her mother has agreed to fund it. Thank goodness. Suddenly the year looks like a lot of scrimping, going without and worrying about money. So much to do and all of it has to be done by me, thinks Meg.

Funding the purchase of the books is one thing: actually reading them is a whole new ball game. The British History textbook is the size of a toaster. Milton’s Paradise Lost goes on forever and as for Crime and Punishment, Meg isn’t sure they got the translation right. She has to buy three lots of poetry: TS Eliot, John Donne, William Blake. Woolf’s To the Lighthouse is the shortest novel on the English syllabus but the most agonising to read. There is no way she can read them all before classes start, Meg decides. Read them in the order they are studied.

Philosophy looks as dry as a bone. But I’m sure they’ll help us, Meg thinks. What is ontology anyway? Sounds religious. Political science is weird. Bob Hawke one week, Thomas Hobbes the next. Fortunately they only have to read small excerpts of the Leviathan. This is why we only have 14 contact hours, Meg decides. The other 26 are for reading!

Dr Madigan gives her the run down on University Arts: all bludgers and loafers there. Arts and what, he asks? Teaching, says Meg. Oh, well....
we need teachers, it is implied, along with the clear sense that it is a second rate profession, if it can be called one at all.

Meg has noticed how people react differently to her plans; she is not yet sure why. Dr Madigan and his friends seem a bit amused and rather patronising, as though Meg has made a poor choice but it is to be expected. Meg’s family and friends on the other hand are impressed by the College’s proximity to Philip University, by the subjects she has chosen, by her drive. They are pleased, even a bit intimidated. Meg feels a sense of achievement, rather than confusion. She has always known teaching is not a well-respected profession and this has not diminished her wish to be a teacher at all.

Jason is appalled by the study load Meg draws up. He studied not at all for his two years at SUV and scored the accordant marks.

“Surely you knew I’d have a lot of study to do?”

“Yeah, but when am I gonna see ya?”

“On the weekend sometimes. In the evenings.”

“Great!”

“It’s good for couples not to spend too much time together.”

Jason knows where this is headed.

“Between work, school and study, you aren’t in a couple.”

“Well, if you would get a job....”

“I’m trying, Meg. You might’ve noticed a little thing called unemployment...”

Meg brushes off his defensiveness.

“That reminds me: I’m looking for a second job. I’ve realised how many study costs I’ll have. I’m gonna try and work on the weekends.”
Jason is flabbergasted. Meg sighs.

“Jase, the rent’s gotta be paid. I’ve got books to buy and lots of photocopying and....”

“And clothes!”

“Yes! What’s wrong with that? I’m at Uni now. Clothes are really important to me. I’m the one working for it.”

Jason is silent.

Secretly, Meg agrees with him. A second job will mean having a tiring regimented life. But she knows herself enough to be aware of her priorities. She will want clothes. Whether there is money for them or not, Meg will buy them. Better to plan for it than to risk serious financial deprivation.

It is hard to concentrate on the four chapters of the *Leviathan*, most of which sails straight over Meg’s head. The Peterloo Massacre is much more interesting but Meg has the distinct feeling she is missing some juicy illuminating detail and doesn’t know how to find it. She saves poetry for last and is delighted to find Edna St Vincent Millay amongst the 20th century selection to be examined in week one.

“I only know that summer/sang in me a little while/that in me, sings no more.”

Planning and dreaming of the first day at MSC takes much of Meg’s time and energy. She decides to wear her old Levis, which seems to be the uniform of choice at Uni. She wears her favourite windcheater, in hot candy pink, which shows some teddy bears with books, under the heading ‘UniBearsity’. Her dark roots give Meg some concern but there is not time- or money - to reblonde her hair this week. It is only a month since she did it: the day of enrolment.

The first day of semester is fine and bright - what a relief - and Meg can carry her books. Anna is cheerful and encouraging. Jason was going to make breakfast but in the end he doesn’t actually get up.
Meg's first class is her Philosophy lecture at 10 am. Next week, when tutorials commence, she will have one in philosophy at 9 am. Four straight hours: double Philosophy, Double Poli Sci. Then lunch, History and English. Four hours is a bit much. Coffee would be nice.

Philosophy is a shock, with the sweet vague lecturer posing all kinds of dilemmas and then pointing out how they have no solution.

“How is God omnipotent? Can he make a round square? Can he make a rock he can’t pick up? No? Then surely he’s not omnipotent?”

Meg goes white when Professor Dougall says that. The Christian Union students wriggle and murmur. Meg hears them saying later that he was making false analogies: she has no idea what that means, and the sense returns, sharper this time, that she is missing something and doesn’t know how to find it out.

Poli Sci is fabulous: hardly any mention of Hobbes and a rambling assessment by Dr Largewood of Bob Hawke’s performance. Unfortunately Meg cannot glean from it if Dr Largewood supports Labor. Right at the end he warns them against trying to guess his political leanings. How strange, thinks Meg. Surely it’s hard to hide whether you’re Labor or not? One of the students is a former policewoman, who continually interrupts Dr Largewood to correct his policy assessments. She makes no attempt to hide her ideological bias. Dr Largewood seems to find this amusing. Meg finds it confusing and feels something like dread in her stomach whenever the woman speaks. She could never talk to that blokey, harsh, loud woman. A pale earnest Christian boy tries to put a gentler spin on an extreme right wing view. Dr Largewood does not take so kindly to him.

Next it is British History, where Meg sits next to a very pretty dark intense girl who takes tiny notes and makes very individual “a’s” and “s’s”. Jennifer is small and very thin and wears a button-down cotton shirt and long baggy shorts, which make her look even thinner. Meg is also thin, but such an outfit would make her look fat, she thinks. The girls rush a whispered introduction before they are focused by the deep sarcastic tones of Dr Bryant, co-lecturer in the subject. Dr Bryant tells them dryly a long list of things he will not tolerate; the minimum amount of reading they must do (eight hours each week); and that the sorry state of history in
schools is all the fault of their predecessors and it is up to them to set it right. He then gives brief, stark instructions about the standard and layout of the major essay, which causes a gasp to emanate from the students. Dr Eden, his co-conspirator, is a social historian and tries to play good cop by making the students laugh. “We are here to help”, he says. “You are not alone”.

Lunch is a lonely affair. Some people have friendship groups, although Meg is pleased to see that they are the minority. She spends lunchtime running errands and sorting out the reams of paper given to her so far.

English comes after lunch. Meg sits next to Jennifer again: this time they talk. Jennifer comes from PLC. Meg avoids the obvious response by pointing out her age and her time in the workforce.

English is the largest subject so far. The huge angled lecture theatre is practically full. They are to hear an outline of the course and a brief introduction to the poems. The lecturer, Dr Segnall, is warm, witty and urbane. He makes them laugh. He clearly loves his job. When he starts talking about the WWI poets, Meg gets that lovely familiar shiver: this is why you are here, this is what you came for. She takes copious notes, dreaming of the erudite, insightful essays she will submit, so impressing Dr Segnall. Jennifer sighs next to her.

“English is not my favourite subject, cantcha tell?”

Meg feels irritated and relieved.

“Why not?”

“I’m a history girl. I love Australian Studies. English is so.... English”.

“Some of these poems are American.”

“Yes... it’s not really ‘happening’, is it?”

Meg is surprised. She finds the most learning always occurs in English. Part of her is gratified: English is her subject. Part of her questions her choice of so easily dismissed a study.
“You have to write so much for English”, adds Jennifer. “In history, it’s mostly reading”.

“But I like writing....”

“Oh. OK, then.” Meg feels Jennifer’s amusement.

It is so difficult to communicate to others her love for English. She feels stupid and heavy. But it’s true. Why do I feel these different ways, Meg wonders. I can understand a love for history like that. It’s not better. It’s just a different love. The eloquence of this observation comforts her.

Dr Segnall talks of the war poets, their psychological struggles and violent deaths. It seems every poet he mentions had a mental illness or a breakdown. Meg wriggles deeper in her seat. This is fascinating to her! Writers are so often such troubled, introspective people. Here is a teacher who probes the psychology and looks at the connections. How exciting! Dr Segnall is now outlining the political activism of Edna St Vincent Millay. The impact on her art, he argues, was both internal and external. Many writers were punished by the literary establishment for their politics.

Meg can barely contain herself.

"Settle down," admonishes Jennifer.

Defiance rears.

"This is exactly why I'm majoring in English," Meg whispers. "This is my passion."

"Fair enough. Whatever turns you on. I don't know how you can look past history."

Jennifer is good natured but she makes her amusement apparent. This does undercut Meg's joy. Always she seems destined to incur disdain, whenever she is really being herself. Anna is the only person who understands.

Dr Segnall outlines the lecture series; two weeks of poetry and then straight into Crime and Punishment. The lecture concludes. Meg feels the

Jennifer yawns. "I'm glad *Crime and Punishment* is first", she murmurs. "I'll be glad to get it out of the way. Too cruel- yuk!"

"You've read it?" Meg is taken aback.

"Course. Haven't you, Miss English?"

"Well, I haven't finished it." A white lie. The first of her tertiary career.

"Well, I'd hurry; the cruelty doesn't improve. I think that Fyodor is a nasty piece of work. What point does thrashing a horse to death serve, even if it is in a dream?"

Meg is traumatised.

"Yes, I, I don't know..."

"I can't see the point Dostoyevsky is making. I barely skimmed those pages..."

"How many pages?"

"Maybe ten.... haven't you read that far?"

"No..."

"I'll mark them for you if you like?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I hate reading about animals suffering."

"Oh, it's vile. The murder was easier to read and that's more violent than *A Nightmare on Elm Street*."

Great. So much for a supremely intellectual novel. Violence and cruelty is Dostoyevsky. It will be so much harder to read now, always wondering what is coming next.
Jennifer is still chatting.

"Thank God for Austen, eh? *Emma* is a boon after bloody Fyodor. No cruelty, just teacups and gentle flirting. The odd slightly pointed remark. Austen is my speed."

Meg, who cannot appreciate Austen, suddenly feels nauseous.

"The real issues are cruelty and murder. Not tea cups and daisy chains. That's the whole point."

Jennifer laughs. Dr Segnall has packed up his papers and appears beside them. They are the only people left in the vast lecture hall.

"Tea cups facilitate a great deal too, I think."

He beams encouragingly, but Meg is suddenly tongue-tied.

"Hope they do," this from Jennifer, "because if all meaning is communicated by murdering horses, I'm dumping this subject." She is completely relaxed as she speaks to their teacher.

Dr Segnall laughs. "That is one of the toughest passages in writing." He looks at Meg. "Don't feel too bad if you are squeamish. It is upsetting. But we won't be focusing on that too closely. We'll be looking at the macro themes, Dostoyevsky's take on human nature and drives. Lots of students skip those pages, with my blessing."

Meg smiles dreamily at him. He is so charming.

"And keep your mind open to *Emma*'s teacups. Austen has a fair bit to say about human nature also, albeit on a smaller canvas."

"OK". Well done, Meg. How articulate. He'll be real impressed. She takes a deep breath.

"What you said about Millay was fascinating. I love hearing about the political stuff." Another good demonstration of vocabulary.
"Good, good. Millay is an unusual writer. Her work has fallen out of academic fashion. She was closely tied to anarchists and socialists, passionately involved in their causes, but held herself fast to a liberal humanist tradition. Millay was a radical in the real sense, but not identified with any one ideology. She lived her own definition of a moral life."

"Her sonnets are so beautiful. Yet, they're ... modern?" Are they?

"Yes. You've read her before?"

Meg blushes.

"I read a lot of American young adult books." Don't mention *Sweet Valley High*, "Millay was like the poet of choice of American girls. They studied her too. I got to know her work so I borrowed her *Collected Poems*.

"Good on you. Do you have a favourite?"

Jennifer is smiling lazily at Meg. She seems utterly relaxed. Meg feels the clamping tension between eagerness and fear.

"I, um, *Dirge Without Music*, I love that one...."

"Do you know what number it is?" Meg can see Dr Segnall is really interested.

"Oh, um, sorry, it's not one of her sonnets, it's a poem... I love that one, 'love is not all, it is not meat nor drink...', maybe number ninety nine?"

"Yes! Good girl", more intense blushes, "you know her work quite well."

"It's kind of easy to know," Meg startles herself.

"What a compliment to the poet. Would you ladies stroll toward my office? I must keep vaguely to my schedule."

Meg leaps after him. Jennifer walks backward and casually flips off the light as they leave.

Dr Segnall continues their discussion.
"I don't know Dirge Without Music. Perhaps you could let me know which collection it is in, when you have a chance?"

"I think it's The Buck in the Snow, but of course, I'll check."

"Yes, thank you. Miss Flanagan, is it not?"

"Ah, yes?"

"Good. Thought I had it. And, Miss Wren."

"That's me", drawls Jennifer.

"I am pleased with myself. Every year one's memory is less and there are more students."

Jennifer laughs. "You English people have fabulous memories for detail."

"Oh, Miss Wren, are you not one of us?"

"Nah". Meg is astonished at the familiar tone Jennifer adopts. "I'm a historian."

"Ah? Brava. I love to see students identifying one true love intellectually speaking. Why then do you take English?"

"All the general knowledge you get. I'm taking Modern British History- look at the English writers on this course. And history is so much about reading. I figure English will help my written expression."

She is so casual…and….calculating, thinks Meg.

"I am glad to hear you have thought about the applicability of our offerings. Certainly we are in the business of broad development of written skills. Argument, expression, structure: these are our strengths. And Miss Flanagan? Dare I hope that English may be your true love?"

Meg beams. "Oh yes! I've always wanted to be an English teacher."
“Ah, why so?”

“Well…”, she swallows, “…books are…novels…are like a way of finding yourself, or they can be…they are where I learnt so much. I love to read honest things, about people…”, oh, really clear, Meg.

“You will enjoy the year, then. *Crime and Punishment* will look very interesting to you from that perspective. And *Emma* too, for all its lightheartedness. But I urge you to a close reading of *To the Lighthouse*. Interiority through art: Woolf was the Patron Saint.”

He sees Meg’s face.

“Yes, I do understand, believe me. It *is* a difficult work. All of Woolf’s oeuvre is thus, but it is all about sticking with it. Practice, Miss Flanagan. Your enthusiasm will carry you through. Now, here we are. Come in, ladies, and see our Department. Have you been in before? No? You can sign up for your tutorials.”

The English Department of MSC is in the modern Library. Dr Segnall’s office is small and is further dwarfed by eight foot high crammed bookshelves which form a U around every wall but the window. Meg is transfixed.

“Yes, I have a few, eh! But it is a professional library, remember. You too can build one! It takes far less time than you’d think.”

Jennifer hangs impatiently in the door.

“Come on, Meg. I want to sign up for tutes.”

“Yes”, Dr Segnall peers out into the corridor. “I just want to check with Dr Priget…ah, Nick, there you are. These two young ladies are signing up for first year tutes. Can you clarify…they must do two in a set, must they not? Ladies, Dr Nicholas Priget, the First Year Co-ordinator.”

Meg smiles at the exotic looking Dr Priget. He is wearing shorts! Dr Segnall wears a navy blazer and grey trousers. It *is* hot, but….shorts?
“Yes, right”, Dr Priget speaks in a high affected voice which manages to be soothing at the same time. “The tutorials are in pairs. You pick one pair and go to both. No splitting!”


“To simplify our administration. If you are jumping all over the place, we must keep track of what you’ve done. This way we only have to track the group, because you stay with it at all times.”

“Oh. OK.” Jennifer is persuaded.

Both teachers smile.

Meg and Jen cannot fit the same tute group into their respective timetables, so they are to separate. Jennifer feigns distress.

“I wanted to copy off you.”

“Sure. Like you need to…”

“Yeah. I’m hopeless at English. Swear to God.”

“How bad can you be? You got a ‘B’!”

“I always get ‘A’s for everything.”

“Why’d you come here, then? You don’t wanna be a teacher?”

“Didn’t get into Arts. Thanks to that B. I’ll try and transfer.”

“Can you do that?”

“If you make the marks. Lots of A’s.”

“Yuk.”

“Yeah, but I can.” This very casually. “So, wanna coffee?”
They head down to the stairs which divide the old and new sections of the College. The 1888 Building cafeteria, the Caf, is small, but the lounge area is comfortable. It’s crowded, so Meg and Jennifer take their coffees outside.

The huge oak trees create a bower over the courtyard. The March day is warm, breezy, balmy. Meg feels a rush of exhilaration. She is at University. She has just had an intellectual conversation with her English lecturer. She has a highly intelligent, stylish new friend. This is what she has dreamed of for so long. It is really happening.

“Jennifer? Why don’t you want to teach?” Meg could not imagine not wanting to teach.

“Well, it’s not very exciting, is it?”

Meg is too astounded to answer.

“It’s not very well paid and I think I’d be bored.”

“Well….”, what could you say?, “…what do you want to do?”

“I’ve no idea. I’ll major in history and see from there.”

“What about law?”

“Boring!”

“Oh.” Fancy calling law boring. “The law students don’t look bored.”

“Wankers.”

“But they have such nice clothes….” Actually, all they seem to wear is khaki and loafers without socks. Jennifer shrieks with laughter. “Meg! They have no clue. They take no risks. They shop at Country Road and Sportscraft with the parental Amex. How hard is that? It’s a fucking uniform. They all look the same.”
Well, that’s certainly true, thinks Meg.

“Actually, now that you mention it, architecture, design, has always appealed to me”, muses Jennifer.

“That wouldn’t be boring.”

“Certainly wouldn’t. But you’ve gotta be a superbrain.”

“You do for law, too.”

“Yeah, but that’s only in academic terms. I’d have to prove some design skills for architecture. I’ll just put my head down, get my four ‘A’s and try and get into Arts.”

“Then what?”

“Christ, what are you? My mother?”

“Sorry, it’s…we’re so different. I know exactly what I want to do.”

“Teach?”

“Yes. Maybe…”

“What?”

“At university.” This very softly.

“Yeah? Wow. You are Miss English, aren’t you?” But there is no malice in Jennifer’s voice. Meg breathes again, testing herself. That was scary but in fact it hardly hurt at all.

Jennifer stands up to greet some acquaintances who went to her school. Meg is introduced and watches them, fascinated. They are all clean-faced, easy, elegant girls, who seem to have no doubts or awkwardness. They laugh and chatter effortlessly. These PLC girls are rarely shy, thinks Meg. She lives in constant fear of the question, “where did you go to school?” Why this bothers her so, she is not sure. “Hurstbridge High School” was a very good school. Meg knows this. It was full of young
enthusiastic Uni graduates from the late sixties and early seventies, working off their studentships. They cared. They had a passion for scholarship. They treated their students like equals. It had been challenging and exciting. But none of this would be evoked by the words “Hurstbridge High School”.
Going Bowling

Meg twists to examine her rear in the mirror. The jeans are slightly too tight, but they will have to do. She bends over to simulate shooting a bowling ball. Hhm. Jeans definitely too tight. She changes to a pair of pink Capri pants. They fit better but they are a bit girly. She adds a black turtleneck and black flats.

Anna is devouring a bowl of fruit salad when Meg enters the kitchen.

“Well!”

“Oh, thanks. I think?”

“Yeah, you look great. Where ya going?”

“Bowling with my college mates.”

“That was quick! Where’s Jase?” Anna raises an eyebrow.

“Ahh, at Diamond Creek, I think.”

When Meg advised Jason that he wasn’t invited, he chose to spend the evening with his parents.

“You can’t take him?”

Meg shrugs. “I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” Consternation.

Meg looks at Anna over the top of the fridge door. Anna lowers her gaze.

“He- he drives me crazy. It’s much easier, nicer, to keep it all separate. I’m engaged, I’m like a wiser big sister to them, I don’t have to think about boys or wonder what others are thinking…..”

“Meg!”

“….and that’s a lot less pressure! I’m a grown-up to them. I’ve always been the awkward dumb kid. Let me enjoy being a grown-up.”

“I would have thought a grown-up would see a problem here. If you feel so warm and positive towards Jason, do you really think you should marry him?”

“I feel positive. I know what I want.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Gotta go.”
“Ah. Have fun.”

Meg sits in the breezeway of the Number One tram as it jerks towards the City. At VCA, lots of young people jump on, laughing with end-of-the-week euphoria. They wear baggy jeans and old careless jumpers. Meg admires the effortlessness of their elegance. If she wore such a jumper she would look scruffy and plain.

The girls have squeaky clean faces and clean hair pony tails. They wear pearl studs. None of them have handbags. There are hundreds of these groups on university campuses. They dress down. Meg only dresses down on her way to the shower. She wonders why it seems so much less effort for them.

At Bourke Street, Meg alights and marches up the hill to the Southern Cross Complex. Out the front sit Rosemary Marshall and Pete Danville. Rosemary is chattering as always when near Pete. He looks uncomfortable, thinks Meg. Pete is still an unknown quantity. He seems to like girls as mates, but rarely shows interest in them otherwise. He is fun and flirts like crazy. This is wearing thin for Rosemary who desperately wants to go out with him.

“Hi guys.”

“Hey, Meggerina! Nifty pants, babe. I’m surprised Jason lets you out of the house.”

Pete flirts far more with Meg than he does with Rosemary, which confuses both girls.

“Ah, well, what he doesn’t know!”

Rosemary crosses her arms over her flat chest.

“You’ll be cold later”, she states blankly.

“Nah, she’ll be drunk by then”, says Pete.

“Drown my bowling embarrassment, eh?” Meg squats beside them, keeping her pink bottom from the dusty bench.

“It’s easy. Those l-o-n-g arms and legs are made for bowling.”

“Monkeys good at it?”

“Meggie, you’re not taking me seriously. I am a bowling connoisseur. Incidentally, your fetching attire is very suited to bowling.”
Meg laughs, warm in the glow of this praise. She sees Rosemary’s face. It is folded in lines of resentment. Her outfits could not be called fetching by any measure. She is tiny and skinny, bent over and caved in, with no chest, and bow legs she covers up. She currently wears acrylic flared slacks and a brushed nylon windcheater with an Egyptian motif. Wide pink spectacles cover three quarters of her face under a thick curly fringe. Her auburn hair is beautiful in spite of the poodle perm. Nevertheless, Rosemary is the lynch-pin of their group. It is she who gathered her choice of people from her various classes, and forged them into the generally happy coterie they now are.

It is a complex tangle of people. Their political views are broad- Pete insists he is a conservative, Dave claims to be left leaning, Meg and Rosemary are strong Labor supporters; the rest claim not to know or care. They have wide backgrounds, too - working class, middle class, rural, Catholic, anti-Catholic. They are all academically committed, or so it seems to Meg. Even Kelly, to whom Rosemary is devoted notwithstanding Kelly’s very middle class background. Rosemary “hates all private school kids, except for Kelly”. That she made this determined declaration in front of Jennifer is something that still causes Meg to cringe. Rosie knew they were there. Jennifer isn’t here tonight, nor is she ‘part’ of this group in spite of many mutual friendships. But Meg would not feel so confident to go with Jennifer, “snatch a bite and hit the clubs”, as Jennifer loftily describes it. Jen is a shiny-faced girl who rarely carries a handbag and has no fear of the elegant cafes or tall charming boys which she takes for granted and which so terrify Meg. Here, now, Meg is powerful, with an absent fiancee and nifty pants, and more than enough confidence for the environment. Jen would not approve of these pants. Meg would not wear them if Jennifer were here.

“So, Pete, where’s the others?”

“Slow coaches, aren’t they? Kelly and Dave….maybe something’s going on…?”

“Hardly. You think?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Meg laughs and Rosie interrupts crossly. “Rubbish!” spit flies across them. “David has a girlfriend, remember?”

“Sure, Rose, but these things are not set in stone.” Meg is surprised at herself.
Pete gasps. “Oh, is that right? Trouble in paradise?”

Meg laughs again, seemingly untroubled. “Noooo! But as you say, stranger things…. shit happens. Still, Rose, I don’t think David is Kelly’s type. Do we know why he isn’t bringing Angela?”

“Yes, silly!” Pete cuffs Meg lightly.

“What? Tell me!”

“Because you said no partners!! Duffer!”

“But I only meant mine!”

“Well, that’s an order you give at HQ, hon. Anyway, who can interpret these married people’s language? Not me”.

Camp and very funny.

“Seriously, Meggle, he thought you meant all of us….”

“T’m not a fascist!”

“…and it’s only you two who’ve managed to snare anyone anyhow.”

Rosemary snorts.

“Nicely put there, Pete. Didya ever think Jase might’ve snared me?”

“I’m sure that’s what took place, babe. You would’ve waited for me if you hadn’t got snapped, eh?”

Meg giggles. Rosie stalks away from them. Pete feigns surprise.

“Oh, dear."

“I think she is a little, er, uncomfortable,” Meg suggests.

For once, Pete is silent. Meg is surprised.

“Well, she’s not exactly the flirting type herself, is she?”

Meg considers.

“No-o ….. why not?”

“She’s so earnest”, he scuffs his shoe embarrassedly. “She can’t relax and just …. be a dag.”

Meg is quiet: she has always thought privately that Rosemary is the daggiest by far.

“You mean she takes it too seriously?”

“She takes herself too seriously!” Pete sounds almost bitter.
He must know she has a crush on him, thinks Meg.

Poor Rosie. How awful for your crush to think of you in such a way. Rosie is earnest. She struggles to relax. Yet Uni has meant for Meg the chance to fashion a new persona and test it out; even multiple personae can be shuffled and applied like face creams, depending on the weather, her mood, the social group in which she finds herself. Even Rosie is a tiny streak in Meg.

Rosie has returned and is gesticulating wildly to a couple on the footpath. Kelly and Dave have arrived. Jack and Marina are with them. She waits for Rosemary’s response but Pete leans over to her.

“Rosie will now question these people for ten minutes, I swear to God.”

“You’re late. Why are you all together?”

“Kelly drove.”

“But why you four and not the rest of us? I’d’ve liked a lift!”

Silence.

Meg quickly interjects.

“They’re all in the East. If they came to get you, we’d still be waiting for you all.”

Her tone softens this statement.

Rosie is not placated.

“Whose idea was it? Who set it up?”

Meg and Pete cringe and dart horrified glances at each other. Kelly raises her sunglasses coolly over her forehead. She is unruffled, Meg notices.

“Me. I’ve got a car. Dave is on the way. I’ll drive everybody home. What’s the problem?”

Kelly is all smoothness and warmth. She is beloved by Rosie who made such a notable exception to her social agenda in order that they be friends. Rosie starts to look mollified.

“Oh, well. You coulda not been late.”

The rural lilt is more apparent under stress, Meg observes. I wonder if I do that, she thinks.
“My fault”, Dave is the opposite of Kelly- sweating and red with stress. “Angela and I had a domestic five minutes before Kelly knocked. I held her up.”

Bad move, thinks Meg. Rosie just would not understand.

“Really”, utter sarcasm. “How nice for the rest of us.”

Meg can’t stand it.

“I’m surprised you got here this quick. My domestics take way longer than that!”

Dave laughs with clear relief. “I walked out on it!”

“Oooh. Brave man. Will your stereo be safe?”

The others are laughing. Pete is teasing Meg about domestic arrangements. Rosemary shoots daggers at her.

Meg leaps up. “OK, are we gonna bowl, or what?”

“According to you, you’re not.”

“No Peter, you are correct. I shall not bowl but I shall demonstrate a unique elegance in the humiliation I am about to endure.”

“Get off the grass!”

Bowling is not a literal success but Meg enjoys herself more than she could have imagined. They laugh hysterically for hours. Meg spends much of the evening paired with Jack, who is not the coolest guy- he is certainly not Pete or Dave- but he loves the attention and his unabashed admiration continues the salve to Meg’s ego. Marina tries occasionally to get Dave’s attention. Marina is glamorous and outgoing, but her anxiety comes through. She seems as unable as Rosie to accept the presence of a partner extant from the group. The concept of Dave’s girlfriend, Angela, is ignored by Marina. Kelly is the most practical. Kelly is tiny, with thick dark curls and a creamy face. She is supportive and Meg liked her immediately, weeks ago. But Kelly is Rosie’s particular friend and the stop signs are un-missable. It is so difficult to avoid annoying Rosie.

After bowling, they pile into the Molly Bloom for nachos and coffee. Pete waits on Meg, and Rosie sulks. Kelly manages to maintain a pleasant group wide conversation. Jack also hovers around Meg. He reminds her of Jason, probably because none of the other girls are interested in him.
Rosie orders a hot chocolate. Why is that such an unsophisticated drink? Jason orders that; never tea or coffee. Kelly drinks her coffee with her hands cupped around the mug; they are tiny, fine-boned. She smiles and laughs easily.

Jack takes no part in the conversation but laughs at every joke made. Dave and Pete spar with each other.

"The Australia Card killed Hawkie. He’ll hafta go before the next one. His love affair with the people of Australia is over."

“What, and have Keating? Ugh. You’d be fucken’ jokin’. How can they win with Keating?”

“What’s wrong with Keating?” Meg and Rosie agree on this one.

“Face it Meg,” Dave interjected. “Labor’s been in too long.”

“Six years?! Right, OK, 23 years is fine for your born to rule mob, but six’s too long for Labor….?"

“Has it only been six years?” from Kelly.

Rosie beams at her.

“You don’t much like politics, do you Kel?”

Kelly actually looks annoyed.

“I certainly have views,” she responds tartly.

“We historians,” Rosie’s tone grates, “are very into our politics.”

“We political scientists too, actually.” The bantering tone has left Pete’s voice.

“Yes, yes, but the historical perspective is so much broader.”

Silence.

Pete stretches. “Time to call it a night. What time does Jason ring the fuzz, Megbabe?”

Meg shrieks.

“He wouldn’t dare! But he’s out tonight, too.”

“How liberated! How modern!… Pete is teasing but Dave looks askance at Meg.

“How’d ya manage it? Angela has this idea that going ‘out’ is a synonym for ‘together’.”
Marina is eagerly perusing their faces.

“I think it’s very mature. Balance is just as important as togetherness.”

Her eagerness makes for a slightly uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Ye-es”, Meg feels like a pretender. “I certainly don’t want to live in Jase’s pocket.”

“He might prefer to live in yours. Of course, in those pants, there ain’t no room.”

“Oh, shoosh …no, Marina is right, it’s about having an adult relationship. Where there is trust, we can just accept each other’s choices and roles…”

“Am I in an Oz studies lecture?”

Rosie hates these conversations in which she cannot speak authoritatively.

“You make a good point Meg,” Dave pushes himself to his feet. “but it’s invariably more theoretical than practical. I think Angela would agree totally but she still has to know where I am, for how long, who with and when I’ll be home. I feel like a puppy. Or a kid. It’s hard to shake the annoyance.”

Meg would’ve liked to continue the conversation but clearly it isn’t appropriate.

“Poor old married people. Hey Kel, we’re still free”, Pete waltzes Kelly around their table. “Doesn’t it put you off?”

Kelly pulls a face. “Yeah. A bit. But I think what Dave’s saying is we talk trust but we’re too insecure to mean it. Angela is a beautiful confident woman. She still feels that way. And I totally relate to that.”

Meg considers the expressions on the faces of Marina and Jack, who say little and look amazed and awed. I know what they’re thinking, muses Meg. They won’t do it that way. I remember thinking that. And look how I’m doing it.

She drags her thoughts away.

“OK, so Kel’s the taxi. Where are you headed first babe?”

Kelly frowns. “Rosie first, then Dave, then me.”

“What about Jack and Marina? Forgotten they’re here? Little mouses they are.”

“No. Marina drove herself and Jack.”
Rosie gapes. “But I thought you…..?”

“You assumed.” Kelly is very crisp. “I only picked up Dave.”

The group assimilates this development in silence.

Marina clears her throat. “Meg, I’d be happy to drive you home. Albert Park’s ten minutes from here.”

“Oh, thanks, Mari. That’d be great.”

Pete sniggers. “Have you seen her drive?”

“No, but I’ve seen you bowl. I’m safer with Marina.”

“You can talk,” he sounds slightly miffed. Meg realises that he wanted to drive her home. Half of her would like to go home with Pete. He claims to vote Liberal and he has a cruel streak. But he is clearly attracted to her and his banter is very…soothing. Meg shakes herself. Much better to go with Marina.

“We’re off, night all.”

“Don’t forget the Oz studies assignment.”

“It is always on my mind…” Kelly sings.

“Oh, swots.”

“Night. ‘Night Kel, Dave. ‘Night guys.”

“Bye.”

Jack is quiet so Meg chats gently. She encourages Jack to take the front seat, but he won’t. Marina is suddenly much more forthcoming.

“How is that Rosemary? I cannot believe that girl. She is just so transparent. Do you think she realises? I never saw anyone with so few clues as to how to present herself. What message is she giving with those glasses? And those Osti clothes…."

Meg murmurs in discomfort.

“….and that poodle perm! My goodness….what is she thinking? She can’t really expect to get Pete interested dressed that way, surely? I know she’s your friend, and all, Meg, but really, she could learn a few things from you…”

In the back seat, Jack suddenly laughs.
“Jack? Are you amused by my account of Rosemary Marshall?”

“Yeah, particularly the bit about her tryin’ to be like Meg.”

Meg wriggles. How often has she thought all these things herself?

“She is unhappy, clearly. Her friends really matter to her.”

“But Meg, she doesn’t listen. At all!”

Meg acknowledges this truth silently.

“Surely she knows Pete’d have responded by now if he were interested?”

“I don’t- I doubt she realises how blatant she seems.”

“Pete is so fastidious. He would hardly be drawn to the sound of Sunshine, would he?”

Jack pipes up, “Rosie’s from Benalla, not Sunshine.”

“The sound of Benalla isn’t music, Jack!”

Meg cringes. The sound of Sunshine? Does she have the sound of Diamond Creek in her voice?

“She can hardly help that,” tartly.

“No-o, but if you see how Pete is…..”

“You’re suggesting she should mould herself to his preferences?” Sharply.

“No, I…..”

“…Because that means she has to become someone else. I agree that she isn’t exactly sensitive to the vibes he’s putting out, but changing yourself for a partner is pointless, you are who you are.”

Jack grunts in the back.

“You agree, Jack?” Marina is momentarily taken aback.

“Yeah, sure. Anyone who cares what bloody town you come from is a wanker anyway.”

Marina looks crestfallen. Meg warms again to Jack. The sound of somewhere rural dogs him as well.

“Here you are, Meg. Can we have lunch next week?”

“Of course. We still have to discuss the Cultural Revolution, remember?”

Jack gasps. “At lunchtime? Lunatics!”
Meg laughs. “Thanks, Marina. ‘Night, guys.”
The Ball

By 1990, the girls had talked the guys into going to the Faculty Ball. Meg was incredibly excited. A real dress-up, dinner dance. She knew just the Sportsgirl dress she’d buy. Black velvet with more than a dash of flattering lycra, it had a deep scoop neck, and floating transparent chiffon sleeves, anchored at the wrists with bands of black velvet. Just above the knee, it was the right combination of elegant and sexy.

Meg and Jason have been married for ten months but the chasm has never been wider. She ignores his presence as her husband; she could almost pretend he was her flatmate, except for the small matter of his financial contribution. Jason was a necessary illusion: she could whip him out like a shield if needed, but easily ignore him the rest of the time. Since she told him she wanted out, he spent his time at home in his room anyway, worshipping a mountain sized pile of all the foods Meg had previously tried to ban. Thus she was able to put Jason largely out of the increasingly appealing picture.

Discussion of dresses filled all the between tute hours. The guys would skulk off to another booth and talk AFL- even Dave, who normally hated sport. Pete ventured loud sarcastic remarks from a distance. But nothing could deter the girls from their wardrobe planning.

Everyone was wildly impressed by Meg’s outfit. Even Kelly, who owned more After Five outfits than most of them owned shoes.

“Sounds so sophisticated”, this from Rosie, who did not find costuming so enjoyable.

“Yes, we'll be a contingent in black”, said Marina.

“You wearing black too?” asked Kelly. “How cool we’ll be. Of course, my black has bright embroidery appliquéd on it. It’s an applique of flowers coming up from the hem.”

“A dress?”

“Yeah, just straight, ankle length.”
“What fabric?”

“Geez, Meg”, Rosie is frowning, “Who cares?”

“I do.”

“Me, too”, says Marina. “Fabric tells you everything.”

“Like what, exactly?” asks Rosie plaintively, but they ignore her.

“It’s velvet jersey”, says Kelly. “It’s by Laura Ashley. I really feel her stuff doesn’t date.”

Laura Ashley! Meg has seen her ads. in Vogue and read about her in English novels. Wow! A designer dress. Haute Couture.

“What’re you wearin’, Rosie?” Marina cocks her head at Rose.

“Guess I’ll wear my Year 12 formal”, says Rosie resentfully.

“Great.” Meg has never been to a school formal. The others look suddenly downcast. “What color is it?”

“Lilac.”


“I think it’s taffeta.”

Meg is suddenly silent but Marina snorts laughter.

“Rosie, you can’t wear taffeta!”

“Why not?”

“Marina, shoosh”, Kelly is authoritative. “We wear what we choose. Tell us about it, Rose.”
“Well, it’s got a fitted bodice and a flared skirt with a, like, net underskirt, and three-quarter sleeves, they’re called, um, leg-o’-mutton….”

More snorting from Marina.

“Wow. Lilac is so pretty.” Meg hears her insincerity.

“So, what about shoes, guys? I’m wearing my Robert Clergerie suede pumps.”

“Marina! you and your labels”, jokes Kelly. Meg has never heard of Robert Clergerie. Rosie looks contemptuous.

Meg describes her shoes. “They’re very plain.”

“That’s all you need with that dress. How about you, Kel?”

“My shoes sound like Meggie’s. Just black suede pumps. Dead plain.”

“Classy”, purrs Marina. “Rosie?”


“Oh”, Marina is saccharine. “Got any toe sandals? Desert boots, perhaps?” Kelly elbows her again.

“What about your white sandals, Ro? They’d be, er, better.”

Rosie beams. “Yes! I forget about them. Thanks, Kel.”

Meg can’t stand it but she knows how to change the subject.

“Guess what Jen Wren’s wearing?”

More sniffs from Rosemary.

“She’s wearing tobacco velvet flared shorts!”

“Meggle, don’t tease us!”
“I swear! They’re from Indigo and they’re flared like a skating skirt. They sound vile, but they look fabulous. She’s wearing this sheer black chiffon shirt and thick black opaque tights. By Christian Dior.”

Kelly smiles. “She is our finger on the pulse of fashion!”

Marina cocks her head. “Fad, perhaps. That stuff’ll date in ten seconds.”

“That’s true, but she’s young.” Meg is the voice of reason. “When she’s older I’ll bet she’ll do classic perfectly, too. You wait and see.”

“Yuk”, declared Rosie loudly. “What a meaningless existence.”

Meg loves clothes. She could never look as groomed as Jen but she can try. She is learning more all the time… not so much jewellery. If you mix gold and silver you need to do it knowingly. The charm bracelet, for example, is dead working class.

Jennifer has her up-to-the-minute street look, and Marina her European labels and huge costume jewellery. Rosie thinks it’s all stupid. Gemma, who is relatively new to their circle, and who exudes confidence and thick corkscrew curls, is extroverted and quite successfully eclectic.

Kelly is always perfect, albeit mostly in her 501’s and little tops. Dave spends more time with Jen, to Rosie’s disdain - Rosie and Jen disliked each other on sight. Pete is still devoted to Meg but lately he has been distant and busy- he studies hard for his ‘A’s and he works twenty hours each week. Rosie has never had a part-time job. She claims her ‘job’ is to study. No one points out that they all have to do that and they work to earn money as well.

Marina and Jen argue about their class backgrounds. Jen says that anyone with an ethnic or immigrant parent, non-Anglo, is working class because of the ‘inherent structural barriers’. Marina takes exception to this, not wanting to be seen as working class. She does not consider a non-pejorative application of the term. Lately, it does seem as if everything they do is a source of conflict.
Rosie will be in a good mood. It’ll be fun. Marina and Jennifer are meeting at Meg’s place to get ready and leave their stuff. Marina will drive them to the Town Hall. Both girls are nervous - Meg has confided that she and Jason were separated but this situation is awkward and unfamiliar. What will Jen think?

When Jen arrives on the sunny warm May afternoon she is casual and tanned in a linen sundress. Her leather uni knapsack is stuffed with her clothes and overnight stuff- all so easy. If it was Meg, she would have two bags and everything would be fussy.

Part of the appeal of Jen’s look is the no accessories rule. She wears a silver ring, a watch and plain studs in her ears. The watch and studs are very good quality. Marina is very different to Jen. Her watch cost the same (and her shoes cost more) but they compete for attention with her necklace, bracelets, huge dangly novelty earrings (not cheap for all their appearance) and two rings on each hand. Meg is frustrated. She loves wearing jewellery. But it’s too busy, she thinks. Jen never looks busy. Less is more. Meg read this in Vogue.

Jen throws her knapsack carelessly on the huge couch and herself down on top of it.

“I wish I wasn’t so tired”, she complains. “I want to dance ’til 5 am.”

“Perhaps we should have a nap?”

“Nah, it’ll muss my hair.”

“Fair enough.”

“You been to the hairdresser?”

Meg feels her face flame. “Mmm.”

Jennifer adheres to the ‘if you can’t say something nice don’t say anything at all’ rule. She is smoking, blowing smoke casually out her nostrils. Meg longs to join her, but Marina, who hates smoking with a passion, will be here soon. “I’m an asthmatic, you know.”
“Wanna ciggie?”

“Yes, but as Marina will be here any sec…Wanna coffee?”

“Thanx. Don’t let Marina push you around.”

“Imagine if she had an asthma attack”, Meg calls from the kitchen.

“Yes, I see English is helping you with the study of fiction.”

“What?” asks Meg, coming back into the lounge.

“Nothing. Smoke if you want. I guess we could smoke outside.”

“She won’t like it.”

“She doesn’t have to like it.”

“Her parents both smoke.”

“D’oh! So does half the planet.”

The doorbell rings. Jen sighs and curls up on the couch. She looks like a picture out of *Vogue*, with her linen dress and slim brown limbs.

Marina is all chatter and excitement. “Hello Meg, how are you? Oh, your hair! I love tongs, don’t you? I just blew mine dry, volume was all I wanted. Oh, hi Jennifer.”

Marina’s tone drops three octaves and there is a noticeable pause.

“Hello Marina”, Jennifer drawls. “You don’t mind if I smoke.”

“Well, actually…”, begins Marina, but Meg interrupts hastily.

“Coffee, ‘Rina?”

“Oh, yes, Meg, thank you, I’m gasping. I had to run like mad, so much to do today, to fit it all in. The hair, the outfit, I had to go in to work and fill out these forms, they’re doing Police checks….”
“At a … restaurant?” Jennifer’s pause is not missed by anyone.

“Oh, no, not at Patissero, no, at the Council. I work in child care, Jennifer. Anyway, that took ages! They needed all this ID….”

“Coffee.”

“Oh, thanks. Oh, Meg, please, I’d really rather you didn’t smoke, you know about my asthma…”

Jennifer raises an eyebrow. “We’ve heard. C’mon Meg, let’s grab a couple of kitchen stools and sit on the front verandah.”

Marina gapes. “What’ll I do?”

“Well, join us, silly. The smoke won’t bother you, outside.”

Marina does not argue with Jen. She follows them outside. And sulks.

Meg is relieved. It is a lovely May day, fine and warm. People are starting to head home from work. Ashmore Street, Brunswick is full of terrace houses and young professionals. Some very nice tailoring clips past. Jennifer notices, as Meg hopes she will.

“This isn’t a bad spot, eh? Nice and close to everything. Lovely little houses.”

“I love being so close to Uni. It takes fifteen minutes to ride in.”

“You must be fit.”

Meg laughs self consciously. “I don’t think so. But I really enjoy it.”

“Got your shorts ready, Jennifer?” Marina interrupts.


“How …thorough.”
“Well, it is your ‘halfway’ ball.”

“Halfway?”

“Yes, Meggle. Halfway through- for you that is. Yours is a four year degree.”

“Aren’t you going to do honours?” asks Marina.

“No. I’m going to do an MBA. Work at Uni. I’ve got a job lined up.”

“Oh.”

“Transferring to Arts was the right move for you”, says Meg thoughtfully.

“Too right”, says Jen.

“So why didn’t you just do Arts to start with?”

“Didn’t get in. Only got 3 ‘A’s and 2 ‘B’s.”

“What went wrong?”

Meg is shocked at Marina’s attitude. They all got in to MSC.

“Well, I stuffed up English. And I hated Eng Lit. I simply couldn’t be stuffed. Shouldn’t have done it.”

Meg rouses herself. “It worked out best. You got the marks to transfer. And you met us!”

Jennifer laughs. “True. Double the friends. It’s funny, the work in arts is no harder. Not at all. That first year at MSC set me up.”

“Why’d you think it would be harder?” Marina is scowling.

“Well, why have such a high entrance score if it isn’t? One assumes there is some logic in the process.”

“To regulate the number who emerge, obviously.”
How does Marina know that?

“Right. So we must need a lot of teachers on that basis.”

Meg frowns. “Yes. By that yardstick we must be low on primary teachers. But we know that’s not true.”

Marina shrugs in annoyance. “It’s all political. MSC has to be seen as less prestigious…”

“It is!” Meg and Jen in unison.

“…But you’ve just said Philip Arts is no harder.”

Meg sees this escalating. “Listen, we’re talking like they’re still two different institutions!”

Marina is silent.

Jen nods. “The amalgamation turned out to be the best thing for you guys. You’ll get a Philip degree, the back door way.”

Marina is incensed. “I could have gone there, had I chosen! I wanted to be a teacher, for God’s sake. I chose”.

Meg is not listening. It’s true, she thinks. I’ll graduate Philip University, but I wouldn’t have got in there.

Marina and Jen are arguing; Marina has become highly agitated and Jennifer is silent, blowing smoke rings, which only exacerbates Marina’s irritation.

“Um, more coffee?” Meg asks weakly.

Jen smiles. “Thanks.”

“Marina?”

“What? Oh, yes, please Meg, yes I really need it, I…”
Meg is learning that you can’t wait for Marina to finish speaking. Marina follows Meg into the kitchen.

“That Jennifer is very full of herself, you know, Meg, she really is.”

“Yes, well, I can be pretty self absorbed myself at times. I think we all can, really.”

“Yes but Meg, you don’t think that you’re better than someone because of your background, of course you don’t.”

“Jen doesn’t either. She has a sense of her own…. capabilities. She is incredibly capable. She’s very good at history.”

Marina sniffs. “She’s not alone in that.”

“Of course not, but …”

Meg is perplexed by the competition which clearly exists among the historians of their group. Jen always leaned towards history, as do Rosie and Marina. Yet when Marina got A’s all the way through Western Civ, French, Asian History. Rosie, who was making good B’s, suddenly found that her true disciplinary love was psychology. She now plans to be a Child Psychologist. Meg disapproves of this disciplinary promiscuity.

If Kelly were here now, she’d be asking Marina all about herself and building her up, and telling them all how great they are. But I can’t easily do that, thinks Meg. I don’t want to support Marina in that negative attitude she has to Jen. Why do I agree with Jen, when I’ve got so much more in common with Marina?

“She does have a lot of confidence”, Meg concedes. “But does that have to be a bad thing?”

“I have a lot of confidence”, Marina sounds a little piqued. “I don’t think that’s what it is.”

They return to the verandah. Jennifer is examining her face in a hand mirror. Meg wishes Marina would relax.
“Put your makeup on too early?” Why do all Marina’s questions seem so nasty?

“No. I’m not wearing make-up.” Jen says it as though it is mud.

“Looking for blackheads?”

Meg can’t stand it. “What sort of makeup are you gonna wear, guys?”

Jen snaps the mirror shut. “Just powder, mascara and lip gloss. Why?”

“Oh, just fascination. Marina?”

“I’m wearing my Chanel stick foundation and my Christian Dior eye palette and my Christian Dior Fire Engine Red ….”

“That’s gonna take a while. Better get started.” Jen can give as good as she gets.

Marina’s mouth drops open. Meg hastily tries to retrieve things. “I wish I could afford those labels. I’ve got Maybelline and Cover Girl! I feel rich if I stretch to Revlon!”

“What difference does it make?” Jen casts a narrowed glance at Marina.

“Oh, Jen, those brands are so rich and luxurious. The lippy lasts for hours….”

“Meg, at our age, we shouldn’t need thick chalky stuff, pancake. A bit of mascara and clear lip gloss. Maybe some powder to take the shine off your nose- no, I’m not saying you’ve got a shiny nose! When I go out, I brush the slightest dusting of baby powder on my face….”

Marina is horrified. “Eeech!”

“…with a huge brush, just to cover the shine. You use your sunblock?”

Meg nods obediently.
“You use scrub? You moisturise?”

More nodding.

“Then what are you covering up for? Save pancake for when you’re fifty. If then.”

“If you both keep smoking, you’ll need it much sooner.”

Meg sighs. But Jen’s not inclined to let that pass.

“Why? Because of wrinkles?”

“Exactly!” Marina sounds triumphant. “Smokers have all these wrinkles around their eyes and mouth.”

“Yes. You can see them really easily because they fill them with spakfilla and they stand out like grooves. It’s the makeup that ages you, Marina!”

Meg can see why Marina is so outraged. Marina uses Dior and Chanel, yet Jen still isn’t impressed. It is this effortless thing again. Everything is so airy, tossed off. Marina and Meg have in common that effortlessness looks very different on Jen.

Marina is very grumpy now. “What about dinner? Do we get fed at the ball?”

“Oh, yes, that’s included”, Meg assures her.

“Hungry, are you?” asks Jen.

“Well, it is 6 pm, Jen. I haven’t eaten since 12.30!”

“That’s the beauty of smoking. Kills the appetite.”

“That’s disgusting! Die of cancer and expose everyone else to passive smoking so you can be thin.”

“Well, if I ate a meal now, I’d be eating four meals today. That’s overeating, I think.”
“We can have some carrot and celery sticks. That’ll hold off any hunger pangs.”

Marina is slightly mollified.

“I don’t usually eat dinner so early in the evening, Meg.”

Meg draws Marina inside to assist with cutting celery, out of the arc of Jennifer’s perfectly honed asides. They nibble on carrots and celery and discuss TV programs...so many girly topics Meg had thought would be safe have turned out to be disastrous. Meg understands now that there is no reason to take offence; Jen is often self-deprecating. But Marina, who takes taking offense to a professional standard, has not gotten to know Jen in this way.

“What time are we expecting Kelly?”

“Not ‘till 7. I asked her to get here for photos.”

“Is Anna taking them? How cool.”

“Yes, she’s bringing her full outfit. It’s worth it, we’re all dressed up, it’s one of our moments at University. It’s got to be properly recorded for prosperity.”

“Oh! That is so true, Meg. That’s so important. Will we all be able to get copies?”

“Of course. If you want.”

We are so lucky to have Anna taking our pictures.” Marina is quite sincere and Meg is reminded of her affection for her friend.

The doorbell announces Kelly, who is already dressed. Her Laura Ashley dress is stunning, elegant yet sexy. Kelly’s long dark hair is up and curled, and her perfect face is creamier than usual. She’s wearing lipstick: a beautiful rosy tinge on her lips.

“Kel, you look stunning!”
“Oh, Meggle, thanks. Love your hair.”

“Oh. No.”

“Don’t like it?”

“Let’s not talk about it.”

“Oh? But you can carry anything off, Meg. You always look striking. Don’t stress.”

“G’day, all. Where’s all the finery?”

Marina gabbles explanations to Kelly. Jennifer stands in the hall outside the bathroom, her mouth full of toothpaste, her hand raised in greeting. Meg squeezes past her and shuts herself into her room. Shedding her casual clothes, she dons underwear, sheer expensive panty-hose, and lowers the dress around her. The sleeves float beautifully. The lycra holds the dress at the right distance from her body: tight but stunning. It is perfect.


Anna has arrived and is setting up her flash when Meg returns. Everyone oohs and aahs over Meg’s dress, even Jennifer, who pronounces it perfect. This is a compliment because Jennifer looks like a model. The flared double velvet shorts flow in a soft A-line. The Dior opaques are the perfect foil, as is the soft chiffon blouse. Jen’s hair never moves, and her makeup is subtle. I wonder if she used my baby powder, thinks Meg, resolving to try it.

Marina is wearing a black evening suit, with a huge spill of Chanel pearls and chains around her neck, and a gigantic pearl bracelet. Her face is a mask of Dior foundation and Chanel red lipstick. She looks dramatic and glamorous. But not elegant? Meg considers. In the past she would never have thought of street fashion as sophisticated. Jennifer, like Kelly, is all grace, smoothness, elegance. Marina knows about labels and makeup.
But it is too much. The big hair, the bulky jewellery, the over made up face.

Kelly and Jennifer are giggling together; a quiet tinkling sound. Their voices never carry like mine and Marina’s, thinks Meg. They just don’t sound- or move- in the same way. Marina stands slightly off to one side. Anna is clicking away. Kelly and Jen are un-self conscious. Marina is posing.

“OK, line up please. Group shot.”

Kelly and Jen turn towards Anna. Marina and Meg walk in from the sides and bookend them. The photograph sits in Meg’s album; four girls, two relaxed, smiling, even glowing. One tense and hostile, one awkward and hesitant. Meg’s hair is documented for eternity, causing her a stomach pit reaction every time she glances across it.

“Thanks, Anny.”

“No problem, it was fun. Isn’t Kelly’s dress lovely?”

“It’s a Laura Ashley.”

Anna, who Meg knows does not care about Laura Ashley, glances slyly at her friend.

“Yours too, actually.”

“Yep. Shame about the hair, eh?”

Anna laughs. “Well, everything can’t be right.”

Why not? Meg wonders.

They park in an underground carpark behind the Melbourne Town Tall. It is an eyes-closed process for Meg, because Marina screams incessantly as she negotiates the tight ramps. Kelly tries gently, unsuccessfully to offer advice, and Jennifer bullies.

Eventually, they leave the car and head towards the Ball. It is pleasantly
chilly and fine. Jen particularly is very excited. Cars of boys whistle and jeer at them and Jen turns to follow.

“Jennifer!” Marina is flabbergasted.

“Yeah? So what’s wrong with a bit of roughneck? A diet of bland is for life, not for Sat’dy night.” Jen exaggerates an Ocker accent.

Kelly is talking gently but firmly to Jennifer. It is interesting how Kelly can affect Jen’s behaviour but Marina and Meg cannot. They straggle up the steps to Melbourne Town Hall. At the threshold of the ballroom, Jen disappears, sucked into the flashing, booming cavern.

Long tables line the room. Meg sees their group nearby to the right. The boys stand to welcome them and much comment ensues. Jack is particularly taken with Meg’s dress. Rosie, sulking in lilac taffeta and white sandals, alerts him to Kelly.

“What about Kelly, Jack? Isn’t she gorgeous?”

Kelly murmurs in discomfort.

“As always, as always, Rose. But Meg has the edge on her tonight. They’re equally beautiful to the knees, but then, Meg wins. She left her pins on display. Lookin’ good, girl.”

Rose frowns. Kelly laughs.

“She’s got six inches more leg than me, Jack! I can’t possibly compete!”

Now Meg is uncomfortable. But she’d have to shout to defend Kelly and suddenly it is too hard. Kelly is laughing joyously. She is not offended. Only Rosie is offended, having received no compliments at all.

Pete isn’t bothered by the volume.

“Meg is well aware of her legs. You’ll never see her in a long dress.” This comment takes the edge off Meg’s appreciation of Pete in spite of how attractive he looks in his waiter style black tux.
“I wouldn’t either if I had her legs”, says Kelly loyally. Marina is silent; no comments have made it her way. Dave is pondering them from a distance. Jennifer has not reappeared. Meg wonders how the compliments would have been divvied up had Jen been with them.

Kelly touches Meg’s elbow, “Wanna drink?”

“Yeah! I’ll come with you.”

Rosie, Meg and Kelly thread their way to the bar. Wine and beer are free, including champagne, so champagne it is. Meg is thirsty, so she drinks one quickly at the bar and collects another. As they work their way back through the dancing throng, Rosie turns a malicious smile on Meg.

“Look at your little friend.”

Meg is lost for a moment. Then she sees Jennifer on a chair, straddling the lap of an unknown and very cute boy. His hands are on her bottom and they are kissing passionately. Meg is taken aback. Does Jen even know that boy?

Back at the table, Pete and Jack are laughing as they slowly become inebriated. I wonder if any of us will do as Jennifer is tonight, thinks Meg and promptly shakes herself. Of course not. Rosie and Kelly are subdued and Pete notices this immediately.


Meg looks at him silently. She’d like to tell him.

Rosie is about to speak, to give the incident her particular flavour, when Jen appears and flops down on a chair beside her. She gulps Meg’s champagne and looks pained as she drains the last drop. Like a shot Pete Danville has leapt for the bar, returning with a bottle.

Meg daren’t look at Rosie.

“Christ”, Jen lifts the hair off her neck, “I’m gasping.” She pulls a cigarette from her tiny evening bag.
Instantly Jack leans across the table to light it. Jen flashes him her cat’s eyes gaze and he flushes.

Rosie stares straight at Meg.

“Dancing a bit too hard, Jennifer?” coos Marina from the end of the table.

“True, true. I’ve hardly come up for air”, says Jen, and Rosie snorts.

“Good music”, offers Meg.

Jen stubs out her barely smoked cigarette and is gone again, off to a snaking crowd of tall clean boys and shiny girls whom Meg doesn’t know. They are not teaching students, she thinks. They must go to all the balls.

“Ball sluts”, says Marina helpfully.

Marina often uses such expressions. Just last week she made a reference to fag hags. Meg had never heard the expression.

Rosie is giggling, high on Jennifer’s departure. “What’re ball sluts, exactly?”

“Rich arts students who go to other people’s balls. Even the Ag ball, for God’s sake. Why can’t they stick to Choc Soc, hey?”

Pete laughs, “Yeah, from what I hear it’s pretty sticky, eh? Get it?”

General groaning and laughter.

“Well, that’s cheered you all up”, says Pete.

“I’m going on the balcony for a sec”, Meg murmurs. Only Kelly hears her. The balcony is shuttered by huge heavy scarlet velvet drapes. It is an elaborate curved bluestone structure, with potted trees and plants and a column in the middle. It is chilly enough to be bracing. Meg gulps in some air.

“Aren’t you having fun?”
Pete Danville stands in the doorway. Meg is struck by how tall he is. He must be 6’1” His physique is really perfect and his spiky blonde hair is very stylish. God, you’re handsome, thinks Meg. How come I’ve only really noticed this lately?

She shivers. He moves towards her. Suddenly she is really nervous.

“Is everyone … coming out here?”

“No. Dave and Jack are dancing with three women. No one is wondering about us.”

“Oh.”

“Not that there’s an us, eh? You run like a rabbit whenever I turn your way.”

“I do not … my life’s… complicated.”

He has reached her. He puts his hands on her shoulders. God, he’s strong, she thinks. He’s totally different to Jason.

“The only thing I want us to do, Meg, is simplify. I don’t want to add to your… pressures.”

“Jason and I are….”

“Sssh. Doesn’t matter.”

She thinks he will kiss her but he doesn’t. He looks at her. Into her eyes. Meg feels weak and vulnerable. It is flattering. They have been friends for more than two years. He is funny and bright and trustworthy. Then she remembers Jason, at home in Brunswick, conveniently moved sideways in her life.

“Jason does matter. It isn’t fair to either of you, otherwise…”

“You’ve split with him. It’ll work out. I’m not asking you to marry me!”
Meg laughs. “That’s good! Let’s be good to each other instead.”

“So marriage is the issue, is it?”

“No…..”

“No. That’s right. Don’t blame the concept. I know you, Meg. I know that your world opened up too late to avoid Jason. You go on and on about learning experiences, choices, values…. How about some honesty? You got married out of fear.”

Meg exclaims.

“....admit it! And you always feel you have to make all these rationalisations. Nobody gives a fuck! You’re persuading yourself. All because you didn't know what was possible until you limited yourself.”

“Well, that’s understandable, isn’t it? I had a slow start....”

“Fine, but there’s no need to go on that way now! Take the road less travelled...”

“Oh, stop. Where does the road less travelled lead? To the back seat of your car?”

He is silent and Meg can see he is angry. She feels a fascination with what he is saying. There is no fear now. A strange peace descends on her. Jason was over so long ago. What holds her now? Others’ opinions?

“Pete. Listen to me.”

He turns away, his hand holding the back of his neck.

“Do you want....us....to be together?”

He turns to look at her squarely.

“Yes! I do want that. But I don’t want to do some sleazy dodge-your-husband act. I don’t want ‘an affair’! That’s up to you.”
“There are so many…..”

“What?”

“…Obstacles! Problems…..”:

“Only if you make ‘em. It’s quite simple. We complicate it to protect ourselves.”

“I have to deal with my life. But I still don’t know what you want.”

“I want to explore us. I want to see where we go.”

“You want us to be lovers?”

“Among other things.”

“Rosie will hate it.”

“I’m not offering it to her.”

Meg laughs. “You know what I mean.”

“No, actually, I don’t.”

“She’ll be hugely angry with us.”

“For what? Being attracted to each other?”

“Being disloyal, I think.”

“Loyalty runs both ways.”

Meg contemplates her shoe. “How have I got to….decide?”

Pete catches her chin and forces her to meet his eyes. “Time limits sound like force. I want you to choose me.”

He does not look away. It feels shivery, delicious.
“I will. But it'll take a while to change my life.”

“How long it will take depends on motivation.”

“I feel incredibly motivated right now.”

“Good. Stick with it.”

He drops his hands to her shoulders and draws her against him. Thrills course through her. Jason never does this. Pete takes her face in his hands and kisses her, gently, softly, then suddenly his arms are wedging her against him and he is kissing her hard, tongue ramming the back of her throat. With his left hand he reaches under the Lycra skirt. Meg freezes…. This always feels so… tacky when Jason does it. Pete traces her thigh, grabbing handfuls of flesh, but it is not rushed or sleazy. His breathing is heavy and fast and he makes little sounds. He is so… taken, with her thigh. His hand moves up to her bottom. He is whispering in her ear, hot daring things. Suddenly his hand is withdrawn, cold air rushes against her leg. Pete stands back.

“I need to cool down.”

Meg looks at him.

“I, um, can’t let this happen until you’ve made your choice.”

“Fair enough. Your self control is impressive.” Slightest touch of pique.

“If it’s any comfort, my balls are bright blue.”

They both laugh.

“You’re the one…..” Meg hesitates.

“I could’ve had you, could I? You blush, but you look intrigued. Yeah, blush a bit more.”

Meg feels her face flaming. She is not used to this. She realises safety has always been her first choice. This is so… lurid. This is the sort of lover she has secretly dreamed of.
“So we both gotta wait. No nooky until you have a bed in a different place from Jason.”

“So the back of your car isn’t an option?” Meg is surprised at herself. Pete doesn’t seem shocked. He is smiling broadly.

“You wanna fuck in the car?”

He said it. Fuck. They are not even in bed!

“I thought you did.”

“Sweetheart! I do. We can do it at my place. I just wanna do it when it’s just you and me. No ghosts, no bullshit, no excuses. Present and on board, OK?”

“OK.”

“Good. Wanna dance?”

Meg smiles. “Yes.”

“OK, then. Have I mentioned how damn edible you look in that dress? Those legs could kill a man.”

“Shoosh.”

“Why? I like lycra on you. I wanna spend a lot of time gettin’ that dress off.”

“When the time comes.”

“Up to you, Meggle.”

Marina confronts them in the doorway as they re-enter the ballroom.

“Gosh, you two, your absence has been noted, Rosie’s wondering … I’ve been sent to collect you…..”. She breaks off, staring at Pete.
Meg frowns. “Rosie should get us all wired!” She feels Pete’s hand on her back, it is soothing.

“Oh, I know, she’s dreadful….” Marina is speaking slowly, her gaze on both of them somewhat distracting. Meg feels savage again.

“What?”

“Um, Meg, Pete, if you’re going to report to Rosie, I’d um, I’d fix my, er, lipstick, Meg, and Pete, I’d, um, wash my face, if I was you…. Er, sorry, but she’s got eyes like a hawk…”

Pete is pulling the back of his hand across his mouth.

“That’ll do. It’s dark in there.”

Meg is both embarrassed and proud. Marina has noticed! It’ll go round like food through a goose now.

“Rina?”

“Ye-yes, Meg?”

“Don’t tell Rosie, at least not yet. We, um, don’t want to ruin her night.”

Pete is frowning silently.

“No, no, I wouldn’t anyway, take it to the grave, it’s no one’s business but yours, of course, you know she’ll hate you Meg, she’ll just…”

“I know. I know.”

“Who gives a fuck?”

They look at Pete, startled.

“Well, I do feel low, she’s confided in me about you and….”

“Yeech!”
“…and I could have prevented it.”

“What?! Not my feelings you couldn't!! Get a clue, Meg. I feel this way no matter what anyone does. Who died and made her centre of the Universe, that we have to deny our feelings because they don't suit her fantasy?”

Marina murmurs approval.

“I would never have fallen for her! There's no way, Jose! She doesn't get it and I'm not sure you do either! If you deny me, how does Rosie Fucking Marshall benefit? Does she thinks we're pawns on a chessboard?”

Marina is enchanted.

Meg wriggles. “OK, I get it, but I feel bad, it's like a betrayal precisely because no one chooses who they...she can never see it. It's all personal to her.”

Marina places a hand on Pete's arm.

“There is a ‘best way' to do it, Pete.”

“Yeah, how?”

“You tell her to her face, that you know of her feelings and yours can only ever be friendship. Tell her there's someone you love, who is with someone else, so you know how she feels.”

“That's damned well true.”

“Good. Then after a little time, you and Meg 'come out', so to speak, if that's what you want. Meg?”

Marina is in her element.

“That does seem the least horrible way to do it.” Time, it buys me time, thinks Meg.

“How long is a little time?” Pete is frowning.
Meg smiles to herself. We are on the same wavelength all right.

“At least a few weeks. This way you get Meggie here off the hook. You really need to do that, Pete. Meg will suffer such guilt! And be very vulnerable to Rosie and it could divide the group because Rose is so self-centred. This way, you take responsibility and Rosie will see you did the pursuing, not Meg.”

Meg is overwhelmed with gratitude.

“Pete?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s OK, darling. I’ve got it.”

“So, we’ll go that way?”

“Yep.”

Oh beautiful, fluid relief.

“Rina?”

“Meg?”

“Wanna dance with us?”

“Oh, I’d love to, I’ll get them to play Kylie, OK, Meg?”

“Yes! We’ll be there in a sec.”

Marina undulates towards the newly befriended DJ.

Pete pulls Meg back out onto the balcony. “We’ve both got stuff to do, now don’t we?”

“Mmm.”

“But listen, Meg. I need to be with you. You gonna get on with this?”
“Yes. I will.”

“OK. In the meantime, I need to see you. You know what I mean. Get a taste of what’s to come.”

“Oh.”

“OK?”

“Of course. We are friends. Friends do stuff.”

“I don’t think they do the stuff I’ve got in mind.”

More shivery, delicious.

“OK, well, it won’t be long before…I promise, Pete.”

“Before what?” He draws her close to him again, his hands on her bum.

“Y-you know.”

“Don’t play so coy.”

He kisses her neck, chewing at it.

“Pete?”

“Mmmh?”

“We have to go dance.”

“In a sec.” He draws up and folds her tenderly in his arms. He feels so strong and warm. Meg melts. He feels it and tightens his hold.

“Let’s see if we can dance without my intentions being completely obvious, eh?”

Meg giggles. She feels a sudden rush of euphoria.

“Well, no one else will be surprised if we, er, flirt, will they?”
They snake through the crowded room, spotting Marina, Rosie, Dave and Kelly dancing in a tight little cage. Rosie can’t dance by Meg’s standards, especially compared with Marina who has rhythm oozing from her pores. But Meg has always felt warm towards Rose because of her enthusiasm for just having a damn good time. “Let’s dance!”, she says and cares not for how she might look. This loosens up the boys, none of whom can dance naturally, and has led to many fabulous evenings of fun.

Pete and Meg slide into the square. They have done this so many times that it does not feel strange, although the euphoria is giving way to a sense of fading reality which Meg has not experienced recently. Is this happening? She moves comfortably to Kylie’s Got To Be Certain while contemplating the very immediate dilemma facing her. Leave Jason? Find somewhere to live. They’ve been married one year. Her family will have kittens. I know what they’ll say, thinks Meg. You should never have gotten married. Right you are.

Soon this won’t even be possible, thinks Meg. Rosie’ll never consider this was Pete’s doing; it will all be me. It’ll change everything.

Pete is making googoo eyes at her. Meg laughs almost involuntarily. Dancing around him she realises Rose is watching them. Unsmiling. What to do? Nothing. Come what may. I want this, she thinks. I want it. Australian Crawl’s Reckless is on again, making dancing difficult for the unrhythmic. Pete leads Meg back to the table.

He leans in to whisper, “Whadya wanna drink?” and plants a wet kiss in her neck. Sparks run through her.

“Um, lemon, lime and bitters, please.”

He nods and wanders to the bar. Kelly returns and throws herself into her chair. She is panting but looks at fresh and smooth as she did at 7pm.

“Oh, Meg. Exhausted? I am!”

“Yep. More fun than aerobics.”
They laugh.

“Where’s Rosie?”

Kelly hesitates.

“What?”

“She’s …gone out for some air.”

“Is something wrong?”

Kelly glances around.

“Well, she’s feeling a bit low.”

Meg is silent.

“She just struggles to accept that Pete’s feelings lie in a different direction.”

Meg glances up, startled.

“They do?”

Kelly laughs. “You know that, Miss!!”

“Er, well… I didn’t know anyone else did.”

“If you were a blind-mute insensitive, you might miss it.”

Both girls ignore the implication.

“But his friends - and yours - couldn’t miss it. I’ve always known it was just a matter of time for you, Rosie has a …different perspective.”

“You’ve discussed it with her?”

“Oh, yes. She’s fond of asking that helpful question, ‘Why can’t he just love me?’”
“Oh.”

“And I try to suggest that experience teaches us that it doesn’t work that way.”

“But because of me being married, too. She was at my wedding, for God’s sake. She thought I was safe… I guess. She must think I’m…awful…”

“Well, as I say Meg, shit happens. You didn’t really wanna get married. We could all see that. I’m afraid Rosie is a bit inclined to be… self absorbed. Also, she is in love with the idea. Of course, I wouldn’t say these things in front of anyone but you. I know you’re scared of hurting her. No one can be expected to sacrifice their own happiness…”

“I was so afraid I’d be rejected for doing this to her.”

“I think she’s the only one doing it.”

“So, Kelly…?”

“Yes?”

“If Pete and I are together and I lose Rosie…”

“You won’t.”

“But if…she takes it very badly…”

“Yes?”

“I won’t lose you?”

Kelly’s mouth is open. “Meg! I’m your friend! Of course you can’t lose me. You are so stuck with me.” Kelly races around the table to hug Meg as Pete returns with the drinks. “Meggle, put that out of your mind.”

“Oi! What’s all this then?” Pete does his English bobby impersonation.
“Oh, I was just explaining to Meg that we will all love her no matter what.” Kelly grins broadly at Pete.

Pete stops sharply, the drinks aloft. He is looking at Kelly. Meg can see gratitude in his face. How silly I was to think Rose can control Kelly, she thinks. Kelly is her own person.

Dave hobbles back to the table and groans as he sinks into a chair.

“Those ball sluts surely should be better dancers if they go to all the balls, eh? That train they’ve formed ran me over twice..”

“Eh, Dave! Our Jen’s in there.”

Dave laughs. “Oh, I’m sure Jen’s proud of the title ball slut. I’ll ask her…”

It occurs to Meg that, in the absence of Rosie, this joshing is not hurtful or critical but done in fun. I’ve always been so defensive, she thinks. Jen doesn’t mind the word slut. But like so many things, Dave has said, it is good natured. Yet again, Meg is struck full on by another potential way of being. She feels this knowledge take root.

Jen is laughingly bashing Dave with a large serviette, while numerous other ball sluts congregate around them. Marina and Kelly are pretending to defend him, cat-calling across the empty tables. Jack is beaming, caught up in the reflected glory of the attention of four beautiful young women. Jen calls to Jack.

“You wouldn’t do such a thing, would you, Jacques?”

Jack rises to the occasion.

“Non, non, mademoiselle. Le gentleman.”

His accent is shocking. Jen’s fellow ball sluts turn to stare at him. He flushes.

“Oh, I knew you were, darling. I could just see it. Nice guys finish first, David.”
“First? First date, more like it. Where’d I start? Right about here?” Dave makes a grab and Jen mock shrills. “Jack, help!”

Her three fellow ball sluts run towards Jack, also mock screaming. Thus there are three minimally clad girls simpering around Jack when Rose returns to their table.

Pete’s arm has been loosely slung behind Meg, and his fingers have once or twice traced her shoulder blades. Meg is so conscious of that arm and Rosie’s laser gaze that she tenses all through her body. But Rosie is far more concerned with Jack and Dave.

“Friends of yours, Jack?”

Is the harshness of the flat vowels emphasised?

“Er, friends of Jen’s actually, Rose.”

Jack is always completely polite.

“Are they joinin’ us?”

The ball sluts look perplexed and their noses wrinkle. Jack’s face is suddenly a picture of misery.

“Sure. Ladies?” He pulls out a chair. But the ball sluts are leaving. One kisses him on the cheek. Kelly and Marina still kneel on their chairs, now silent. Jen and Dave, spotting the tension, have stopped their game and converse in low voices.

So quickly with the arrival of Rose, the silly affectionate fun is over. We are a miserable lot now, thinks Meg. Poor Jack; that was cruel.

“Well done, Rose”. Meg can hardly believe she has actually spoken aloud, let alone in that hard tight voice. Marina and Pete stare at her. Jack sits down. Rosie is eating. An apple. Brought from home.

“Whatdya mean?” Nonchalant.
“I mean, you’ve cleverly chased away the fun we were having and now we’re miserable again. Well done. Keep that fun rationed.”


“I was being a bit silly, I guess, Meg.”

“We’re at a ball, mate. We’re with our friends. When’s a better time to be silly?”

Rosie snorts but Meg ignores her.

“Why shouldn’t we enjoy ourselves together? These are times we’ll look back on; I want to remember when we nearly lost Jacques the gentleman to a bevy of ball sluts.”

Everyone laughs. Jack is beaming.

“You are right as always, Meg.” Rosie looks at Kelly in horror. “Balls are for lettin’ your hair down. So, let’s.” Kelly jumps up, pulling Marina behind her. “Let’s go cruising the room for action. Jack knows where he can get some. What about the rest of us? Let’s do our own train.”

An extended mix of Reckless fills the room.

“Let’s be so reckless!” screams Kelly.

Rosie stands still, mouth open. Pete is following Kelly’s trail, behind Meg. He leans into her neck.

“No action for you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m serious, Meg.”

Megs spins to face him.

“Me, too.” She gives him her velvety look. He smiles. “I wanna look back at tonight fondly.”
“Oh, I think you will.”

Kelly is dancing provocatively beside Marina, lifting her hair sexily off her neck and floating away with the music. Rosie is a dot on the other side of the room. Meg feels… not guilt, suddenly, but … pity. These are good friends. Rosie wastes them. A totally different ball slut is now wrapping her arms around Jack’s neck. They are dirty dancing. Pete spins Meg and draws her into his arms, rocking her. Dave dances Jen madly by in a rigid tango. Meg is overcome with laughter.

Then Rosie is there, throwing herself around in no relation to Australian Crawl. Fortunately, Toni Basil’s Mickey comes on. They all leap into disco action. Everyone accepts Rose’s presence. She is dancing alongside Jack and his ball slut. Kelly and Marina join her. Pete continues holding Meg, although he has quickened the beat. Meg feels some profound, new quality descend.
**Future Present**

Meg shifts her weight and lifts her heavy black fringe off her sweaty forehead. The queue out of the Bookroom is fifteen metres long and the March sun is reflecting the 38oC temperature. Why, Meg wonders, do we return to Uni in the hottest month of the year?

The queue inches forward. Thousands of new first years chat, craning their necks- where should I be? Meg finds them tiresome when standing in the sun. Once she gets inside it’ll be packed and then twenty minutes to queue again to pay and get out. But it has to be done today or her crucial reading schedule will be thrown. Pete is a time consuming luxury and he considers only study an excuse for Meg’s distraction.

Meg notices Kelly in the queue ahead of her, but she does not call out. Meg had thought she and Kelly would be friends, but that promise has lessened. The events of the last twelve months have irrevocably changed their group. Pete still hangs with Dave, Jack, Kelly and Rosie but Meg feels distinctly the discomfort of all when she joins them. Rosie has never let go of her jealousy and it is all directed at Meg. Kelly had no choice. She had to be primarily Rosie’s friend. Meg is now relegated to the role of Pete’s girlfriend, as much her own doing as theirs, although she knows Pete likes it. He would like to be a conduit for all aspects of her life. So different from Jason. Strange…that was so much a part of the attraction.

Meg shakes herself. Gemma Nolan is strolling across the courtyard and stops to chat to Meg. Gemma was in Meg’s first year philosophy class and they study education together. Gemma is one of the Eastern suburbs private school girls Rosie loves to hate. She has corkscrew brown curls, is very slightly, beautifully plump, with creamy skin and loads of confidence. She wears long flowing black chiffon garments that Meg wouldn’t know where to find. Gemma wears her sunnies - Raybans- all the time, pushing them up onto her head when indoors or wishing to make eye contact. She is one of those fascinating girls who is perfectly groomed, reads and writes constantly and drinks two litres of water a day and yet carries a small bag. Where is the paraphernalia Meg requires to do those same things? This less is more philosophy is very Vogue, but where the hell do you put the stuff you need to achieve it?
Gemma smiles in a feline way.

“Hellishly hot, isn’t it?”

“Yes, hardly study weather.”

“Thank God for air-conditioning.”

“Wish I had it. I have to go to Lygon Court.”

“My dad knew we wouldn’t study without it. You live in Carlton, Meg?”

“Yeah, I share a flat with my boyfriend.”

“Great to be so close.”

“Oh, it’s cool. Coffees, brekky, dinner, cakes…”

“I’d never be able to resist.”

“Carlton has caused me to gain three kilos.”

“Well, you obviously needed to. You’re so skinny!”

Meg is surprised. “You think? I think I’m rounding out a bit!”

“Well, good. Skinny isn’t pretty- yuk! Some of these hat racks really worry me.”

Meg is perplexed. Gemma doesn’t want to be thin?

“I thought thin was chic.”

“I don’t get that. Historically, thin means poor. How is that chic?”

“Ye-es, I guess….”

“Men like flesh on you, Meg!”

Meg smiles weakly. What about women?
“What’re you buying?”

“Um, some readers for ESL; language teaching books, pop. culture. Are you doing that?”

“Nah, did it last year.”

“Oh.”

“Loved it. He’s great, Nick.”

“Yes, isn’t he? I love him too.”

“Camp as a row of tents.”

Meg is shocked.

“Do you think…but isn’t he married?”

Gemma roars with laughter. “They’re not mutually exclusive, Meg! Ever heard of Virginia and Vita?”

“Yes…”

“Well, they had real live hubbies, didn’t they?”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose…”

“Oh, Meg! You’re so naïve….”

Meg feels flustered and downcast.

“Nick Priget is a great teacher.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that he’s gay! I just didn’t get it…”

Gemma pats Meg’s arm.

“We’ve got that special English lecture this week. Let’s sit together.”
“OK. Marina is coming too. We’ll have fun.”

“Ah, Marina. She’s a very bright spark under all that costume jewellery.”

“Ye-es.”

“See you, Meg.”

“Bye…”

Meg has noticed that certain girls of her acquaintance do not say ‘see ya’ but always ‘see you’. In spite of Rosie’s derision, Meg has taken it up.

The queue is about to cross the threshold of the Bookroom. Meg stows her bag and squirms through the milling throng, wallet and booklist in hand. The required texts add up to $125. Meg feels very moral spending money in this sensible way. Before she sees another bag she has to have.

Pete used to joke about Meg’s fetish for bags before he moved in with her. Now he struggles to hide his horror.

“No! Another one?”

“Well…I needed one for research days…”

“You’ve got six backpacks!”

“Not in black…..”

“Black! They’re all bloody black…”

“…leather.”

“This is why it’s always a struggle for you to pay your fees and buy books, let alone do anything with me. You can afford it if you’d stop buying bloody bags and notebooks!”
Meg is so embarrassed. He is right. For a while he thought it was cute. Now she hides her purchases from him.

Having purchased her text books, Meg heads to the Barry Library, finds her designated study carrel and begins to immerse herself in the life and verse of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson was a great choice for the fourth year research project. Her verse is accessible and exciting. And her life! Meg loves this research. There is so much to probe. So many books on Dickinson, and such contest and debate. She loves seeing the various links develop and deepen and feeling the jolts within her as her insights quicken. There is much speculation over whether Emily had lovers. Male critics dismiss this as unlikely. Yet Emily’s sexual life lived in verse:

*Wild Nights, Wild Nights*

*Were I with thee*

*Wild nights would be*

*Our luxury*

Men fiddled with Dickinson’s unique punctuation, too. It was nearly 100 years after her death that a true volume was published. It makes Meg seethe. But Ted Hughes changed Plath’s layout of *Ariel* and in spite of lots of criticism, no corrected edition has appeared. They say Hughes burned Plath’s last journals. And her second novel. In part, these issues have impelled Meg’s project. Her feminist readings grow ever stronger.

She reads most of a text on Austin Dickinson and his annexing of his sisters’ help with his infidelity. Emily did help. This is significant, Meg thinks.

At 2 pm Meg heads off to her tutoring commitment. She earns $20 an hour helping an overseas student improve his language and written skills. She loves it. It brings in $60 each week and should be enough to supplement Austudy but Meg spends money like water and so works in a catering firm three lunchtimes per week. This way she keeps her financial head above water.

Meg’s routine is exhausting and she knows it could crack her soon but for the moment it is easier not to have too much time to think. Pete is not the source of solace and comfort that he once was and Meg has that greasy,
too-hard-to-think about feeling that she may have made a mistake. Living in Carlton is fabulous and so much of her new life is exciting and fulfilling. Better to be busy, pack a lot in, enjoy it while it lasts.

Back to the Library, to read for a few chapters before heading home. It is hot there and Pete constantly interrupts her. All this running around in the heat makes Meg cross and resentful and she and Pete can bicker like crazy once they start.

Meg plows through articles on teaching theory, reading less than one third of her intended allotment. I always overestimate what I can do, she thinks. But Emily is a different matter: Meg wishes she could just write a feminist biography of the poet, as her life is so interesting. Dickinson would not be reduced to the prim New England enclave where she lived. She broke out and spilled the pain and tumult into poems which challenged all assumptions about poetry at that time. Meg feels so scholarly when she works on her Dickinson project.

The afternoon is still bright and buzzingly hot when Meg emerges from the Barry to head home. She enjoyed Carlton much more in the winter and spring. The women who emerge from the University and alight from trams are all so cool and uncrumpled compared with Meg, who simply cannot escape the impact of the heat on her appearance. In winter she loves to pace down Palmerston Street stylishly in her retro gear. But retro summer is not so easy.

The early Carlton evening is fine and clear, with a warm breeze which carries the promise of something cooler. At Neill Street, children play at skipping with an enormous rope; a group of Turkish boys play a form of soccer, and many different cries fill the air. Meg greets Mr Puddles, the fat black and white cat who lives on the corner and hates the heat as much as she does. Then she checks the mail and runs up the concrete steps to let herself into the first floor flat she shares with Pete Danville.

They have lived together nearly eight months. For most of that time Meg has run to Pete wherever he is and been greeted with a passionate kiss, and quite often, a short sharp fuck up against a wall. Tonight she doesn’t announce her arrival over Pete’s cooking and the Chopin he loves to play. She dumps her stuff on her desk and goes straight onto the balcony. Pete has set the small table. There are wine glasses. He drinks wine every
night. Meg never drank wine at home until she met him. Pete judges this as odd. Meg feels both resentful and a failure as a result.

“Meggle?” Pete emerges from the kitchen with a tea towel around him as an apron. He has the stove going full blast. Meg likes to eat cold on nights like this. Pete thinks that is silly.

“Say hello, why doncha?”

He leans in to kiss her hard. She runs her hand down his thigh in greeting.

“Mmmh. It’s too hot.”

“For what? Cooking. Now sex? No wonder you talk about putting your life on hold for summer….”

“Well, I hate it.”

“I can take your mind off it, babe.”

He runs his hand around her neck and pushes her head down towards him. She resists.

“C’mon Meg! We haven’t done it since Sunday!”

“It’s Tuesday!”

“That’s the longest we’ve ever gone.”

“The rot’s setting in, obviously.”

He looks at her. He looks sad and angry.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing. Really. Hard day and I hate the heat.”

“How was your day, Pete? Oh, fabulous, I slept all day.”
Meg is contrite.

“I'm sorry, darling.” His face melts. “How was your day?”

“OK. I had history method. It’s really good. Fabulous ideas for teaching history.

“All your mates are there.”

“Yeah, we have a blast.”

“How’s Rosie?”

“She’s fine. I really think she’s come to terms with it. She treats me totally normally.”

“Yes. It's me she hates.”

“Meg, rubbish, you’re way too….”

“I know. Listen, what’s for dinner?”

“Lamb cutlets in orange sauce, potatoes and salad. OK?”

“Sounds mega.”

“Meg-a!”

He pulls her up to him and holds her tight while sliding his tongue into her mouth. Meg feels the stirrings of lust begin. Until recently it was overwhelming. Now she has to help it along. She kisses him back, knowing that inflaming his passion will cause him to ignite hers. She has learnt a lot in her time with Pete.

“Meg”, increasing urgency in her ear. She slips her hands under his shirt. She likes doing this. He has a man’s body and it thrills her. He is thrusting against her now. He pulls her inside the flat and pushes her down on the floor.

“What about the cutlets?”
“Turned ‘em off.”

This time, when he pushes her head down, Meg does not resist. There are so many things on which they see eye to eye. He never comes in her mouth and he never comes before her. She knows that her orgasm is everything for him. Yet something has changed between them. Even as he slides into her and captures her ass with his hands, kneading it just the way she loves and cradling her so she comes hard and fast, Meg is wondering, what is it that has changed?

**********************************************************************************

Early mornings in Carlton are beautiful. Pete is an early riser, which is part of the protestant work ethic Meg has since discovered runs deep in him. At 6 am he is kneeling on the bed with a mug of tea for her and kissing her neck, and whispering “muff dive?”. Meg has long since abandoned complaining or refusing. She no longer giggles hysterically or even wriggles as she used to do with Jason. She knows Pete’s determination will wear her down and it is sweet how he sincerely wants her to come that way.

“Pete! I’m never gonna come that way.” He leans on an elbow and gazes up at her.

“You’re determined not to, eh?”

“No! I just….it doesn’t work for me. Darling, you’re very sweet to try”, she wheedles, “and I do try to get into it, but I’d so much rather, you know…” He smiles and slides up the bed, “after I drink my tea, OK?”

But Meg doesn’t quite get to the bottom of the cup. As he showers and she drinks her second cup she considers that things must be OK in their relationship. He can still arouse her so totally. He has to touch her now, whereas even a few weeks ago the sight of him did it. But sex is not the issue. It obscures the issue. The kernel of the germ of the seed of the issue is in there, some deep cavernous place, and Meg is not sure how to locate it. Or even that she wants to.

It is this life, with its tiny, beautiful shiny bits plaited into the duller twine, so much more prosaic than Meg would have believed. When Pete told her
his feelings, that he wanted to be with her, Meg thought only of the
difficulty, the obstacles, and, when those were startlingly easily
surmounted, of the allegory of the experience. I can create a new life. I
can architect it, and shape it around me. I need only a catalyst to slide
back the drapes shading possibility. And therein lies the answer. Pete
was the catalyst. Is that all he is?

It is so hard to name where and how parts of their life became pedestrian.
Carlton is alive, cosmopolitan, all promise. They are managing financially
and it would be easy were Meg not a spendthrift. But Pete does not see
the same strands of life as shiny. Shiny to him is common sense, getting
a teaching degree, a job, buying a house and having kids. Meg can’t quite
believe he means it. It is in the comments, the asides. Why do postgrad?
Teachers earn what they earn; postgrad won’t help.

She can rehearse their exchange in her head. Why would you think I’m
doing it to earn more? Why else? What about that I love it, it makes me
sing, that I’m good at it? It doesn’t pay, he says.

Pete emerges from the shower, gleaming. He is beautiful. He fucks
brilliantly. He is caring and loving. He cooks and cleans. All that is wrong
is…..he has no aspiration. For her.

“Gonna get up, Meggle?”

“Yeah! When you’ve cleared out.”

“Whatcha doin’ today?”

Good day.”

“Try and eat lunch today.”

“I don’t feel like it after serving 750 lunches, I swear I lose interest.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to work there if you’d rein in a bit. Only buy
things you need.”

“Our definitions of need are probably different.”
“Yeah. Listen, I’ve got a meeting at Mount Lilydale College today, so I’ll be late. Will you cook?”

“I’ll make something cold.”

Pete’s jaw sets.

“Well, I hate turning on the stove when it’s 38 degrees!”

“It’s gunna change this arvo.”

“If it changes I’ll make pasta. Otherwise a salmon salad or something.”

“Great. No lunch and a rabbit meal for dinner.’

“Stop nagging. What’s so good about Mount Lilydale that they get to interview you for teaching rounds?”

“I’ll get it. Dad’s gunna lend me the car. I’ll feel a bit obvious turning up in a clapped out Holden with all those Magna’s and 929s.”

“You’re a student!”

“Yeah, but still. It’s a good school.”

Meg knows Pete is not referring to the quality of the education. She has abandoned her usual practice of defining and debating good.

“Is that why you wanna do rounds there?”

“Statistically, lots of student teachers get offers from the school where they do their longest round. I really wanna work there.”

Meg shrieks and leaps off the bed.

“What, next year? Eeech! It’s in Lilydale!!”

“Yeah, exactly, good school, lots of two parent families, high anglo, and house prices are still realistic. It’s perfect for us.”
“Us! Are you crazy?” The young guy next door bangs on the wall. Meg drops her voice. “Don’t you know there’s NO WAY I’m living in Lilydale?”

“Ah, Meg. We’ve gotta grow up, graduate. You too, my darling.”

“Yuk! I’ve got another year, Pete.”

“Yeah, I know, but you’ll have a lighter load. You can limit it to a coupla days if you pick subjects right.”

Meg is flabbergasted.

“I’m overloading next year, idiot! I’m taking four history units! It’ll be my heaviest year yet! I had no idea you were thinking this way.”

Pete sits on the bed to do up his shoes. Meg contemplates him. I’m not sure if I know him, she thinks. But I know he doesn’t know me.

He turns to her suddenly. “Listen, Meggle. I’m happy to be the one to guide us. I don’t mind at all. Once I’m earning, I manage our income, it’ll all fall into place. And then you’ll see our house and suddenly you’ll fall in love with graduating. You’ll start to see that whole Mrs Danville thing….it’ll be much better this time.”

“I’ve never been Mrs anything AND I NEVER WILL! HAVE YOU GOT THAT?”

Pete is smiling with a ‘you can’t get to me’ expression. Meg feels hysterical with rage and frustration. The exhausting scary business of getting out falls like a screen in front of her eyes.

They eat breakfast in silence; Pete is smug in the certainty that he will prevail. He sees her attitude as childish. Meg realises this now. Sex is where I’m grown up, she thinks. That’s why it works. But even that is cracking under this strain. Move to Lilydale and marry Pete? She’d only be a few lifeless minutes from her life with Jason. How could this have happened. Her life took this huge deviation and she is back so close to where she was. Pete isn’t Jason. He’s much stronger and more determined.
Pete gulps instant coffee and rises.

“I’m off. Coming?”

“No. You can see I’m not ready.”

“Could you remain civil, please?”

Oh, listen to him. The camp quality that disappeared when she fell in love with him has reappeared lately. It’s me, Meg thinks. My gaze is some sort of filter.

Pete leaves without attempting to kiss her. Another first. Meg has a slimy bothered feeling throughout her shower and it is only as she walks up Palmerston Street that she realises what is behind it. Two parent families and high anglo? What was that? It reminds her of some other small minded person; who? It hits Meg with a start so physical she stops dead, and two Newman students crash into her. It is Rosie Marshall he reminds her of.

Oh, God.

Meg is shaking. And sweating profusely. It is 33oC at 9 am. She can’t possibly go to Pop Culture now. She heads to the Philip Union Cafeteria. Philip Student Union has lots of catering outlets but Meg’s favourite is the old style cafeteria, where you can buy lousy coffee for fifty cents and operate the machine yourself. It looks like the cafes you see in American college movies.

Meg buys her fifty cent coffee and a huge over-iced chocolate yeast donut. All the gourmet cakes of Carlton are within reach but Meg does not think it right to see chocolate therapy in elite terms. Why don’t I lose my appetite when I fall out of love? she wonders. I do when I fall in love.

So what to do? Pete has so much going for him. Meg composes a list of his pros and cons.

**Pros Cons**
attractive
  tall
  strong
  good lover
  has aspirations

Cons

Camp
Racist
Elitist
Conservative
Aspirations are inimical
None are for me

The number is even but for an extra on the cons list. Meg racks her to think of another for the pros so the list will be even. The only one she can think of is Pete’s earning power. He works hard and saves and pays a lot of their living expenses. But Meg does not want to write that down. It is a terrible thing to make tangible about yourself, that a man’s earning power might be reason to stay with him. What about independence? Meg has many quivering thoughts and beliefs about herself which make her uncomfortable; one of them is her willingness to let a man support her. It works with Pete because he wants to be that sort of man, with a little woman. He sees her shopping addiction as a sign of a silly little girl who needs a strong husband to mature her.

Oh, goodness.

The last con is dripping off the end of the pen. Unwritten. Meg remembers how you do this exercise. You need to have less than 3 cons OR a minimum of 5 pros to every con.

Forget it. She writes down the last con.

Boring

What now?
Meg cannot really think of what to do next. She doesn’t want to break up with him. That idea gives her knots in her stomach. She just left Jason, for Pete. She is not yet divorced. If she and Pete split up, she’ll look so stupid. Better to try a new focus with him. It doesn’t feel good but the knots dissipate a bit.

As she cross the campus heading to her meeting with Dr Segnall, Meg spies Kelly sticking up posters on a bollard. Kelly is now very active in the Philip Wilderness Society. Meg feels a rush of sadness. Neither of them have much time or opportunity to see each other.

“Hey, Kel.”

“Meggle! How ya doin’? Lovin’ this weather, I’ll bet!”

Meg is reminded that it is unpleasantly hot. God, I hadn’t noticed, she thinks.

“Yuk, isn’t it?”

Kelly stares at Meg.

“Bothering you a lot, is it?”

Meg shrugs.

“You look so low. Are you OK…Meg?”

Meg’s eyes have filled with tears.

“Kelly, I’ve gotta see Segnall for half an hour. Please could you meet me afterwards? I’ll skip Ed. D. Please?”

“Sure, honey. This is not like you, eh?”

Kelly’s soft arm on Meg’s shoulder threatens to undo her. Meg suddenly realises how isolated she is- she has not seen Marina in weeks except in class. Jen never calls; Pete dislikes her. I have been losing my friends, Meg thinks.
“Meg? I’ll be in the Gelman Café at 10.30, OK?”

“Thank you,” moistly.

“Sweetie, it’s OK.”

Dr Segnall is a firm favourite of Meg’s. She loves talking to him, he never misses a trick. When she appears in the door of his book-lined office, he gazes intently at her, clears a chair and offers her a tissue.

“Am I to conclude that it is not the tortured soul of Emily Dickinson that is moving you?”

Meg giggles wetly.

“'Fraid not. She does move me, but….”

“Not to this extent, not too often, I hope.”

“No. I’m loving the work, I’ve got lots of ideas about the Master, but…”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure…I do you wish to discuss what is distressing you, m’dear?”

Meg looks into the heavy jowled, ruddy face of Keith Segnall. She studied *The English Novel* with him. He is like someone she imagines from Oxford or Cambridge, except he is warm and kind. Once, when they did *Middlemarch*, one of the Real Feminists gave a precis of the novel and said that Dorothea ends up with Will, throws off convention and Casaubon’s cruelty and then ‘turns into a baby farm’. Dr Segnall had great forbearance but gently remonstrated, saying ‘she only had one’. It has taken Meg three years to understand the gender politics which underpinned this exchange. But she can forgive Seggers such is his generosity in other ways.

“I’ve mucked up my life. Again. I never seem to know what I want until I’m past that particular fork in the road. I’m always so sure about the path when I choose it.” I sound so dumb, still, Meg thinks. Four years later.

“Is it the road less travelled, perhaps?”
“Well, you know, I think that’s the point. I don’t want to miss any road! And then I don’t really like them or I discover it doesn’t go where I thought, or something.”

Dr Segnall is trying to suppress a smile.

“Forgive me, I would never patronise you, Meg. But I think what ever it is need not be so..disastrous, eh? Do you want to tell me?”

“It's pretty sordid actually.”

“I’m more worldly than you might think.”

“Well, I got married. In second year. Stupidly, knowing full well....”

“Yes. I hear you.”

“And at the Ball, last year, I became involved with one of the guys- he’d been my mate, a really dear friend, for years....”

“Yes?”

“And I left Jason- my husband. Only twelve months....but that part was right, I know. And I moved in with Pete... it was great, amazing but....”

“But.”

“Well, in part, it’s still great but...he wants... such a different life. He’s about to graduate and he wants... and I want to do...I don't know, more. And then today he tells me...” She sobs.

“Yes m'dear?”

“He’s a - a racist. He’s... he’s got horrible values. I just don’t want the life he wants and he thinks it’s because I’m childish and self-indulgent.”

Meg’s sobs deepen.

Dr Segnall whistles, eyebrows raised.
“Of course, you’ll be feeling dreadful. This weather, of which we neither of us are fans, I know. Your onerous study load. And now, this. Ms Flanagan, I know that you already know the answer. With your questing mind..., Meg blushes, “you will have identified what you need to do. But I caution you. Aspiration, the seeking of dreams, can make others very uncomfortable. They can be downright destructive in their response. You must guard yourself. You know where you are headed, and I know your reserves of courage are great.”

“I think I’m a scaredy cat!” Meg is surprised by her own vehemence.

“Of course. Remember, courage doesn’t mean being unafraid. It is progressing in the face of fear. You name your fears and front up to ‘em, squarely. You of all people can do that, I know.”

Meg turns her teary face up to him.

“Why did I do this?”

“Well, m’dear, we are not islands. Seeking after dreams can be very lonely, as can marriage to the wrong person. That takes courage to acknowledge. But you are getting stronger. Of course, you can make peace with all this at your pace. No rush. Venture slowly so you have time to smell the roses. There is nothing wrong with wanting to venture down all the paths. Don’t admonish yourself for your hunger. This something more you want, I’d say it is written in the stars. You are a born scholar. Sick to your guns, go with your gut and other clichés. And as for the racism…”

“That was awful. I didn’t know.”

“Once again, it is attributable to fear. Always allow for people’s childish, rigid fears. They will emerge, again and again. You are less troubled by fear, so this is not such an issue for you, I think.”

“It just exhausts me to think of moving on. But you’re right. I need to start rescuing myself, rather than letting others do it.”

“That is a very good resolution, my dear. Now, can you come back this time next week and tell me your theories about Dickinson’s Master?”
“Yes! Thank you, Dr Segnall. I feel a lot better.”

“Ah. Take care of yourself, Meg.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Meg feels lighter as she crosses the campus to the Gelman Café. Kelly is reading a geography journal. Her glossy dark hair is caught in a short band at her neck. She is so beautiful, thinks Meg. I’ve missed her.

“Hi, Kel.”

“Meggle.” Kelly jumps up to embrace her. “You look better, now. Of course, you love Seggers. Did he have words of comfort and wisdom for you?”

“Actually, he’s a genius. He totally understands. I told him I was married, left after 12 months. Not a flicker. He’s so … wise!”

“Only judgemental people worry about stuff like that. You didn’t want to marry Jason…”

“No! I was weak….”

“That’s harsh. There was pressure, obviously….”

“Well, yes, but there always is. It hasn’t gone at all, it just changes. I think…I think I made a mistake, Kel.”

Kelly leans forward.

“With what? Not…leaving?…”

“No! With Pete.” Meg looks ashamed. Kelly is silent, startled.

“You - you don’t love him?”
“Um. No. But, I never loved him. I liked him. He is so handsome…", she blushes, "…and he was very strong and he was so into me. Oh, I'm pathetic..."

Kelly smiles. “Doesn’t sound bad. I’d like it too, I think. But you thought you loved him?”

“Did I? I don’t think so. I wanted something different from Jason. I got it. He was so sure. He still is. I wanted that certainty. But he’s sure about what he wants and that’s the problem. I’m sure, too. That I don’t want it.”

“What? Meaning?”

“Well, you know, at first, it was about us, the relationship….the sex…", Kelly smiles, "…but now, it’s about us, separately, what we want as people. And it’s different. Totally. I mean, when he talked me into being with him, he talked of facing fear and being hungry for life and I’m a sucker for all that….”

“Who wouldn’t be?”

“Well, I don’t know, Kel. I think it was just talk. It was … manipulative. But I so wanted to believe it. I want that stuff, facing fear, being hungry. I hate trying to work it out alone…”

“Phew, you are tough on yourself.”

Meg is silent.

“Meg?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been meaning to ring or write or something…”

“Yes?”

“Because I feel awful, sad, and sorry, that I promised you’d never lose me and you …sort of have….“
Meg looks directly at Kelly.

“…not in principle, of course not. But in practice. You’ve slid out of our group. And my intentions were always good, I promise, but Rosie took it so badly…”

“I know.”

“…and you seemed to avoid us! And I wasn’t sure…I know that’s silly, because we spoke of it, but I wasn’t comfortable….”

“Fair enough, Kel. It was awful. It was just easier to move sideways. I always knew she’d blame me and overlook Pete’s role.”

“Well, I was surprised at how he allowed her to do that. He is very…placatory towards her….”

“Really.”

“Well, yeah, I think….he seems, I dunno, not so bothered by you stepping out of the group as I would have expected.”

“Yes. His talk and action are two different things. Don’t worry, I know this. But the talk is so seductive!”

“And you knew you didn’t love him when…when…?”

“I know. Sounds so dodgy, doesn’t it? I was so confused about the whole thing. I was infatuated with Pete largely because he was so 180 degrees away from Jason, and because he flattered me so much, always calling me beautiful and sexy, it felt fabulous…oh, I know, Kelly, that’s disgusting…I know. But the sexual thing…it seemed real. It still does, but it’s been cut down by this…attitude he has.”

“What?”

“Oh, he wants me to get out of school, teach, buy a house, have babies, be Mrs Danville…”

Kelly laughs, a rich full sound.
“Does he know you?” she jokes.

They stare at each other.

“Well, I guess that is the question.”

“I hated the way he used to talk you down…Meg, don’tcha wanna coffee?”

“Yeah, ‘course, but I wanna hear this.”

“OK, but let’s go to Lygon Street. We won’t see anyone we know there.” Kelly gives a conspiratorial smile.

The sun is already hazing Faraday Street. The girls set a leisurely pace.

“Do you think Pete always talked me down? Academically?”

“Oh, yeah. Don’t you?”

Meg nods her head.

“Now that you mention it.” Ironically. “He did, he does, hate the idea of post-grad. All the writing I wanna do. I never really saw it before. He hates the student union stuff I’m doing, how I’m getting into the Left and stuff. He whinges about my schedule because he thinks it’s unnecessary. Unnecessary, to fight for things!!”

“Hhhm. Meg, what brought this to a head today?”

“Oh. Well, he literally expects me to live in Lilydale and change my name. That was scary. But in fact…Kel, he made a full-on racist statement.”

They have reached Genevieve’s. Kelly is sliding into a chair in the shade. She stops short and stares at Meg, openmouthed.

“Oh, poor Meg! How awful.”
“Yeah. It was. But I feel better now. I feel stronger. This whole thing is about me…not facing stuff about me. I don’t like facing my weakness. I wanted the financial support. I’m not proud of that.”

Kelly waves a careless hand.

“And the …approbation…admiration. My ego was really stoked. I’m not proud of that either!”

“Meg!”

“…but the truth is, all these things are different potential ways of living…and I’ve always been one for trying different ones that clash at the same time. It’s like unconsciously creating safety nets…”

“It’s very clever!”

“…but it trips you up. At some point I have to commit and choose a way of being. Mrs Danville in Lilydale is light years from Ms Flanagan, post-graduate student in Carlton…”

“That’s much more like it.”

“You think?”

“Oh, Meg! You don’t love him, you’ve torn on the dotted line all the way along. You know. It’s just a question of what to do, I guess. Or rather, how to do it.”

“Yes. I know what to do. I’ll go with what I want. But I’m not rushing anymore.”

“No. That’ll be a new way of living in itself.”

Meg looks at Kelly, startled. Then they both laugh.

“Yes, rushing….big issue. OK. Take it slow.”

“Good. Now, Meg. We have to fix this situation between us.”
“Consider it fixed, Kel.”

“No. Not yet. I want us to be a bit more active, rather than just letting it happen and then it fell through the cracks. I want to do stuff, just us.”

Meg’s eyes fill.

“Kelly! Thank you…Rosie….”

“Hello? I’m going to try living differently, too. I’ve known from the beginning that I wanted us to be friends, I thought it would just happen, but…stuff got in the way…”

“Other people….”

“Yes, and my assumptions. That caused me no end of trouble.”

“You astonish me, Kel.”

“I never allowed for Rose’s….”

“Ah, Rose.”

“Well, I had to learn not to let it happen, rather than just blame her…”

“You are loyal.”

“I hope I am. To you, too, Meg. Loyalty isn’t singular. Friendship shouldn’t be jealous.”

“There’s so much…mess!”

“Well, that’s easily fixed. OK?”

“Kelly, you bet.”

“What to do about Pete?”

“Well, talk to him. I mustn’t do it angry…I’m always angry lately….”
“You are probably exhausted.”

Meg ponders. “You know, I am.”

“Not surprising.” Dryly. “You’ve got three jobs.”

“If he can accept my plans and modify his, for me I mean, then maybe…”

“Oh, so you do love him?”

“Um…I don’t think so. Help!”

“Well, that seems pretty basic to me.”

“Yes…how’s…it…Drew?”

“Andrew. Yes, he’s great. I am a lucky girl.”

“Hah, he’s lucky. How’s Rose with him?”

“Good. She’s happy for me. She’s more understanding than you might think.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Meggie, were you in love with Pete?”

Meg hesitates.

“…because that is actually the primary issue. I reckon.”

Big sigh. “I don’t think I ever was. I am such a superficial person… Kelly, why are you laughing?”

“Oh, very superficial indeed!”

“I think…I have to let it all go. Money. What’ll people think. I worry about all this. I do.”

Kelly sighs.
“I know you do. You get lost in all that. But there’s a lot of strength in you, Meg. You’ve hung onto yourself. You go after what you want… but sometimes…”

Meg shifts in her seat.

“…you stuff yourself up.”

“I’m just trying to do right, or …I don’t know!! I’m sick of always feeling I’ll upset someone if I do what I want. But part of me thinks…I did a really low thing, using Pete to get away from Jason. I can see from other people’s point of view… I didn’t see what I was doing. I hide from myself…I can rationalise anything!! I mean anything, Kelly! This situation is the same.”

Kelly whistles. “Well, I’m other people and that’s not my point of view. I think you’re way too hard on yourself. But even if you really think it’s true, you can choose to change it now. Just be you. Do what you want.”

“I’m afraid….”

“No, you’re not, Meg. You’re not!!”

“I think I’m afraid of being…."

“Yeah? Tell me.”

“Alone. Not having anyone.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t mean a boy! I mean, anyone. A place. People.”

“That’s the whole point of having friends. You never are alone. You’ve got me. Marina. Jen. We’ll never let you down.”

“Kelly.”

“Yes?”
“Nothing, …just…thanks for understanding me.”

Kelly stretches. “Wow, we are so deep. I need a coffee.”

They order coffees and drink them in silence for a while.

“So. Next step?”

“I’m going to housing this afternoon. I’ll see if I can get a PUSH house. Set all that up. Then I’m going to break up with Pete.”

“Um, straight away? You weren’t sure….?”

“Yep. I see now. I just saw before. I laid him down like a stone on a path and stepped on him. I’ve got to step off. It’s rotten to do it to him. And it’s not how I wanna be, either. This is just, like, the sign….”

“The wake up call.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I’m here, Meg. Lean on me.”

Meg squeezes Kelly’s elbow. The sense of support suddenly flows within her.

“I hope you’ll be able to study.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s funny….that’s gotten easier. I escape into it. It drives Pete mad….”

“Why, on earth?”

“He must see something. All that clipping me back…."

“Cutting you down!!”

“Well…yes. I never put it all together ’til now. He saw it in me. I want to study- not for school. Not for classes. Just for the sake of it.”
Kelly smiles. “Keep me posted.”

“I will. I'll call on you often.”

“Come over and have dinner with Drew and I.”

“That'd be nice. I'll need stuff like that.”

“You will be fine, Meg. I know you will.”
**Beyond**

By 1992 Meg had stopped attributing her excellent results to someone else. “Dr Priget brings out the best in me” (true); “You can’t get a bad mark in Feminist Fictions” (untrue); “Pete is a good influence/example/competitor” (partly true). With Pete gone, she began to see that she made her own marks. She did this by burrowing into an idea, connecting a tiny focused picture to a larger one and clearly tracing their relationship. It brought her lots of A’s. Soon, as Meg was fully integrated as a Philip student, she had those beautiful special marks, real University marks. First class honours, division one. H1s.

The burrowing and connecting happened in English more easily than History. History was great, particularly American, taught by Professor Annie Meldrum who was so exotic and suddenly brutal if she took a dislike to you. She gave Meg a ‘very high H2A’. This was in the Philip History Department and Meg was euphoric. Professor Meldrum was like a real scholar who talked about professional historians (Meg’s other teachers never did that) and about how you might ‘take up an issue’, in honours or as an MA thesis. Meldrum was always discussing a phenomenon and saying ‘there’s a BA thesis there’, or ‘there’s an MA topic for someone’. Meg felt the thrilling twinge of possibility… but there was no honours program for Education students. And no one ever talked this way in English. Meg had never even heard about honours. She hovered, wanting to change tracks, afraid of hearing the reasons that may be offered in objection.

It seemed not to concern teaching staff or even fellow students that Education did not have an honours program. It seemed completely unjust to Meg, who raised it at every possible opportunity.

“But I’ve majored in English and History. I have the same number of History subjects as a major sequence and more English subjects, ‘cos I over-enrolled so much…”

“But your degree is in Education, not Arts and you can only do honours in your Faculty.”

“So I’m denied honours? I have the marks.”
“Well, not exactly...you chose Education.”

“I had no information whatsoever!”

This made others uncomfortable.

“Meg, Education is not exactly an academic track. If you choose to change tracks....”

“But you can do a generalist arts degree within it! That disadvantages arts stream people within Education.”

Only Kelly and Gemma were supportive.

“You’ll find a way, Meg.”

And that was true. That was how she was now. That's how you get things you want. So Meg started searching for a way.

The only person Meg knew who was doing honours was Heloise Waul. They met when Meg joined the student Left. Heloise was in the Feminist Collective; she was Philip's new Women’s Officer. Heloise was the only student pollie Meg knew wrote her thesis in English. It was on Body Cities. Meg had no idea what that was or how you wrote an honours thesis on it. And Heloise was smug about study and so dismissive of Education as a major. Still, there was no one else. Meg asked Heloise to have coffee with her on the Coffee Lounge balcony which was the definitive cool place for suede clad, Penguin reading English students.

“Hel, I’m really hoping to do some sort of honours equivalent in English next year but as an Education student I can't do honours in arts. What do you think? An MA prelim?”

Heloise drinks a short macciato, to which Meg cannot relate. Two mouthfuls and it’s gone. But it is very attractive and exotic looking. Meg doesn’t enjoy the taste. She has taken to ordering a long macchiato because it comes in a glass, looks incredibly sophisticated and actually has coffee in it, unlike the milky lattes she is used to. She loves to come to the Coffee Lounge and drink a long mac on the balcony with the beautiful, retro Heloise Waul.
“How about the postgrad. diploma?”

“The what?”

“Postgraduate Diploma. In English- or anything else in Arts for that matter. Cultural studies…”, Heloise runs a quick eye across Meg, “… not really you, I guess. But English, you do three honours seminars, a research methods, and a thesis- 12 000 words. It’s honours for those who didn’t do their BA here. It’s just what you want.”

Heloise neatly sips a tiny mouthful of coffee without disturbing her dark red matte lipstick.


“No, it’s still HECS. Haven’t you got H1’s?”

“Yes. A few.”

“They’ll snap you up. What’ll you do your thesis on?”

Heloise is smoking Marlboro. Meg cannot accustom herself to seeing the beautiful elegant girls smoking Marlboro. They laugh like hyenas at her Alpines.

“Um, on Blake. William Blake. On the dilemma between organised religion and his radical spirituality.”

“Phew. Any feminist dimension at all?”

“Well, not exactly. Blake was progressive on the woman question….“

“Generous of him.”

“…it’s more a socialist perspective.”

“Mmmh”. Is that massive disapproval?

“Who would I talk to about a postgrad diploma?”
“David Bracken would be good. Or Michaela Moore.” Heloise doesn’t mention their titles. Meg always uses academics’ titles. “I can introduce you. Better check out the handbook for what seminars interest you. The reading subject, and research methods, are compulsory for everyone.”

“Sounds great”, Meg sighs with pleasure. Heloise pulls a face. “You are such a girly swot.”

Meg takes this well. Heloise gets all H1s herself. She is also a girly swot. Meg feels she has been admitted to a club she has longed to join.

Heloise is wearing a French blue and white 1960’s housedress with a floral pattern. She teams it with black opaques and tiny mary jane shoes, like the shoes little girls wear with their best dresses. Her bag is a fifties’ child’s school satchel, which is stuffed with her hairbrush and her red Chinese silk purse and her diary and an A5 notebook (is that all she uses at Uni?) and a much read twentieth century Penguin copy of Sartre’s Nausea. Meg has never read or studied Sartre, let alone picked him up for personal edification. Heloise double majored in English. She is nearly through her honours. She does not do philosophy, yet she reads Sartre. For pleasure? Meg thinks of the Sweet Valley High novels by her bed with a shudder.

Suddenly Meg notices the fat spiral notebook stuffed with papers, on the floor beside them.

“Is that your notebook?”

“My notebook? That is my entire honours!”

“All in there?”

“Well, 20 000 words on my hard drive at home. And a few floppies!”

“But…is that enough space?”

“Sure. We took too many notes as undergrads. How often have you ever read any of ‘em again? I take the bare minimum; same with texts. I rarely quote now at all so I use hardly any notebook space researching. I put
them straight onto disk. I write straight onto disk. Most of that stuff’s printouts of drafts.” She lifts the notebook casually with one mary jane.

Meg is silent, not sure whether she should feel humiliated by the fact that she has reread all her English notes, found them edifying, and even drawn on them. But one notebook like that would be fabulous…so streamlined. So cool.

“If I’m not studying in the evening, I leave this in my library carrel. Saves carrying unnecessary stuff.” Heloise has always seemed so effortless. But not in the same way as Gemma or Jen Wren. Heloise is going to do an MA next year.

“So, a postgrad dip could lead to …further study?”

“Sure. If you get the marks you’ll get a scholarship. That’s my plan.”

“But….“ Meg does not seriously engage with this idea. “How do you know you will?”

“Well, you don’t exactly. But I know the standard. I know my grades. I know I have advocates in the Department. I’m on track.”

This does not have the lofty ring to it that Meg associates with other girls who get good marks. Heloise is merely stating a fact. Yes, thinks Meg. Get on that track.

“Michaela would be good for you to talk to… I’ll organise a coffee.”

“You…you can just do that?”

“Well, she’s a mate. And David can supervise you. He’s a Blake specialist.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know him?”

“Oh, no. I don’t know anyone…there.”
“Where?’

“In the English Department.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your lot run their own thing.”

Meg bristles but says nothing.

“Well, that’s OK. You said you’ve got a few firsts, you’ve thought about Blake. You’ll be fine.”

Meg smiles. Oh, for that nonchalance. And mates who are academics.

Heloise stretches and yawns.

“I was up half the night, talking Nietzsche of all people. But some of these boys need guidance. That Brett Forlorn. He is such a fan of Easton Ellis.”

“Aren’t you?” slightly tart.

Heloise looks pointed and laughs. “Well, sort of, but critically, critically. Remember Meg, we don’t enjoy texts. We critique them.”

She laughs loudly. Meg laughs without mirth.

“I think Easton Ellis has something to offer, certainly, but it’s this valorising. There’s no, well, not much, analysis in it…”

Heloise expounds on Easton Ellis. Meg, who doesn’t get the attraction of American Psycho, pays only scant attention.

“….and a feminist reading enhances understanding of the novel, aesthetically anyway, that’s what they don’t get, they think automatically that it’ll just condemn it… I say no…but that reveals the tension in their ambivalence, wouldn’t you agree…?”

Fortunately the question is rhetorical.

Meg feels that horrible negative slide of impossibility wash over her. She often feels this around Heloise. Heloise is a hero, a role model. But Meg
feels like whatever it is, is beyond her. She can't be like Heloise no matter what she does.

A strand of irritation thickens down Meg's spine, till she wriggles from the twinge. Heloise thinks Meg's topic has no feminist aspect. Blake was a humanist. Easton Ellis hates people. But Meg does not speak these thoughts aloud.

Heloise has braked on her remarks.

“So, Meg. Are you planning to study full time?”

“Mmmh. Aha.”

“Astudy?”

“Well, I'm still eligible. And my work is really flexible. They'll fit in with me.”

“You realise the study load is huge?”

“Yes, but I've got time. I’m…single, remember. I need to work. If I can't hack it I'll go part time in semester two. Take the thesis a bit slower.”

“Yeah, fair enough. You love your job…public housing, isn't it?”

“It's real.”

“I know what you mean”, Heloise stretches. “I loved the Clerical Union. It was so…. ordinary lives, you know?”

Meg forces herself to smile.

“And they put my intellectual life into perspective, which I needed. But listen, don't count on being single for time. Sure as eggs that's when you'll meet someone.”

“I just won't let it happen. But I never meet anyone new, anyway.”

“Sure, Meg. Like no guys in the Left notice you.”
“They’re so busy with you!!”

“Or the Right, actually. Rubbish! Me?”

“Oh, yeah. Actually the Right isn’t a bad idea…”, careful Meg, “…because I wouldn’t want to spend time with someone like that…”

“Careful! If he’s a good fuck, you’ll wanna spend time. That’s death to honours, a good fuck.”

“Do they fuck well in the Right, Hel?”

“Everyone’s an individual. Some members of Student Unity, even, may fuck well.”

Heloise looks gaily at Meg.

“Nah!”

“Not very likely.”

“Anyway, there is no boy for the present and I think it should stay that way. It was weird, feeling so …ambivalent. I don’t wanna do that again.”

“I can’t imagine.” Heloise is believed to be in a recurrent casual relationship with a law student who is technically independent but is in fact a right-winger. This is unconfirmed. But she flirts with him so profoundly at Student Council Meg thinks it must be true. Of course, Heloise is right into personas and she may just be playing a role. Beautiful, straight girl, feminist.

“You must miss it, ambivalent or not.”

“What?”

“ Fucking!”

“Oh! Yeah, that is a problem. But fucking generically and fucking X boy are such different things. Nothing puts me off sex like the average boy.”
“You need a man.”

“Hey?”

“You know, someone who knows. What he’s doing.”

“I think the female submissive thing is way unsound.”

“How many boys operate that way in your experience?”

Meg is silent.

“Um, well, no, not many.. but I haven’t…there’s only been four boys.”

“Four! I thought you were 27?”

“I am! I know- but it’s true. The first one was a man.”

“How old?”

“Oh, only 16. But he was…the strongest one.”

“Yum.”

“Ye-es.. but, why do we like that?”

“You tell me! You liked the other three better..?”

‘Pete was a man at first. But it didn’t last. He’d boss me round everywhere but in bed.”

“Sex is better when they know what they’re doing.”

“Obviously, technically…”

“No! Obviously- d’uh. I mean in themselves, existential-type stuff. Even if it’s a play act. Steven and I…”
Steven is an activist and a recurrent boyfriend to Heloise. He is a botanist and goes overseas constantly, where he writes letters to Heloise about all the girls he has fucked or wants to fuck.

“…Steven and I would play-act these dumb games. I’m ashamed to tell you…"

“No, don’t be….”

“Well, in one, I’d pretend I was a 16 year old virgin on our first date and he had to push the envelope and see how far he could get with me. And I would let him go so far, then come over all Miss Priss, then a bit further, and it was this whole game about arousal and morality and the forbidden. It was hot. We’d fuck like crazy afterwards. It was role playing, but we learnt so much from it, it spilled over…”

“Pete would’ve freaked.”

“Why?”

“Oh, you know, he liked to be in total control. He never was with me, so it all fell apart for him. I think.”

“Was he…good?”

“At first. For about six months. Then… I dunno. I got… the shine wore off. He was always down my neck. And he hated the idea of honours. Whatdya need that for, be a teacher, blah blah…”

“Idiot. Thank God you 86’ed him.”

Meg considers. “Ye-es. Of course, sometimes I can hardly believe I did. We were friends for years. He was a good friend to me, too. Until he was my boyfriend.”

“I s’pose you’re not friends now?”

“Well, I’ve tried. He’s left Uni… the intention is there but…he’s got a new girlfriend…”
“Oh. Good?”

Meg laughs. “Well, we went through with her- Rosie Marshall- you’d never have met her, I guess. He was, er, troubled, by her crush on him for years, then he took up with her soon after I …we…”

“So you dumped him?”

“Yeah …I just grew right away from him. It’s happened to me twice now…only this last time was so quick. I think I used him to step away from Jase…quite unconsciously, truly.”

“So, be single. I agree.”

“I will!”

“Honours is so busy, you won’t notice. It’s a great time to be single. Male egos are so…”

“Thirsty.”

Laughter.

“As you said, nothing puts me off sex like the average boy!”

“True!”

They laugh so wildly a first year nearly spills his latte.

“I have never met a boy who supported my goals,” muses Meg.

“That’s dubious. What about the buddy?”

“Pete? No. He wanted us to get teaching jobs, earn, buy a house in three years. Have babies.”

“And?”

“Die, I guess. Pay the mortgage off.”
“What was his hurry?”

“That is the question. He hated me studying beyond the core stuff. Why are you reading *that*, he’d ask? And women’s studies! Forget it. Why does a girl like you, with a guy, need feminism?”

“Whatdya say?”

“That is why! Because of the guy! It didn’t go down well. He used to go on and on about not doing penetration…”

Heloise cocks an eye at Meg.

“…didn’t you?”

“Oh, of course! He just read it in one of my books. He was waiting for the day I’d ban it. I think he was disappointed I didn’t… I like it *most*…”

Heloise chortles.

“…and I knew if I had to protect my books, from him, it was time. I got so hungry these last two years. It scared him, I guess.”

“So. You don’t refuse penetration?”

Meg looks at Heloise in surprise.

“Hell, no. Am I a failure as a feminist?”

“I know. What if you like it?”

“We-e-e-l?”

“It’s complicated. It could be seen as an act of violence.”

Meg is wriggling.

“How is it inherently an act of violence? I mean, there is a small matter of procreation.”
“Maybe that’s why we are overpopulated. Because we’ve focused on penetration beyond what we were meant to.”

“By whom? A patriarchal God? I thought organised Judeo-Christianity was phallocentric.” God, I sound really angry, Meg thinks.

“Sarcasm, Miss!! No, Meg, I’m with you. I love it, too. It feels, I dunno, natural. How dubious. God, I can’t come that way and I still crave it.”

“Oh, I crave it. But …if I couldn’t come that way…l dunno. That is really interesting.”

“You can?”

Meg giggles.

“It’s the only way I can.”

“Hey? Surely, if he goes down…?”

Meg squeals.

“Ooh, no. I just giggle. I can’t do it. Yuk.”

“You are insane.”

They laugh.

“I like the main course. Who can live on entrees?”

“That’s all fine, but I can’t exactly digest the main course.”

Meg sores.

“You know, Jennine told me that Jill Feldman and Andy Glen didn’t do penetration. I was so shocked when I heard that…They are the left wing couple. They do everything together, all their classes, same essay topics, honours….”
“Why, Miss Imaginative? There are other ways to fuck. If they do all that together they hardly need penetration.”

“It’s so...defeatist. I could find plenty wrong with the boys I’ve fucked...but penetration isn’t listed! It’s one of the only things they did right. It’s so...prescriptive. Like what happened to feminism being about choice, and all?”

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*
Letter to Jean

Hello Aunty Jean (in a very small voice)

Well you asked me how things really are. They are really good but….I have moved into a share house in Brunswick because Pete and I split up. Obviously, I haven’t told Mum and Dad because after Jase…. I hate looking like I don’t know what I want, but that isn’t it. I’m finding out hand over fist that there are too many things I want. The difficulty is acting on them! And telling people- especially Mum- because I know I look like a scatterbrain. But Mum doesn’t get what I mean about stuff feeling wrong or not being true to myself.

You must have had an inkling about Pete because you asked me. I know you didn’t like him. I sort of knew you wouldn’t. He was such a snob. I swear he was planning to vote Liberal! He wouldn’t come out and say so, but he was. Anyway, he just suffocated me with his plans, I would’ve been back with Jase- only worse because Pete was a ‘doer’. He rode roughshod over all my beliefs- I can hardly believe it now.

Making the decision wasn’t so hard- it all came to a head anyway- but acting on it was. I had to move out quickly and I found a share house so as to be near Uni. I’ve got a lot of contact hours this semester. It’s tough- I had to move so suddenly and find the money (without asking Mum). I had to get a student loan, pay a removalist. I didn’t take much. He bought it all anyway. Such deja vu; same exact thing I did with Jase. Except then Pete executed it all for me. The leaving part was OK because he was so scathing and dismissive that it strengthened me. But the share house… it’s tough. I don’t feel it’s home. I’m at Uni or at work all day every day but I’m there in the evenings and I must study on weekends so I have to make peace with it. It’s really cheap. My housemates are all profound feminists which is wonderful for me. But it’s communal and I’m so not good at that, I’ve discovered. They think I’m a refugee from heterosexuality.

I’m eating well because it is a vegan house and they are all brilliant cooks. They are brilliant full stop: triathletes, dancers, all H1 students. One is an international student but I don’t get on well with her - she keeps telling me
I wish I was better at focus, at setting a goal and just sticking to it. I know you think I am but I love gratification and I seek it all the time. Especially when I’m lonely and if I tell the truth, that’s my problem now. I leapt from Jase to Pete and now I’ve got emotional space to spare. I see Anna most weekends but she’s busy with Tom and her work and she thinks this place is awful! It’s still new and I’m ‘homesick’ for some place that doesn’t exist. I could’ve chosen a share house with people who are employed-who are out more.

I saw Pete, at the Mid Year Ball. He’s done with university- it’s not the Real World. He used to get so mad at me when I’d say it’s the realest world I’ve ever known. Anyway, he was there for a drink at Naughton’s (that’s the Liberal pub) with my old group- I don’t get invited anymore. He was strolling across campus holding hands with Rosie Marshall!! It was the strangest thing, you know. I felt so …pleased for her. She has really blossomed, no more poodle perm, wears contacts, gained some weight (or else she’s had implants!). She looks terrific, much more relaxed and confident. Anyway, he was mortified to see me. It’s been three months...
since we split. He moved fast- or she did. I’ve no idea how it happened; I don’t like to ask Kelly. Rosie greeted me very warmly- I guess she feels as pleased as punch with herself and fair enough, too. He mumbled and went red. They even bickered about politics- quite funny, as Rose is a staunch Labor supporter- she even liked Hawke! Pete is moving to Lilydale because he’s teaching out there as he planned, and Rosie is teaching at a Parish school in the inner west. They aren’t living together- I guess that would be absurd. Only I do such hasty foolish things. Rosie expressed real interest in my plans and chattered on about her classes- she’s teaching Australian history which she loves and even has a Year 12 class. I refrained from asking Pete how the ‘anglos’ were, tempted though I was, because I didn’t want it to seem like I was petty with him. I couldn’t see anything in him that drew me. He’s cold, camp and callous. He doesn’t like people! The only thing I could’ve seen then was his feelings for me- he really laid it on thick with me and that’s what I fell for. I’m officially pathetic. I ignored my uneasy feelings about him because I liked his decisiveness and I liked being adored. Gross! Not a high point in my life thus far. But poor old Pete was so uncomfortable. He is really pissed off at me- fair enough. He was just being sensible, I was immature and self indulgent, wanting to aspire.

Oh my God, Jeannie! Did you hear that? He’s my mother! Pete opened his mouth and Mum came out! Yikes. Now *that* explains a lot. I wonder how I missed that? I spend so much time worrying that this is self-indulgent, that I’m kidding myself, so I go and link up with people who confirm it and punish me for it. Eech. Getting rid of Pete was so the right thing to do. I love reasserting this fact. I feel so much better!

I meant to tell you about my mate Marina- you met her at the 4th year party- well, she’s got another year to do. But she’s become a fundo christian. Full on, like Uncle Ken and Aunty Verna. Awful. She used to be so stylish and offbeat and now, she put all her beautiful jewellery (all of it) in a pillowcase and put it in the collection plate. And did they take her aside and say, think about this? No, they just took it, thank you kindly. She had enough jewellery to set up a minor European princess. I’m so jealous. Couldn’t she give some of it away, I’d be blessed by it!

Isn’t it awful about Jeff Kennett? He is so horrendous I don’t want to think about it. There were 130 000 people at the last rally, so that’s good, he’ll radicalise people. But what damage will he do? They have no respect for
public money. None of my friends got teaching jobs- he’s sacking teachers hand over fist. Public housing may be next.

I’m starting an honours group this week, sort of informal, run by the Faculty of Arts for people who feel they need a grounding. The reading is full-on theory and very daunting but I’m determined to ‘get’ it. I’m being tutored by Kate Llewellyn who is this incredible, glamorous young intellectual. Cripes, Jean, she is so intimidating. She’s just divine, I want to eat her for breakfast. So I’m reading on poststructuralism and postmodernism, which are very dubious and (I think it can be argued) depoliticise us. We’ll see. But it’ll be fun: lots of others also getting ready for honours. I’ll love that. One big advantage of my share house is we eat very cheaply, so I’ll have extra money for coffee and meals out.

You have mentioned your plans for this year- have you chosen your subjects? It’s so exciting that you’re doing a BA- I can help you! You’ll love it, Jean. It’s just the best!

Love love love
Meggle
Bound to the Caucus

After a year on Women’s Committee, Meg assumes the Students’ Representative Council will be easy. It is where a lot of the political action takes place, and Meg was preselected at the top of the ticket, so her confidence is stoked. The formality of the big Boardroom, with its l-o-n-g oak table and high backed leather chairs, is startling. Council is also the first committee Meg has sat on where the Right turn up and take part. That is a shock in itself. They actually have numbers on the SRC. They are polished and professional. They come in all known varieties: engineers, law students, giggling girls who major in criminology, jocks, college students.

SRC has a strict agenda. Coffee and biscuits are served on the long table overlooking North Court. Future politicians sit, their filofaxes and fountain pens in front of them, writing intense notes in response to solemn debate about Union Catering or Child Care on the southern campus. Liberal club representatives make frequent points of order or clarification and every other month without fail a long debate on standing orders delays proceedings. The Council President chairs every meeting. Most of the chairs get into trouble quickly (you need to know your standing orders to chair) and the current President is an earnest, well intentioned young woman, only moderately right wing.

Council does make Meg a bit nervous. Preparing to speak is always stressful but Meg forces herself to do it. It depends on her mood, too. If she is bored with Council and student politics, then she doodles ‘to do’ lists and vague future goals on the back of her agenda. Other times she is absorbed in it. Like the night Stuart Noble tried to say the Women’s Room is unconstitutional. It was all because of the rule that says any student can go into any Committee meeting of the student union. But Women’s Committee is held in the Women’s Room, effectively preventing male students from attending.

Stuart is the ‘Free Market Party’ Club’s highest flyer. He can’t be easily boxed. Athletic and brilliant (a rare combination), he is also earnest and unfailingly polite. There is none of the usual Me Liberal You Trot overt aggression, which both intrigues Meg and makes her uncomfortable. Meg is not used to this polite exchange and the first time she met him one on
one she was extremely aggressive. Meg sits at SRC with Jennine Barrett, who is the current Treasurer of the SRC and she knows Stuart well. Jennine is as much a Trot as Meg. To Stuart's credit, he ignored Meg's initial aggression and remained gentle, pleasant even, which really meant she wasn't ready for the steel when it came.

Jennine watched Meg's confusion and gradually abating 'Liberal: on guard' stance, with amusement. She liked Stuart. He ran against her for Treasurer and they called him the Shadow Treasurer because he takes such an interest in Jennine's performance. She thrashed him by 4800 votes. It is a bit humiliating for FMP Club's stalwart. But Stuart got over it fast. He is professional. And Jennine is, too. They have what she calls a 'working relationship'. And they both hate the Labor Left.

The trot in Meg is hostile to Stuart just because he's a Liberal. Of course, that may be the Labor in her, too. He isn't odious. He isn't a raving homophobe, that Meg knows of. He doesn't approve of the Women's Room, but Meg thinks that is just an earnest belief that women aren't oppressed anymore. He is reasonable and mature. He doesn't grunt at women the way his Drinking Club colleagues do. He isn't scared of women the way they are. But he isn't one of the business suit, mobile phone Liberal students, who look like they've just stepped out of a Senator's office (many of them have part time jobs in electorate offices). Stuart wears his gym clothes most of the time. He comes from the western suburbs. Not very Liberal cool. His family are not Upper Middle Class. But he is the sharp intellectual of the FMP Club and they know it.

For some reason the fight ended up at Student Council. Meg felt bad for Stuart. Sure, he's wrong. But he will be wiped on the floor by some fierce lesbian feminists. Meg feels like he doesn't know what's coming. She also felt like a traitor: why am I worried about him? He enjoys the privilege inherent in ascendant Liberal status. Meg thinks she must be typically male identified, as working class women often are.

But worry Meg did. She didn't want him to be the individual human target for the kind of man hating that she herself often engaged in. When you take man-hating to its source, you have to hate an individual. Meg has found this to demonstrate the paucity of the philosophy. It applies to hating any group, as such. At the end of the day, it focuses on one
person. Never mind if the hatred is provoked, like the Irish hating the English. It is still pointless and self defeating.

Stuart is about to personify the entire history of male appropriation of space, and hostility to female reclaiming of it. He will be theoretically naked to withstand this onslaught.

And why the fuck does Meg care?

Well, it is complicated. Meg knows that in part, she would be concerned for anyone in his position. She doesn't like political aggression to be misplaced, even though she's done it many times. Meg'd split with Jason partly because of the differences in their values. Same was true with Pete. It sounds so impressive to explain it that way. "We have different values." It is true but did it follow then that you cannot connect in any way with someone whose values are anathema to you? Meg would have said so. How do you respect them? In practice, there would be just too much conflict (this is a theoretical objection, since many people reach a critical mass of conflict with people whose values they share). It would be unethical to have any respect for a Liberal, surely? Save for the human rights type respect? The kind Libs don't afford anyone beneath them.

Stuart isn't the best looking guy in the SRC. He isn't particularly tall. He is strong, lean and wiry and from the time Meg admitted this faint possibility of lust, it rushed through her like a North Queensland thunderstorm. She'd known this for some time. Politically, Meg is comfortable with her sexuality. But this? Why isn't she fiercely attracted to a Left winger? Oh, woe. And the eternal question: is this chemistry just me?

Even Stuart's performance at Council that night does not deter her. He raves and rails at the injustice of closing men out of the 4' by 6' space that is the women's room. He goes on and on about tertiary entrance rates, results. Women have prevailed, he says. They don't need a women's room. Meg tries to ask why women having one room so bothers him? But he can't reply over the jeering. Of course, the argument is at cross purposes. He is so sure he is right and they are so sure he is a malicious misogynist.

Meg makes an impassioned speech about letting women looking after their own affairs, which receives applause from her feminist colleagues
and a look of consternation from Stuart. Meg could have gone in for the kill— he is by far the easiest target the Libs have because of his character. He doesn’t call the Feminist Collective sluts or try to grope them when he’s alone. He is always unfailingly polite. This greatly confuses them. Politeness is not a standard tactic of campus misogynists.

Meg thinks about going in for the kill. Her best performances at Council are always those driven by rage. But she simply couldn’t feel rage at Stuart Noble. He is a raving dry Liberal who ignores the cruelty his Party enacts on ordinary people. He signs up under a creed of wealth worship which is built on wrecking worker’s lives and raping the natural environment for shareholders. And Meg can’t get mad at him? What is the matter with her?

Meg comforts herself that she’s never been good at personalising the rage. She couldn’t entertain the idea that her heightened awareness around Stuart would cause her to behave this way. Meg doesn’t like him or respect him— eeech! She just lusts after him big time. If she was in a relationship, she’d be focused and not so easily distracted. But there is no relationship. And Meg is distracted, to the detriment of her principles.

The SRC votes that there exists a precedent in Equal Opportunity law; to correct past injustice you may sometimes have to discriminate. Stuart loses, and he takes it well.

His girlfriend, Veronica, sits beside him all night. Plump, fair and very pretty, Veronica is tiny and looks like a first year. She is very quiet and struggles to say anything. When she does speak, her voice shakes with terror. It makes the feminist Left uncomfortable. It tests all their theoretical training. But Ronnie, as she is known, does not speak out against the Women’s Room. She just sits by her man. Dreadful unsisterly thoughts run through Meg. Does she fuck him? He is all coiled masculinity and she is so... **repressed**. Meg is ashamed of these thoughts. Besides, he might be more comfortable with a repressed, passive woman. He may be one of those guys who dislikes women who hold their own.

But Meg doesn’t think so. He is so fit and centered. You never see him and Ronnie touch, although they are always together. There might be five years difference in their ages, but he seems so much older. Meg is not jealous of Ronnie, except that if she chose she could sleep with him.
Perhaps they are both christians? Waiting for marriage, perhaps? Meg chides herself again.

Usually Meg would examine Ronnie's hair, her skin, her clothes, her figure, in order to compare herself. But she does not do this. It is so unlike her that Meg is struck by it. Ronnie's hair is blonde, thick, fluffy rather than glossy. She is very plump but it suits her. She is short and Meg is tall. (Meg rarely envies short women unless they are very thin, gamin even.) Meg wouldn't want them to split up. She just wants to crawl in beside him for a while.

After Council, Jennine approaches and leans her chin into Meg's shoulder.

"Good one, huh?"

"Women's Room? Yeah. Never thought he'd win."

"No. It's strange for him to be the one pushing it. He's not anti-feminist like some of them."

"Maybe he got the short straw?"

"Then, why don't they come and back him up? Where are they tonight?"

"Yeah, that's a point. It is odd. He only has Ronnie."

"Oh, she's his cheerleader. That won't last. He'll get sick of the adoring puppy thing."

"Neen!"

"What? It's true."

"But they're together, they're lovers...."

"No. Apparently...", Jennine taps Meg's shoulder to emphasise her knowledge, "he told Gordon that she won't do it and he plans to 'relax their relationship' unquote."
"Poor Ronnie. She's pretty straight. Whatdy mean 'relax' the relationship?"

"Well I'd would suggest Stuart's definition is 'fuck other people'!"

"Oh, poor Ronnie!..."

"Yeah, so you said!"

"...it'll break her heart. That's effectively pressuring her to sleep with him. I thought better of him than that."

"Well, he also told Gordon that he doesn't know if he loves her because how can you know if you don't fuck?"

"Well, true. But Ronnie seems to know."

"She is young, for her age."

"What is she? 19?"

"20. But incredibly sheltered."

"Is she a christian?"

"Dunno. She's not in Christian Union or anything."

"Poor Liberals. Where do they find lovers?"

"I know. Not like us, with no standards at all."

They laugh hysterically.

Meg speculates a lot about Stuart after that. She sees his point. How can you analyse your mature feelings for someone who won't sleep with you? Similarly Meg can see Ronnie's point of view. She wants a boyfriend. The FMP Club is a chilling environment when you lack social confidence and Stuart is a major player whose presence by her side would make it a lot easier for her. But she may be terrified. Or she may not believe in doing it before marriage.
Meg ponders this. If it is the former and he couldn't get her through that, then he is clearly a shithead. Meg hopes it's the latter. She doesn't want to lust over a shithead.

The issue is resolved within a fortnight when it becomes apparent that Ronnie is going out with another, junior Liberal. Pale, thin and campy, there has been much speculation that Jeremy will come out. Meg thinks his physical appearance could be attributed to the lack of light shining within the FMP Club. But either way, it augurs well for Ronnie. Meg notices she and Jeremy hold hands. Meg never saw her hold hands with Stuart. So all's well that ends well. For a time.

Stuart looks tired and stressed for weeks after their split. Meg thinks of approaching him, but what would she say? Sorry about your relationship? Better luck next time? Besides, they hardly know each other. They are adversaries acquainted through the snake pit of student politics. But Veronica doesn't come to Council anymore. She does come to Women's Committee, which is tough for her because the Feminist/Dyke contingent dominates proceedings. But in spite of her new relationship, she too looks grey and low. It cuts Meg a bit. Maybe she loved him? He dumped her because of sex. That's gotta hurt. But she has someone else and he doesn't.

About this time, the SRC being dominated by overblown law students, a long debate occurs over the legal principle of estoppel. It sounds like a European pastry to Meg. The non-law students are either utterly perplexed by, or completely uninterested in, this debate, which its participants take very seriously. It covers a number of meetings and is excruciating. It all hinges on some exchange student wanting full membership of the SRC and are they estopped if they refuse.

The non-law refugees collect at one end of the long boardroom table. Meg; Jennine Barrett, who has to take minutes; Gordon Seaforth, a right wing engineer; and Gemma Nolan, a drama major. They call themselves Union South, which is a cunning and inflammatory reference to the SRC’s outlying commercial arm. It also denotes all the negatives of ‘down south’. They make a small banner and increasingly talk amongst themselves, because they don’t know or care one iota about estoppel.
In the middle of the table, connecting law with Union South, sits Stuart Noble. Himself a commerce/science student, he has a very attractive contempt for the law clique's pretensions and he makes it apparent. The gradual descent into hysterical mayhem may have irritated him but he is remarkably tolerant. Meg guesses he thinks they deserve it. It passes the endless estoppel time well.

During the course of these meetings, Gemma Nolan has caught Meg looking at Stuart once too often. She is quick as a hound and not backward about what she'll say aloud. She is onto Meg.

"Why are you gazing at that Liberal, Meg Flanagan?"

"What? I wasn't...."

"You are, and not for the first time, Miss?"

Meg shrugged. Try a new tactic.

"Well, I'm not making a policy enquiry. I can look, can't I?", very casually.

Jennine laughs loudly. It is a good-natured laugh.

"Really? You don't have a little crush on that Liberal...?"

"Sssh! He'll hear you!!"

"So?"

"Gemma, keep your voice down", Jennine frowns.

Stuart is actually engaged in trying to follow what sounds to Meg like an extra law tute on estoppel. He has a most appealingly crinkled brow and, thank God, is not paying attention. But Gemma is determined.

"Oh, Stuart Liberal!"

"Shut up, how can you..."
Of course, he turns to look at them. Meg is hysterical with embarrassment. She feels her face go purple. How quickly could she leap out of the chair and get to the door? Not quick enough! Besides, that'd look even more like Grade Four behaviour. She'll have to tough it out. Be cool, Meg chants silently. So you're up front about being attracted to him. That's fine. Never mind my face going up in flames?

But before Gemma can compose her next sentence, the door opens. And in comes Veronica. Oh, no! Or maybe I'm saved, thinks Meg. Gemma wouldn't be so cruelly insensitive, so vicious, as to....

"Look, Stuart Liberal's gotta harem!"

Stuart looks at Gemma with astonishment.

"What?" he asks uncomprehendingly.

"Well, little friend Ronnie's come to join you..."

Veronica takes a seat, not next to Stuart, but at the end of the table next to Gemma.

"And if you'd like a shag on a different rock, so to speak..."

"Gemma!!"

"....there's the usually very anti-Liberal Ms Flanagan, who apparently would make a very particular kind of exception for you, Mr. Liberal. Meggie doesn't do that every day, at least I hope she doesn't. His lot are nearly all christians, Meg. They do it Sunday nights only, through the sheet, babe!"

Meg's chin is tucked into her chest. She simply cannot look at him. She looks sideways at Jennine, who is as shocked as Stuart, and meets the saucer eyes of Veronica. Ronnie stares at Meg with horror, fascination and...amusement? What is this?

Meg peers through her fingers. Stuart is grinning his bloody head off.
"I, um, must say that I find estoppel the least erotic thing imaginable, so I have to commend your comrade for her capacity to rise above such tedium. But actually, I'm sure you're mistaken, Ms Nolan. Meg? Cat got your tongue?"

Meg has never heard him use her given name. Of course, he has, but...this time, Meg notices. It takes everything Meg has to look at him. Which means she is very vulnerable when she meets his amused gaze. A long thick flame runs the full length of her body. Oh, God. It is not just her. Meg is leaden, unable to move. Jennine is recounting the famous Liberal-Left feminist mating of NANTS Conference two years earlier, when Michele Spanner fucked John Julian and the Left saw it as a loss of credibility to them. Apparently Michele pointed out it was just a fuck. But it's true that it did more for John's credibility than for Michele's. Liberals are not expected to be in touch with their sexuality.

Meg is still staring at Stuart and he is holding her gaze. The ringing in her ears and the heat rising from her body fully occupy her senses. Until...

"So", drawls Ronnie. "Any actual business happen at Council? Anything else, er, significant I might've missed?"

Silence. Meg looks down at the table. She feels herself going purple again.

Gemma never misses an opportunity.

"We've been weighing up the pros and cons of fucking Liberals. Fucking is a verb in that sentence, OK? You could contribute helpfully to such a discussion, Ronnie."

"Oh, idiot." This from Jennine.

Fortunately the President declares the Council meeting closed. Stuart is engaged in discussion by the MSS rep. Jennine and Gemma head for the coffee. Meg sees her chance and approaches Ronnie while she is alone.

"Veronica? I, um, have to say how, um, sorry I am for, um, this, um, scenario...tonight. It was childish and pathetic and I am so sorry."
In her embarrassment Meg fails to notice that Stuart Noble is now standing slightly behind her.

"I was foolish enough to trust a friend with a flippant remark, which I shouldn't have done. I would never want to do anything to hurt or offend you. I really meant you no disrespect but it got out of hand, it was juvenile and...."

Ronnie beams at her.

"No worries, Meg. It's OK. I'm not offended. My only problem is, Stuart's ego will be so inflated now, he'll be unbearable. Worse than usual." She indicates him with a hand. He is right beside Meg now. She can feel his body heat. And that damn look again. Meg feels the rush of colour to her face.

"Thank you, Ronnie." Meg steps back.

"Good night, Meg." She walks out the door.

Stuart holds her gaze. He whispers, "I'd be a bit disappointed if you really thought juvenile is quite the right word." Then he too is gone.

Gemma and Jennine are staring at her. Jennine gives her a long knowing look. Meg pulls a helpless face.

"Well it certainly does seem la chemistry is a two way street."

"It was obvious to me", Gemma is lofty. "He's always been kinda crackin' on to Meg....", Gemma loves to appropriate such expressions. "He knows it'll be sexual curtains for him once he moves into Liberal land..."

"Take no notice, Meggle. If I'd known what she was going to pull tonight, I'd have told you."

"Told me what?"

"Er, about Stuart. Let's go to Lygon Street."
"Yes, Neen. You two go plan. You be on Meg's side. I'll be on Stuart Liberal's. We will orchestrate their consummation."

Jennine laughs.

"Actually, I don't think they need much help. Now, Meg and I are going for coffee; are you coming?"

"Nah. I've had my fun", Gemma slings an arm around Meg's shoulders. "Joshing ya, honey. He's OK, for a Liberal. And it's just a shag. See you." She disappears into the dark North Court.

Jennine is recounting her To Do list for tomorrow. Being Treasurer is effectively being manager of the SRC and her role in the caucus makes her the Senior Office Bearer. Not an official role but very necessary. After all, sometimes caucus members forget themselves and behave like children. Senior Lefties like Jennine and Meg pride themselves on their mature, professional behaviour.

"I'll never be able to face him again."

"Bullshit."

"What if he tells his caucus. Sorry... party room?" A mirthless laugh escapes Meg.

"Party room! He won't."

"Or Ronnie does?!"

"No way. She likes you. It is very sweet the way you apologised to her."

"Oh, Neen. I feel like a heel."

"No need. She's over him. She shtupping Jeremy Makim."

"No?!"

"Yep."
"Poor Stuart."

Jennine roars with laughter.

"Oh, yes. Needs comforting, doesn't he? Think you can take his mind off it?"

"Well, he must feel bad."

"Somehow, I think he's coping." Jennine is dry as a bone.

"What if Gemma tells our caucus? Or TDC? Or ESS? Ahhg! I'd die!"

"She won't. She's just full of …spirits….

"So. Neen?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you demystify me about Stuart Noble?"

"Can you even wait 'til I've gets a hot chocolate?"

"Oh, I guess."

Laughter. "OK. Although you do seem to have it bad...."

"I'm a bit worried...."

"...but then so does he."

"What?"

"He's, um, watched you for a while, I think."

Meg makes a meaningless noise.

"He barges into my office and tells me how effective a campaigner you are. How you can persuade a vote for the Left in two minutes. I thought
he just saw you as an important target; you know, someone who needs tagging."

"He said all that?"

"More than once. He also asked me your romantic status. And your orientation."

"Whaat?!!"

"Yes. Get this. While he was dating Ronnie. In the middle."

"Ohhh!"

"Indeed, Miss Meg. He always asks at every meeting if you'll be joining us. And remember when you sent apologies to Exec because of that funeral?"

"Yeah. My Ex's grandfather."

"Aha. He came to that. He watched every time the door opened. And when your apologies were given his face fell. It was priceless."

"You're exaggerating."

"Actually, I'm not at all. It isn't necessary. He's got it, bad. Poor boy."

"We are ideologically diametrical."

"Ye-es."

"What'dya mean, 'ye-es'?"

"We'll, he's very wet. He's not a homophobe at all. He's only sexist in the most legalistic way. There is a woman in one of their sub-caucuses- please don't tell anyone this, it's top secret-..."

"no, no."
"...her Dad's violent and he was cracking on to her and she goes to Shaz Welder, you know Shaz, CU, very fundo, Women's Officer for the Libs..."

"...they have a fundo as women's officer?"

"...long story. Anyway, Shaz just prayed about it and brought it up in a general caucus as a prayer point..."

"...they tell their caucus prayer points?"

"...trying to convert 'em? Stuart goes to Shaz and blasted her and told her to use the resources of the SRC and she said it's a sin to interfere in the family, yada yada yada..."

"Bitch face!"

"...so he goes to Heloise Waul, who gets the girl into PU housing and to CASA... and then, great irony, she joined the Left and FC and Stuart is her mate, he bears no remorse that they lost her. She says he's been like a brother to her. He told me that they lost her because she associates CU with the Right."

"They are the Right!"

"Yeah, sorry, I mean we all think the entire Right is sympathetic to CU."

"I guess we do."

"Well, he's not. Not at all. Lots of them are not."

"That's a cool story." Meg pushes down a slight twinge of discomfort at the thought of Heloise Waul being anywhere near Stuart. "I still don't understand why Shaz, of all people, would be women's officer."

"I can. Helping women be women?"

"*Who Want to Be Women!!!* Yes, you've got it!"

Laughter.
"He seems to tell you a lot."

"Is that a question?"

Meg giggle. "I guess."

"We're friends. You know I don't choose to make personal enemies of right wingers. The Left hates it. But I really like him. He's sincere. He can be trusted. In his bizarre way, he really cares."

Meg contemplates.

"Well, at least I can discuss it with you. But don't encourage me, Neen. I'm pretty gratification oriented as it is. I need to rein this in."

"Why? It's just gunna buzz louder if you try to do that. So, you fuck him. He'll meet you 7/8's of the way. Just the first eighth has to be you. Come on, Meg, it's not like you, you're not gunna fall in love with him."

"No. We could discuss sport, I guess."

"Yeah. Rebel cricket tours and the annihilation of working class Aussie rules clubs."

"Hey, the corporatisation of cricket by Kerry Packer!"

"The biggest slush fund in living history: the IOC!"

More laughter.

At Piccolo, they order coffee and hot chocolate respectively and sit in the street. It is pleasantly cool.

"Neen?"

"Yes, Meggle?"

"Do you think it's because I'm too male identified? No good feminist would contemplate what I'm...?"
"Gunna do?"

"...contemplating!"

Jennine snorts. "Forgotten Michele have we?"

Meg leans forward. "There's a really good example. Middle class, perfect, Michele fucks John Julian and wrecks her relationship with the Left. That's what scares me. How can I align this with my politics?"

"It's a fuck, Meg. You're not talking of living with him."

"Not the point!"

"Yes, it is. Our politics is surely about choice and exploding repressive moral codes. Your politics aren't sexually transmitted! Fucking Stuart Noble is just that. Don't make it more, OK?"

Silence.

"OK, Meg. Tell me you...understand that?"

"Well, I do feel sort of .... tender, towards him. Does that count?"

"You'll get splattered and I don't want that to happen."

"I don't think I have feelings for him, but...I do...care about him...sort of....I don't know!"

"Maybe what you want is a relationship?"

"No! With a Liberal?! No way!"

"Wait a sec! I mean, maybe you are ready for a relationship and you are attracted to Stuart. Bad timing, star crossed, yada, yada..."

"Shut up!"

"...so, fuck him and look for someone else, in the Left. What about Samual Mathieson? He's very nice. He's single. He's..."
"...an example of the boring as hell straight men of the ISO."

"Oh. OK. Not Sam, then. Um,...Roger..."

"No, Neen. Don't. If it doesn't hit me like a ton of bricks, forget it. I'm so attracted to Stuart Noble, I can't talk near him. If only I could feel this way about a Leftie."

"Yes, would be preferable. One'll turn up. In the meantime, fuck Stuie, have a few raving arguments with him about welfare, run out of places you can eat together without being seen, and then you'll forget about boys for a while. Then whammo, a nice Left wing one will appear."

"You make it sound...clinical."

"Well, no, but it doesn't have to be complicated."

Meg shakes herself. "Let's talk 'bout something else. WSNAC. Are you speaking?"

"Yep. You, too."

"I know! What fun. Who are we on with?"

"Oh, an ISO, a Koori and someone from LA..."

"Why'd they pick us, exactly?"

"Well, we were ALP women students at the time."

"Yes, but neither of us is currently," giggling, "and shouldn't they get a voice?"

In unison:

"Not in the Feminist Left!"
Jennine laughs. "I'm looking forward to it. It's a chance to talk about politics and class in personal terms, without being constantly interrupted, and to a broader audience. It'll be great."

"So you're planning to release a cat among the pigeons."

"Yes, gently. Aren't you?"

"I'm, um, planning to defend the non-parliamentary assembly..."

"Well, that certainly goes 'miaow'."

"...but talk about the failure to provide any meaningful political alternative to the ALP for working people."

"Yeah, good. So challenge the middle class-ness from two directions?"

"Onya."

"Well, don't let your dalliance with Melbourne's senior Liberal student interfere there."

Meg squeals. "Don't say that. Oh, I can't have a dalliance with him. It's all too hard."

"Don't be defeatist. It'll be OK. It's not in his interests for it to get out either."

"This is silly. It hasn't happened. If I have to do the one eighth, it'll never happen. What do I do, exactly? Ring him? How?"

"Won't be necessary."

"What? Why not?"

"Because when I leave in ten seconds, he'll get out of the car he's sitting in and he'll approach you."

Meg is speechless with shock.
"You're not serious!"

"Yep. Here's my bill. I'll see you- ring me or come tell me ASAP. I'll be dying to know."

"Ah, Jennine, don't go...."

"Don't be silly. Have fun. At least it's late; you'll only have to dodge the Left: the Libs are all in bed!" She giggles. Meg feels hysterical.

"Jennine, for God's sake..."

"Settle! It'll be fine", she raises her voice. "Goodnight, Meggie."

"B-bye."

Meg busies herself in her bag, retrieving her diary and senselessly staring at the entries for tomorrow. It's a coincidence he's sitting there. He's gone. I'll just pay and head home and that'll be it. Meg feels a little calmer now. Maybe he's lost his nerve. But no. In her lowered line of sight she see a man's legs and feet parallel to her table. Ever so slowly Meg raises her eyes, 'til her gaze is locked with Stuart Noble's.

"Well", he says, softly." What a coincidence" Coincidence? They are five minutes from campus after an SRC council meeting. "Can I offer you a lift?"
Letter to Anna

Anna Darling

Well, it’s Family Night in Communal House and my best excuse is letter writing to my far-flung best friend! We had an extraordinary dinner of some pumpkin pie (no pastry of course) and a side dish of vegies, nuts and lentils flavoured with parsley! I am eating so many vegies, all organic, and drinking herb tea til I splash! But the anxiety and depression has me nicking up Grantham Street nightly to the Tuckerbag for God knows how many choccie bars. I gained 4 kilos in Carlton, it’ll only get worse here! Different anxieties! My three housemates are either twigs or athletes. They comfort me by telling me about how I’ve got a woman’s body! Everyone knows my heart wasn’t broken by Pete- you always lose a least a couple of kilos. I need to fall in love - that’s even better for losing your appetite.

Be careful what you wish for, Meg, I hear you saying. True- I can’t fall in love now. Lust even isn’t helpful. Actually, I don’t know the difference, they get so blurred. I do know I love what I’m doing. Next year it’s honours. All those years as an undergrad. I didn’t know how good it could be. I loved it but I ran myself stupid; study, jobs, boys. I never felt ‘in place’ then. Now, with this job and honours next year, it’s almost…effortless! I really think it’s my belief, Anna. That’s what’s changed. I think of how often we talked about what we wanted ‘to be’ and I wanted English teaching so much, all my life. Now, it’s just a different level of English teaching!

I am too busy given all the study but it does keep me out of the house, when Juanita prowls about criticising Australia and how none of these bad things happen in Spain. I guess she’s homesick. She gets so defensive over bull-fighting- she’s a vegan! She tells me I’m a middle-class twit blind to the need for working-class peasants to have their own culture. Juanita says when they get free education the working-class will give up bull-fighting. I get so stung, Anna. This is an issue for me- I know my class background isn’t clear to people and I like that- I can pass easily as middle-class (I’m not sure I’m happy about liking it!). But when people say things like that to me I want to say, hang on, is that how you see working-class people? Because a part of me will always be working-class
(I know, you hate me saying that) and I don’t want to lose it. That said, all these years at Philip I’ve started to see things that give it away. Attitudes to things. Shoes are a good one. I’m careless with my shoes. My best shoes probably cost $50 and last one year, two at the most. The idea that I could allow myself to have (fewer) better things took ages to germinate. I’d think, I can’t go there, but I never had an actual reason. I thought I literally couldn’t, wasn’t able. Sometimes, I think I’m truly middle-class, I seem to be ethnically blind and I’m always being taken by surprise over sexuality; I assume everyone is straight. My heart is in the right place, but isn’t that what we say about middle-class twits: that they ‘mean well’? Sure, like the men who stole the indigenous children! It’s this ridiculous tussle of wanting to be the authority on working-class-ness- the great status of ‘I am’ and be accepted as Not Other. Working-class is Other, of course!

I am really busy in the student union at the moment. That’s what gives these issues impetus because I’m around women I’ve met at Philip who are really radical and have excellent politics and all. But…I always feel their disapproval. I feel so hopeless next to them. They’re all poor (although their parents aren’t!) but they’re groovy and stylish and they just seem to know how to do things. It’s this groovy lifestyle poverty, which almost looks desirable the way they do it but then they got a lot of groovy stuff before they got ‘poor’. We may have different class backgrounds but they want the “I am”, too. Anyway, it’s wearing on me because I find I’m conscious all the time of not being… up to it. Even academically (this pains me to say) I can be thrown into doubt and chaos very easily. Which is absurd because it’s my passion and a lot of them are very blasé about it, but still to me it feels like they own it and I’m asking for a slice. And when I reflect on what was said or how it was said, I can’t find the reason—there’s never a substantive reason. I brought up Althusser on an issue of demarcation (in a union dispute) and one of the women said, “Oh, that’s so 1970’s”. I was just silenced but when I thought about it all I could see was her sloppy thinking. She had to play the person because she couldn’t refute the argument. They talk Marx all the time and I don’t say ‘that’s so 19th Century!’ Anything I don’t agree with, I apparently just don’t comprehend and while this treachery enrages me, I am constantly troubled by fears that I don’t get many things, theoretically speaking. After all, I haven’t had that education and they all seem to be able to talk about Theory and Deconstruction so easily.
You do meet interesting people in the Student Left. I was on Women’s Committee. I got elected to Council and Exec.- that was great. It’s a steep learning curve but I had lots of useful experience. I’m also on the Philip University Council as an SRC rep. It’s incredibly formal and tokenistic, but it sure teaches you about the insides of the university. The middle-class kids all use it to get noticed and make connections with all the Orders of Australia who are appointed to it. I simply can’t do that, how can you ‘network’ people in such a phony manner? But it seems to work because they all get to put it on their CVs and drop the names, obviously Philip Council has a lot of influential people on it. But when we all have drinks afterwards (G&T, of course!), they all chat about X and what school they went to and isn’t such and such an old Grammarian and what can I say? Hurstbridge High, eh? Good school, nice wattle emblem on our insignia. Yes, we had one, it was written in Strine, “Work and Strive”, do you remember, Anna? I feel awful if I try to talk about schools because when they ask me, as they eventually do, what can I say? HHS results in them feeling discomfort (they usually say how well I’ve done to get there!) and then I feel guilty, of all things!

Anyway…I’m not missing Pete at all (I don’t think I told you, he’s going out with Rose. She’s so happy!). I see Kelly regularly and Marina occasionally (she’s become a born again christian which is painful). Oh, and Gemma, who did the B.Ed with me. They’re great - Kelly and Gemma are incredibly middle-class but Kelly particularly doesn’t seem to have any attitude about it. Gemma can push my buttons but I’ve discovered if I tell her so, she’s chagrined! And they really build me up - coming to me for English advice. Kelly is going to do grad studies in Geography next and Gemma, who’s an actor, is going to make her debut in an MTC play! She’s always getting us in to plays, stuff I’d never have thought about. I love it - the level of engagement with drama is so high (if it works) and how an actor inhabits a role can change everything…anyway, they bring wonderful things into my life.

And they listen to different music from us. Better stuff- not mass produced pop but local indie songwriters. I love a lot of it but it’s a surprise to me. I think Rod Stewart and Elton John, even Billy Joel, entertain the working-class. Part of me wants to rebel and say why shouldn’t we like them? But I want to know why it’s different and that’s hard to get answers to. No one from this life listens to Elton John.
I want to hear all about Tom’s plans for the company. I am really impressed with the two of you, out at the edge of computer technology. It challenges my assumptions about artistic and scientific practice. All you graphic artists seem to love Macs so there must be a connection there somewhere. How does the travelling go? You did say Bacchus Marsh isn’t that much further than Diamond Creek, so it’s not like you’re doing it everyday. I loved the weekend I spent there, I felt like City Girl on Bush Retreat. It’s hard to believe how different our lives are. It’s like you’re a grown up. But then, you always were.

I’m not, of course. My life gets sooo messy, again and again. I keep saying I need to fall in love but the fact is, I’ve fallen into ..something! You asked me last couple of letters and I know I’ve avoided it. Well, here it is. Stuart. Our relationship is odd, I’m the first to acknowledge that. I’m so conscious of his being a Liberal and wondering how the wheels of his mind turn, is he thinking Liberalish all the time? It’s a challenge to my deeply held stereotypes; not that the Liberals don’t deserve them but I guess, I was so sure I could sum them all up, and then….Stuart is a challenge to all that. Yet he is very supportive of me and what I’m doing, he’s interested. It’s weird. I’m all about education, participation, enfranchisement. He’s opposed to government programs, ownership or intervention of almost any kind. I suppose you’ll vote Democrat? I will refrain from saying, please choose a party that stands for something!!

I’ve got a truckload of reading to do over the summer, as I want to get a jump on the honours courses, not to mention the thesis! Fortunately, there’s masses of stuff on Blake; it’ll be trying to be fresh that’ll be the challenge. I’m determined…I think there’s a real feminist sensibility in there or at least can be read through a sympathetic lens. I’m so lucky they let me do Blake; he’s been in my system so long. *The Sick Rose*, Anna. I chant it to myself when I have to meet with academics. Knowing Blake off by heart seems to impress them, at Philip. Makes no sense given we are supposed to critique, not enjoy, eh?

Love to you and Tommy, and special love to handsome Bentley.

Meg
Divergence

“So, we know that in spite of his influential position as a leading sexologist of the twentieth century, Havelock Ellis was a fetishist of particular type and suffered from those sexual misfunctions he pathologised in his female patients.”

A hand goes up in the middle of the lecture theatre.

“Yes?”

“Did he acknowledge his own dysfunction?”

Professor Andrews sighs deeply. “Note, I said misfunction. Dysfunction is defined by normative social standards, constructing the notion of ‘deviance’. Ellis did not write of his own sexual fetish. Pathologising women was his forte. Women who did not welcome the eroticised domination and submission relations of penetrative heterosexuality…”

Meg lays down her pen. Around her, others scribble hastily.

“One of the essay questions relates to the practice of sexology on women and seeks to encourage the elucidation of themes in the work of the major sexologists of the period. Many of you may see Ellis as a deviate due to his explicit misogyny, while unquestionably accepting the work of Kinsey or Pomeroy or Masters and Johnson….”

Meg habitually notes the names in a list down the right margin of her notebook.

Somebody calls out, “What about Shere Hite?” There is muffled laughter.

Andrews becomes animated. “A fair question! What about Hite? I would argue that she uncritically propagates eroticised male domination…”

Meg drops her pen again.

“…she does, however, analyse women’s so-called complicity with their eroticised submission.”
Lower down the lecture theatre, Heloise turns, catches Meg’s eye and smiles.

“In fact, very little scholarship or research exists on female sexual response which is critical of the eroticisation model of hetero relations. Why is this? We may argue that it follows a path similar to the eroticisation of female thinness. Its vicissitudes are political.”

Andrews is off. Meg picks up her pen again.

“You might want to consider essay topics which compare and contrast hegemonic practices on women’s bodies.”

Meg notes this. Her heart is not in it. Why’d I take this subject, she asks herself for the fifth time this hour. The Politics of Sexology. Surely bread and butter stuff for the aspiring feminist scholar? But Professor Leslie Andrews does not admit any concept of female heterosexual agency. The only way Meg can defend her sexual choice is to accept that she has eroticised her own submission. This is deeply discomforting to Meg. It seems a ‘cut off at the knees’ argument- you are wrong because it’s acting on you and you don’t even know it. One can hardly add to that debate that one’s lovers rarely dominate as much as one would like.

Andrews continues to elaborate on eroticised female submission. Meg would love to say that for some of us, it is erotic. But such an essay would wreck her average and this is the year when marks count as never before. Scholarship track. Perhaps I could critique one of the really gross sexologists? Or do a socio-political analysis of representations of female sexuality, somewhere? Now there’s a plan. We’d agree on that, for sure. Scribbling notes frantically, Meg is still very relieved when the lecture ends. Heloise races up to her.

“Did you count how many times she said it?”

“Lost count at 24.”

“52 times!!"
“It’s not funny, Hel. Quite seriously, she should update her bloody lecture…”

“It’s not really updatable, is it?”

“Why can’t she see the holes in her theory?”

“Dummy.”

“We-ll! She allows no agency or choice…”

“Bullshit.”

“Hello?”

Heloise is eating a chuppa chup, very prettily.

“She would argue agency is exerted in your political choice to become a lesbian.”

“I don’t desire women. That’s my agency.”

“Well, you don’t know because you’ve learnt desire within…..”

“Let me guess…..”

“Yes! Eroticised domino-submissive hetero relations.”

“You forgot penetrative.”

“Well, that’s entirely implied.”

“I’m over it, but I need an essay topic I can blitz to keep the marks up. I’ll talk about the eroticisation of anything else, but not shagging. Please.”

“Yes, thank God I’m only auditing it.” Heloise is now doing her MA. “Perhaps the internalised misogyny of shagging a Liberal, Miss Flanners? There’s some masochistic choice, eh?”

Meg blushes. “Who are you to talk?”
Heloise laughs, as they leave the Zoology Theatre and walk up past the Barry Library. This teasing is the only acknowledgment between them of their sexual involvement with members of the Right. It remains unspoken in any real sense, which suits Meg fine because she can’t articulate it anyway.

“How’s thesis?”

“Good”, Meg’s mood lifts instantly.

“Freak.”

“Well, it’s so interesting. David is great. He wants me to sell Blake all over again.”

“What’s the topic this week?”

“Oh, stop. It’s not changing. It’s spiritualism versus organised religion. Blake was such a radical, Hel.”

“Oh? What does Stuie think of that? Seems he likes radicalism too, on the side!”

Meg is momentarily flummoxed by this uncharacteristic directness.

“Blake’s a canon poet, thus he’s generally acceptable. Most people know nothing of his political activism.”

“Good answer. I wonder what Stuie would say about this morning’s lecture?”

Meg smiles. “You’ll only know if you ask him.”

“Aw, shucks. Think of the games you could play…. ‘oooh, you’re oppressing me, you ex-ploit-ative bas-tard’…. Heloise feigns panting.

“Stop! I get pissed off by Andrews, seriously. It makes me so angry. She shits all over the one thing I really know about in myself…”
“Ye-es…”

“What?”

“Well, the sexology stuff’s really important…”

“Of course! But what about some recognition that in spite of all that, I know what I want and I’m in charge of getting it?”

“I think Andrews really thinks it’s a plot, Meg.”

“Exactly. It’s some psychic conspiracy and she never seems to move forward. Where’s the development in her scholarship? We all move forward with our ideas, don’t we?”

Heloise is looking at Meg, her hennaed head tipped to the side.

“You have really come on, you know. It’s great. Your confidence has grown so much. I feel quite…proud of you!!”

Meg blushes.

“Th-thanks. I know you think I’m nuts to get so excited…”

“Well, just target your energy, use it rather than waste it.”

“Yes…I see what you mean. But I can’t write an inauthentic essay and how else am I gonna keep the 80+ average? I thought maybe if I wrote about male representations of female sexuality…but still you have to have a touchstone for comparison and Andrews would fail me for mine…”

“She can’t. Only for structural grounds. She’s so unpopular she’d lose if you appealed…”

“Yes, that’s another thing. The Faculty’d come down on her and I hate that! Because she is a passionate feminist and it is her lack of compromise that makes her so unpopular. If Winston or Gene Mellon failed me, I’d get very little joy…”

“True. The anti-theory twins. Yes, I take your point. So you wouldn’t …?”
“Well, I can’t cut her down using malestream apparatus. I just want to keep my average up. I’ll have to find a way… I might talk to Kate Llewellyn about it.”

“Yes…. I’m not sure about the gender awareness there…”

Meg cocks her head. “You know, you’re right. But she hates this prescriptive stuff. There are so many fine lines. It’s a challenge, Hel!”

“Your life’s full of them, m’dear.” Heloise’s slightly arch tone draws Meg’s attention.

“One FMP campus President is looking your way. I’ll nip to Old Arts-stuff to do. Coffee on the balcony?” Heloise is casually fluffing her auburn hair.

Meg feels tongue tied. With Heloise’s words she can immediately feel Stuart’s gaze on her.

“Yes, coffee. 2.30? I’d like to wait til the crowds disperse…”

“2.30. If you can drag yourself… have fun being oppressed….”

“I’m eroticising my own submission.”

Heloise laughs loudly, causing Stuart’s eyebrows to raise. “When you say it like that, it is fucking absurd!”

“Bye, Hel.” Meg strolls casually toward the Barry foyer, subtly searching for fellow left wingers. Her smile to Stuart conveys a number of different messages. Stuie knows her now; he is less concerned by the opinion of his colleagues, but the Liberals are a hierarchical lot and notching up leftie women is considered acceptable university behaviour.

“Hey. How was feminism 401?”

“Painful, actually.”

“I always find it so.”
“No, you don’t”.

He smiles lazily at her and her stomach catches. It is just sex, Meg chants. She is into the 1000s now.

“You wanna torture me tonight?”

“What’s in it for me?”

He smiles again. “A good meal. Maybe, um, a massage?”

“And?”

“You won’t suffer.”

“Cocky, aren’t you?”

“You once said I had reason.”

Meg lets that slide. He doesn’t skip a beat. These conversations have never lost their heat, even after eight months of trysts.

“Meg, I need to talk to you tonight.” She is startled. He has never said such a thing before.

“Oh- OK. We need to ‘talk’, do we?”

“I'm serious.”

Stranger and stranger.

“Over dinner?”

“Um, yeah. Could you keep Saturday arvo free?”

“Well, with difficulty. I’ll need an early night tonight. I guess I can- why?”

“I’ll tell you at dinner. Let’s get a coffee?”

“What, here?”
“Professor’s Walk- no one there. Who cares, anyway?”

“You know I do.”

“Oh, that’s right. The free, democratic Left decides who you may have coffee with. The evil, fascist Libs allow me to choose…”

“You’ve got less to lose!”

“How can you lose anything, from this?”

“My credibility. My responsibilities as a role model.”

“You’re not joining. All we do is…..”

“Shush!”

“OK, let’s not do this again.” Stuart runs a hand through his hair and Meg is startled by a sudden resignation in his voice. He is different today. It occurs to her that he might take her paranoia personally. He seems to be so invincible, like he never has doubts about himself.

The rush of tenderness courses through her, again. This is awful: it leaves her feeling so drained and confused. She doesn’t love him. Of course not; he is a Liberal, therefore such a thing is impossible. The warning voices that chorus, we love people, not political affiliations, are shaken out of her head, quickly. It’s values. Values are everything. You can’t love someone with such divergent values. And she’s never, like, been in love with him. That rush you get is merely sexual. It’s ‘cos he’s such a good lover. He’s into it in the way Meg has dreamed of. He relates to her in a way that is almost ideal. Yet he has never tried to influence her in any way. Their boundaries are clear. But he is a Liberal and he thinks Peter Costello will be this nation’s finest hour. Of course it could never be love.

“Stu?”

He looks across at her.
“What are we doing Saturday?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you. Hang on…”, he moves ahead of her up the narrow brick lane to Professors’ Walk. There is a catering outlet here, hidden by shrubbery, its outdoor seating frequented only by the Botany lab technicians and the occasional commerce student. Stuart drops his knapsack onto a table and moves to the caravan. Meg marvels again at his fit, powerful body.

“Coffee?”

“Ta.”

He is wearing his gym clothes- he lives in them so he can race to the Sports Centre whenever there’s a gap in his 34 contact hour schedule. Meg always knew he was fit, but proximity has shown her the extent of his strength and power. He is much shorter than Pete, only 5’10” but the difference is profound. There is nothing light or camp about Stuie- his groundedness is a new experience for Meg. His strong determined views might be similarly held to Pete’s but they need no investment in her own. He seeks no control over her and only encourages her academic plans, always suggesting opportunities as he sees them. Whenever he commends her for how far she has come, Meg points up the role of Liberal policy in the obstacles she faced. This used to be a source of sport for them both. Meg perfected some of her arguments through her debates with Stuart. But lately she is conscious that their differences have taken on new meaning. Neither of them has a partner - they are each other’s lover- and it is starting to wear, this secret non-relationship, that is really only sex but involves so much of both their intellects and values.

“Here you go”.

“Thanks.” He always pays. He says it is the least he can do- his part time job is for a merchant banker. Meg points out this is contradictory to his claimed position. He asks her to let him be human. The implication hangs between them every time.

“You seem tired.” She smiles tenderly at him. The girlfriendish feelings are off and running. She sees the catch in his throat, the flare in his eyes.
“Well, I have these sleepless nights.” He strokes her cheek—they both glance hastily around.

“Oh, right. It’s my fault.”

“Yes. You’re killing me.”

“What a way to go.”

Silence. Long looks. His hand on her knee, under the table.

“I am actually, tired I mean. It seems the federal election is set.”

“Oh, now? Surely Keating will go full term?”

“Well, the rumours are, May 13. So we’ve gone into campaign mode.”

Meg sighs. A federal election draws Liberal-Labor lines like nothing else.

“Great. I’ll have to campaign, too, although nothing like you. You’ll be torn in all directions.”

“In more ways than you mean.”

Another sigh. Their whole relationship seems to have shifted this morning. Meg feels the anxiety but under it she feels something else, something she does not like feeling….pleasure?

“OK. What do you need to tell me? You’ll be unavailable?”

“No.”

“Oh? You will; that’s OK. I’ve got plenty to do. I’ll survive. Keating will win….”

Stuart smiles broadly.

“…so you’ll be back where you are…”

He puts his feet up on the picnic table. “Not such a bad place.”
Meg is shocked. “But you want Hewson to win, I know you hate Keating…”

“Rubbish. I want Hewson to win for the Party’s sake. I want Keating out so we can get some decent IR laws happening…”, his voice goes up over Meg’s squeals, “…but in terms of micro-economic reform, Keating’s been terrific. He’s a hero. I like his social stuff too. Best Labor PM in history…stop spluttering, woman!”

“Chifley…”

“Socialist prick.”

“How dare you?”

“Well, we gave you Fraser. He left all your socialist shit alone.”

“He sacked an elected leader…”

“Who was pouring illegal money down the drain….”

“You gave us Billy McMahon….”

“OK, quits?”

“It’s not funny”, remonstrates Meg.

“Meg, we’ve both stuffed it up.”

“Not in the same way at all. But this time it’s war. Hewson will introduce full fees upfront, no HECS, no deferred option…”

“The market’ll sort it.”

“Stuart! That’s such total fucking crap, it never happens! When’s this trickle down effect gonna wet the heads of working-class kids? Who’ll expand their life chances?”

“Whoever it produces for.”
“It produces social good, for the community….”

“Why won’t they pay for it then?”

“They do, you nonkus, it’s called the social wage, you want to scrap it.” Meg is breathless with frustration and the awful tight feelings in her chest and throat are back. They are worse. He is too intelligent and humane to think this way, surely?

He traces her cheek again. “Sorry, love.”

Meg flinches. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t say that. You should never say love if it isn’t. It’s the worse pretence. I did it once…it’s my only regret…”

He looks hard at her. “You would regret being fake, that’s a real Meg sort of thing.”

“But it’s even worse…if you know and you’re too weak…”

“Weakness is hardly your issue.”

“Not any more, and it isn’t yours either, so don’t…”

“Say anything I don’t mean.”

“No!”

“I don’t.”

She can’t look at him. Who’s being fake now?

Stuart sighs. “This is nice, but…what’re you doing for lunch?”

“I was gonna eat a bowl of vegies at the Co-op and go hear Nelson Maxwell speak…..”
Groans from Stuart. “That anarchist prick?!”

“Is prick the only insult you have? Of course you wouldn’t like him, he’s a humanist!”

“That fuckwit cost two companies millions of dollars.”

“For screwing their workers…”

“Oh, Meg. That’s the way it goes, accept it.”

“Not while I’m alive.”

“Christ, he’s a fucking thug.”

“You are so full of it.”

“What?”

“A unionist with a prick, you hate. I see you make an exception for one with a cunt…” She sees rage in his face. “I’m a unionist! Get that? It’s the way it is, Mr H R Nicholls.”

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* 

Meg has attended a Left seminar. Afterwards, she has coffee with her friend Jennine to discuss some problems in the Feminist Collective.

Jennine sits down next to Meg.

“You had a lot to say..”

“Sorry, Meg. There’s just no point in this forum. They think their class stuff is put to bed just by being unionists.”

“Aargh!”

“Yeah, well, it gets worse. I need your help.”
“What with?”

“EAG….”

“Oh, no, I can’t be active in anything else. I must commit to honours.”

“OK, settle down! I’m not asking you to do more, just to help me with a, um, situation…”

“Oh?”

“Let’s get a cuppa; coffee lounge?”

“I’m meeting Heloise there at 2.30.”

Jennine gives Meg a look.

“30 minutes. That’s plenty.”

Coffees delivered, Jennine corners a table for two in a corner and goes in search of chairs.

“Shoulda known it’d be packed.”

“It’s great, given how bad the coffee is. So, how’s honours going?”

“Wonderful. I’m really loving it. Except for….”

“What?”

“Oh, the house…I hate it.”

“Yeah. That’s gonna wreck your life. Come to Carlton.”

“Can’t afford it.”

“$50 per week.”

“I pay $35 now. Plus moving costs money.”
“OK. Listen. The WSTN- you know we got ‘em into EAG.”

“I knew you were onto it. That’s great. It’ll change everything.”

“Not in a good way.”

“Why?”

“We’ve planned three joint meetings. The first was here on the 3rd floor.”

“Yeah?”

“It was…. Awkward, to say the least.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll get to that. The last two, including one last night, have been re-scheduled or relocated each time.”

“That’s odd. Why?”

“Well, first time was to be held at Kangan in Coburg.”

“Yeah, alternate the venues.”

“But it was relocated.”

“Neen! What’re you getting at?”

‘Half an hour before the meeting.”

“That’s ridiculous. Where to?”

“The Lincoln.”

“Who by?”

“EAG women’s convenor.”
“What, ring the EAG tree to move the meeting at 6.30pm?”

“Yes.”

“But what about the TAFE women?”

“Exactly.”

“What, they missed it?”

“They turned up to Kangan.”

“Oh, no. What happened?”

“They were not happy.”

“No….but why was it moved?”

“Coburg was too difficult for the EAG crew.”

Meg laughs. “That’s not it, Neen! Who said that?”

“EAG women’s convenor.”

“Hang on. Isn’t that Mia?”

“Yes. One of them.”

“So, explain clearly, why….?”

“Do the maths, Meg.”

“Well, I’m sorry. But I’m not getting it.”

‘OK, I said the first meeting was awkward?”

“Yeah…?”

“It was awful. I felt terrible. They treated the TAFE women really…badly.”
“Hey?”

“Remember at SUV that time, we had a meeting and that guy from the Diplomacy club came in to tell us the space was condemned?”

“Yeah, and we were so ashamed of how they treated him.”

“Exactly.”

“But, no, surely…that was….that was a class thing…but they didn’t see that…..”

“Hello.”

“I don’t ..how do you see…?”

“This is, was, exactly like that.”

“Neen! WSTN is part of EAG. That guy was seen as like, ideological enemy. Plus, he had stretch Faberge jeans and moccies®…”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, no! Now you’ve…you’re being so cryptic. What happened? Spit it out!”

Jennine is startled as Mia plops down beside them.

“Why so intense, guys?”

“We were discussing WSTN.”

“Oh.” Mia’s face drops away. “What about it?”

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a Moccies is colloquial for ‘moccasins’, footwear made from sheepskin and normally worn as bed slippers. It is part of Australian archetypal humour that ‘bogans’, people who live in traditional working-class suburbs of the cities, wear this footwear.
No one speaks for a moment. Meg is frantically trying to frame a sentence.

“I guess we’re…concerned… that the TAFE women won’t have a really welcoming experience….”

Jennine snorts.

Mia rolls her eyes. “You haven’t been, Meg.” Meg is less surprised by the defensiveness this time.

“No, but Jennine can paint me a picture using places I have been.” Feeling more confident, Meg goes on.

“It’s a phenomenon, Mia. It’s a process that’s incredibly difficult to describe. It’s really about feelings.”

Mia exclaims. “Well, feel differently.”

“Mia?!”

“Oh, Meg. I’m sorry. But…why is there always this …whinging? You should hear these people. They’re like….racists!”

Mia states this almost triumphantly. Meg is speechless. Drawing herself up for a full-on attack, she is beaten by Jennine.

“Mia, would you excuse us? Meg and I were discussing this issue. We clearly don’t share these concerns so we’ll raise them with you another time.”

Mia suddenly looks like she might cry.

“I don’t know what it is I’m doing wrong.”

“Well, we need to have a dialogue about it, but first I’m discussing it with Meg.”

Mia gets up. “Meg…?”
“It needs to be talked about”, Meg speaks awkwardly.

“Yeah, OK.” Mia swings her webbing pac onto her shoulder and weaves through the coffee lounge.

“Yuk.” Meg looks at Jennine. “She is sooo defensive. And I still can’t put this issue into words properly. Why are they so defensive, like, in advance?”

Jennine hesitates. “Well, just because we can’t speak it doesn’t mean we don’t all know what’s going on.”

“No, that can’t be right. We can’t say, they think they know…”

“Who’s they?”

“Well, we wouldn’t do it.”

“But that’s because they’ve done it to us, we know what it’s like….?”

Meg looks sideways at Jennine.

“What?!"

“I’m thinking. I can’t actually say what they did to me….?”

“Did? They still do it to me….”

“OK, do. It’s almost impossible for me to define.”

“Yeah, but, you can see it? The Diplomacy guy…”

“The attitude, the tone…..”

“Always so patronising.”


“That could be a boy thing.”
“Yes, except when Mia talks to male lefties, like Maxwell or Brian Kennedy…or even Terry.”

“That’s it….”

“She’s so … different. She flirts, Neen. Her head rolls back, ‘look at my throat’, purr, purr. If I did that I’d be male defined…”

“…Aha….”

“It’s fucking hypocrisy…”

“I know.”

“So, we need to describe what they do and get them to see how it’s class related..”

“Yes. You write something.”

Meg squeals.

"No! Why do I have to?"

“Because you can write and you know what I mean…”

“But it means saying…”

“Jesus, I know it does. ‘I feel this, you made me feel this’. You feel horrified at saying that, so do I.”

“I’ve just got over how no one wanted me to do honours.”

‘That’s the same thing, Not for the likes of you.”

Meg is considering.

“No. That’s not it. It wasn’t me at all. The department gave me lots of support. It’s not ‘us’. It’s the track. The stream. They flow us onto them. Teaching track, academic track, professional track. It’s about classifying. Honours and not honours.’
“They need control over teachers, big time.”

“What are you saying, ‘they’? It’s not a conspiracy! It’s just reproducing social arrangements…”

“You don’t reckon they think about how to do that?”

“Who? God, no. They don’t have the consciousness to even see that’s what’s happening. They have no idea they’re doing it at all. They just follow…social arrangements.”

“I don’t agree. Capitalism needs certain structures…”

“Neenie! Capitalism isn’t one monolithic entity. Even capitalism has its splitters.”

Jennine looks shocked. Meg laughs.

“Anyway, I feel terrified at the thought of saying to Mia, and Catherine…”

“And Heloise…”

“God, Heloise. No.”

“Saying what, exactly?”

Meg breathes and stares squarely at her friend.

“Well. That the struggle I’ve had with feeling ugly and stupid and awkward and inadequate…”

“Eeek!”

“…is not fair, not my fault and traceable to my relationship with women in the feminist Left right here at Philip, and in the movement generally.”

“Oooh.”

“OK, so we hate the idea of saying it. But it’s true, isn’t it?”
“Oh, yeah.”

“I feel so…gauche…and…lumpen, around them.”

“Lumpen? Hah! You lumpen prole!”

Shrieking with sudden laughter, Meg and Jennine fail to notice Heloise approach.

“What merriment, sisters. Share the joke?”

Heloise is wearing an emerald green retro dress, fitted, with a box pleated skirt. Her black stockings, mary janes and angora cardigan set it off perfectly. Her hair is a hennaed Louise Brooks bob and her matte white face and dark red lips betray no sign of the warm day. Meg doesn’t feel her heart sink as it has in the past. She is fascinated by Heloise and wants to drink her in. The black square satchel which is slung snugly across Heloise’s body is no better than Meg’s fabulous bag (a gift from Stuart after he saw her admire it a dozen times in the Tuesday market). It is interesting how this feeling about Heloise has changed quickly but not suddenly, segueing from a resentful envy to a neutral, even intellectual admiration, as for a stunning and resonant piece of art. I wouldn’t wear that much make up to school, thinks Meg. Jennine is starring at Heloise with a look Meg recognises. She feels utterly inadequate and unattractive. What a lot of failures we are as feminists, thinks Meg, if this is what we’re dealing with.

Heloise pulls a dark red pout. “Tell me.”

Jennine is looking at the table, leaden with awkwardness. Meg is struck by her changing feelings about the situation.

“We were talking about some issues we have with the EAG Women’s Collective treatment of WTSN. We just uncovered a common oppression and made a pun. I suppose it’s a form of in-joke.”

Heloise raises one arched brow. “Hhmm. One of those….background things I suppose.”
Jennine’s mouth drops open. Meg is surprised that she does not reflect Jennine’s reaction. She feels quite calm. And something else. Is that...pity for Heloise? She doesn’t get it.

“Actually, it’s one of the central political issues facing the Feminist Collective - facing our movement.” Heloise looks pained.

“We’ve been discussing it in the context of WTSN and its recent supposed entree into EAG. You might be aware....”

“But that’s not relevant to your...backgrounds.”

Meg sighs.

“You’ll forgive me, Hel, but it disappoints me that the most elementary political connections escape you. The theoretical model is really basic but none of you, it seems, can apply it.”

Now Heloise’s mouth drops open.

“This is cultural studies in practice - this is surely why we theorise, so we can understand and attribute some motivation? Mia was just here telling us how EAG had to shaft those women from WTSN...”, an exclamation from Heloise, “...because these people from migrant families and the west, who are in certificate courses at Kangan, were racist! They lack a privileged, elite sandstone education. Let’s have them shot! The great irony is of course that the Mias of this world...”, purposeful pause, “...have all the education and privilege taxation can buy and they are just as ignorant about social class as these working-class women are about race, but of course with less excuse since it’s under their noses, in all the books they read, and, they are members of political movements which seek to resist it! How’s that for irony?”

Jennine is beaming at Meg. Heloise has flushed a dark red; her mouth curves away from her face.

“I had no idea you felt so much rage at us.”

“No, that’s my fault because I haven’t articulated it.”
Jennine snorts. “Bunch of crap! We shouldn’t have to articulate it, we had it done to us. How can such privileged spoilt fucken rotten feminists expect us to do the sophisticated political work so their fucken comfort zones stay put? I heard you say, ‘us’, just now, Hel. You’ve got no illusions about where you sit on this.”

“You don’t know anything about my background….”

“I know you say background ‘cos you won’t say ‘class’.”

“You don’t know what my father does for a living…”

Meg laughs.

“Here we go, Neenie. The most sophisticated educated analysis in our entire group, reduces our class to what our fathers do! So, what’s your class? Given your father is, as they say…”

“.de trop…”

“Is that what they say?”

“Dead, actually.”

“Oh, dear. How will we ‘class’ you? You will be historically classed. Time warp, whatever your dad did before he died and took your class with him…”

“Well, he spent three years dying. Does that count?”

“Er, I think that’s classless, like sleeping. The counter-revolutionary bastard. Of course, how he went about dying might be relevant…”

“Meg, that sounds a bit like cultural capital to me. You don’t want to get too complex, mind. Complexity is for the cultural studies classroom, not the Left. You need to be able to say, easily, who’s us and who’s them, OK?”

Heloise is silent, grim-faced. Meg turns to her.
“We have fundamental problems about ownership of feminisms and deeming ‘we’ and ‘they’. Those problems are universal to the women’s movement, I reckon. But here, in this environment, we have the most sophisticated analyses anywhere. We are the Left and we have cultural studies scholars amongst us who can theorise identity better than anyone. But they leave all the complexity and nuance at the tute room threshold. Can you believe, Heloise, how clichéd it is for you and Mia and Catherine to be dismissing the WTSN women because of their lack of privilege…”

“We’re not!”

“No? Why are their clothes relevant? Why is there humour in deriding the bogan stuff? Pretty shallow, isn’t it? Poverty ring any bells? Subcultures, perhaps? I seem to remember you mentioned them in your honours thesis.”

“Meg, I…”

“This is horrible, I know. But it has to be said.”

“Oh, suddenly you state everything, do you? You’ve turned over a new overt leaf?”

Meg is momentarily silenced; Heloise’s tone is loaded. Meg stares at her in astonishment. Is that a…threat?

Jennine has missed the implication. “Yes, we are going to state it. It must be said - why does this scare you? The same reason you are so defensive, because you think it’s difference which makes you uncomfortable. It’s the reflection of your own privilege…”

Heloise is still staring at Meg.

“There are more substantive considerations, Jennine.” Here we go, thinks Meg. Pattern time.

“How does it get more substantive than acting out the clichès of the women’s movement when you have the most analysis…?”
“These women have no theory.”

Meg gasps. This isn’t funny.

“Hel? Listen to yourself!”

Heloise pulls a pack of Marlboros out of her satchel.

“Well, Meg, you can apologise for them as though they’re Hill people all you want. But when they claim to be something and then…”

“Do you really have so little analysis of your own privilege?”

“Oh, please. There’s not so much difference. They’ve got education, what are they doing with it?”

Meg and Jennine exchanged astonished looks.

“You simply can’t engage them on ideology.”

“No? So use hegemony instead, that’s the plan?”

Jennine laughs. Heloise flips her cigarette over the balcony and leaps to her feet.

“Really, Meg, your standards are very double, not to mention elastic…”

“I am astonished at the failure of your theories and analysis in helping you to see what’s operating here, Hel. Did you hear Jennine mention cultural capital? Do you even know what that is?”

“Oh, Bourdieu, I think he meant…”

“No! Not ‘Oh, Bourdieu!’. That is fucking privilege! We know about Bourdieu because we’re at the most elite SANDSTONE in the nation…”

Heloise sits down and lights another Marlboro.

“Well, you’re here too, don’t bullshit me with that backdoor crap. You can hold your own….”
Meg feels leaden with frustration. What can’t Heloise see?

“The place I come from is foreign to this. I had to learn a totally new language and culture to survive here at all….”

Jennine pipes up. “Me, too.”

Heloise gives an exaggerated sigh.

“That's true for all of us.”

“Not in the same way, it isn’t.”

Meg can hear the same emotions in Jennine’s voice. “We don’t know cultural stuff that you know.”

Heloise interjects but Jennine raises her voice.

“We don’t know it, we get judged for it. That’s the difference. Do you think being Left is all you need, that you’re in then? It really points up the privileged basis of the Left, doesn’t it, thinking like that? It’s universalising…”

“Yes!”, shrieks Meg, making Heloise jump.

“…it’s homogenising. How can that be, Hel? I thought you guys were the arbiters of capital T theory?”

Heloise looks pained.

“Well, in order to call yourself Left…”

Meg explodes. “There you go- pathetic assumption. We can theorise and name ourselves and our experience because we’ve become privileged through education! Now, we can. Do you think the WTSN women really think of being in the Left, talk about themselves self-consciously as ‘the Left’? Of course not! They just care about an issue. Oh, sure, they might be broadly radicalised and become ideologically aware but they haven’t had a fucking education that teaches them what they’re doing IS a social
movement. Why do you have these expectations at all, Hel? What’s so obscure to you?”

Heloise looks anxiously at Meg.

“Well, I didn’t know any of that….”

“What?!” Jennine is very impatient.

“You two aren’t like that.”

Meg and Jennine look at each other in astonishment.

“Oh, you idiot”, from Jennine.

“Hel, is there only one way to be working-class? That’s not you. You understand heterogeneity, surely?”

“Meg! I don’t … I don’t get this like you do. When you walked me through it, just now, I see it. But I never saw it like that before. You don’t seem any different to me….”

More exclamations from Jennine.

“That just points up that the theory on difference is merely theory. So, why do that stuff, when it’s not used as it could be, where it’s needed?”

“Well, to do academic work…”

“Which has no accountability? To translate into something…?”

“It’s about understanding things.”

Jennine laughs. “I think we just covered that. It’s not working properly!”

“Neen! Do you see, Hel? If the purpose of theory is to illustrate and illuminate, how come it isn’t being used for that in this context? When would you see it being needed…?”

“Well, not in the Left! We’ve got our analysis…”
Jennine exclaims again. “It’s not ‘our’ analysis, Sister! We are not the same!” Leaping up, she snatches her backpack and spins away.

Heloise looks sadly at Meg. “What exactly did I do?”

Meg sighs. “It’s a form of homogenising…and… I have to say, arrogance.”

Heloise starts to cry.

“Hel, perhaps we should start at the beginning? If we can’t deal with our own issues as a group, we’re not ready for a network with TAFE women…”

“Meg, they were awful! They wore moccasins, like some Westie cliché! And one of them kept calling me a wanker! What is that?!”

“Culturally specific. Who decided moccasins were awful…?”

“You know! That’s silly…you’d never wear moccasins!”

“Of course not. Because I have so many other choices, because I have the self-worth to choose from them, because I understand the role of clothing choice in image and particularly because I want to fit in here. Did you mention that mocs were unacceptable footwear at EAG?”

“Oh, Meg!”

“Did you?”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“So, it’s stupid to tell them? But it’s OK to justify excluding them because of their clothes?”

“Nooo! That’s not fair! I told you one of them called me a wanker… more than once…”

“Have her shot!”
“…and they were so racist…but I suppose that’s what you were talking about before. It’s a funny way to describe privilege, not being racist…”

“Heloise, that is not at all what I said. Did you bother to hear what I actually said?! These women generally have no elite education, have various ethnicities and experience racism themselves every day…”

“Well, then, surely they shouldn’t be so racist?”

“I see. As you have gloriously and generously turned your gender oppression into feminism, they should do as you do…”

“Well?! What’s wrong with that?” Meg smiles wryly at Heloise’s failure to see any irony.

“I am really struggling to know where to start! ‘What’s wrong with that’?! Oh, Hel. I don’t think I want to do this anymore…”

“Why? Do what, talk about it?”

“Face up to it.”

“Name this fucking ‘it’ for Jesus’ sake!”

“Oh, let’s call it…Tory twit-ism. How can you be so obtuse?”

Heloise is silent for a second. “I want to get it…."

The rage has receded in Meg, leaving her weak. “Well, at least you are aware there is something you’re missing…that’ll help. OK…I think we need to look at this in epistemological terms…”

“Are you having a go at me?”

“No! I’m saying isn’t epistemology just really ways of knowing…”

“Yes, I’d agree with that…”

“I mean, in a cultural studies sense, not linguistics or philosophy…”
“Oh, those are precious disciplines. They lack reflexivity.”

Meg stares at Heloise, noting she is now completely relaxed.

“OK, so if we call it ways of knowing, you must see, it’s just…difference, isn’t it?”

“Ye-es…”, doubtfully.

“Some things are signified, differently.”

“But…”

“Yeah?”

“Surely, they’re…oh, you said, not in the Left.…”

“That was your assumption, that they’re deemed ‘in’…”

“You deem yourself….”

“Do you? I never have. I just talk about the Left, but I started saying ‘in’, as though I were there too, only when others said it of me”

“Oh. But…”

“Yes?”

“You got how the Left works?”

“Well, I’m getting more every moment!”

“But you do…so…”

“Don’t you see what’s being said here? You’re saying ‘how it works’ and that I magically ‘got’ it? Don’t you see all the structures and practices you theorise, as othering?”

Heloise is pouting again. No worse accusation than othering.
“But not once you join it, surely? I mean, the othering comes from the Right, doesn’t it?”

Meg falls back in her chair.

“No, Hel. That’s the explicit, known enemy. The othering from within is insidious and much more destructive, because if people with a sophisticated class analysis can’t put it to some meaningful use…”

“Yes, I don’t agree with burning police horses, either.”

OK, thinks Meg. She’s not going to get it. Let it go.

“Meg? What?”

“Er, it’s just pointless. That’s all. The fact is the TAFE women make you uncomfortable and you project onto them. OK. Let’s move on.”

“You sound angry.”

“Yes….I don’t think that’s unjustified. Don’t worry. Weren’t you going to give me something to read?”

“Ye-es. A draft intro. It’s very…”

“An intro, a month into the masters?”

“I like to write my ideas formally.”

“Fair enough. I’m impressed.”

“It is an MA. You should, too.”

“Oh, I will! I’ve got lots, anyway.”

“Once you do that you get to a draft so much quicker. Besides, I’ve been working on it since October.”

“Yes, when you put it like that….“
“I s’pose honours is keeping you very busy?” is there a faint emphasis on honours?

“Ye-es. It’s a crazy year, given the thesis is half an MA.”

“Any chance of going to Vic Market on Sunday?”

Meg’s heart sinks. She loves to go shopping and people watching with Heloise, and hardly ever gets asked.

“Oh, I’d love to…but…”

“Ring me Sunday morning?”

“Is that OK?”

“Yeah. I get up early- yoga. My form of church.”

They laugh.

“I have a lot on this weekend. A family thing…Saturday…” Meg flushes at her lie.

“Oh? They got over honours yet?”

“Not Mum. Never will, I’m used to it.”

“I s’pose with working you need to study weekends.”

“I sure do.”

“You won’t know yourself with a scholarship.”

“Oh, God. If only.”

“Written in the stars, I’d say.”

“I really like that expression!”
“Well, keep an open mind about Sunday. We should talk about this…issue again.”

“Um, I think I’ll write something. We seem, as a group, to stumble over theory on this, so I’ll use that as a starting point…”

“That’s an excellent idea. We can have a proper debate that way.”

Meg feels the maelstrom of her sudden pleasure at Heloise’s approval contrasted with the absurdity of what she actually said.

“I’m off.”

“Seminar?”

“Not til 4; I’ve got to copy some journal articles and that takes forever.”

“The Barry shouldn’t be too busy yet.”

‘No, I’m dreading assessment time.”

“I’d stockpile now.”

“Ye-es. I’ve thought that. I’ll find half a day…”

“Early mornings or evenings, it's almost empty.”

“Except for graduate students!”

“Well, only the really focused ones.”

Meg smiles at Heloise. This truly bonds us, she thinks. We are so bonded and so divided.

“Listen, I’m serious about Sunday. Please spare me two hours.”

“OK, I will. I'll ring you.”

“See you.”
Meg heads home to get ready for her date with Stuart

A cool change has blown up across the South Lawn as Meg heads through the Law Cloisters and down to the Barry. Leaves sweep in front of her. Autumn is coming, she thinks. Philip is so beautiful in autumn. Despair sinks through her. It is easy to plan the Right Life in theory. Plans come naturally to Meg. She can reinvent the wheel of her own life. Execution is a different story. It can feel... inert. The doing part has got easier, as she has shed the false aspects of her life, but still... Stuart is loving and comforting, his presence lifts her mood. He makes her laugh. She is struck by his passion, for everything. Especially her. Amazingly, he is not judgemental, except in politics. I've done it again, Meg thinks. I've walled off a section of my own behaviour, so I couldn't see it.

The afternoon stretches before her. Thesis time, home to change, dinner with Stu, early night. She looks forward to it, in spite of their earlier fracas, which is such a familiar pattern with them.

There is a plethora of material on Blake but concentration is difficult. Meg tries to focus on more recent work, especially that which is theoretically informed. Scholars have been writing on Blake since the discipline began. Meg makes copies of some journal articles and sits at the mezzanine window, overlooking the South Lawn. Some close textual analysis of the Songs of Experience holds her attention for a time. 'Blight with Plagues/the Marriage Hearse'. Don't we do that quite well ourselves? Meg thinks. What would Blake think of me, with a Liberal? He'd be appalled. I am untrue to myself, that's what would concern Blake. Or am I? How can I be so... torn? What can I possibly believe can come of this? Meg forces herself to write her paragraphs in response to the material she has read.

Her study plan, broken down into days, involves a strict word count. This has worked for her before and gives her a frame when under emotional pressure. But 500 words is all she can manage. Packing up, she borrows some additional texts to the 45 currently lining her fireplace at home, and heads out to the bike rack near Botany. The day is now much less warm and it is threatening to shower. With books and folder in her pannier and her new satchel slung across her body, Meg pedals her red bike up Royal
Parade. Riding alongside Princes Park is a joy. The smooth bike track allows for high speeds, the green canopy over Royal Parade provides shade and peace, the breeze is softly fragrant. Soon, she turns up Park Street and onto the bike track alongside the railway line. A left turn and it is a short ride up smooth quiet Union Street to the double-fronted Edwardian at number 55.

Meg hopes for emptiness and peace as she lets herself in and props the bike in the long hall but she can hear Juanita moving about in her bedroom; instantly Meg is on edge. Quickly shutting her bedroom door, Meg unpacks and tidies away her study items. Superorganisation is key, Michaela Moore tells her. Of course, Michaela doesn’t subscribe to this notion in practice.

Juanita is in the kitchen now, so Meg escapes into the art deco bathroom which is off the lounge.

“Mig? You wan tea?”

“Er, thanks.”

Always herb, of course. No teabags in this house.

Meg emerges; Juanita hands her a large mug of cranberry tea.

“Ta.”

“Ees gude for uterus.”

“Oh, excellent.”

“You are een for deener?”

“Er, no, not tonight. Date.”

“Yees.”

Juanita does not approve of Stuart. The feeling is mutual. “How de study?”
“Good, thanks. And you?”

Juanita pulls at her hair. “Thees teacher, they not understand me. They not help weeth writing.”

“It is expected, when you are admitted…”

“I am 2nd language…”

“Yes. But there is still an expectation of fluency…”

“Eet ees very judgmeental.”

Meg is silent. Everything about Juanita irritates her.

“What you write today, Mig?”

‘Oh, about a poem by Blake.”

“Ees good poem?”

Expulsion of breath. “All his poems are good.”

“I neever hear of heem.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of any Spanish poets.”

“Australian education systeem…”

They hear a key in the door. Juanita is still talking but Meg leaps up to see Naomi wheel her bike in.

“Tea, Noam?”

Meg receives a knowing look. “Sure.”

Naomi is a vegan chef, the size of a small sapling. She is of the kind of woman Meg never encountered prior to university. Wiry and lithe, Naomi seems wholly unencumbered by the anxieties that drive Meg and her friends. With a high H1 in honours, research didn’t beckon because it’s
too ‘theoretical’. Naomi leaps up at 6 am and retires by 10, seems never to crave chocolate or coffee, and conducts her relationships without any dysfunction at all. This seems to make her a tiny bit intolerant of others’ troubles; she is also unsympathetic to Meg’s food addictions. But she is deeply warm and supportive and Meg adores her.

“How is it, people?”

Juanita sighs. “My teecher give me deeficult time, Nami. He not understand.”

She whirlwinds through the living area, putting ferns in a vase and concocting some fresh beetroot and celery juice. Meg would not normally drink beetroot juice but its effect on her skin has reduced her distaste for it. That, and the fact that Stu has taken to calling it ‘root juice’, which has led him to conclude that the ‘ferals’ in Meg’s house have something to offer.

“So, Meg? Betraying the Prole tonight?”

Meg smiles. Naomi is affectionate, funny and entirely without judgement (except regarding processed food).

“Yes, about 7.”

Juanita frowns. “I thought you care for Prole? You say bad thing for Leeberal people…”

Naomi bangs down the jug of beetroot juice. “Ambiguity rules, sisters. Meg, you’ll be needing some hetero-patriarchal root juice?”

Juanita sniffs. “I know not thees word. Why you do thees, Mig….?” She falls silent as Naomi kicks her.

“So, is Jules in for dinner, anyone know?” Naomi lands on the couch, tucking her legs under her in a way Meg has recognised comes naturally to all categories of middle-class girls.
“I dunno. I hardly see Jules.”

“You are hardly heer, Mig.”

Sigh.

“Well, neither’s Jules”, says Naomi comfortably. “That’s OK. I’m making spelt ratatouille tonight. It’ll keep for days.”

Meg pulls a face. “Yum. Wish you’d make lentils when I’m out, Noam.”

Laughter. “I’ve got to have some subtly manipulative strategies, you know. You can take the ratatouille to school tomorrow.”

Meg stretches. “Fab. I’d better get ready. I won’t be late- gotta put in a couple of hours tonight ’cos I’m taking Saturday afternoon off.”

“What, seeing him in daylight? Ooh, getting serious!”

“Shut up. His idea, not mine.”

Meg changes quickly, brushes her teeth and puts on mascara and lipstick. She is always nervous before a date, her heart still thumps when she hears his car. She sits down at her desk and writes in her journal while waiting. Her journal has been sadly neglected lately and will be no guide to her current life in years to come. Meg jots down some notes to her conversation with Jennine earlier that day and writes up her thoughts about it. It is great that Heloise no longer affects her as she used to.

Naomi’s grandmother clock chimes 7 and the ABC news intro wafts up the hall. It is very unlike Stuart to be late- he is incredibly punctual. Meg shakes off a shiver of uncertainty. They often fight- it’s never affected him before. She writes a letter to Jean. But she is leadenly conscious of the lapse of minutes.

By 7.20 Meg feels so agitated she could cry. He is never this late. Could he have crashed? Had an appendicitis? Or has he decided to give up on her?
On her way back from the loo, and avoiding Juanita’s glare, Naomi grabs her. “This is odd, isn’t it? He’s never late.”

“No.”

“Well, I guess you don’t want some ratatouille?”

The clock chimes 8 pm. He isn’t coming. Meg changes her clothes and makes some peppermint tea, going through the motions of settling into study. In her room, she spies childhood Teddy starring down at her from the bureau. He is wearing an Essendon footy scarf, put there by Stuart at the end of last season when Essendon made the finals. She picks up Ted and buries her face in the scarf. It smells of him. Deep sobs rack Meg. She knows, this has always been the real thing. But much much better to let him go now, get it over with. He wants out. That’s good.

At 9.30 she admits defeat and brushes her teeth for bed. It is still warm, so she opens her sash window and turns out the light. An early moon sheds a few milky beams on her floor. In the distance she can hear some tom cats calling. Juanita’s SBS program rolls up the hall. Meg gives into herself and sobs madly into her pillow.

An hour later, her eyes hurt and her throat is dry. She sits up, ready to get some water, when she hears the familiar roll of his engine. It is 10.25 pm. Why would he come now? Perhaps he was hurt? Had an emergency? She races to the front door and opens it before he can ring the old chiming bell.

Whatever Meg expected, it was not what greets her in Stuart’s face. Both see immediately the other’s tears. Meg considers that she has never before seen him cry. I made him cry? she thinks.

“Hey.”

“Come in.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no. I did it too.”
They slip into her room.

“I guess you don’t wanna go out?”

“Um, I look a fright…”

He laughs shortly. “Not even close.”

She smiles hesitantly. She can feel it, in him.

“Do you want to?”

“Well. I need to talk…”

“OK, then. Give me a minute.”

40 minutes later, they are nursing take away hot chocolate in the car, overlooking Brighton Beach. The line of lights back to the city twinkle and flash. Their conversation has been light and trivial; media coverage of the forthcoming election, Stuart’s triathlon preparation, Meg’s humorous account of her exchange with Heloise. But now, silence descends.

“I should explain why I … stood you up.”

“I totally understand why.”

“No, you don’t.”

She looks across at him.

“I love you, Meg.”

The tears begin in her throat. This is it.

“You must know that?”

“I’ve been far too busy hiding from my own feelings.”

“Why?”
“I never understood that we could feel this way…across our values, in spite of them, at odds with them even.”

“Very few people live their values as you do. That’s part of my problem.”

“I’m exactly the same.”

He looks astonished. “How can that be?”

“Oh, silly. It’s not what the values are, it turns out. It’s that they’re so passionately held, it’s the belief; you, in your demented, sad, pathetic Liberal way…”

He laughs.

“…that they will change things for the better. I’ve never…been with anyone who was so clear and single minded. I thought Pete was…”

“Fucking cretin.”

She smiles.

“But he had such an investment in my values and in changing them! You don’t have that. We’re sort of the same, you and I. Oh, God, but we are…”

“Meg. That’s a profound compliment. But it’s not the same. You said you were exactly the same. No way. So I’ve got to be selfish. I’ve got to get…I’ve got to protect myself…”

Meg murmurs.

“…let me finish, please? I’ve got to face the impossibility of this. You see that? I’m sorry, I wish I could say I thought this wouldn’t happen. But I knew it would. I knew.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I knew I’d fall for you. That night at Council. I fell so quick.”

“I am exactly the same! Me, too. I’m just better at denial than you.”
“Denial of what? You didn’t…”

“Loving you! For the first time in my life, having my world really rocked…”

His face is aghast. He is quite pale.

“What?”

“What did you think? It was just a shag?”

He doesn’t speak.

“Stuie. As if…it’s all clear to me now. I’ve never had a relationship like this before, with a grown-up. How ironic. We’re so mature, we know we have to stop…”

She is pulled, roughly, into his arms and he is kissing her, passionately and tenderly, all over her face and throat, her arms, her head. He whispers, not the hot explicit dialogue of their sexual encounters but a new kind of urgency. Love. It courses through her, the sensation of being lifted and she flows with it, realising suddenly he has lifted her, over him, into the back seat. His hands are under her skirt, he is still talking, half-incoherent, mixing his usual erotic chatter with words she has never had said to her. There are sounds- the doors are locked, his zip undone, a condom unwrapped, the kissing noises as he devours her breasts. Then the reverberant sound of her own breath as he enters her, again and again, holding her fast and tight and groaning, agonising over his own pleasure, tears falling on her, til their movements towards one another, forcing downward and upward, meet and still, hold the tension, release it, in a cry from him that freezes in Meg’s mind forever.

He is still for a long time, his face buried in her neck. She stiffens and he lifts immediately.

“Am I crushing you?”

“No.”

“What is it?”
“You’re crying.”

Silence.

“Stu?”

“I am only human. Even for a Liberal.”

She holds his head against her, feels his sobs.

“Stu? What can I say?”

“You’ve said enough.”

“I thought you knew…it was obvious.”

“I had no idea. Good thing..” he lifts on one elbow and looks down at her.
“In all my planning out my life, it never occurred to me that I might meet someone like you. That someone like you could….that this sort of thing could happen. And there’s no way. You know that, Meg?”

“I do…..I do.”

He fiddles for a moment; he is the first man to take responsibility for providing condoms and disposing of them. He cannot allow her to see or touch the condom, unless she is applying it and thus it is entirely a sexual process. He tries to protect me, Meg thinks. How ironic.

“Hang on.”

“OK”, dryly.

He laughs but it hangs in the air quickly. Meg feels the deep sigh pulled from her and another feeling, waiting behind somehow, to be fully felt. Like cramps in her gut…in her jaw…like a pain you know is going to come on, later. He is going, she thinks. I have lost him. Something strong surges through her: hope? Couldn’t they find a way? It’s only politics….

“I did know….”
“What?”

“That there's no way.”

Slumped on the back seat alongside her, he turns away. Meg slides her skirt down.

“As if there could be.”

“If we chose…”

“OK, then.” He bounds up. “You, Meg Flanagan, want to be the wife of a Liberal MP and send your daughters to Lauriston, where they will receive elocution lessons, in case there are any vestiges of the working-class accents of their parents? You want to entertain mind-numbingly ignorant elderly Liberals who might contribute to your campaign fund, and pretend to be a good Christian and drink crap cask wine and hear about how much they hate those Asians or is it those gays this week? And never falter, for a second, never let that mask slip. Make sure you live behind it, Ms Flanagan. Except of course the wife of a Liberal MP becomes Mrs Noble, that's not negotiable; does what I've just offered you sound that much different to being Mrs Danville? Because that's what I've got ahead of me.”

Meg has pressed the back of her hand against her mouth; she is shrunk back against the door.

“No! You’re too good for that, that's not you….tell me you know that's not you…”

“It's part of me. It's an irrevocable part of what I actually want.” His tone is clear. And cold. His body language has changed. God, thinks Meg. He's… gone, now. And he's right. That world would kill me quickly.

“You'd never survive, it would crush you, Meg. You’d leave me and it would be much worse than it is now. No other way.”

“We couldn’t….give up politics…party politics I mean….”
He looks sideways at her. “I’ve wanted to be Federal IR minister since I was fifteen. I want it bad; that’s the truth. I’ve thought of it, believe me. But shit happens, Meg. My dream is your nightmare and vice versa. I want individual contracts for the nation. You want Keynesian protectionism. It’s not like we’re unclear here.”

“Minister? For… IR?”

“Yep. I’ll leave higher ed as a gesture to you.”

She has never heard him so bitter before. It is completely over now, this bizarre senseless connection with a man who stands for things she deplores.

“Very generous. I will oppose workplace contracts with every cell in my body.”

“I’d have laughed at that once. Now that I know you, I ask you not to get on the front line.”

“You come near universities, I will. But you won’t be bothered. Maybe Ronnie can be Mrs Noble by then. At least you won’t waste good fascist energy, shagging.” Her voice breaks.

“Shut up!”

“OK, take me home.” The tears spill hotly, loudly, out of her. They embarrass her as they never have, in front of him. He spins the large car fast up Brighton Road and the Highway, to Beaconsfield Parade, cutting down Clarendon Street, up Spencer Street, to North Melbourne and Parkville, along Royal Parade to Brunswick. Meg sobs all the way. The rage coming off him is shocking to her. He is furious. Then she realises it is grief. The enormity of it overwhelms her. He would have married me, she thinks. This man I think is so special and wonderful. If only I could be a Stepford. But my Stuie, the Stuart I’ve loved. He would’ve married me.

He pulls up at Union Street. He says nothing. She turns to him.

“In the upset…I didn’t say anything, but… when we were talking, of a parallel life…”
He smiles weakly.

“…you said, do you want to be the wife of a Liberal MP….”

Stuart draws a hand across his face.

“… I didn’t comment then…but I think….not the shiny stockings or anything….”

“What?”

“Sorry, it’s a stupid Lefty feminist reference to Liberal women…”

“Ah! ‘Cos they have shit legs?”

“No, I don’t know…”

“Yeah. They have shit legs.” He is crying again.

“Well, I just feel, for you, the person I’ve spent all this time with, to talk of marrying me, of wanting to marry me, is such a privilege….”

He turns away.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry… “, God, how I inane I am, she thinks.

“I don’t want to …make it worse…but I’ll treasure it….all the good things, I love my bag, always will…”

Really crying, tears all down his face, he faces her.

“Please get out of the car.”

“Um, OK. Stu? I love you…..”

“Get out of the car, Meg! Get out!”

“OK, OK!” She closes the door, and stands in the doorway, bent toward him, loathe to let go…
“I’m sorry, Stuie….”

“Don’t say that.”

“But I don’t regret it! I don’t at all. I hate to see you in this pain…”

“My own fault.” He looks directly at her and the pain, waiting for later, explodes through her. She feels it rush through her system. It is powerful, she feels weak.

“Goodbye.” A rush and he is gone.

Meg stands on the footpath. The silver moon is still up. A local tom crosses the road, yowling. There are some watery stars in the sky. Go inside, she chants. Just sleep. Remember honours. Even as the pain is fully felt, she remembers. There is honours.
Cusp

“I really can’t appreciate this time of year. Just when I’m free, it’s hot”. Meg scuffs dirt with her chinese slipper, $6 in Smith Street. Cheap elegance. Meg doesn’t think they are elegant at all but she has learned from watching the girls she envies and longs to be, that there are these short cuts. Shoes are so hard: this is the best of a limited set of options.

“So you’ve said. I’m not fond of the heat, myself.” Agnes leans against the giant oak trunk. “But the break, Meg. No deadlines. Academics all disappear. Just read what you want to, dabble, Rilke or Emerson…”

“Read Blake!”

“…W S Merwin, he was great. No, I’m not reading Blake! I’ll wait for your potted Critical Blake. That’s the whole point.”

“Ah, Agnes. You soothe my ego. We must see what the markers think.”

“Oh, you. What did Mikaela say? Tell me, yet again…”

“Yes, yes, but she’s not actually grading the thing….”

“You’ll get scholarship marks, guaranteed. You’re on track, my girl.”

There is that expression again.

“I love the sound of that.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? It’s getting on one that’s the challenge. Staying on is a lot easier.”

“Yes, I see that now. I got on a track! I’m not entirely sure how, but it’s the right one…”

Agnes laughs. “Palpably!”

“You think?”
“Oh, Meg. I love how naïve you are about your own talent. It’s sweet. No-one gets as fired up about their work…”

“You do!”

“Well, yes, but that’s the point. You’re always saying you can’t compare yourself with me! We are very similar and I take that as a compliment. Get it?”

Flushed, Meg smiles.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. I don’t find many kindred spirits amongst our colleagues.”

“No, me either. Why, d’ya think?”

“Passion, I reckon. It’s so complex, choosing this life.”

“It is. You’re right. I’m not sure I feel I can dare to choose it. Oh, why are you laughing?”

“Oh, there you go again! You need to make peace with your calling, my dear. I can see it is harder for you….”

“Why?”

“…but your talent is proportional to that, so you’ll be fine.”

“But why harder for me exactly?” Meg winces as she hears her own defensiveness.

“Well, you’re the one always going on about the fight to get here and how it isn’t normative, no role models, blah blah….”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, but I think that just underscores your achievement. After all, my Dad is…well, he furrowed a track for us, they both did…”
“He’s the Evatt Professor of International Law!!”

“Yes, well, law did nothing for me.”

“I always felt that way too. From Day One. But then it was a mystery!”

“Now you know too many lawyers.”

“It’s terrible, the disrespect it creates. I think they’re….”

“Squiffy.”

“Yes! How’d you know?”

“I think so, too. Mystique is how it’s done.”

“But it doesn’t always. Mikaela has mystique, and Kate Llewellyn and Gemma Nolan…half the English Department has it. Some quality…”

“It’s your Authentic Self calling you.”

“Oh, shut up, Oprah. I’m serious!”

“Me too! What’s Mikaela or Heloise or….”

“Or you!”

“Oh, please! Alright, me, got that you don’t?”

Meg considers this.

“It’s some quality…it’s not style, although that has to be there…”, Agnes smiles self-consciously, “…and it’s not…privilege, exactly…it’s some kind of certainty. Self knowledge. I think.”

Agnes is beaming. “Well thanks for all the implicit compliments. But really, Meg. Certainty is exactly what characterises the true scholar’s feeling about their work. Like Dinny O’Hearn or Pat Grimshaw…isn’t it? We’ve got that…”
“I don’t know how you can put us in that sentence....”

“Listen, I’m not claiming the same stellar position for us, yet, just a characteristic I believe we share with certain others. It’s a good thing, given the track we’re on and the taxpayer dollars invested in us.”

Meg sighs. “You’re certain.” She realises what she’s said. They laugh hysterically for a full minute.

“God, that was a crack-up.” Agnes wipes her eyes. “I could use a good laugh. What’re you doing tonight?”

“I rarely have plans. It’s the single state. All, almost all, my friends are couples which is deathly dull if I’m honest. They’re all joined at the hip.”

“I thought you liked being single?”

“I do! I loved it while honours was on. The truth is, I needed honours....you know, after Stu, I just couldn’t contemplate...” Agnes smiles gently. “But Friday night and Sunday night are the two hardest times and I’ve got no girly swot excuses now...”

“Well, I’m single too. I usually go to my parents, they love it. Come with me.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Why, they’re pretty good. They’re not right wing or anything. Hey, they’ll buy dinner.”

“Agnes!”

“Well, for God’s sake Meg, they’re both Level F or something. They love it, anyway. Please come, I’m always talking about you and impressing them with my second hand knowledge of Blake. Please?”

“Well, if you really want me to...”

“Of course! My brother might rock up...that’d be interesting.”
“Why?”

“Oh, nothing…”

“What does he do?”

“Medicine.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, thought you’d like that.”

“What? I’ll have you know I can intelligently discuss medicine…I was a medical secretary ’til halfway through my undergrad.”

“Well, he’s on the committee of the Doctors Democratic Alliance and he’s a public advocate for voluntary euthanasia, he’s not right wing either.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“It is a cliché, right wing doctors and lawyers.”

“Ye-es?”

“But I warn you, my family is a bit cliched. Upper middle class house in Carlton, two professors, blah blah…”

“Very handy to Uni.”

“These days it’s a ritzy suburb.”

“Yeah, cos’ it’s beautiful. Much better than Toorak or anywhere like that. I loved it when I was here.”

“When was that?”

“Oh, the end of undergrad. I broke up with a boyfriend and found a share house in Brunswick.”

“Which was worse?”
“What?”

“Boyfriend, break-up or share house?”

“Definitely boyfriend. God, he’d have hated what I’m doing now! But Carlton was fantastic. Tempting, fattening, expensive. Books, cakes and bread. I’m really glad I had that eight months in Carlton as a student. I’ll probably never do it again.”

“On a scholarship, you could afford to share in Carlton, surely?”

Meg considers. “Why, you’re right”, she says. The vista of Carlton, study full time on a living wage, slides through Meg. “Carlton! Agnes, it’s true, I could afford to live here! I so need a scholarship.”

“I think we’ve covered that.”

“Well, it’s good to have a contingency plan.”

“Do you, Meg?”

“Sort of. Just work part-time and study part-time. And have no money. Sort of what I’ve been doing, except I’ve been full time.”

“The determination is very pleasing.”

“I want to do postgrad. Come what may.”

“Yes, I feel that way, too. But I don’t need a contingency plan like you. I’m very privileged.”

Meg feels a vague discomfort. “I’m sure your parents work incredibly hard. I know you do.”

“Oh, sure. They do, I do. We’re good people; just letting you know in case you think we’re doing a bit too well for ourselves.”

Meg is taken aback.
“Agnes, you sound almost…bitter.”

“Well, I know about privilege, Meg. I hear you talking to Mia…”

“Oh, but Mia doesn’t get it…”

“…and she can hardly even be called privileged compared to me…..”

“That’s not the point! It’s not a judge by weight competition…”

“Oh, I see it.” Bitterly.

Meg looks sadly at her friend.

"I know you do. Why do you sound so angry, suddenly? Do you think it’s sour grapes or something?"

“Meg! Now you’re not getting it! Mia isn’t particularly wealthy or privileged, very run of the mill middle class family, for Philip…”

“Yes?”

“…but she can do postgrad., get a scholarship, walk into a research place, holding out someone…like you, maybe, who didn’t get the….”

“Enculturation?”

“I was going to say, training…”

“I don’t understand?”

Agnes is palpably frustrated. “I’m saying that if the Mias of this world, who’ve had a free ride basically, can do it with such…impunity, then what am I doing? What is my family about? We share something, Meg….”

“I know! I love that we do….”

“But we come from such diametrical backgrounds! Why shouldn’t I love it…I’ve been fed culture and letters since I was in-utero! Did you get season tickets to the Symphony?”
“No.”

“The Ballet, plus any that visited?”

“Sigh. No.”

“Jazz teas at Ripponlea?”

“Yum. No. But I went to the footy a lot!”

“Meg! Be serious.”

“I am, sort of. It sounds like guilt, or some feeling of not being entitled, which is ironic, ‘cos that’s how I feel…..”

“Now you’re getting it! You and I get the whole thing, we are natural scholars or maybe I was inculcated…”

“Who cares? You love it, it’s in you…”

“OK, that’s generous, Meg, but…”

“Now hang on! Generous? I don’t own it, Aggie! That’s as bad as Mia acting like it’s her default….I’m part of it like you are, and if I’m seen as generous because I don’t blame you for your accident of birth that’s as absurd as you seeing me as special because I’m here in spite of mine. That’s the whole point: what we do with it. For years, I felt blocked at doing anything with it, what I wanted, as I felt I was missing something. Now I’ve dealt with that I feel quite unstoppable….”

Laughter from Agnes.

“But I do think there’s a naturalness to it for some of us which is much less to do with privilege and power. You could choose anything and you chose this. I could choose from options that didn’t include this, or much else really, and I chose this anyway! It was active choice all the way. Mia just fell into a groove carved by social arrangements and she reaps all the accordant joy…”
“My God, Meg, you can really string a sentence together.”

“Well, I truly don’t feel that privilege is the key issue here. It’s your relation to it, your attitude and belief about it….would you vote Liberal, Aggie?”

“God, no! Please??! No one in our family votes Liberal. We’re humanists, for heaven’s sake!”

“Well, then. Tell me why you vote Labor.”

“Oh, I don’t vote Labor! Oh, Goodness, no. I vote Democrat, or Green wherever possible…why are you laughing?”

“Well, perhaps there’s only so far we can go together…."

“You expect me to vote Labor as proof of my position?”

Meg’s eyes are watering.

“Well, yes….no, of course not!! It’s just so ironic. We’re having a conversation about how the huge class gulf in our backgrounds doesn’t divide us, because of your attitude…."

“Oh, me?”

“….and then you come out with the twittiest middle-class thing you’ve said yet…."

“Oh, great. I am a middle-class twit….."

“You’re not claiming to be a socialist, it’s not the same. You are real and that’s what bridges the gap between us, which is actually bigger than any between Mia and I…."

“Or Mia and I. That is such a lovely thing to say, Meg. That I’m real.”

“You know, it is. So few people seem real to me. Or you think they are, and then you find something…."
‘Yes, that’s awful, that’s always happening to me. But what I hate most is how you get criticised for the parts of you that are real.”

Meg sits bolt upright. “You get that?”

“Yes, all the time. People laugh at my realness. My family was rewarding of it, it was such a cocoon and then, in the so-called Real World, I was a freak because of it….”

“You? Too?”

“I can see in your face…you thought it was class?”

“God, I did! I was so sure. Isn’t that bizarre….?”

“Well, it is….but…..”

“What?”

“It gives me an insight, doesn’t it? Into class? We’ve had an experience you felt was class…..”

“I must’ve been projecting!”

“Rubbish! It may have been class…..”

“But you had it too?”

“Well, I thought you didn’t believe in stable categories? I think ‘identity blurs and leaks’ is a phrase that came out of your mouth?”

Meg whistles.

“Oh, oh. Praxis. You’re right.”

“Yes, if there’s a centre and a margin, how you experience something depends on where you are in relation to that…”

“So it might not be class?”
“Of course it’s class- you can’t take it out. Wish you could. Meg, I think it’s…..”

“WHAT? Tell me!”

“Passion. It’s passion.”

“… I think the common denominator is passion and that’s why this started. It’s an admission that passion is rare, and precious…..”

“For sure. “

“Yes, but I mean emotionally! People hide their passion or they frame it in language that undercuts how much it matters to them…..”

“Discourse.”

“Yes, yes, except we often allow theory to be used to distance us from emotion. We can’t escape discourse, for sure, but epiphanies are about connecting to something that’s uncomfortable to theorise. We limit our passion within that.”

Agnes’ head is inclined.

“You don’t. Do you think I do?”

“No. But you’re not naming it either. I think we were drawn to each other in spite of how intimidated I was, because you could accept and value and, yes, share my passion for what we do. What’s wrong?”

Agnes’ lip trembles.

“You’re were intimidated by me?”

Meg laughs. “Hey, maybe you’re having an epiphany? You’re crying! Oh, sorry, yes. I’ve told you this before. I’m not intimidated anymore!”

“I hate that I intimidated you at all. “
“Well, hang on. I’m saying I felt intimidated. You didn’t do it. And as I’ve gotten to know you, I’ve realised, I was attributing things to you that were coming from me.”

“But you didn’t have much opportunity to analyse that. I should have seen what was happening and been conscious of it.”

“Since you didn’t to intend transmit it, how can you be aware of it? Don’t make privilege into something else. It’s your relation to your own privilege, that’s the real issue. You always treated me as an equal….”

“As opposed to?”

“But others didn’t!! It takes a bit of time to grapple with this stuff, especially when you’ve been projecting your head off as I have. Besides, epiphanies can come in many forms.”

“I never see you limit your passion.”

“But you do! We were just laughing about it! I keep giving it away, that I can have this. No, no, not when I’m talking about Blake, or Plathie, but when I think about it, the track, I panic sometimes, and that is limiting.”

“Yes…”

“And you do it by talking down all your work and excellence and positing your privileged economic and cultural position. Don’t you? You’re not owning it either. That limits the sheer passion.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Meg squeals. “I lurve being right.”

Agnes leaps up, shaking crumbs from her straight black skirt. Meg ponders the skirt- the cut and fabric distinguish it from any of the cheap acrylic skirts Meg owns. But I don’t feel resentful, she thinks. That’s interesting in itself.

“OK, are we heading to my parents’ place?”
“Oh, um....”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. They’ll be so glad to meet you.”

“Do you think?”

“I know. But if they make class-clunkers, please forgive me.”

Meg laughs. “Why would it be your fault? If I make ghastly social gaffes, will you forgive me?”

Agnes looks stricken.

“Aggie! Humour, girl! Of course I might make gaffes. You know.”

“Like what?”

“Dunno! If I knew, I wouldn’t make ‘em.”

Laughing, Meg takes her friend’s arm and they head up Grattan Street.
Letter to Anna

Anna Darling,

Life is wonderful. Carlton again....I am in a Victorian terrace with a balcony, I have a huge room and high ceilings and lovely sensible flatmates, all postgrads or working in their dream jobs. It does help enormously to have people with some goals or values in common. I've told you of Gemma, I did undergrad with her. Well, she's an actor (jobbing, she calls it) and she's just so incredibly middle-class, but it's not bothering me at all! I find that just amazing. I've been reflecting on it a lot lately; being in the MA and getting the scholarship and then tutoring, the way it's fallen into place. I never thought I'd get these things. You know I thought there was some class rule about how you got them. There is a rule, actually, it's the willingness to ask. To let people see how much you want it and love it. I used to hide all that, but...it's brought me everything I've wanted, beyond even.

I saw Mia again on the weekend, she is seriously pissed because no scholarship. Resentful as hell of me, I guess I understand. The track failed her. Of course, she says so to Agnes, who takes no prisoners and is so staunchly loyal to me...Agnes is another one. She and Gemma (and Kelly) just don't have that effect on me. Could it be they weren't claiming any superior analysis, or political insight? Mia would insist that as feminists, all potential conflict due to our differences is negated. In fact, it was the source of our conflict! I wish I could sum up what went on there.

Mia, Heloise...you know, I do feel rage at them. They're hypocrites. But I think they truly have no idea what they do. Does my rage seem...disproportionate to you, An? I can't tell you how rugged I feel. I could duplicate their style. It's like they were appearing in ads. for themselves.

I heard Heloise explaining about WSNAC to a male academic. He was flirting with her. I waited for her to sock him like he deserved but I was surprised- she didn't. Admittedly she was patronising as hell but then, I have never heard another tone in their voices. She was kittenish, rolling
her head into her shoulder. Showing him her neck? But it is only working class women who are male centred.

Oh, and Anna! The ‘cool, poor’ look is in. All these ridiculous rigid statements. But my poverty never looked groovy. Poverty doesn’t leave much energy for being groovy.

I guess I saw them as something. They were real feminists, activists, they were…. heroic, maybe? I was so raw, do you remember? Boy, did I take wounds from my first encounter. They see class very differently, it doesn’t suit, the way we presented it. So they ignored it, shut it up, spoke down to it or if all else failed, denied it and tried to take it from us with blades in their voices. Good schools like Lauriston, they teach you how to talk like you’re cutting someone. I remember Mia telling me, she said she had majored in Poli Sci, so she hardly needed a lesson on class!

The thing with Heloise is so complicated. I love her! I wanted to be her, truly. She has all the elements I wanted. I know that’s dumb because I hardly knew her. I couldn’t be her, ever, but I do crave impossibility, don’t I?

She’s a funny one, Heloise. She was in No-Girl’s Land too, for all her middle-class ness. Hetero, English major, flirt, very beautiful (flirt is almost as bad as hetero), stylish, as women in the Left often are, but she was more so. She was the one I most envied. For so long I thought her badges were about class -if I was middle class, I’d have them, too. But gradually I acquired all the badges, of her class. I can pass for middle class easily now, An. It was what Heloise represented: possibility, promise. My fascination with her has changed since I acquired so many of her trappings.

You know, the middle-class girls don’t “self reveal”, except in very controlled environments. They never show the inside of their faces, let on how much something means to them. And it seems I am still driven to seek their fucking approval. Do you hear a theme here, An? And that leads me to Mia! We did women’s studies, Mia and I, and she was so superior, like being a dyke is intravenous feminism. She has an economics background. So she knows about class!
I always thought her contempt was because I was too mainstream, too clumsy, too straight. I thought that for years. That perfect creamy face, those thick red curls, that lithe little body. If I’d had those…I’d have had different insecurities instead of the ones I’ve got. I wish I’d had an inkling of this sooner.

I want to be rid of it, Anna. I want to not bump into Mia or any of the EAG women and have to hear their surprise, “Oh, a scholarship? Really?” and you hear the subtext: how did you do that? That’s how I see Heloise is different. She offered to share the track. Mia acts like I took her spot on it. I know what you’ll be thinking. It’s all bullshit. And it is. But it takes a whole journey to get to the point where you can call it bullshit. And now I’ve claimed my spot on the track, I can conquer it.

Oh, I must tell you! Kate Llewellyn got a job at the State University of Victoria! She’s in communication studies, in a building just near where you did graphics! I found out, SUV used to be The Worker’s College; it was founded in the 1880s for working-class men. How cool! I’ve decided I’ll go there when I’m an academic.

Forgive me for the rants. Kindred spirits are still rare.

Love forever,
Meg

PS Did I tell you, I’m applying to Cambridge for a PhD (and scholarship)? Maybe dumb, but Michaela nagged me, and I’ve learned how to do this asking thing now!
Cambridge

Proctor College

Mrs Dora Plynthe
Bursar
Proctor College
Cambridge University
Cambridge UK

Dear Miss Flanagan,

It is with great pleasure that I advise that your application for doctoral candidature at Proctor College has been successful.

Enclosed is confirmation from the Faculty of English and the Commission for Research in the Humanities. The information package provided by the latter details all scholarship and payment information, but rest assured that this is a full scholarship which covers all fees, tuition and living allowance for the normal duration of doctoral candidature.

On behalf of the Fellows and Community of Proctor College, I congratulate you and welcome you to membership. I trust your three years with us will be fruitful and successful.

Also enclosed please find the necessary enrolment and information forms. These are extensive and require detailed attention. There is a reply paid envelope for their return. You will in due course receive information pertaining to your arrival. You will be met at the airport if you advise your flight details. Many students prefer to spend some time in London; please let me know when you will arrive.

Don’t hesitate to be in touch if you have any questions. Fax or email contact will assist in expediting matters. We look forward to welcoming you on your arrival in Cambridge.

Yours sincerely,

Dora Plynthe.
Faculty of English
Newnham Road,
Cambridge

Dear Miss Flanagan

Congratulations on your admission to the doctoral program in English at the University of Cambridge. You will be aware that such places are highly sought.

I write to advise that there will be a Faculty welcome and orientation for new research students on Tuesday 4 September, at 4 pm. This meeting is partly administrative, but mostly it will be a social event. We do request that you notify the program Co-ordinator, Professor David Bryant, of your arrival, as all correspondence thereafter will be sent to you at Proctor.

I note your proposed thesis topic; on the basis of this advice, you have been assigned to a tutor, Professor Lucy Spears, who is a specialist in feminist literary criticism and also on the work of Sylvia Plath. Professor Spears will attend the Welcome.

I also urge you to note that Cambridge University Press has a pre-term sale for which you will arrive just in time. Scholarship recipients receive substantive discounts at CUP in addition to sale prices and part of your book allowance may be well spent there.

Enclosed is the research and speaking program for the Michaelmas term. Research students are required to contribute at least once in each year of candidature. Research students at Cambridge are required to meet certain general standards and I enclose a reading list which will assist you in identifying this for yourself.

Please don’t hesitate to contact my office if you have any questions. The English Faculty at Cambridge is one of the finest in the world and we look forward to sharing in this important time in your life.

Warm regards
To Mum and Dad

Carlton, Sun night.

Dear Mum and Dad

I do feel I’m being cowardly writing to you, but after our last discussions it seems to be the only way to be heard.

I know you felt taking up an MA scholarship was just ‘more study’. You remind me constantly that there are no academic jobs. But this is my passion in life and I must pursue it, in spite of your disapproval and disdain. Other people’s parents are proud of them. Why not you? I know you think reading and writing aren’t work, Mum. And I know you think I shouldn’t skite.

When I told you I was applying to Cambridge you laughed and said it was silly to waste time and good money on castles in the air. Well, there will be castles on terra firma, it turns out. I was successful with my application and I have been offered a full scholarship place in a PhD program at Cambridge, based at Proctor College (which is so old and beautiful and I’ll be living there!!). I’ll start there in September. The scholarship covers everything, even a return airfare home for each long vacation. I’ll be gone a minimum of three years and I’m not sure I will come home each year. If I cash the tickets in, I could see so much of Europe. Imagine, Paris and Prague and Amsterdam and Berlin and Venice!

So I tell you this life-changing, shattering news by mail. I know what you will say and I know nothing will change my decision. Cambridge University. I will write my PhD on feminist poetics and recasting in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. She was at Cambridge, you know. She married Ted Hughes, whom she met at Cambridge. He’s the Poet Laureate of England, which means he writes pretty mediocre poetry for royal weddings and birthdays and stuff.

I’ll be out on Sunday to see you, and I write this now in part so you can have come to terms with it by then. I will have an academic career now. I know this, although even as I say it I feel it must be a mistake. Mum, can
you possibly know how I feel? If ever we love another human being, would we want anything for them but that they get to feel like I feel today? I am overcome, I tell strangers on the tram, shopkeepers, passing birds. People are so happy for me. Even Indian Mynahs sing louder. Can you possibly be happy for me too? It is a fait accompli. There is no further discussion to have. This is just a time for celebration and wonder. And to wander the Memory Lane by which I arrived here.

I will be telling everyone, especially Aunty Jean. I'll also tell Aunty Stella, so you have an ally, Mum.

Be proud of me, Dad. I'm going to visit Ireland, again and again.

See you Sunday

Margaret.
Letter from Mum

Diamond Creek
Tues

Dear Margaret,

I am looking forward to Sunday. Stella will ice a sponge. The Radcliffs are coming- he went to Oxford, too or so they say. They are the nice people I told you about who are going to breed emus.

Of course we are proud, darling, and I can’t imagine why you think we’re not. You think I can’t understand your book language. I am not disdainful. But how will you manage? England is terribly expensive and I’m sure the scholarship just pays fees. You can’t be just travelling places willy nilly, all those places. Perhaps you could go to Wales. And Dover is supposed to be lovely, where the ferries go. You might see France from the cliffs. It gets very cold in England.

You loved being a medical secretary, didn’t you? You were quite good at it, as I recall, being such a bossy girl. Many girls think they want to go to University or to England and then they settle down to a good job and being responsible. Irresponsibility has a mounting cost, Grandma Fraser used to say. You remember me complaining that I wanted to do Form Five and Latin but Nana just wanted me to turn 15 and get on the line at Tom Piper. Thank goodness she did, or I might have had the same silly ideas you’ve got now. What would I have done with Latin? Doctors need Latin, not nurses. It doesn’t do to get ideas that just make you dissatisfied with your life.

You probably do still feel a bit funny darling. I can understand that. Dr Mathews was just saying yesterday how hard it is to get into Cambridge. He said only brilliant students get in, the top few per cent. I told him about you and he was very doubtful.

Your father and I would be happy to help out with a little trip to get your mind off it all. You could go up to the Riverina or the Murray: Echuca is very nice. I’m sure that would settle you. Take a break from always having your head in books. Stella was here this morning and she said that a masters degree will set you up nice in a job, so you can go back to that of
course, but I turned around and said to her, what does a masters degree tell me except someone is good at reading books? None of your cousins has a masters degree and they all own their own homes. You know, they used to believe that too much reading was bad for female health. Those academic women always have the worst labours but that’s partly because they leave their run too late and want to manage the whole thing. You reap what you sow.

I'll see you on Sunday, Meggie dear. We'll sort it all out then.
Love Mum.
Letter to Jean

Carlton, Thurs

Dearest Aunty Jean,

I was so happy about Cambridge but I’ve just had a letter from Mum. Now I’m enraged. What’s the fucking point (sorry)?! She is never going to get it. Why does she seem to want to cut me down? Why can’t she be proud?

Jean, what is the difference between you and them? How come you get it?

Why do I seek something so absurd as her approval? I know Dad’s proud, it’s obvious but he’s ashamed that he knows nothing about it. She just smiles and says ‘lovely’ and then just slowly cuts away at it like, she is just being kind. *Realistic*, she calls it. Never once has she said, you’re clever, darling or good on you. How can I be the only person I know whose mother thinks this way?

Can you adopt me please?

Love Meg.
Dearest Anna,

I know I could ring you, but I’d rather write. I need to talk and there is so little time for that.

I had the Family Do today, weird as can be. I’ve had letters from Cambridge all week, so my head is spinning and my mother thinks I’ve made a mistake (or rather, thought. A squiz at the offer letter sorted her out!). Today, I went out to the folks and heard the responses of our entire kin and social network in Diamond Creek, and every lifeless planet near it. I really felt I couldn’t breathe. I can’t sell it, which makes no sense because that’s how I got it! Mum can’t handle it at all. Dad and Uncle Pat are happy for me but they’re dumbfounded, you know. When I tried to tell them about the books I’ve got to read -oh! (Cambridge expects you to know 900 years of the canon, 2000 if you count the Greeks, in lit., poetry, drama, you name it. I’ve got a few B.A.s to do before I get there!).

Jean reckons I’m the problem because I want Mum’s approval. But really, she tried to tell me I’d made a mistake and then when I showed her all the letters, what could she say? I wanted, “Well done, darling”. I got, “Look at all this money, what a waste”. Why? Anna! My world has split open like Plath’s watermelon and I’m miserable because my mother can’t seem to congratulate me.

It is something to do with tribe, I guess, taking the place you came from with you, this universal need we all seem to have to get our families’ (read mothers’) approval. I bet with boys it’s father stuff.

Mum always said Philip was impossible, then honours was absurd, then a scholarship ridiculous. Silent whenever she’s been wrong, except this time. This time the money should be spent on starving Africans and proselytising missionaries rather than my future!! Aargh.
I know you’re with me on this one. They’re weird in the same strange ways, our tribes. I remember our first evening in that flat we shared in Prahran, before Jason, another life ago. I cooked gnocchi and we walked down Chapel Street and you fell in love with the possibilities of such a life. You switched from Diamond Creek that evening. Thank God you came ‘with’ me, Anna. You and Jean are the only ones who understand. Perhaps that’s part of my problem with Mum; my fear is having no one who understands this split self. But my self wouldn’t be split if she understood or even just accepted my choices!

Ah, Anna. Thanks for listening. Love to Tom and Bentley.

And you.

Meg.
Locus

There is an aspect of the main street of Cambridge, just near Round Church, which on a sunny winter’s afternoon looks so cheerful as it sits against the colorful maelstrom of tourists and students in bright coats and scarves. As afternoon tea gives way to dusk, Meg always notes from her seat in Garfunkels that the gloom creeps up so quickly and the chilly air turns icy and opaque as though a wand was waved. It is comforting to know this transformation; to have made Cambridge so her own. But any slight permutation in her mood, and the swift fall of evening strikes a deep chord in Meg’s soul. To be in another hemisphere raises such questions as this. What in the air, the sky, the light tells me this is not there? What is it? This question obsesses Meg, since she learned how to cross the globe like she used to cross the Yarra.

Meg has always been subject to swift fleeting moods affected by weather and light; a different place has only deepened this tendency. A place of winter-bare trees and chattering squirrels and hearty pots of tea all day. A place of such wealth and privilege, in which you are an interloper, yet which welcomes you like a natural home and fills your soul with wonder. Meg sits in Garfunkels regularly, writing to Anna, trying to capture her Cambridge in a wordscape. The sudden drop of English night like a thick shroud can send Meg in many emotional directions. The first winter, she soon chose to be home before night fell. Never was her foreignness more apparent to her than when icy gloss of evening seeped like a quiet stranger into the air and up to her. Winter segued into spring, when at least the trees had leaves; spring became summer when the watery sun shook in the sky a little longer and the wobbly light faded slightly more slowly. And once or twice, the temperature rose and Meg got the faintest reminiscent whiff of Australian summer; just a sweetness in the air, a vague fragrance just as quickly gone. English girls in midriff tops and shorts. Nothing tangible enough to flood her soul with nostalgia for home. Only a consciousness that her soul was truly Australian as it pulsated in the light on her first trip to the Mediterranean. Rich light, full of yellow, full of glare, touched some sleeping part that awoke; am I home? Where have I been?

All these experiences simply flesh out the notion: foreigner. In Britain Meg could pass, briefly, as native; she could commune with fellow scholars
across a wide range of disciplines and even with those foreigners who had made Cambridge their home, she could share this particular otherness- we are at Cambridge. She could share feminism with the women fellows at Proctor and in her field. She had Blake in common with the literary critics (even the living unapologetic Leavisites) and fitness with her fellow runners. Meg even made a strong connection with the group of ladies who ran the charity shops of Grafton Centre. They knew her, not as some Cambridge toff, but as that girl who likes Laura Ashley as long as it’s under ten quid. But no-where could Meg be all of herself. This had always been true. But added to it now; nowhere could she be Australian.

Exhaustion began. A trip to Tuscany the first summer. Someone in F wing at Proctor had a Daddy with a villa. Meg was invited. Only fare to Italy, no other costs. She accepted. Tuscany- was there anywhere more foreign to the Melbourne girl? Yes, it turns out. After a week of sun to rival Yeppoon or Taree, of fresh olive oil dribbled on crusty bread, and no tea at all, Meg found herself in Prague. More foreign again. Yet there was a familiarity in being amongst Italians and Czechs for they were not English. In Tuscany they squeezed her cheeks and patted her bottom and fed her six times daily. In Prague, they were either world-weary locals shut down to the soul beauty of their city, or tourist pimps trivialising it for a few crowns. Meg took the Bridge Tour and walked 22 kilometres in a day and soaked her feet in a huge ancient marble bath in the only Youth Hostel, and pondered difference. Not being English pulsated strongest. Perhaps the southern light feeds us against these fadings of the soul? We are selves divided, driven by so many desires and passions, our souls can be simultaneously fed and starved.

Back in London, Meg could walk around Russell Square and Primrose Hill, visit the former homes of her literary heroes, gaze all day at the treasures of the Tate, or the poets’ graves in the Abbey. Her soul did sing. While it grieved the light and the not being English, it was restored by the fierce pots of tea and constant active history. To live as your soul peaks and troughs, constantly, as you know fleeting joys promptly denied you by your foreignness, is to tire in your bones. To know you are at Cambridge, to know every day that this is your Path, is to send yourself a little mad. Meg went to supervisions and glowed at Spears’s approval and suffered the criticism, initially with tears and resolutions to fly home and be a medical secretary, but gradually with a growing sense of the canny- do I agree with that? Not always. Meg wrote of how Cambridge did itself- how it educated its undergraduates, how it trained its Fellows. She found lots
of faults. She watched the endless march of the British ruling class drag away Firsts and Seconds, having learned little; while so many of the comprehensives at Proctor savoured every morsel and came out changed people. She considered how the Fellows conceived their own roles. Proctor was full of socialists, acting as though they were engaged in some subversive project, which, compared to Peterhouse College, they were. The students from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Yorkshire could all be heard lilting above the fray at dinner. Proctor did not have enough of the braying Harrys to drown them out. Class was a known issue at Proctor and people were proud. This was entirely new to Meg. Proctor was full of women who looked like she had once felt, but they expected it to be fine. They were often a little uncomfortable around Meg and it was here that she encountered for the first time her seemingly new middle-class persona. Am I making these women feel inadequate? Undergraduates looked at her with big round eyes and asked her advice on clothes and personal problems. It astonished her. When did this alchemic shift occur? Was it here, as a full member of Cambridge? No. Was it in honours, when the rightness of the track settled into Meg’s cells? Partly. Was it earlier, slow and gradual, as she began to sing and speak in an authentic voice, telling the real story, when she began finding and forming the self she wanted to be now? Yes. And suddenly it was not all about class. Class was where the obstacles to that self were standing. It was the wool over the eyes, the false front to the cupboard. You had to walk, stumbling through it, to find this Other Self. And this self would always be classed for our class is all around us, a blurred soup in which we all percolate. But the project to find ourselves, Meg discovered, starts at the very outer edge of class. The tools are unclassed. The excavation of the Self is a classless way of chipping at a classed shell. Confidence. Self belief. Authenticity. Meg would hear these women, her Proctor colleagues, talk of the class injustices done them daily and how unfair it all was and how they could get firsts if they had all that privilege. She notes in Anna’s letters a still-simmering rage, a sense of entitlement denied. Or just unclaimed? And people tell her she is different, unusual, it all comes easily to her. Meg knows this to be true. It is in the shift. The mindset. And thus she is foreign once more, from her class, a working-class girl in an equity college, at an elite university, on her way to a doctoral qualification in an elite discipline. A girl who asked, and asked again, who asked why and said, no I won’t settle, and demanded. And obtained. It is not my class at this point, Meg has decided. It starts with class and that is where the fight must be. But it is surely about getting to
this point, where class falls away…ground so crucial, so alien and inarticulate and fraught. And glorious with possibility.
I can’t believe how big Jas will be before she meets her Aunty Meg. Don’t grow too much, little niece. I want to be called Aunty before anyone calls me Doctor.

Do I want to be a Doctor? Sigh. It’s all such tiresome bullshit. I seem to have come so far to end up in a sucky place (Remember sucky places; that date we went on with those two guys from Philip, now that was a sucky place!). I don’t think I’m working-class anymore, Annie. Just when I finally knew what it all meant, means, I think the thing that connects me to it is gone. Why did I come to a fucking elite School like this? ‘She’s at Cambridge.’ Oh, well, then. She’s jolly mem sahib (No, I don’t know what it means, exactly, but I know I don’t like it).

It’s all so weird now. Not long to go. Finishing is not the issue. I’m going to SUV- did I tell you? Sure as God made little apples, as Uncle Pat likes to say. I really can’t wait for that bit. But it’s not real, Anna. Do I have anything to offer the kids at SUV? Blake or Plath. It’s all this disconcerting class crap, kids here thinking I’m middle-class and acting like I’m … one of those Philip girls. Preening and patronising and fucking missing it all the time. Am I up myself? Tell me honestly. I hate mentioning Cambridge now. I am not a better person because of Cambridge. I am merely a far more privileged person.

So, it turns out, it’s shame. “Survivor guilt”, the Yanks call it. But true.

I realise so many of my initial impressions were through these fears I have about my being changed, by this very thing I wanted and craved and then got, and inevitably, I am not that person any more.

I cannot wait to go for a ride on Mary across the rolling hills of Bacchus Marsh and watch Bentley snuffling at some bush and hear the magpies and the bellbirds. I had a whiff of scone the other afternoon, in a tea room in town. It was a freezing day and the sun set so early and it just smelt like that place in the Dandenongs, King Arthur or whatever, where the scones are as big as Texas. And it took me to that wet freezing Sunday, so dark at 4pm and we thought we’d be too late for Devonshire tea and
they said, only have one scone each, they’re huge, and we laughed, no, we’re cold, we said. We can eat any amount of scones, we said. So they brought us two scones each and we stuffed and moaned and we couldn’t eat them. Scones on steroids. Never get that here, too vulgar. I do love England, and Cambridge is heavenly. But even in the land of Devonshire, where cream teas were invented, I cannot eat a scone at 4pm without a longing so thick and sharp…. It’s time to come home.

I’ll get through this headspace, of course. I’m starting to see the pattern, the psychic journey that parallels research. All those years at Philip, I was ‘becoming’, but then, in this one, while the becoming goes on, it’s also fruition. No more the next thing. This is next. Time to do. I know, I’m contradicting myself; of course, research is doing. But it’s much easier, too. Next I’ve got to get in there and do it the way I always said it should be done. Aagh!

At least I’ll be able to say I got this ‘good education’. Not because it’s Cambridge (you should see the clots who take firsts here) but because of my particular learning. And as I’ve said 100 times, Proctor is amazing. It’s truly a community and so aware of equity and psychic barriers, and so enabling to someone like me. The lessons of Cambridge are immense. I needed the incredible academic discipline they taught me here. I needed the structure of this life, the compulsion around you, which is competitive, but not entirely in a bad way. Peripheral stuff falls away.

Soon I’ll be home. I hope I can come out for weekends, ‘cos you need to see I’m still normal. I’m ready to have the sort of life where you are still for a while. I used to say, hurry up and wait. I never knew why I needed to hurry. Remember Billy Joel? ‘Vienna waits for you.’ No one suggests we slow down in life to smell the weeds.

Back to the writing now. Lucy thinks it can go in soon, but I get to wait until my last paper has the green light. Then the PhD is over, and I am determined to go to Paris and Florence, before coming home. It’s a thick longing now, home. The tug grows fiercer. So let me know if you want me to buy anything, ‘cos I won’t be back this way for a while.

Love and hugs to you both, and my niece.

Meg
Courting the Enemy

The external glass lifts which scale the Swanston Street Vista of Building H were added as an afterthought years after the controversial construction. Meg loves them. Just as she loved the new Ormond Hall. Look at us, it said. We are on the edge. Ormond Hall is not the flagship building of a risk-averse institution.

The external glass lift opens into the 8th floor foyer next to the Faculty of Design office. The Fashion schools all live up here and thus a lot of Beautiful People can be spied darting through the labyrinth corridors that make up the SUV high rise building.

Meg enters the Faculty conference room. The harassed Secretary is serving refreshments on a side table. The staff who make up the membership of SUV’s Equity Policy Committee are a mixed bag; eminent, much-published scholars, senior non-teaching staff, representatives of all equity divisions and interest groups, student representatives. Meg recognises Professor Stephanie Newland, one of the Education Faculty’s highest fliers, chatting fiercely with the EO of Meg’s own Faculty. The Director of Admissions is gazing out the 8th floor window. The Head of Disability Services is munching on a chocolate biscuit. Junior academics arrive, looking slightly anxious. Meg takes her seat alongside Professor Janet Zelikov, Associate Dean of Health Sciences.

“Dr Flanagan! You’ll be fired up. We’ve all seen this come ‘round before, haven’t we Meg?”

“Well, I’m angry.”

“Good. I am sick of having to do this every bloody year.”

At this point, Professor Dale Adrianopoulos sweeps into the room, her policy staff humbling in her wake. In her thirties, Dale Adrianopoulos is the youngest DVC in the country and is renowned for her vibrant energy. She declares the meeting open at 9.30 sharp. The secretary reads a long list of apologies, most of which are from Heads of Department. Meg fumes. Why can’t they front up?
“Welcome”, Adrianopoulos is all crispness. “We have a major policy initiative on the agenda this morning and a couple of guest presentations prior to that….” Meg allows herself an audible snort, drawing Adrianopoulos’ bright gaze. “Are there any amendments to the agenda?”

“Yes”, Meg leans forward.

“Dr Flanagan?”

“I propose that the approval of the timeline for the admissions policy be determined prior to the policy discussion”.

“Well, that’s not doable.”

“Excellent, Meg”, the Head of Business Technologies is not usually an ally. “I endorse that suggestion”.

“The timeline is absurd. No meaningful discussion can take place until it’s sorted out.” This from the EO of Art and Communication, Pria Singh.

“There is a good set of reasons for this timeline”. Dale Adrianopoulos is already impatient.

“There is an equally valid set of objections”, Meg is as crisp as the Chair. “This policy proposal speaks directly to our institutional charter and the timeline should reflect the consideration such a dialogue requires.” Meg exhales quietly.

Dale Adrianopoulos tosses her head. “Very well. I’ll star it for initial discussion after our two guest presenters.”

Meg sighs again.

The Committee hears from the Director of Student Services as to the Employment Service and the specific role it can play for equity groups. Next a project worker from the Development Division outlines an initiative to challenge the negative learning experiences of marginalised young people. The presentation is powerful but Meg wills it to be over. All these initiatives won’t amount to a hill of beans if the Senior Team has its way.
Observers continue to trickle into the room; it is now filled with about 40 people. Meg is a bit awed by the sheer number of them. Could they really be here just for this discussion? Then it hits her; equity is SUV’s raison d’etre, or one of them. Look at all these people who are choosing to be here. She is suddenly buoyed.

Professor Adrianopoulos thanks the guests, somewhat cursorily.

“We open our policy discussion of equity in higher education admissions by discussing the timeline for consultation and response to the paper SUV Equity Platform. Dr Flanagan, did you wish to speak to this?”

“Thank you, Professor Adrianopoulos”, Meg addresses the long table. “I have many concerns regarding this initiative. This is such a departure from our practice, both historically and culturally, that the flimsy token timeline that has been proposed is offensive. If we are to have such an unnecessary and dismaying debate as this policy would imply, we must allow time to do it meaningfully and in a manner that enfranchises our broadest community”

Murmurings of ‘hear hear’ emanate. Dale Adrianopoulos is tapping her foot. Meg continues.

“I propose a full three month cycle for Faculties’ consultation, which would mean Faculty responses are considered at the July meeting of this Committee….”

Dale Adrianopoulos exclaims.

“I’m sorry, that is undoable. The Senior Team will determine final policy at VCAG in May. We aren’t doubling the timeline …”

Meg is really mad now. “So you admit this is a token gesture? You are seeking the imprimatur of a Committee charged with enshrining SUV’s historical commitment to equity. The Senior Team asks too much, Deputy Vice Chancellor. I am moving a substantive motion that a consultative timeline be adopted….”, Meg leaps from her chair and draws the timeline on the white board. “Final submissions from EPC to Academic Board and VCAG after the August meeting.”
“That is untenable.”

“That is for this Committee to decide.”

The Head of Business Technologies clears his throat. Meg has always assumed he is a Liberal. She is delighted to be suddenly unsure.

“Dale, we can’t be told how and when to do such things. This is a total revamp, removal even, of our equity process. Look how many people have come to this discussion. How many committees pull 50 people? SUV’s community cares about this and I think that escapes the Senior Team. I endorse Meg’s suggestion and I second her motion.”

Dale Adrianopoulos looks astounded.

“The VC is away from June to August. It can’t be done.”

“The discussion will be finalised by August. She’ll get it on her return”, Meg responds. Janet Zelikov nods in support.

“You’ll have a mutiny, Dale, if you try to push the Committee on this.” Dale Adrianopoulos opens her mouth and shuts it again.

The EO of Science raises her hand. “I have a whole suite of 2nd semester equity programs which sink or swim on the basis of this. This policy states that implementation is for semester two, this year. If the time line is changed, it can’t happen ‘til next year. I need to know what to tell my staff and our prospectives.”

Meg takes a deep breath.

“We are going to fight this, Eileen. Your semester two programs are safe.”

Dale Adrianopoulos throws down her pen. “Really, Meg. The VC won’t like this.”

“Tough. She’s the VC, not the CEO. I am now moving that the motion be put.”
“No”, Dale starts, but there is more whispering from the policy advisor. Meg glances at the Secretary, who looks pained and anxious; such fierce debates require highly diplomatic minutes.

Janet calls for order. “Under the circumstances, we must vote on this motion. It has been moved that debate on the timeline proposal be halted and the motion be put to a vote. All in favour?”

A young satellite of Dale’s, Audrey Templeton, wrinkles her nose. “That’s a bit hasty, isn’t it? We haven’t explored any options!”

Meg rolls her eyes. “The procedural motion hasn’t been carried yet, Audrey.”

“Oh”, Audrey looks chagrined.

Janet repeats, “All in favour?”

“Of the time line you mean?”

“No, Eileen. Of putting the motion containing the revised timeline up for a vote, rather than continuing to argue about it.”

Meg breaks in. “There are two motions, Eileen. The substantive one I moved earlier and which Keith has seconded, and the procedural, that the substantive motion be put to a vote, which does not require a seconder.”

“Oh. OK, then.” Much murmuring occurs amongst the large pool of observers.

Audrey Templeton is regarding Meg thoughtfully across the table. Audrey is very young and hip, but Meg nonetheless recognises the dependence on a wagon hitched to Dale Adrianopoulos’ star.

Audrey clears her throat. “I’m curious, Meg. What danger does a full debate pose to you?”

Meg almost laughs. Is this woman for real? Dale Adrianopoulos looks slightly dismayed.
Meg smiles at Audrey. “Well, I’m in cultural studies, so debate is in fact my bread and butter. But I put it to you that this timeline is the real enemy of debate; it hamstrings any serious, broad consideration of a radical change. I want this debate conducted without fear or favour; obviously SUV can’t on the face of it provide those conditions, so my modified timeline is an attempt to reduce the inflammation around this discussion. We do not consider proposals asking us to abandon our core values lightly, let alone in obscene haste. I think your question would be far more appropriately directed to the authors of this document.”

There is a smattering of applause from some non-teaching staff. Audrey is looking at Dale. Janet hesitates for a moment, but Adrianopoulos does not look up.

“Voting members of the Equity Policy Committee, the procedural motion is before us. All in favour of putting the motion containing the timeline?”

Amazingly, the vote is unanimous. The Chair only casts a deciding vote and her group of satellites have chosen discretion over valour. Janet makes no attempt to hide her pleasure at the outcome.

“Excellent. The motion reads as follows: Faculty and stakeholder groups’ responses to the Admissions Pathway document will be requested, gathered and presented to the July meeting of this Committee, with response to the Chair to be made for the agenda of the August meeting of VCAG. All in favour?”

Slowly, arms go up. This time, the satellites are not amongst the ayes. The observers have all raised their arms high, despite their ineligibility to vote. Meg holds her arm aloft and glances along the table. All the EO’s are with us, she notes. That takes courage. The Dean of Education hasn’t raised his arm. Damn him! Stephanie Newland is on side; that’s worth a lot. In the end, all but the four satellites and the Dean are in favour.

“All opposed? Clearly carried!” states Janet, beaming.

“Dr Flanagan, I ask you to write to the VC directly about this,” Dale Adrianopoulos is leaning back in her chair. Meg is struck by the sudden weariness in her face. “You should make the position clear.”
“Yes, certainly. I’ll circulate a draft to members this afternoon.” A tic pulses on Adrianopoulos’ face—this was not what she meant and Meg knows it.

“Very well. I declare this meeting closed.”

An uncomfortable spasm passes through Meg. Her feelings for Dale are so complex. A great, passionate scholar, Adrianopoulos has always beat the VC’s drum, but to her credit, she did support Tatiana Tynan long before TT became Victoria’s first female vice-chancellor. Meg had hoped that meant Dale was not a yes-person, after all. She has not been persuaded by the shrill clamour of voices that some unspecified being referred to as ‘industry’ must be the final arbiter of tertiary policy, and graduate capabilities. Compromise is inevitable but Meg sees herself still fighting capitulation. Now Tynan and her posse of E-educated non-scholars are proposing policy nonsense under a guise of innovation. When Tynan proposed getting rid of Faculties, ‘because they strangle research innovation’, Adrianopoulos said nothing. When Meg stood up at a VC briefing and asked how the Group of Eight keep their research activities oxygenated in spite of retaining a faculty structure, Adrianopoulos looked at her lap. Tynan did her sparrow impression, head on one side, looking at Meg like a juicy insect and suggested Meg might discuss the details with the Research and Entrepreneurship Team, the implication being that their Leader isn’t concerned with such things as details.

Meg sees in Dale’s weariness the conflict she must be facing. Dale Adrianopoulos is a Professor of Classics. She must know how absurd much of this is. Ergo, having to defend it uncritically in public must be wearing, not to say humiliating. But Adrianopoulos clearly cannot admit a chink in the policy armour. In part, Meg loves this fight. But the having of it points up that there are some who would let the whole sacred project in which universities are engaged go straight down the gurgler. Why? Self-interest? Money? Yes, but more…disgustingly, to Meg’s mind, it is because they cannot stand up to be counted. Surely you cannot be a scholar and a teacher in a place like SUV without having seen the glory of it, the sacredness. They can’t debate ‘knowing how’ versus ‘knowing that’ They don’t get the passion. Why not?

The EPC secretary leans over Meg with an anxious expression.
“Jean, hi. No fuss minuting that, eh?”

A wry smile. “Meg, I’m quite uncomfortable. Could I very quietly send you the first draft for comment on your remarks and then I’ll send it to the DA”. Meg is always amused by the secretariat nickname for Dale. “I’m compelled to do that, but I want your endorsement…”

“That’s fine, Jean. I’ll feedback any concerns straightaway.”

Jean nods and moves away, having seen ‘the DA’ approach. Meg is struck by how exhausted Dale really looks. Known for her energy and vigour, Dale Adrianopoulos looks like a different woman.

“Meg, I’m sorry for the unpleasantness….It’s not personal, my dear”, Meg smiles at her. “I appreciate your commitment. The timeline is unlikely to be accepted by the VCAG but it’s certainly a fight worth having.” For the first time ever, Meg hears resignation in the voice of Dale Adrianopoulos.

“Thanks, Dale. You know I have to fight long and loud on this. It’s who SUV is. We must be who we are….“ Meg breaks off. Are those tears in Dale’s eyes? Surely not!

The policy advice team has caught up to their leader and Dale starts to move off. Suddenly, she grips Meg’s wrist tightly but quietly, shielding her action from the room where various staff are still chatting in pairs and groups. Her voice, though low, is urgent.

“Fight, Meg. Don’t ever stop. I’m so frightened....”

Then just as quickly the mask is reaffixed and the DVC sweeps out of the room.

Janet Zelikov approaches Meg.

“What's up? Dale slap you, did she?”

“Nothing so predictable. I…almost wish…”
“Yes, she was a bit off today. It’s odd, isn’t it? I’m not sure what she’s about.”

“No.”

“Meg, you’ve got to write to the VC, that’s a bit rich…”

“I don’t mind.”

“Yes, but why? Just because she failed, she doesn’t want her name on it? Even TT knows how this stuff works; Chairs or Secretaries write about Committee decisions, not Deputy Chairs, or the leader of the dissent or something….”

“Perhaps trying and failing wasn’t an option.”

“It’s a committee, Meg, you know….oh, I see what you’re saying. You look a bit pale, actually. Please don’t lose your nerve, because I couldn’t do what you do, I can only back you.”

Meg leaps to her feet. “Janet, my nerve will never be the issue. I think Dale is better than this and worse, I think she knows it.”

Janet considers. “They ignore due process. They ignore history. Now they want to ignore us completely? We have to be seen differently.”

“We have to show ourselves to be seen at all.”

“Well, yes, but everyone’s frightened of …payback….”

“Disgusting…”

“But it’s happening. Look at George Agnew at Philip - the conservationist. He spoke out and they refused to indemnify him. And Michelle Godson at University of the West- she lost email access for speaking up on something like who got a consultancy…”

“What you are describing is unscholarly and anti-intellectual. Do they bother to define University?”
“I agree. But there are so few youngsters coming through who see this. You’re always quoting Newman on these notions and I heard you talking about Bologna the other day…”

“They invented the doctorate…”

“Yes, I know; because you told me! But Meg, this strength is not showing up behind us. We graduate far too many PhDs. You can scrape through and still walk into the same responsibilities as any other academic….”

“That’s partly a teaching and learning issue…”

“But it does no harm to the bean counters because their opposition historically is thinning and the younger ‘scholars’ are like that Wentworth woman…”

“Who?”

“Oh, I mean Templeton, Wentworth was 5 years ago. They’re not like you although they’re not much younger….”

“I’ve always been a freak.” Wryly.

“That’s not at all what I mean. Adrianopoulos respects you deeply, that makes it harder for everyone….”

“Something’s ‘given’ in her.”

“Probably, not surprising.”

“Anyway”, Meg gathers up her papers. “I know what to do. Haunt and hound. Gotta draft a letter to the VC. What fun!”

“Poor TT. I s’pose she’ll have it by lunch?”

“No, I’ve got Human Sexuality for two hours now. After lunch.”

“Are you the only Senior Lecturer in SUV history to teach Breadth Studies?”, Janet giggles.
“Professor Zelikov! Of course not. Where does this attitude come from? We invented Breadth, it’s central to our innovation....”

“Oh no, not the breathless SUV marketing discourse!”

“Staff who hate teaching Breadth can’t sell it to their students....”

“Well, so many of them just resent being there.”

“Ah, so, you have to create their learning. I love counting the weeks into semester till the Aero engineers start engaging with Human Sexuality....”

“Surely some don’t?”

“I’d be failing my duty of care if I couldn’t engage them....”

“Dear God! I’m frightened to continue talking to you.”

Meg laughs as they enter the Building H lift. “I get very well rewarded, Janet. Don’t you have days where you stand in Bowen Street....”

“I’m at Northern!”

“Oh, well, under a huge old tree then, and say, ‘how lucky am I? I wanted SUV so bad and I got it!’”

“Why?”

“Well, I was surprised at the time, but....”

“No, silly, I know why you got it....”, they exit into the Quad, “I mean, why SUV?”

“Why? Because we, this, changes life chances. People find who they’ll become, and start becoming that person. We do that for the north and the west, brilliantly. And then you leave at night, and the taxi and the train and the pavement and the buildings and the interior design and the clothes, the fabric and even the hospitality, probably an SUV graduate, everywhere! We are the source!”
“Calm down.”

“No, I can’t. That’s been said to me for 20 years. I don’t think I can be quashed. I am a walking example of all they can’t hide from. I’m as hungry as I ever was!”

Janet laughs. “What Dean wouldn’t promote you? Any that knew what’s good for em…”

“No- because I’m such a thorn. Packhouse can’t stand me. But they do need people who kick goals, that’s the bind, isn’t it?”

“Well, research income is pretty basic. But so many staff give up fighting. There are exhausted, demoralised people out there…where’s your class?”

“Building F. People talk this place down….”

“Experience, perhaps? Cynicism, disappointment…”

Meg eyes Janet. “Sounds close to home?”

“Well, I’m an Associate Dean. You have to learn the art of compromise.”

“Yes, but on some things you don’t! I have research fights all the time- for a whole litany of bad reasons. But I’ve never lost a fight like this one. But I refuse to entertain that notion.”

They stop outside the art deco entrance to Building F.

“Here’s your precious Bowen Street. It is pretty, actually.”

“It’s exquisite! I can see students from my window, at lunch-time. And staff in little groups going to meetings. It’s such a community.”

“Well, you’re well placed to write to our titular head. Now you have to empty your mind of equity to discuss human sexuality!”

“Oh, Janet, surely you know the theoretical base is the same! Lacan says…”
“Oh, leave me alone, you freak.”

“Yes! I’ll email you the letter draft this afternoon.”

The women part and Meg races towards her class. She is proud of her Human Sexuality students; they have overcome many hurdles to engage with the curriculum. In an institution dominated by scientists, studies of thought are not properly respected, in Meg’s opinion. Breadth classes usually have one or two serious students who’ve engaged with their choice of study. Then there are those from Engineering and Geology who are compelled and have only selected Meg’s course because of the word ‘sexuality’ and references to sexual preferences and behaviour in the outline. Finally, there are always a few dinosaurs who can’t graduate till they complete their last Breadth requirement and attend the seminars with an attitude of such surly resistance that many staff describe them as unteachable. Meg loves them- they give her a huge challenge. She loves to use these assumptions as a way to come at them from an unexpected angle. Meg knows her Breadth students take away skills they did not expect to develop, that they sorely need.

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Back in her office for lunch, Meg tries to catch up on some administration.

The phone rings; checking caller ID, Meg answers.

“Janet?”

“Gosh, yes! You techno, you!”

“Got the email?”

“Yep- great. Tatiana’ll love it….”

“We’ll see. But it’s important she knows the full extent of concern.”

“We’ll get together when you get a response?”
“I’ll be crying on your shoulder immediately!”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, if the unthinkable happened and we lost, I don’t know what SUV would be to me …there is a bottom line.”

“For you, especially, I guess.”

A faint, familiar twinge.

“Well, not just because of my background, you know…”

“Oh, Meg, I’m sorry, I wasn’t meaning to make you defensive…”

“I know, I still am. But the point remains- aside from the issue of justice and opportunity to working-class kids, what about the right of any kid to aspire as they do? These policy initiatives deny us potential scholars as much as they deny kids chances, it’s not all one way…”

“Ye-es, I see your point.”

“I wouldn’t be here without equity policies.”

“Gosh, did you tell them that at Peterhouse?”

Meg laughs. “I was too scared to speak at Peterhouse!”

“I find that hard to believe.” Drily. “Nevertheless, you’re a good mouthpiece for this stuff. Equity entrance yourself and Cambridge behind you to prevent any…doubts”

“Janet!”

“Well, you have to be canny, Meg.”

“Yes, but you don’t subscribe to their bullshit, either.”

“I think there are assumptions that equity entrance isn’t merit based…”
Meg exclaims. “Well, it’s my job to contradict that. This fucking Cambridge crap can be a liability. It’s just bullshit. You know PhDs are externally examined. You can send an SUV thesis to Cambridge examiners! What the hell is it with this gate-keeping? It’s all about propping up a bunch of plodders….”

“Well, where are the mavericks, here? On the outer, aren’t they?”

“But plodders make lousy leaders- not great scholars, either. I can’t understand you, Janet…”

“Well, I’m selfish, Meg. I want research support in the Faculty. I want to get my projects up. I want R&E support for grant applications. I want my projects in the research concentration. I want to further my work and I compromise certain things for it.”

Meg whistles. “That’s harsh, surely? You support me…”

“Yes, of course! But I don’t lead it. I let you do that. That way, Dale and I can keep the niceties going and I’m not bad cop.”

“It’s never affected me- my projects go fine.”

“Have you applied for any CRC or internal funding?”

“No- only T&L quality stuff. Not in my area, but then…”

“T&L stuff makes them look good. Besides, they’re compelled to provide quality money! What about your University research?”

“Well, I’ve always assumed it’s stuff they’d prefer to have control over…”

“You’re still senior lecturer…”

“Oh, I can’t be an Aspro yet!”

“Disrespectful girl. Why not?”

Meg is silenced. God, she thinks. I don’t have an answer.
“Well, hang on, I haven’t sought it. It’s one thing to say they block stuff because they see me as a maverick and quite another to say they haven’t benevolently bestowed Associate Professor on me. I’ve not thought to that point…it’s still a…far off goal.”

“Rubbish. Read the criteria again.”

“Oh, I have. You….your….”

“Right.”

“Um, oh. goodness.”

“If you go for it, and don’t get it, you’ll see.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Meg!? How can you say that?”

“Well you see, that part’s about me. I’ll get it once I know it’s right. I will go for it. A little bit too much on my plate right now! This admissions thing will take a lot of leg work, not to mention lobbying, my oh-so favourite thing…”

“Maybe Tatiana will retire gracefully…”

“She did that once already, when she hung up her spiky shoes. No, she won’t let go til she’s clearly lost, so I’d better get on with it. I’ve asked for responses by close of business. Anything you want changed?”

“No. I’ve been thinking of the Saint…”, this is their euphemism for Audrey Templeton, “…she’s always having goes at you, but I’m starting to think you’re right- not very bright, that one. Accusing you of gagging debate, that got up my nose.”

“Mmh. I’ve gotta watch these young scholars. It could be mid-career resentment on my part!”

“What is it you envy? Her blind allegiance to the Senior Team or her utter lack of concept of a community of scholars? Or is it the 7 years and counting PhD?”
“None of that, but I do like her Motorola flip phone!” peals of laughter follow.

“Haven’t you got a mobile? Surely, Miss Techno?”

“Hey, watch the Miss. Mrs.”

“I’m a Professor, thank you.”

“So you can avoid taking responsibility for being a Mrs!”

“Noo!”

“Are you one of those women who checks “Prof” on forms?”

Silence.

“Oh, Janet! Tell me you’re not!”

Small voice. “Well, I haven’t had it that long…”

Meg is weak with laughter.

“That’s OK, as long as you don’t correct the admin. staff. That’s very bad form. I bet the Saint will do that.”

“When she finally gets Dr. she’ll correct her own mother.”

“Oh, we’re being bitchy today.”

“Why not, I say? When are you sending the letter to TT?”

“By 6, I think. Everyone who cares will have replied by then.”

“Good. I’ll ring you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Janet.”
“No worries. I’ve got CRC strategic review now, so I’m happy to be fired up.”

“That sounds great. We don’t really have that…here.”

“Yes, it is great. We close the door and we are all doing exactly what we love. We got two new post-docs in the last Linkage round and one of them, you’ll love this, went to Reservoir High and was the first kid to go to Uni, usual story…”

“Janet.”

“I know, I didn’t really make these connections til I talked to you. I watch him. He hesitates a bit, that’s just confidence. They’re only 26 or something, for Chrissake. But it is, I can see what it is you always say…”

“What?”

“Sweet. ‘It’s sweet indeed’, you always say. I know how the staff in the CRC just all salivate over the work. This kid cleaned offices at night for six years. Still got all HDs. Got an APA(I). Now a post doc. It’s…”

“Such a trope to say ‘sweet indeed’. But many fall through the cracks….”

“Yes and we get so many smuggies who can’t cut the mustard, but don’t know it. So irritating. I must go, Meg….”

“Sorry. Let’s make time to talk about this….”

“Oh, you and your ‘make time’. If you learn how to do that, please teach me!”

Meg laughs. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I hear!”

“Goody, something to look forward to. See you.”

More laughter. “Bye, Janet.”

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Meg drops into her chair. From this ideal position she can watch the entire university community crossing Bowen Street. On any day, you can look out of this window and set the date. Long lines of suits— the Academic Board is meeting. Thick colourful throngs of students; it’s Orientation Week. Multicultural food stalls and costumes; it’s International Week. Deserted save for the Allied removalists’ trucks and the ever-present administrative staff; it’s the long break.

Times to ponder this precious view are ever fewer. Meg has never complained about the administration load she carries, seeing it as part of the quality and accountability process. Everyone Meg talks to suggests that a publishing scholar with an interest in policy and governance need not continue with teaching so much at undergraduate level.

Five minutes later, nibbling on chicken schnitzel from Druids, Meg locks her office and crawls into the wide window seat overlooking Bowen Street to watch the passing parade. She still drinks the University in, as she did in those first breathless months when she was tutoring. Summer semester in England. Home for eight weeks. First time in three years she hadn’t travelled in the break. Desperate for some homeness, some touchstone with where she came from after two cold and confusing, exhilarating years at Cambridge, Meg had landed in Melbourne, stayed with Agnes and Anna, and reformed her relationship with her city. Even a mild Melbourne winter was warmer than the Cambridge summer she’d left. Meg walked all over Carlton, visited Philip, had lunches and dinners with her old mates and Sunday barbeques with her extended family. She watched herself as she gave the same scripted answers to questions about Cambridge: yes, it’s wonderful; no, I don’t find the standard higher; yes, it is very cold; no, I will come home to work; yes, I do intend to teach; no, I don’t think a PhD is a waste of time.

Occasionally, among friends, Meg could go deeper into discussion of her experience in England. But it was difficult. Recalling something you’ve seen in Prague or Tuscany is so…discomforting. Listening to her monarchist family wax lyrical about the Westminster system bothered Meg less now she knew how totally wrong they were. Uncle Darrell had been convinced Meg would return a monarchist and his utter consternation at her reaffirmed republicanism was touching to her.
For a fortnight, Meg had allowed herself to ‘recover’ her Australia. But the uneasy foreign feeling remained. Craving like minds, she arranged to have lunch with Kate Llewellyn, ‘at work’ at SUV, after her British Council term. Kate was a lecturer in philosophy in the interdisciplinary Communications department. They met at Café Verdi, right opposite SUV, with its view of the lawns of the State Library. Kate was all nonchalance. The energy between them had shifted substantially by this stage. Meg admired the old buildings of the Arts Faculty and talked of Proctor and reading groups and her unorthodox thesis on Plath. Kate talked archly of teaching and curriculum and supervising honours students. The jealousy ran in Meg’s veins again but it was very different now. She had no desire to be Kate. There was no envy of Kate, just of the job. Kate introduced her to some colleagues, who smiled without interest except for Madge Johnson, who was pleased to see Kate rubbing elbows with a feminist, and Laurie Jeffreys the irascible, eccentric Head of Department, who promptly offered Meg marking work during her stay. Just at that prosaic moment, as the lunch hour finished and the steady trickle on Bowen Street thinned to a trail, Meg’s world shifted. Kate stood there open mouthed and Mick Stapleton, who went to Princeton, suggested they use Meg to tutor in the intensive winter-break courses. An excellent idea, they agreed, and so it was that Meg joined the staff of SUV Communications and spent six weeks of her stay teaching and marking and talking in building F. Agnes came to meet her for lunch, they went to Southbank for early dinners and rides on the Yarra (Meg had never done that when she lived in Melbourne). Graduate students sought her out to discuss their ideas and Madge and Mick inundated her with discussions of pedagogy, quality and the special role of SUV.

It was some time into this happy routine when Meg noticed the feeling. She still has it as she sits in her window seat watching the protean landscape of Bowen Street. During that trip home, Meg had her first encounter with The Feeling at SUV. It felt like good chocolate at home in the fridge or a gift voucher to a favourite bookstore, but deeper, like something has grooved and taken root that is right with the world. She thought it was just the work—she could run up and down to her cubby hole, go for coffee, meet with students and these partial routines of an academic life were joyous and energising to her. It was not ‘til that day in the Sorbonne that she realised it was SUV, that they fell in love, not just she but they, with each other. Kate once accused Meg of having a very romantic view of SUV. At first, Meg was stung. It implied a Pollyanna
view. With much reflection it came to her. Yes, I have a romantic view of SUV. It has been one of the great love stories of my life!! So, why not?

Meg returned for her last year at Cambridge and applied for teaching jobs to get ‘the practice’ and got offers from places that her Cambridge set sneered at, and then, finally, SUV. Dear Ms Flanagan. Would you be interested in applying for a lectureship in Cultural Studies? She dreamed it into being. Gazing down on the courtyard in front of Building A, Meg smiles at the memory. I did. I dreamt it into being.

Fifteen minutes later Meg’s computer diary beeps with reminders of tasks she had relegated to the lunch hour. Nipping out to top up her herbal tea, Meg narrowly misses Ellen Merwick, the Welsh-born Oxford literary critic with whom she shares little common ground despite their alma maters and disciplinary connection. Ellen is highly critical of Meg’s ‘crash through’ approach to academic life; indeed, she has taken to calling Meg ‘Gough’. Relations between them have become fraught.

Ten minutes later, Mick, who is now Head of School, sticks his head around Meg’s door.

“Hey Flanners- got a minute?”

“Not at all, no.”

“Ha, ya’ markin’ pile’s up to me knees.”

“That’s how many students I’ve got. Whatd’ya want?”

“Faculty PRC want to review two programs. Neither of ‘em’s yours, so I need ya. 10 am tomorrow?”

“I’ve got Themes from 10-12.”

“Bugger. OK, 12-2?”

“Great, can we eat lunch there?”

“It’ll be catered.”
“How’d ya know?”

“Just decided. Shockin’ use of COG, eh?”

“Yes, it is. Why the hurry?”

“Well, the truth is…”, he comes in and shuts the door, “..it’s not reviews they wanna do, it’s specific monitoring. Feedback’s dropped below 3.5 on both of ’em.”

“What, the whole programs?”

“Yep.”

“Fuck”, Meg whistles. “Have you talked to the PCs?”

“It’s Ellen.”

“Oh, no.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m a prudent choice, then.”

“Well, no one can sell modernity to her like you can.”

“Troglodyte. Post-modernity, and I can’t sell it. I think you mean best practice. She is awfully hard on undergrads, harder than me. And internationals. It’s a very difficult situation, Mickey.”

“Your problem now, m’dear.”

“Mickey! You’ll be there I presume?”

“Yep and the two student reps from both programs.”

“And the QU staff?”

“And Ellen.”
“That’s it?”

“No, no. Not by a long shot. Associate Dean Academic Programs, Pria, and an external. From the Professoriate.”

“Ooh. Yuk.”

“Fraid so.”

“OK, midday. Let’s eat first, Mickey, or Ellen will put everyone off their tucker. But don’t go overboard. Vegetarian sandwiches and a fruit platter, OK?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Meg, I don’t suppose…?”

“Fuck off, you sexist bastard! You decided, you do it!!” He departs, stopping to mock-measure the precariously stacked pile of paper in front of Meg’s desk.

There are a number of emails from colleagues on the Committee; fortunately they are almost all supportive and mercifully brief. Only the Dean of Education has sent an objection, chiding Meg about the imperatives of university governance of which she is clearly not cognisant. Meg ignores him. She clicks the ‘read’ advice and notes how many of her colleagues have opened her email: almost all of them.

Time to send it to TT. This is good; there might be a response by 6!! Meg copies the email to Dale Andrianopoulos and quickly presses Send. A minute to snatch up her folders and bag and run literally across Bowen Street to the seminar room in Building C for her honours seminar.

It is just after 8 am the next morning when she lets herself back into the office, which she left in chaos as she departed the previous evening. The early morning sees no interruptions from students or colleagues, allowing Meg to organise her day with some decorum.

There are a number of voicemail messages but no email from the VC. Meg is frustrated as she listens to the messages. One is from Fred McDougal, the Young Man About Campus and recent confidant of the VC. It is believed that his is the Mind behind the revised Admissions
Policy proposal. McDougal holds no higher degrees and has little university experience; his claim to fame is consultancy. On what exactly, Meg has been unable to discover. A year ago, he proposed a Fleximode Delivery Strategy for all program offerings which contained glaring contradictions of both the TLMP and the Maxwell Model, both enshrined missions of SUV, endorsed by Council. Tatiana listens to him and has installed him on her Executive Committee. He is now widely feared, and in Meg’s view he exploits this. Meg has little respect for Fred, and she has noticed he tends to stay out of her way. Until now, when he has rung and ranted down the phone at her apparent obstructionism. Meg is confused but the next message is from Janet, whose voice greets Meg’s ear with a huge, “Wa-Hoo! How’s this, Jeanne d’Arc? Ring me.”

Meg dials instantly.

“What? What? Mr Fred Mac is on my voicemail spitting chips at me, but he doesn’t say why…."

“Why? Because, Dr F, TT has told DA that ‘our’ advice…."

“Meaning the Committee?”

“Yes, our advice suggests this policy was somewhat hastily prepared and needs a working party to examine and revise it, taking submissions. It’s off the table!”

“What, the whole thing? Yes! Oh, Janet, hallelujah. How do you know?”

“Well, DA rang me this morning. She’s happy with you, m’dear! No working party will pass it as it was…."

“So, Mac wrote it?”

“Seems likely. I wonder if TT read it? I’m unkind…I guess she realised she could never sell it that way…."

“Quite seriously, that might be when she read it!”
“Yes…discretion is the better part of valour and all.”

“There’s valour? Hope springs eternal! That policy was, is, and always will be a valour free zone. Oh, what is it? Hang on, Janet. Someone at the door…”

“God, early bastards.”

Marilyn puts her head around the door.

“Sorry, Meg, but one of the EAP students seems to be having a crisis…”

“And?”

“Well…you know…”

“Oh. OK, I’ll come out in a sec.”

Marilyn smiles. “Thanks, Meg.”

“Sorry, Janet. An EAPie needs something. Gotta go. I’m on Cloud 9, truly, thanks for ringing.”

“Yes- it’s done!”

“For now.”

“Well, true. But ‘now’ is all there is. The irony, eh?”

“Where?”

“Well, you’ve just fought this off and instantly you hear you won you have to go to assist a student who got in…”

Something catches in Meg’s throat.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Sorry. But it’s just…”
“Poetic.”

“But real. It underscores it, so. It's done for a while longer. That while could be hundreds of students, thousands. There'll always be these fights and God willing we'll fight 'em off.”

“God doesn't have to be willing.”

Janet laughs. “Have a good one.”

“Thanks, you too. See you!”

Hand still on the phone, Meg takes a deep breath. Let's go meet the raison d'être, she thinks. That'll fire me up to reply to Fred Mac!
The Start at the End, II.

Meg stands in the arched hall of the School of Communication Studies, watching Angela run down the stairs. The revelry in the Common Room is full and rich; more of Meg’s colleagues have arrived. She hesitates at the door. It will be a great night. Meg will luxuriate in the moment, as she admits to herself how much, how long, she has wanted this. But a little chat with an awkward girl in whom Meg recognised that shimmer of possibility, underscores it. Angela will find out who she is.

“Get her back in here”, Meg hears David Stacey in his favourite persona.

But what is wrong with Agnes? She looks slightly pained as Meg crosses the threshold. Kate is just switching off the radio.

“What's up, Aggie?”

“She’s worried you haven’t got the bottle for our new Minister, woman.”

Meg laughs. “I doubt it, Dave! She’s met me.”

But Agnes’s face is a picture of misery.

“Silly, what’s wrong?”

“Yeah, you think our Meg can’t take it up to that Liberal prick? He went to Philip. He must be your vintage, Meg, eh?”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“This Noble bloke. New Minister for Higher Ed…”

Meg feels the blood run out of her face.

“No….surely, you mean IR?”

“Nup. Higher Ed. He wants vouchers. He wants a binary structure, teaching and research. He wants universities like us to stop thinkin’ we’re…universities!”
Agnes's sympathy is palpable.

“I'd've thought any Lib who went through with Meg would avoid that portfolio, Mick.” David hasn't noticed Meg's discomfort.

“I'd have thought so, too, Dave. I remember him”, she catches a breath. “…of course, when we were… undergrads, it was IR he was interested in.”

“Well, the Libs think there's IR challenges to be had in universities.”

“Indeed. Minister Noble will agree with that.”

Agnes places a hand on Meg's arm. “Are you all right?”, she whispers.

More of Meg's colleagues arrive.

“I'm fine. Don't worry.”

“I couldn't bear it to spoil your celebration.”

“No! It's a sign, Aggie.”

“Oh, always with signs. What?”

“I made Aspro today. And he is Minister. I guess you call that upping the ante.”

“You both fulfilled your… um, goals. Oh, Meg. You've got that union delegation to the Department….”

“The Universe never asks of you more than you can do.”

“He'll be so…”

“Yes. He will. He knows what to expect.”

“Any…. longing?”
“For Stuart? No! I’m really grateful to him, actually, because he treated me with a lot of respect. I really loved him, my first grown-up love. We acted like grown-ups. I loved him such a long time, but….I’ve always hoped that he’s happy. I’m the winner for it, you know.”

“Do you know Stuart’s wife?”

“Alison Adams? Of course, she’s Alison Noble. I never knew her personally. We went through together. Loreto girl, pony tail. Shiny stockings.” Meg laughs loudly, causing Agnes to jump. “She’s a heartland Liberal.”

“I thought the Libs didn’t have heartlands?”

They exchange a smile.

“I suppose he has to earn his stripes for IR in Higher Ed.”

Meg considers. “Aggie, you have such good instincts. That’s a real hack remark. But you’re absolutely right. So he’ll be…sharpening the saw.”

“You sound….”

“Yes. I’m primed. I’m ready for this fight. It’s a full circle. Besides, an ideological minister might just galvanise the union a bit better.”

“I am so glad I came to SUV.”

“Aggie. You’re a gem.”

“No, no. I just…. I’ve loved being part of it, with you. I’m so glad I’ll be here, for this.”

Agnes sniffs.

“Now tell me, was that really just course advice you had to give?”

“Oh. No…she was anxious she wasn’t honours material.” They exchange a knowing look.
“I see. One of mine?”

“Dunno. That’s her out the front, in the pale blue.”

“Oh, Angela? Oh. She was born to do honours, that one….oh, here’s Janet!…”

Meg watches Angela cross Bowen Street and retrieve her bike.

“Anything is possible.”

The End
Exegesis:

Mapping Interventions in the Classed Subject
Dedication Two

This dissertation is dedicated to the women and men of the Australian labour movement, who fought for working class education.

Thank you.

But most of all, it’s for RMIT University, which took the job on.

Excellence and equity.
Abstract

Growing up working-class and building a healthy fulfilling interior life which allows self-actualisation is a fraught and disjointed experience for many working-class women. This is particularly the case for those of us who sought 'something more', some unnamed aspiration we knew we would recognise when it happened. In order to name that thing, (education? scholarship?) there stretches an un-languaged chasm and a felt experience which is potentially so injurious it is unknowable in the self.

An examination of the growing literature on working-class felt experience and interiority demonstrates the limitations of existing critical instances, both marxist and feminist. The increasing theoretical concern shown for subjectivities has not been extended to class identity, nor has theory itself been adequately submitted to 'class' readings. This thesis examines the oft-described emotional trajectory of many working-class women in universities. By engaging reflexively this unlangauged emotional space and applying a class reading to the subject positions which create and represent aspiration, I seek to propose renewed critical instances for fictional (and theoretical) representations, such as the novel Crossing Bowen Street which is the companion volume to this thesis.
Watch the things you gave your life to, broken and stoop, and build ‘em up, with worn out tools.

Rudyard Kipling, *If*

**Mapping Interventions in the Classed Subject**

*Introduction*

Social class has been the subject of extensive investigation within the humanities for the best part of a century. Working class studies, characterised by interdisciplinary approaches to various (limited) aspects of working class life and experience, are enjoying something of a renaissance, particularly in US universities.¹ Yet ironically, concern with social class, in terms of our interior experience of it, is intermittent and flawed. While the notion of class has currency well beyond the academy, its position as a meaningful category of analysis has been eroded in recent years, in part by the deconstructive happenings in intellectual practice but also by the limitations and resistances of (neo) marxists² to a holistic human enquiry.

One of the premises on which this work is argued is that humans are ‘meaning seeking’ creatures; we try to make sense of our experience. Modes of analysis which have often been seen as dichotomous, such as marxism and poststructuralism, increasingly inform pluralistic understandings of human experience, such as class identity. They

¹ State University of New York, Stony Brook; University of Iowa; University of Ohio.
² While it is usual practice to give ‘marxist’ and ‘marxism’ status proper nouns, I explicitly decline to do this. I have constructed an epistemology which draws on many frames of analysis. I feel strongly that to give proper noun status to marxism somehow creates intellectual hierarchy which is inimical to the concerns of this thesis.
allow us to access resonant, representative and therefore constitutive notions of ourselves and our experience: they allow for nuance, ambiguity and contradiction. The shifting mercurial 'sand' of class identity requires such resonance in the making of meaning. It is crucial to any project of resistance to hidden injuries sustained in becoming a working-class subject, or a subject who seeks to reconcile that class journey and identity in all its permutations. This allows the possibility that the way class operates in our selves will be understood for what it is, and why. Sharon Isabell describes 'no safeguards against seeping pain', which is the psychic injury of class.\(^3\) The novel *Crossing Bowen Street*, and this thesis, seeks to explore why there is this 'seeping pain', why so many working-class people feel there are no safeguards and how we might interrogate (our) class identities anew for different points of entry, departure and reconciliation.

My novel, *Crossing Bowen Street*, started as an attempt to make sense of my own experience of my 'class'; I wanted to map what I saw as the class inflections in my experience, as well as to examine the impact on my self-esteem and self-understanding. My theoretical explorations in support of this endeavour have led me down paths far removed from my initial ideas on class. I sought theoretical tools which would helpfully explicate the chaotic, fragmented nature of my experience. I wanted to be able to describe and engage (and maybe reconcile) the contradictions I have encountered. This doctoral enquiry has thrown into sharp relief the degree to which my commitment to the Left (read marxist-informed political activism) has determined the way I 'act out' theory; it is teleological, materialist, binary and predicated on tropes and archetypes; these not only invalidate my experience as a working-class woman but are unsustainable in any deeply meaningful, coherent examination of social class.

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\(^3\) Sharon Isabell is quoted in Campbell, J. 1996. "Teaching Class: a pedagogy and politics for working class writing", *College Literature*, June 1996, 23:2, 117.
I argue that a classed subjectivity exists as a strand or permutation which takes on the constructed, societal view of a class; it may accommodate and even collude with a concept of lack in itself. This absence may be perceived as cultural, social, economic, academic, even emotional. Many women from working class backgrounds explicitly avow the need to engage in some kind of re-authoring⁴, to feign or even convince themselves they have control, papering over cracks which they perceive are in themselves.⁵ In order to locate this, we move to add frameworks beyond marxism.

This thesis frames the socio-political and cultural terrain considered in Crossing Bowen Street. I consider various approaches to social class enquiry and propose permutations; these seek as their entrée the capacity of theory to make sense of our psychic experiences, in order to provide a sort of ‘intellectual therapy’. In Chapter One, Framing the Terrain, I describe the methodologies which informed this thesis and the novel, and I consider the common assumptions which permeate

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⁴ Personal communication with Sarah, 24 April 2000. Sarah describes the way she remade her life to hide her background, in the sincere belief that her ‘self’ would follow. She has found that an explicit and separate project is required.

class scholarship and politics. I outline an eclectic poststructuralist analysis, informed by feminisms and some marxisms. This has allowed me the richest 'sense making' interrogation.

In the second chapter, *Theorising the Classed Subject*, historical approaches to class enquiry are considered, in terms of scholarly responses to class identity. Various marxist and liberal humanist analyses are evaluated, with an emphasis on their efficacy as a point of entry to our class as subjectivity. I revisit the dominant tropes of class enquiry in terms of implications for gender. This segues into a discussion of class in twentieth century feminisms and the many tensions which have rightly diversified feminist movements. Contemporary deconstructive analyses are considered in the light of their (lack of) interest in (and applicability to) class identity. I omitted from this study those (repetitive) treatises on social class which lacked efficacy for subjectivity or gender. I have limited my review of class literature to examples which demonstrate the recurrent approach to class identity of twentieth century scholarship.

The internal and psychic manifestation of class is explored in Chapter Three: *Narrating the Classed Subject*. In part one, *Subjectivities*, I consider some of the permutations of working-class identity in our subject selves, in terms of seeking an acceptable self through an interior life which has been classified. While difference and ambiguity constitute much of working-class subjectivities, themes of lack and inadequacy are also recurrent. It is my argument that diverse representations in cultural forms can go some way to challenging this.

Part two, *Classing Representations, Representing Class*, explores the dominant representations of class-presented cultural forms, particularly the novel, and the subject positions generally offered to working-class women as a result. It is the argument of this thesis that

Working Class Studies, State University of New York,
diverse representations breakdown the assumptions which legitimate classed subject positions, allowing points of entry to class identity that are not inherently pejorative but which may receive multiple inscriptions.

The final chapter, *The Classed Subject as Scholar*, plays an exegetical role in the dissertation; it involves meta-writing, as the themes of the enquiry are considered in the light of the fiction submission, *Crossing Bowen Street*. I discuss the frustrations and enablers which facilitated my work on the novel, and I consider the classification of knowledge and enquiry which is so prevalent, albeit tacit, in contemporary Australian universities. This parallel journey as novelist and scholar creates an opportunity to engage and consider the reflexivity which I argue throughout is crucial to any project of social justice in academic, creative and political practice.
A man should try to find before he dies
what he is running from, and to, and why.
Unknown

Chapter One: Framing the Terrain

Introduction

The novel Crossing Bowen Street and the thesis\(^6\) \textit{Mapping Interventions in the Classed Subject} take as their concern the lived subjectivity of social class. Initially, both sections of the dissertation explore an interest in class differences between feminists, a phenomenon on which a considerable literature exists. This chapter outlines the methodologies employed in this dissertation. The conduct of the research and fiction writing is described, as are the underpinning philosophical frameworks. The research questions are posed and the investigation undertaken is outlined.

As the fiction writing, and research, developed, the focus began to shift to a broad experience of classed subjectivity. Our internalisation of our class shapes and sifts our sense of aspiration and possibility. This was born out of the specificities of my own experience and the differences for other working-class women, both in the literature and within my acquaintance. The theoretical interests considered in the thesis broadened to allow (and to seek meaning in) this development.

\(^6\) Many creative and professional writing programs refer to the theoretical submission which accompanies creative work as the ‘exegesis’. While I have sought to write exegetically, particularly in Chap Four, this term is too limiting to describe what I have done. I refer to the non-fiction component as the ‘thesis’ and to the entire submission, including truncated novel, as ‘dissertation’. Exegetical writing is dispersed throughout the dissertation.
In the instance of this dissertation, I use ‘praxis’ to refer to the interrelation of the art and theory; praxis describes the cross-pollination, the ‘third way’, between the creative and discursive components of the submission. That synergy is the site of an additional investigation; in fact, a meta-enquiry. It involves the novelist/researcher interrogating her own practice, the two (or many) subject positions which are occupied as writer and scholar. What emerges is a strand of the enquiry which is not only reflexive in character but is arguably an *embodiment of reflexivity*. Inevitably, this involves reflecting on class as a concept, the ambiguities of political economy and subjectivity and one’s own class, as I draw on it in order to textualise *interior* class at all. That such a reflexive practice must underscore all scholarly actions towards a project of social justice is a fundamental contention of this work.

In order to theorise the experience I was writing, I needed to critique the writing itself. This proved to be anything but straightforward. As the frameworks I sought helped me to a meaningful reconciliation of troubling conundrums, my insight into the creative process declined. I continued to seek (additional) theoretical frames which offered broader resonance; which were efficacious when considered through the insights of the fiction writing. This led me to a powerful, if chaotic and eclectic, theoretical position, which I will outline.

**research questions**

This chapter is entitled ‘Framing the Terrain’ because to me the notion of ‘framing’ implies a frozen moment. We cannot easily delineate those notions I will explore: categories blur and leak. A frame does not necessarily or easily create parameters of any meaning. It may be argued that this leaves us with no stable ground, without meaning, an accusation often made of poststructuralism and postmodernism. I disagree. Instability is a form of meaning, part of a sincere attempt to frame the theoretical ground in this instance is to revisit this the meaning of such instability for a working-class trajectory.
The novel, *Crossing Bowen Street*, springs from my experience in a feminist left political group at the University of Melbourne student union in the early 1990s. This experience was characterised by emotional pain and a profound sense of inadequacy and self-doubt, on many levels. Most significant of these for me was intellectual. I am very conscious of the implication of this deeply felt and painful experience in terms of the qualitative research I undertook for this dissertation. I certainly have personal resonance with this study.

I did not choose ‘working class-ness’ as my topic; it chose me. I sought to find expressive modes for my interest in the class dimension of feminist relationships. The ontology, the origin and beginning of the specificity of my working-class identity, continued to pulsate; it would not be ignored. I had to consider this problematic of working-class subjectivity in terms of my work, particularly the fiction. *How is subjectivity classed? Where does class ‘consciousness’ commence? Where does it locate for us? What governs our felt experience of its expression in social arrangements? What role do cultural forms of representation play in our understanding of social class, as individuals and collectively? How do we aspire? How does fiction (writing) ‘enable’ this, if it does at all? How does fiction ‘make sense’ of the interior? How does a fiction writer create scholarly praxis with theoretical frameworks? Is my scholarship ‘classed’?*

Throughout this time I was reading fiction for explicit class themes. Initially I intended to read Australian women writers but as the topic focus rapidly shifted to felt experience and classed subjectivity, this became limiting. I realised that class themes exist in *all* creative work and it is the emphasis, and degree of reflexivity of the character, which determines their expression. Langer describes this as a critical distinction between novels which [implicitly] accept the class struggle
and those which question it.\(^7\) My naïve plan at the outset had been to examine the class position of authors, thereby assessing their political contribution. Whilst this approach is not uncommon\(^8\), my developing insight into complexities of identity revealed it as absurd. This underscored my growing sense of how our subjectivities are classed. As my reading broadened and I began to articulate the classed subjectivities in all representations, the specific (economic) identification of someone’s class was revealed as peripheral. I began to recognise the essentialism in such an approach and the inevitable silences and absences which might result. Syson assumes working-class writing to be that of working-class people\(^9\), which is in part an important politics of writing. But it is inherently essentialising. More significantly, it assumes the determination of the class of a writer is unproblematic, deemeable, distinct from others by some arbitrary external measure. Class as a theme in writing is a much more effective way to theorise; it allows us to examine motifs and specificities in a way that essentialising the author does not. It allows the fluidity which is arguably a hallmark of class identity; our class is not static, despite the assumption thus on which much class scholarship is predicated.

As the contention emerged, the reading molded to it. I saw the role of 'self-concept' everywhere; in the sociology on class, in the fiction and, differently, in the theoretical work of (particularly) Steedman and Lacan. Lacan’s location of subjectivity in the relation of the self with its own permeability underscored my interest in interiority. This notion is a substantial departure from the marxist-informed models I had drawn

\(^7\) Langer, B. “Reading Class in Canadian Fiction”, *Australian-Canadian Studies*, 10, 1, 1992, 45-59, 47.
on, yet it provides for a socio-political, cultural understanding of actions and social arrangements.

**theorising, practice**

I did not make explicit even to myself my initial theoretical frame because I felt sure I knew it. I certainly articulated the theoretical frame which informed the research *methodology*, believing as I did that these were separate and thus the latter needed explication. But as the research went on, and everything I believed was insecured and destabilised, I began to think more about my pet theories. Supervisors’ comments on drafts were very helpful to this, as I was compelled to question my definitions: of working-class, feminism, patriarchy, and so on. Poststructuralism has brought my work (and me personally) many benefits: one of them is to see clearly the mutable and chaotic nature of everything, including theoretical ideas. Poststructuralism finds ‘breaks, gaps, fissures and discontinuities’... so texts reflects us back to ourselves...where we are. ¹⁰

In exploring the political (and my own experience) in the realm of textuality, seeking to ‘write’ it as fiction, I have drawn helpfully on aspects of narrative theory. This recent theoretical model is paralleled with the narrative *therapy* school of psychoanalysis. I was drawn to it because of its potential for powerful theorising of the interior. Postmodern in its genesis, narrative emerges from the social constructionist movement. Its hallmark is the notion that ‘stories we have about life give meaning to experience and have real consequences in our lives’. ¹¹ Miles Franklin told us that a truly

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indigenous literature (by which she meant local to Australia) is how a nation is constituted;\textsuperscript{12} national identity and character are written into a canon of the stories of our selves. Narrative theory endorses this notion with a point of entry inherently located in the interior; stories are the events of our lives, but they are also what emerges from our compulsion to ‘make meaning’. Narrative explores the relational definitions of meaning which operate through hegemonic cultural forms; this in turns allows us to theorise representations and their role in writing the stories of our social arrangements and the experience of difference, of individuals, within that. I was motivated at the outset of my research to challenge representations, or lack of them, of working-class women. Theoretical frames such as narrative have offered a powerful sense-making tool which also validates the role of story in all its forms and potentially facilitates the ‘writing in’ of absence and silence, not merely to fill in blanks, (rather to write wholly new stories) but to note the meaning of the absence as a point of departure.

This thesis is informed, in part, by a socialist feminist analytic frame. Increasingly throughout the candidature, I have developed a poststructuralist analysis for the work. All these philosophical frames require interrogation; they tell us nothing in rigid usage. I define my situated use of them here.

Due to its contested character, socialism, like marxism, is situational. It is almost impossible to define in a way that is both meaningful and accurate. I use the term generically, to describe a socio-political-economic project. E M Wood’s assessment of revisions of marxist knowledge is helpful. Wood is scathing of what she calls New True

\textsuperscript{12} Miles Franklin gave this address at the inaugural Commonwealth Writer’s Prize (forerunner to the Literature Board of the Australia Council), 1951. Her speech is quoted in McPhee, H. 2001. \textit{Other People’s Words}, Melbourne University Press: Parkville, 263.
Socialism\textsuperscript{13}, which she describes as socialism concerned with certain goals which ‘transcend the narrowness of material class interests’ and therefore may speak to broader social democratic concerns. Wood is derisive because she sees this post New Left revision as divorcing class from socialism, as though that inherent relation is definitive. I argue that this revision has not gone far enough; invariably there is no primacy given to subjectivity or to an interrogation of the implications of socialism for felt experience. Socialism to me is limited to the realm binaried as the ‘public’ sphere. It is the realisation of economic and social democracy and justice; social justice would do equally well as a descriptor. In my socialist state, tertiary education would be fully public funded, homelessness, health care, public transport and the environment would be equal first priorities of government, and utilities and infrastructure would all be state-owned. I understand Wood’s anger at the lessening emphasis on class. But I am no longer persuaded that ‘adding class and stirring’ is any more effective than ‘adding women’ has been; the latter process is such a trope in the feminist humanities that one is alerted to it in other categories of analysis. Yet part of my scholarship (and this thesis) is the recognition that representation is a point of entry, a necessary (if cosmetic) first step, to constituting disenfranchised communities and experiences. Class injustice has not been transformed in spite of considerable scholarly interest in it throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. I am concerned by emphasis on the political economy of class identity, particularly since it generally leaves the sense-making interior meanings unscrutinised.

Throughout the thesis I use the term ‘marxism’ in what might be seen as a generic way; I do not mean to deny the vast range of permutations and post-marxian thinkers. I present marxism in this way because my evaluation of its efficacy for working-class subjectivity is particular to the literary and personal project I seek to inform. I offer ‘marxism’ as it is used here to describe that notion made available to

\textsuperscript{13} E. M. Wood, \textit{The Retreat from Class}, quoted in Joyce, P.
me through my undergraduate studies and activism. Whilst it might be more proper for a doctoral thesis to locate a marxist framework in a particular author or school of thought, this is not how I came to marxism or what I associated with it. This thesis employs what might be called a ‘popular’ marxism, which is necessarily unwieldy (indeed, the term ‘lumpen’ marxism springs to mind). I acknowledge the criticism that could be made that this constructs a vast category of analysis as a ‘straw’ person. In response, I argue that the narrative diversity of marxism, whilst undeniable, was not well presented or understood in my undergraduate education or in the (marxist) social movements with which I became involved. My time in the left was characterised by implicit and partial discourses of marxism, which could be compared to the selective biblical theology of fundamental christians; some tenets are absolute and others are overlooked. I have often been reminded that New Left marxists have been far more concerned with the subject (implying an interest in subjectivity and interiority) than their predecessors. I am not entirely persuaded by this, but nevertheless, an interest in the subject may still involve uncritical adherence to Cartesian notions. Certainly, I have yet to discover any marxist class analysis which embraces diverse gender awareness of the subject, along with value for interiority. The Frankfurt School certainly offers a problematised self but hardly in a way accessible for the project of this dissertation, and is characterised by implicit denial of subjects’ agency.14 Also, the implication is that working-class subjects must do the broad intellectual homework in order to excavate a class aware model of subjectivity. A Freudian lens imposed over that of New Left marxism does not in any way offer amelioration to the specific class injuries and repatriation with which I am concerned.

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In addition, marxist scholars seem to consistently debate Marx’s own definition of class.\textsuperscript{15} Apparently Marx amended and reworked his definition of class throughout his life. While this is ironically indicative of the very nuance and evolution for which I argue, it is onerous expectation that working-class people seeking class aware personal technologies should become advanced marxist scholars to further their project. One reflection of my criticism of the marxism I received, is that the narrative diversity which characterises it is not well communicated. Semantic distinctions such as whether workers sell their labour, or their labour \textit{power}, to bosses are not only irrelevant but dispiriting. These discussions fascinate some political economists. But they offer a psychic obstruction to the project I seek which to my mind creates emotional exhaustion. It is not in this difference that destructive subject positions will be best challenged. I defend my use of ‘marxism’ as exemplifying that which the sub-culture about whom I write encountered in academic and activist life.

I concur with Moi’s\textsuperscript{16} description of feminism as a political position. I am fervent in my belief that feminist politics engage a very broad church and that one’s particular feminism must be clarified; it cannot be assumed. I prefer the term \textit{feminisms}; it seems to me a contradictory and unhelpful attitude to difference to describe a (partially) remedial framework in the singular. My feminism is about enshrining female agency and choice. I am not persuaded by a class blind focus on issues like equal opportunity or affirmative action; they are \textit{potentially} essentialist and superficial, obscuring difference (although I acknowledge the need for a circuit breaker in western social arrangements). My commitment to agency and choice is generic, across sexuality, employment, life/style choices, and management of families and the domestic, ‘caring’ sphere. I am ‘a feminist’ because I still see much misogyny and structural impediment

\textsuperscript{15} Marx in Joyce p 22
to the self-actualisation of people who are female, particularly in terms of sexuality, agency and leadership.

I am drawn to those aspects of poststructuralism which seek to critically rethink Enlightenment assumptions, such as the Cartesian unified, self-knowing "I". Poststructuralism allows us to explore the chaotic and unstable relation of the subject to their own consciousness rather than equating the two, as so much philosophy (including marxism) does. Poststructuralism seeks to break down linear and tunneled assumptions about human actions and interests through deconstruction of the context within which language is used and formed. This allows scholars to practice their own discourse reflexively, being critical of certain linguistic tropes which are often a consequence of the socio-cultural and philosophical milieu in which we find ourselves. I can criticise binary oppositions and practices deemed teleological, while being aware these practices are so pervasive they become difficult to avoid. They are in part an unavoidable consequence of specific discourses around the ‘nature’ of the human subject. Thus, I bring a poststructuralist lens to this work in order to examine these issues and their relation to class, to seek reconciliation, and to make sense of the chaotic and unstable ground such a project inevitably uncovers.

The strength of postmodernism for my work is the stern corrective it has provided to those who subscribe to master narratives and reductionism. Postmodernism reveals the dangers in these practices and the implicit ideologies functioning to underpin them. In practical terms, this has made it possible for me to effectively counter arguments that certain practices are theoretical (ideological and

therefore bad) while other practices (usually those of the speaker) are innate or ‘just common sense’. I always knew there was tension in this argument (very common in the social work profession, which ironically is identified with a social justice project) but study and application of postmodern theories allowed me to articulate a powerful response. A postmodernist approach has helped me trace back the assumptions and givens which blocked my sense making project, which saw me assuming differences were my class, rather than the socio-cultural context which prescribed my understanding. Lyotard calls postmodernism ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’,¹⁸ I see it as augmented by incredulity towards non-reflexivity, which is so often a part and parcel of reductionist discourses such as marxism and some feminism. Postmodernism has explicated the chimera of margin-to-centre relations. The primacy given to difference in postmodernist thought has allowed a recognition of how identities come to be constructed as subaltern. This disrupts much dominant narrative and allows us transferable tools to interrogate the (sub) narratives we might encounter. It is a powerful insight with which to theorise class.¹⁹

reflexivities, specificities

Syson repeatedly uses the term ‘point of departure’²⁰ in his literary theories of working-class writing. Thus, he argues the need to depart

from the unreflexive norms of much literary criticism, to take a sub-
strand which is about class, and possibly the class subjectivity of the
writer. We ‘depart’ then, for a working-class poetics, a notion of what
working-class literary production looks like and what working-class
textuality reads like. Initially, I embraced this notion, until I tried to
apply it across ambiguities of (working) class identity. Any motif or
device written as working-class in character is potentially essentialist;
while lack and a sense of inadequacy are recurrent themes in much
literary work which might be called ‘working-class’, these themes are
in fact present in writing generally characterised by difference, by
margin-centre relations, whether they be transmuted gender, sexuality
or race, or any other strand(s) of identity. Lack is merely a
characteristic which may be projected in the self-other relation and
read as class. It has very sinister overtones politically, but it is not
exclusive to class. Such exclusivity seems likely to lead to
essentialism. Thus, I ask what a point of entry might be. Before we
depart, before we develop that comprehensive critical frame for the
repatriation of (working) class themes in writing, surely we need a
point of entry? Chaos suggests that entry and departure to class
subjectivity through two clearly demarcated doors is absurd. This is
what I learned by starting with a point of departure. The point of entry
becomes the creation of space for difference within working-class
identit(ies), within working-class (felt) experience. Our point of entry is
that we have a culture which hierarchically classifies. Difference within
and without, interrogated and problematised reflexively, constitutes a
point of entry, which is unstable and chimeric, as indeed is class
identity.

Radical Poet", Australian Literary Studies, 16:3, May,
297-311
Syson, I. 1995. "In Search of Betty Collins", Hecate, 21, 2,
1995.
The notion that much intellectual practice is situational has helped me to define my position. Reflexivity is the capacity to interrogate one’s self and its role in where we stand. My own privilege (which in spite of a working-class background is considerable) positions me very differently now to the working-class women around my neighbourhood, who would never guess we share some motifs of class antecedents. My reflexivity allows me to consider the other empathically and especially to consider how difficult it is to stand in another’s shoes. The capacity for reflexivity is (in part) facilitated by privilege; but privilege does not ensure it. Ironically much poststructuralist scholarship lacks the very reflexivity that its phenomenology has highlighted. Equally, much literary criticism has lacked any reflexivity at all for the other of the classed novel. Making explicit and considering the assumptions which underpin our position is all we can do towards a specific project of social justice. In fact, we must create space for new knowledge about the other to flourish. Reflexivity is a challenge to the vacuum of assumptions. Much unreflexive scholarship engages implicitly in what Bourdieu calls ‘aristocracies of culture’\textsuperscript{21} which assume we all see ‘the world’ the same way.

As I have edited and re-worked this thesis, I have become aware of my use throughout of an unproblematised ‘we’ (and us). This has caused me considerable dismay, in that my own reflexivity appears to have ironically ‘failed’. Yet on reflection, this oversight points up two important subjectivities. Firstly, there is a ‘we’, without trying to draw a rigid border. There is a community of practice (and purpose) of humanities scholars, who seek to do socially distributed research, and teach, and publish. They represent the unstable notion of ‘audience’ to whom the thesis is addressed, and they include, but are not limited to, its examiners. There is some comfort in the sense that hope springs eternal, and this thesis has come out of the pen always tuned towards

\textsuperscript{21} Bourdieu, P. 1979, 1996. Distinction; a social critique of the judgement of taste, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London,
the assumption that fellow scholars will seek to understand my intention and the spirit of this enquiry. Secondly, this phenomenon points up the difficulties in resisting rigid social constructions of language and thought. The Enlightenment model bodes strongly still; constantly problematising our practice can be intellectually exhausting. It also involves a layered approach. I had to write and re-write the entire thesis before I could recognise my instructive use of ‘we’.

**the mirror of class: Lacanian ‘lack’ in the working-class subject**

For Lacan, the ideal image which is external to the subject may be the aspiration of the subject, projected or identified in the other.\(^{22}\) This could be described as an impoverished version of the notion of role models, with the addition of the anxiety which Lacan argues inherently follows recognition of the permeability of the self.\(^{23}\) This identification may lead us to act in ways we could not before; in the context of representations, we can view other selves (many of which are implicitly or only partially othered) and even ‘try on’ ways of being. In *Crossing Bowen Street*, Meg explores the ontologies she sees around her throughout her undergraduate career and toys with some (and part of many), until she finds a sense of ‘authenticity’. This notion sits oddly with Lacanian subjectivity, but in practice may simply be the partial resolution of internal conflict which occurs through anxiety about identification with the other, whether centered or marginalised.

The reading practices which operate around our subject positions can be understand much more clearly through this theory of self as vicarious, by the process of its identification with the other. The implicit

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11-17.

meanings and values we bring to bear are fraught with implication for the role and significance of a character in our lives; the risk of alienation through identification is part of the love-hate (desire) relation Lacan describes. We need the other to extend our possibilities and frame our options, but we need to deny them to claim whatever it is we aspire to. The infant cannot do what the adult can do, although in mimicry it may attempt it. The analogy holds through representations and the role of reflexivity. Although Lacan is somewhat pessimistic regarding the subject’s capacity for self-awareness\(^\text{24}\), it is the recognition of the social character of that awareness, of the role of social discourse in offering us subject positions, that makes this analysis so helpful to understand the interiority of working-class experience.

There is much in this thesis that has been explored through a notion of ambiguity; an increasing recognition that delineated clarity is unlikely and that this in fact is the most helpful ‘sense’ which can be made of classed interiority. This is never more apparent than in the usage of classification - those simplistic but resonant terms middle-class and working-class.\(^\text{25}\) At the outset of my project, a senior colleague suggested my use of the term working-class was ‘too rigid’. I was able to critically engage this suggestion from that time on; it continually informed my thinking and has been highly beneficial to my framing of the entire work. At first I was defensive; I am working-class, I’ll use the term as I wish! But it became increasingly apparent that this was

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\(^{25}\) I reserve the term ruling class for those individuals who remain genealogically attached to major institutions of cultural and state hegemony; the parliaments, judiciaries, reserve banks, churches, elite universities, boards of major public and multi-national companies.
unhelpful. So much of the experience of working-class identity I have articulated is not widely shared. Equally, much of the literature cited in this thesis documents experience foreign to me. I am appalled by equally rigid applications of subject positions and projections from those in power, as they construct the experience of working-class people. This process was highly charged (and risky) because it involved recognition that I could act in ways potentially oppressive to women of working-class background. Were I to acknowledge and abandon this rigid usage of ‘working-class’, I would be faced with un languaged, fleeting ground, no longer constructed through my particular experience. The notion that class identity is fluid was initially terrifying. In time, this became undeniably apparent. But I had set out to write a corrective- to write myself through defensive territory. This was my first ‘agenda’ exposed and it was exciting and liberating, in spite of the fear. Not only was I free to pose definitions of class which allowed for fluidity- I was feeling the first powerful, performative resonances of poststructuralist theoretical frames. I was seeing the theory link and illuminate in front of me.

I sought class scholarship which was representative of that with the greatest social currency; I wanted to explore those notions of class identity available to us through a review of the central texts in the field. While this was by no means an exhaustive survey, it was dominated by class models of political economy, an approach of which this thesis is highly critical. This contradictory practice enabled me to recognise that scholars have rarely sought to understand class any other way (until recently). Those notions of class which have some recognition of subjectivity such as Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’ were wholly silent on gender. The contemporary landscape of Western market democracies has changed. And inevitably, the location (and allocation) of class is affected. Class position is necessarily relational,

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thus we can recognise the mediations which bear on our experience of it. As I will demonstrate, the theories through which we have explored class - marxism, certain feminisms- have remained largely -or limitedly- uncritical of the underpinning construction of the subject, written to those in the centre of the binaries which govern our social relations. This construct in turn underpins our concepts of interests and motivations, the choices we make. The late capitalist economy through which we now class the subject has itself been transformed in the global moment; western economies are knowledge and service economies, rather than tiered and stratified industries of primary production and manufacture. Yet workers in this new structure still possess a class identity which resides (in part) in their felt experience. If the process has changed, so must the modes of enquiry.

So, how do we theorise this moment? As I sought to grasp class as a notion which starts with its meaning for felt experience, the ambiguity I encountered at all levels created an intellectual chaos which was dispiriting. Yet I have found that the best, most appropriate theories resonate strongly. They throw some relief onto the chaos, even if only to reveal its inevitability. Most profoundly, a recognition of the postmodern has allowed me for the first time to sit with chaos. Stable ground is a nonsense. There is none. If class identity has been commonly understood to be located in working-class experiences linked to the an outdated economic model, how do we understand its location now?

Working-class identity cannot merely be located in an occupation or group- for many of us who define(d) ourselves as working-class, the felt experience is often only indirectly related to the fluid and diverse work lives we have known. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital,27 the cultural knowledge we possess or lack, may be more significant but this can operate through cultural projections such as those of schooling and social institutions. Class can operate differentially in our
lived and felt lives- we may have experienced no financial hardship but lacked an experience of access to social participation on many levels.

For many of my colleagues, their fathers had well-paying trades but eschewed books and education as irrelevant to their families' lives. Awareness of class was not fostered. Equally, I have met middle-class girls for whom their cultural experience was not clichèd and archetypal; our differences were different again from the dominant middle-class model which informs the class relations of Crossing Bowen Street. Thus my definitions of class identity are not only relational, but largely self-determined. That said, amongst a group of working-class women, such as I encountered at State University of New York in 2002, we know exactly how we are working-class and that we were, in spite of the vast differences of race, culture and resources. We did not share identical economic or cultural 'lack'. But we shared elements of the subjectivity which might result from lack, from the projections of a culture which classifies according to your 'capital' and extends this classification to your self, even if political analyses do not.

The term working-class in this thesis generally refers to those individuals who lacked access to certain forms of participation. Particularly, I locate this in a lack of opportunities or lesser opportunities, a sense of entitlement to education and self-determination. Cultural capital offers some currency here, although the description of resources of culture and thought as capital underscores the analytical obsession with the language of political economy. I have found Bourdieu's conflation of culture with privilege to be very useful; he suggests that knowledge about (high) culture is a form of income and is associated with a hierarchy of social standing. Working-class people in the academy must negotiate a world of obscure literary allusions, classical music, what wine is appropriate and so on. Political analysis allows us to contextualise this sort of social practice as

elitism; poststructuralism has theorised the notion of a literary canon and its place in the high-low culture debate and this is crucial knowledge which remedies the self-doubt which may accompany lack of cultural capital.

Throughout *Crossing Bowen Street*, Meg constantly encounters knowledge she doesn't have, about clothes, ways of being and culturally specific social practices. While this causes her the inevitable pain of self-doubt and social anxiety, it also expands her notion of class, although I am determined that she retains its political edge; a bottom line position which seeks to create opportunities and expand possibilities. The felt experience and subjectivity of cultural capital is the most likely, performative definition of working-class ness for the purposes of mapping interiority. It also allows ambiguity, which in turn shifts the focus away from definitions of working-class ness as merely injury and 'lack'.

A definition of middle-class inverts this notion; equally it cannot be limited to occupation or income. The traditional female occupations of teaching, secretarial or social work are notoriously poorly remunerated and respected (although not in comparison with service and unskilled industries, which is in itself a classing factor). I see middle-class ness as access to certain borne-out assumptions regarding rights and entitlements, a breadth of possibilities. These are by no means wholly prescribed, nor are they uniform. Many differences exist within classes, as across them. But certain codes and insights may be located in middle-classness which are not so readily available to women of working-class background. The rigidity offered by a marxist economic model which gave us ‘class’ (and which is atavistic in the contemporary economy) can only be countered by constant, evolving reflexivity.

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**aims**

I set out to write a novel about the subjectivity of social class, taking such a notion off the ‘factory floor’ and locating it in the place where it resides in contemporary society: *wherever* we live our lives. Class is a popular theme in Australian culture; I sought to examine it from the perspective of a female subjectivity, in terms of interior life. The disciplines of sociology and political science use the term ‘class consciousness’. While marxists may value this term for what it allows them to discover of the radical consciousness of working-class people, it also inherently recognises the psychological nature of our sense of ‘class’. Obviously, that consciousness informs, and is a point of entry to, subjectivity: our sense of ourselves as beings, growing into a set of concepts as to what makes shapes our identity(ies).

To inform and contextualise the novel, I explored the experience of young women of various class backgrounds in university student unions. I wanted to hear them articulate their experience, and their understanding of it. I asked questions about the role of class difference between feminists and the impact of their assessments of that difference. I was seeking insights about how healthy, respectful and

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29 This term is drawn from a study of recent work published in Australian literary magazines. Many of the novels examined, including those with female protagonists, focused on the workplace, the alienation of the protagonist from their labour, and the location of their 'class' subjectivity in the labour process. I fully acknowledge that class experience resides in the labour process but I would argue that it goes wherever the protagonist goes and we should expand our understanding, and the texts we examine, accordingly.


31 These are sites of considerable political and ideological activism on Australian campuses.
honest class relations might occur or be developed. How would such relations be constituted? Why had so little of the broad conversation on difference in feminism located in understandings of class identity?

I examined the idea that experiences such as mine, where my sense of self as a woman and a scholar was invalidated, potentially divorce a certain group of women from feminism, decrying its meaning for them. In order to explore this question openly, I need to consider its opposite. Is my own experience reducible to such an explanation or are other variables present? I examine this in the context of the debates around and difference and the charge that feminism has only served the interests of middle class women. This fragmented process of uncovering meanings first led me to consider the concept of chaos as an element of any journey which challenges - or changes- our classed subjectivities.

**fiction, textuality**

Most research students in creative writing research and complete an exegesis, the name of which describes its nature and function. Exegetical writing is meta-writing; it seeks to open, explicate and evaluate the writing itself and the intellectual and textual practice underpinning it. I had always sought to write a dissertation which would be deemed ‘scholarly’ in the broad sense of the term and so I outlined a study which is only in small part ‘exegetical’ (although the entire thesis is self-reflexive, seeking to comment on its own genesis and development.). I began early on to refer to my ‘dissertation’ as a way of positioning the reader away from those assumptions about epistemologies so often attributed to creative writing theses. Yet the inevitable inter-relation between the novel process and the theoretical research continually emerged and made itself felt. I intended to review sources on social class, with a particular emphasis on class and identity within the feminist Left. Yet I had to seek data and try to make theoretical sense of the fiction emerging from my pen, which was less about classed relationships between feminists and more about class
and the self, sense-making, identity. Such material was mercurial to say the least; the absence(s) spoke volumes and often I found myself wondering if I could create and sustain the argument which illustrated that which was pouring powerfully out of my pen.

Of course, as the fiction made sense of aspects of my experience, it evolved, as fiction will, into those deeper-held concerns, of which I was mostly unaware, that lay behind my own class conundrums. Sense making fiction is for me a personal project and for a research scholar, this can create a helpful, focusing resonance to the topic. This resonance pulsed least when I searched through the work of famous dead white men who talked a lot of social class and said very little. It bounced off the walls when I read Carolyn Steedman, 32 The Common Thread, 33 Class Matters, 34 Once in a House on Fire, 35 My Sister Jill 36 and Red Dirt. 37 Even as I was theorising the constitutive process Miles Franklin describes in being represented, it was happening to me as I read these books. This is explored at length in Chapter Three.

For a woman to write fiction explicitly about class is a fraught activity. I have had much discouragement, mainly because many see this

activity as frivolous and extraneous to the concerns of ‘the’ labour
movement. Such a view is underpinned by an assumption that all work
done on class is teleological (and that there is only one class ‘project’).
I do not see that the exploration of the psychological and emotional
impact of class is inimical to the values of trade unionism; nor is it
unworthy of creative and scholarly examination. It is on precisely this
personal level that such oppressions are experienced and known. By
defining class merely in the context of physical workplace, the impact
of class relations in other spheres is obscured, even invalidated. Class
may exist in, and be defined in terms of, political economy, but it is
experienced across all avenues of life. The specificity of this interior
focus of class is also significant and original.

I commenced writing the fiction project, with a working title of Blue, in
May 1999. I read substantive theoretical material on and around the
topic; I wrote basic ‘maps’ of the characters and how they interrelate
and then I started writing fiction. I wrote episodically, using what I call
vignettes; markedly discrete pieces of writing which might form
chapters in a more traditional structure; each separate piece of the
novel is a ‘vignette’, although these vary enormously in length. I
mapped the academic career of the protagonist, Meg Flanagan. I
attempted to draw out her subjectivity of class (although I did not
recognise consciously I was doing this at the outset). What emerged
from the pen was (as is usually the case for me) surprising and
unexpected, although far from unwelcome. One of the difficulties I face
as a doctoral candidate submitting a novel is the contradictions in
theoretical praxis which I constantly encounter. I would use theory to
explicate and ‘sense-make’ my ideas about the world, which I in turn
explore in fiction. But what comes out of the pen often contradicts the
(literary) theory; ambiguity is the hallmark of all aspects of this project.
Now I know, with repeated hindsight, that fiction is a different kind of
sense-making task for me (as it has been, powerfully, with every
novel). I have continued to seek theoretical frames which resonate and
illuminate. This has allowed a form of reconciliation of the hidden injuries of a (particular) working-class journey.

I have submitted for examination a novel which is excerpted and truncated, and which measures and demonstrates both the primary themes of the dissertation, as well as some of the specificities of classed subjectivity: Meg's journey in *Crossing Bowen Street*. This latter goal is related to Meg's changing relation to the (middle-class) women she meets and her original journey. The subject positions she occupies change, as does her capacity to reflect, consider, and even reject, them. My rationale for submitting in this way is as follows. The goals of the thesis, of the doctoral program, have been met. My goal was never to write a full complete novel within the PhD program. As a writer, I find that I cannot know the full dimensions and geography of the novel until I am well engaged in the writing. About the first 20 000 words I often discard anyway, as they consist of burrowing and 'writing in'. But more importantly, I would consider it anti-intellectual to set as my primary goal for my doctoral program the completion of the novel within it. My goal for this program was to explore certain research questions and reach answers that reconcile the dilemma underpinning the research, which in turn allowed me to map the psychic terrain of the novel. This has been achieved and thus the doctoral program can end, even though the novel does not. All the elements of the research are illustrated and exemplified in what has been written and what will be submitted. I do not have a great deal to do to finish the novel for publication. A truncated novel submission allows me to approximate a reasonable length for a doctoral dissertation, while tracing the theoretical and creative journey and illustrating the research outcomes of the enquiry.

Finally, as a writer, I do not want to formally submit the *entire* novel for examination. I want to 'hold something back'. This is much harder to justify for a fiction student than for a scholar in chemistry or law. An original notion which seems particularly significant may be held out of
the research and presented as a journal article, allowing the candidate more direct control over intellectual property. I wish to suppress some of the content of the novel for creative (and intellectual) reasons.

what is class?

I feel I must ask this question again because the absences I have identified in class analysis in the course of this research leave open the value or efficacy of such a question. Yet my answer now is that class is many things: political economy, social arrangement, subjectivity, hidden (and explicit) injury. Yet all of these things rest in the figure of eight (8) that is the (inter) relation, and mediation, of point of entry and point of departure. If we could draw blueprints and model perfect worlds, we would cease to rank or classify anything, including the significance of the point of entry (interiority) versus the point of departure (social construction). Poststructuralism is the theoretical enabler in this. Class is no less a challenge for social democracies in economic, moral and public policy terms. But deconstructionist thought has enabled for me the reflexivities that are crucial to the asking of this question. Every answer will silence or absent someone. The unreflexive question begs certain assumptions about identity; poststructuralism has allowed me to hear this question anew, to reframe the inflection(s). If we are still asking, we recognise that there has been (and can be) no definitive answer. Answers seek to fill space. Questions open it, they allow the individual to make their own sense and narrate that meaning into a larger question. Facilitating the plethora of meanings and experiences, and therefore further questions, is the reconciliation.
Chapter Two: Theorising the Classed Subject

Class definitions and theories

We have written a book about class while being committed to the view that books about class should no longer be written. We … have written a history of the life and death of class. However, we also intend it to be a pronouncement of the last rites on the demise of a faithful theoretical and conceptual servant…

Introduction

As a scholar of the emotional impact of class injustice, I disagree completely with the position taken by Pakulski and Waters. However, I understand existing modes of inquiry into social class have left un-theorised space, which allows such a view to promulgate. I will outline the most meaningful challenge, in terms of my interests, to positions such as the above. I will examine the absent sites of class injury and propose measures by which we facilitate their representation.

The influence of French philosophy and feminist thought has seen increasing academic interest in memory, identity and the self. These schools of enquiry are in many ways vastly divergent, in terms of their concerns and epistemologies. Yet I would argue that all these disciplines and their offshoots share an interest in an aspect of human existence which is best described in terms of social class.

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39 I am concerned that this discussion is ethnocentric; even Anglocentric, although many people have told me
Class position is claimed as an explanation for many things, from the occupation you choose, to the way you decorate your house\textsuperscript{40}, the culture you consume (or don’t) and the schooling choices you might make, or have imposed on you. We have seen above an attempt to suggest class is no longer relevant, begging as it does the concept of groups rather than individuals.\textsuperscript{41} Class theory forms a master narrative, and there is present in the humanities substantial disquiet about such totalising or reductionist narratives.\textsuperscript{42} Politicians express anxiety around any explicit discussion of class. In every report on social statistics, we hear, in depoliticised language, that the rich and

that to be a non-British migrant or to have a non-Anglo ethnicity is to be working-class. This is a highly contested notion which is beyond the scope of this thesis but which, when considered in the light of class conflict within feminisms, requires extensive researches.

\textsuperscript{40} Boyd, R. 1968. \textit{The Australian Ugliness}, Penguin: Melbourne. This benchmark work of Australian architectural theory contains a scathing dismissal of the aesthetics of much working-class and lower middle-class interior design in post-war Australia. Many of the most beloved objects in my grandmother’s dining and lounge rooms were condemned by Robin Boyd as bringing the Australian middle-class into aesthetic disrepute. It is the vitriol in the tiny details of decor that resonate so strongly. The social meanings of scalloped and etched mirrors, flying ducks on the wall and tea-coupon tablecloths for survivors of the Great Depression were totally missed by Boyd.


the poor are diverging and that those low on the social stratification scale are getting less of the share of societal wealth. Those are the working-class and now, in modern terms, the underclass. Populist versus elite, high versus low culture: these resonate particularly in the mainstream media. And they all find their historical etiology in the concept of social class. Why is social class so controversial?

What determines social class? Class theory is a sociological minefield of conflicting analyses, ideologies and criticisms, and the leading protagonists often give the impression of being at each other’s throats.

Marx described being a certain class as membership of a group who shares your economic interests. Workers sell their labour and bosses buy it and extract surplus value out of it. These two groups are in a complementary relation; therefore, it makes sense for them to relate directly, in an adversarial system, given that their interests are conflated, so to speak. But of course, such master narrative, although politically compelling and relevant in many aspects of our industrial history, reduces much of the nuance of the concept ‘interest’. I may have far more interests at odds with fellow members of my class than I

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43 Underclass is a term which has gained recent currency in Australia. It tends to be used to describe a segment of the population dependent on government benefits and whose communities are also thus dependent. This group has suffered long term unemployment (if they have been employed at all) and are often the children and grandchildren of working people whose employment sectors have (all but) disappeared: manufacturing, public sector service industries, unskilled labourers, public sector utilities.


45 Joyce, *Class*, 22.
share with them. And in order to know this, I have to find out what my class is.

To do this, it seems likely to turn to the sociological literature on class, of which there is no scarcity (although it does diminish sharply in the early nineties). Class is a fiercely contested, complex area of sociopolitical inquiry and this is never more the case than in the literature on determinant factors. A feminist reading reveals that gender bias and male advantage permeate the literature of class identification. Within this, there are two streams of thought: neo-marxist and social stratification, and both tend to ignore, or dispose of, women, in a shrill defensive manner. I will make a brief review of some examples of such writing.

Social class is largely perceived as a marxist concept. It could be said that the discourse of class is derived from Marx and the knowledges which bear his name. The twentieth-century saw the rise of sociology as a discipline, with its concerns with social arrangements and the motivations and influences which result in certain choices. Much sociology was marxist in approach and resulted in the development of a school of sociology which developed and framed a notion of social stratification in terms which went beyond marxism. Whilst this approach sought a less politicised sociological discussion of class, marxist knowledge underpinned it. this is the basis of every form of society known in history. Marx argues, rightly in my view, that all class struggle is political struggle.

British sociologist John Goldthorpe defined a scale of social stratification which is widely applied and useful in part for the macro economic purposes of determining class. Once again, it is rendered incomplete when one seeks to explicate psychic nuances within class and occupational scales. Goldthorpe’s employment scale privileges

the work a man does in determining his class and that of his family. It is a narrow definition but as we shall later see, feminists have responded to it on many levels. Goldthorpe has embraced a notion of a (male) ‘head’ of the household. It is his uncritical adherence to this term which reveals that his gender bias is not attributable to the methodological difficulties imposed by a more inclusive measuring device.

Unit of measurement strikes at the heart of class analysis... Conventional class theory has tended to ignore the unpaid labour of women in the home, treating unpaid domestic work as somehow 'beyond' capitalist relations of production. In these analyses, women are either totally ignored, or placed in a derived class position ... via... the male head of the household.48

This obscures complex interpersonal economic relations and social arrangements.49 It also means that the intricacies of class identity and their fluidity remain misunderstood. Using this measure, my class has therefore been initially determined by my father (working-class), then by husband number one (working-class) to husband number two. Suddenly, I have become middle-class. The subjectivity which I experienced throughout those years, those confusing and contradictory messages about class, are lost to us if we employ only this enquiry. The multiple and fractured subjectivities of social class, which are underscored by its very fluidity, are not only lost using Goldthorpe’s approach, their trails are covered. We cannot explore the subjectivity to seek and understand social class because we have proscribed the mechanism by which it exists and changes. Nuances of class, while in part determined by income and occupation, will never to be wholly explicable in such a way.

47 Joyce, Class, 25
49 Abbott and Sapsford, Women and Social Class, 1-2
Goldthorpe’s position within his discipline is an influential one and thus we need be concerned with the broad endorsement of his ideas. If the sociological academic Left, at best, ‘adds women and stirs’, then they underscore the absence of women generally, and that of working-class women in particular. The history and felt experience of working-class women has hardly been documented and what we know has been extrapolated from larger studies framed to focus on working-class men.\(^5\) Morris tells us that the working-class woman is historically unconstituted.\(^5\) Tax argues persuasively that marxism basically ignores women anyway.\(^5\) So much of the gender discourse within marxist-informed activism is a recuperative and adaptive one, because women were acceptably considered marginal when the framework was incepted. This is little comfort to the working-class woman who seeks a sense-making analysis, much less social and economic justice. That the primary philosophical framework of the Left has basically ignored women implicates that framework and its practitioners. I argue that social justice can only be achieved through a complex set of analyses and resistances to class oppression, which themselves are not well understood by marxists.

Weber states “the way in which social honour is distributed in a community between groups ...we call the ‘status order’.\(^5\) The concept of status illuminates the psychic experience of class. Status is internalised in many ways, representations being one of them. The ways in which we access our selves and the possibilities available to

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\(^{50}\) Kennedy, S. E.. (1991). 1979, 1981. "If all we did was to weep at Home": a history of white working class women in America, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, xiii

\(^{51}\) Morris, P. 1993 Literature and Feminism, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 185

us denote our concept of status and that of our aspirations. Others’ perceptions are of significance, particularly for the subject on the margins: our culture, our self-representation, our tribes, are subject to the judgements and tastes of those in the centre. This is ‘writ large’ in the cultural forms offered to us. Life for working-class people often involves making sense of comparisons between two perceptions; how we see ourselves in our own centre, and the decentering impact of how we are (often) represented.

Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms; embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms.54 McGregor tells us that “for most people, class is what keeps you in your place”.55 Clare William’s Opencut describes the classing process in a mining community, where even the smallest permutations of class difference are highlighted and underscored. The foremen wear different coloured hard-hats to the workers, and the housing is clearly differentiated in terms of size, colour and proximity to the slashed, burned landscape of the open-cut mine. Status as a notion seems to operate across (Western industrial) experience; what denotes or constitutes status is as arbitrary and socially produced as are the determinants of social class.

**class, gender and theory**

Given the approach to gender taken by Goldthorpe and others, it is not surprising that feminist scholars have reworked their theories. Women have largely been ignored in stratification theory, leading to an emerging feminist sociology.56 Kennedy describes the justification for

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54 Thompson, E P, “The Making of Class”, in Joyce, *Class*, 131
55 McGregor, *Class in Australia*, 19
56 Goldthorpe’s approach to class determination has been the subject of substantial contest and debate with
exclusion based on women’s historically limited tenure in the labour force; this phenomenon is recurrent throughout sociology.\(^{57}\)

Goldthorpe states:

After outlining the scale of employment and the nature of work for classes I-VII, we come to the allocation by gender. This is where we need a sub-class (IIIb) because of the size and composition by gender of those [female] work categories.

I would argue that this approach doesn’t even bother to ‘add women and stir’, as so much humanities scholarship did in the twentieth century. This merely creates -and locates- a gender endnote.

There is much to trouble us in this gendered approach. The site of our of class is taken to be wholly economic, involving implicit adherence to the binary of base (economy) versus superstructure (culture). The class position of all those individuals outside the public sphere economy is located within their relation to the nearest (male) member of the paid labour force. The exclusions created by this approach beg many scholarly questions. “It is not recognised that women’s subordinate position is something such theory needs to explain...”\(^{58}\) The majority of women are said, still, to have a derived class position, determined by the occupational position of the man with whom they live. This is offensive on many levels. Its multiple implications for subjectivity are fraught; the class elements of working-class women’s felt experience are completely denied in such an analysis.

Wright offers a notion of mediated class relations, intended to describe housewives, pensioners, the unemployed, students (and others) who

feminist scholars, which, although fascinating, is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, *Class Analysis in Contemporary Australia* cites those debates. See pp 202-220.

\(^{57}\) Kennedy, “If All We Did..”, xiv

\(^{58}\) Abbott and Sapsford, *Women and Social Class*, 2
are outside direct production relations.\textsuperscript{59} Rather than omitting these individuals from the class structure, Wright argues that their class interests will be derived by their familial connection to the means of production. Wright extends this to 'cross class families' or households where the partners occupy different class positions on the basis of their separate work relations.\textsuperscript{60} This begs the assumption that women have 'separate work relations'. There are many flaws in Wright's analysis but it remains a healthier point of departure than that proposed by Goldthorpe. Beechey suggests that labour process theories are better able to explain men's work than women's because they have been constructed with skilled male workers in mind.\textsuperscript{61} This underscores the point made by Abbott and Sapsford, that male scholars seem not to recognise the gender imperatives facing theory. Given the extraordinary impact of women's (paid and unpaid) work on the economy, why has the skilled manufacturing sector continually been written male? Quite aside from the injustice this constitutes, such distortion invalidates existing knowledge. Feminists have argued that skill is a socially, rather than technically, defined concept and furthermore that gender is implicated in definitions of skill.

A further issue raised in feminist research is that theories of work tend to focus on paid work and ignore unpaid domestic labour and voluntary work (which is generally done by women). Where domestic labour is included in analyses of work it is usually considered to have relevance only to women's experience of employment.\textsuperscript{62} Divisions within the working class, such as those based on patriarchal

\textsuperscript{59} Baxter et al, \textit{Class Analysis}, 57
\textsuperscript{60} Emmison in Baxter et al, \textit{Class Analysis}, 57
\textsuperscript{61} Baxter, J. “The Experience of Paid Work”, in Baxter et al, \textit{Class Analysis}, 141
\textsuperscript{62} Baxter in Baxter et al, \textit{Class Analysis}, 143
constructs\textsuperscript{63}, have meant that resistance has been diluted in class terms.

We end up with an impoverished and incomplete set of analytical tools with which to examine class, which obscure and exclude because they have been lifted uncritically from a master narrative which could only author class relations within a newly industrialised, overtly patriarchal dichotomised Victorian economy. Traditional and even heterodox marxist knowledge simply cannot gather additional analytical tools without extending the boundaries of the theories on which it draws beyond marxism. A marxist analysis or critique of any dynamic which is not overtly binaried is necessarily incomplete; marxism lends itself best, was designed for, uncritical binaried modes. “Membership in the working class …involves more than economic factors, including attitudes, cultural assumptions and a category broadly labelled socio-economic, which speaks to the mediated dialogic space between the economic and the social.” \textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{63} Patriarchy is a old chestnut of a term and very suspicious in a thesis which is wary of master codes and reductionist theories. Yet while men, particularly white, straight, able bodied, Anglo-Celtic and middle class, tend to dominate our judiciary, parliaments and councils, police forces and churches, I think patriarchy has some validity. No social phenomenon can be determined by one element. Manifestations of gender inequity are complex and woven through with issues of female agency, desire and subjectivity. Examples of patriarchal practice, to me, include recourse by powerful men to arguments of ‘merit’ only when asked why women do not hold more senior posts in business, law and the church. See The Sunday Age, Sunday 23 July, 2000, statements by High Court Justice Mary Gaudron.

\textsuperscript{64} Kennedy, “If All We Did”, xv
Braverman (1974) offers a minimal acknowledgement of women rather than ignoring them, in an account of the nature of class structure. Williams calls this ignorance a 'time honored invisibility'.

But Braverman omits unpaid women who work at home, seeing this as a 'static and traditional' rather than a 'dynamic' aspect of change (and outside the 'paid' economy!). So even where women are acknowledged, the inclusion is limited and incomplete.

Why is this so contentious? If we acknowledge that the theoretical language which informs most discussions of social class is based on unhelpful binaries, why would we continue to use class at all? The answer is that social class is still a major issue for identity and the formation of a subject self. Class is one of the strands of our development as we become subjects. As we will see, there exists a growing collection of studies which speak determinedly to the interpersonal and felt experience of class, whilst acknowledging the additional dilemma posed by unwieldy and highly inaccurate measures by which it is determined.

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65 Williams, *Opencut*, 12


class consciousness must be learned in some way...class develops in children outside any direct relation to the paid economy, we must understand how this occurs.\(^{67}\)

As literary theorists criticise any text, they draw on those frameworks developed to explicate particular types of knowledge. Some frameworks have less currency at certain times than others. Marxist literary theory has not enjoyed recent popularity, although Fredric Jameson\(^{68}\) does tell us that postmodernism is culturally logical in its assessment of capitalism, and he does so in unapologetically Marxist terms. Literary theory has taken up a great concern with the self, identity and the process of becoming a subject: subjectivities greatly concern literary theorists. My argument is that class is a major determinant of, a dominant strand constituting, subjectivity and that when we seek to problematise class in critical work we turn, explicitly or otherwise, to Marxist knowledge. I do not mean to suggest that we use Marxist literary theory exclusively. Poststructuralism has offered immensely helpful and recuperative analytical frameworks for the purposes of highlighting absences. I wish to critique the silences, tacit and unreflexive, which are the likely result of the partial examination of those fissures in the space between Marxist literary theory and French-influenced thought.

Reason is often misconstrued as the only instigator of thought.\(^{69}\)

**class and the subject**

Any attempt to explicate interiority and the emotional history of class identity using Marxism is obstructed by the model of the subject to which Marxists tacitly adhere. The working-class subject assumed by Marx has been little criticised by neo- and post-Marxists; subaltern

\(^{67}\) Steedman, *Landscape*, 14

\(^{68}\) Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 61

criticisms have been dismissed through an uncritical application of ‘rationality’\textsuperscript{70} such as that which emerged from Enlightenment thought. This seems especially ironic given marxism’s conflation with political radicalism. An assumption of human ontology which is unproblematised as rational, unified and linear\textsuperscript{71} sits oddly with those notions of false consciousness and alienation popularly associated with marxism. It is, of course, important to remember that marxism is now more than a century old and nearly as contested amongst its advocates as by its critics.

Yet even as neo-marxian analysis has evolved along with capitalism (although not as successfully!), perpetuation of the marxist working-class subject still occurs, proving unrecognisable and foreign to many people of working-class background who may hear the words ‘working-class’ and seek reflection, or resonance. In seeking to locate our identities (and ontologies) through our class experiences, we seek to map, and narrate, ourselves against the larger ‘story’; this is how dominant paradigms operate hegemonically in Western culture. As I have sought to locate my class past and my mixed and chaotic present, I hungered for a politicised meaning frame which was also emotionally resonant, which would allow layers of ‘classed’ experience to be explicated. As we have seen, marxism is unable to do this and many may argue that, as a frame of analysis of political economy, nor should it.

Liberal humanism sees reality, truth, timeless truth, fixed immutable categories.\textsuperscript{72}

It is ironic to describe marxist notions of the subject as alienating but this is the likely outcome of a template which bears so little relation to

\textsuperscript{70} Barnacle, \textit{Phenomenology}, 4.
\textsuperscript{72} Barry, \textit{Beginning Theory}, 17.
the lived and felt experience of those it arguably seeks to constitute. Uncritical ‘givens’ function as correctives, even models, with all the accordant implications of measurement and value. Even those texts which offer recognition of working-class subjectivity, continually relate their ideas back to the ‘means of production’. I reiterate, the means of production may define both our political economy and relation to wealth, but it does not resonate in the milieu of felt experience where most Western working-class people live their lives. The resulting subjectivities of self-doubt and inadequacy (which we will see repeatedly later in this thesis) are reinforced by representations of a ‘subject’ marxists have failed to problematise; the unified, teleological, male “I” so foreign to the experience of working-class women. So many measures of a life, so much auto/biography and representation, draws on this template, which ‘others’ the lives we live. In addition, how are working-class people to access radical understandings of their lives, if they see none of those lives represented in the radical ideology?

The rationalist model, epitomised by Descartes, forms the basis of modern thought and foregrounds the pre-eminent role of subject as rational knower\textsuperscript{73} in understanding. This development occurred as Descartes sought to respond to one of the main problems that occupied the minds of enlightenment thinkers: the establishment of epistemological certainty. This underpins the values endemic in enlightenment philosophy. Epistemological certainty; knowing that we know, is an unreflexive and limited goal which denies difference and subjectivity. Knowing what who knows? Do we all know the same way? These questions form what Chambers has described as ‘recent apertures’ in critical thought, constituting an ‘internal displacement in

\textsuperscript{73} Barnacle, \textit{Phenomenology}, 4.
the hearth of the West’. Radicalism comes in multiple forms, much of which is inimical to marxism.

**Classing the Gendered Subject**

The identification as a feminist can greatly complicate our own reception of our class and experience of being that class. There are many entrees to feminism (as there are many feminisms), but for many women there is a sudden overwhelming sense of connection, of belonging, which undercuts much real experience of class difference. For myself, the ambivalent experiences of belonging associated with my family of origin were no measure compared to the overt and passionate acceptance and validation I felt on first embracing feminism. Yet working-classness was seen, at least in the literature, as a correlate of male violence and masculinised sexuality. Working-class life, particularly for women, was grossly assumed to be base, slovenly, ignorant and therefore to be escaped. It was (ironically, given the oppression of many working-class women by middle-class colleagues) seen by many middle-class feminists of my early acquaintance as a place where women were inherently more oppressed and where our choices were strongly prescribed. While economy may well dictate basic choices, this assessment in no way allows for the subtleties of class experience which are so nuanced within middle-class environments as well as those of the working-class.

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Whilst this wholly political recognition of the greater gender oppression of working-class women was validating, it was never applied to the assumed second-wave catchcry (always overstated) that the personal is political. The politics of relationships between sisters, the politics of sisterhood, were developed and articulated by women who were marginalising their working-class ‘sisters’ through those very practices and concepts.\textsuperscript{76} The full extent of the impact of social class on working-class women was limited to their arrival within (middle-class) feminism. (Your class is not an issue now, say feminists, lecturers, commentators in the Saturday supplements. You are studying, writing, reading a broadsheet. You have escaped). This is a peculiarly dehistoricising receptive device which reveals classed anxieties.

Belongingness is another recurrent theme amongst those privileged Western ontological projects. It may be that the seeking of belonging is inherently endless; that the meanings associated with belonging inevitably negate it once it is achieved. I do not believe this personally, I see the parallel project to the seeking of belonging as the very sense-making that I sought in engaging this topic. Understanding why we seek belonging, why we feel its lack, is the corollary to the pain associated with such a project. Belonging, feeling safe, is undercut by rejection and exclusion. In the case of those feminist groups with which this work is concerned, the rejection is heightened by the context of political awareness within which it operates. Working-class women have so often been silenced and marginalised using the tools

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of capitalist, and patriarchal, class oppression.\textsuperscript{77} Even worse, those tools have been sharpened by the very insights available within (left) feminist space: the interpersonal, the psychic. Surely we can assume the thinking left feminist woman understands the gauchery of the class putdown? That she has a socio-political context for the absences in the knowledge and behaviour of her working-class sister? That she might even perhaps recognise the perjorative significance of the concept of absence? That she \textit{recognises} the significance of her own economic, social, class privilege? The experience of so many women of working-class background in universities is that middle-class women do not question the implicit assumption that certain knowledge is good and valuable, and ‘you don’t have it yet’. It is not knowledge which is generously shared, which reveals its tacit value; it must be acquired through the inscription of certain social choices, behaviours and attitudes as valuable. Even now I find it difficult to articulate those practices; certainly clothing and grooming were part of the contract.\textsuperscript{78} Ways of relating to others, gendered and classed, were culturally specific and confronting in terms of the personal confidence required. Lifestyle choices were never seen in any larger context; individuals were quietly, covertly berated for certain choices. This tacit process is born out in much of the literature about working-class women in the academy: indeed, in any middle-class milieu.\textsuperscript{79} What makes this so

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{77} These are not one and the same; gendered and economic oppressions operate in a complex mediated cocktail of social arrangements that cannot (must not) be overdetermined. To do so is to impede projects of resistance and social change.


\end{footnotesize}
extraordinary is its operation in the feminist Left, where such practices when writ large in political economy, attract vigorous analysis and criticism. Obviously, working-class women needed their consciousness installed before it could be raised. Organised middle-class women (who often decried the relevance of their own class) decided on the point (and issues) to which consciousness would be raised. The definitions and positionings are commenced from an intellectual and psychic privilege much less available to working-class women. This is apparently ignored or consciously overlooked by the middle-class women describing themselves as sisters. Poststructuralist feminisms have challenged much of this and are useful for building description and argument of the subjective processes. However, such discourses are inherently privileged and thus also inscribed and inflected in a middle-class voice. Accessing them, making them meaningful to working-class women who often see poststructuralism as a practice of oppression, is a herculean task.

**Class identity, confusion, ambivalence**

The discourse of women who ‘change’ classes\(^{80}\) is often one of confusion and ambivalence, even guilt. Yet clearly a struggle goes on for many working-class women who are feminists and scholars, to re-connect to and maintain any pride they may have in their antecedents and roots. It is not surprising that ambivalence may result from this complex and contradictory project, not to mention shame and anxiety

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\(^{80}\) I refer here to women whose career, cultural or social choices locate them in an environment dominated by people whose backgrounds are different to their own. The most pertinent example for this study is women of working class background who become academics. See Tokarczyk & Fay, *Working-Class Women in the Academy*. 
which often constitute the unstable stage on which the working-class woman treads her new class, a foreign turf, the necessary result of contradictory practices of deeming and measuring class, both economic and cultural. Phillips describes class as being ‘deeply engraved’ on the self, yet difficult to articulate (my emphasis) as a set of practices or cultural markers. A number of the women with whom I discussed this study described, overtly or implicitly, a process of re-authoring themselves, setting out to acquire markers and experiences which would rewrite them in others’ perception. In seeking to constitute ourselves or force out a language to speak our mediated lives, we are often at a loss ‘to say just who we are’. There is no language to access the audiences to whom we speak. The marginality is plural. Phillips gives the example of finding herself at a middle-class school where it was correct to call the midday meal lunch rather than dinner. The latter was considered a sign of cultural poverty; which begs the assumption that culture can be impoverished. This offers insights into what Phillips calls ‘major discrepancies’ in working-class women’s understandings of class, particularly their own. The awareness that such terminology labels and stamps us is a meaning often only gained in the practice, which is itself potentially traumatic.

83 I remember describing my shame and discomfort when recounting to other working-class women my introduction of my first husband to my university friends; I told these women that he had said ‘dinner’ at lunchtime. I needed to say nothing more, they were all horrified. No analysis or conversation took place; I merely stated what he had said. As a result, my discomfort deepened; I felt multiple shame about disloyalty, superficiality, inadequacy. This is complex and destructive emotional cocktail.
84 Phillips, Divided Loyalties, 15-16
As the labelling occurs, it underscores the trauma, as do the unspoken practices which are so much a part of the experience; the judgemental look, the raised eyebrow, the glances between Those Women. This creates a fraught psychic space onto which the subject can project any amount of potential inadequacies and failures. In a milieu which sought to reveal essentialist discourse for what it was, this was trebly confusing.

Kennedy describes the potentially denigrating implication to one’s own class, of seeking to move ‘up’. Many middle-class (and working-class) people see tenure in the working-class as inherently temporary: as something to be escaped or from which to seek rescue. This pejorative discourse of class is an overwhelmingly recurrent theme. It permeates the language of sociology, often seeming quite unconsciously written. Early in my research, senior scholars warned me of the dangers of using terms like ‘class’ and ‘working-class’ rigidly. I was perplexed by this observation. My response now is to say that the construction of class discourses and subject positions permits very little if any linguistic fluidity. We have yet to fully develop discursive technologies with which to receive fluid understandings of classed identity, even though we may recognise them.

Phillips recounts the 1977 UK National Women’s Liberation conference. A workshop on classism was held, in which working-class and middle-class women tried to articulate tensions between them. The trenchant refusal of the conference to consider any action on the criticisms expressed by working-class women resulted in the launch in 1978 of the Working-Class Women’s Liberation Newsletter. This publication was full of long-repressed anger against the patronage of middle-class women. The Equal Rights Amendment movement in the

85 Kennedy, “If All We Did”, xiii
86 Phillips, Divided Loyalties, 135
US, the New Left, the second wave, are all full of similar stories and accounts.\textsuperscript{87}

…that the women’s (liberation) movement is middle-class is a cliche, especially if you are middle-class. Otherwise it’s an oppression. \textit{ WIRES 1976\textsuperscript{88}}

When working-class women challenged this and defended their presence in the movement, they were told they had ‘mistaken their class’.\textsuperscript{89}

Having one’s class re-ascribed is a common experience with the Left, or within feminism, which throws into relief the dangers of (perceived) authenticity. “They”, (that is, working-class people), may challenge the view that has been appropriated on “their” behalf. The depth of commitment to a distanced authenticity accounts for some of the vehemence and vitriol with which social class has been avoided or undermined. When a working-class person wishes to place interpersonal social class relations on an agenda to which they have access, in a forum at which they are present, they are ‘self-constituting’. The instability around a marxist discourse which silences working-class people by speaking \textit{for} them is problematised and revealed by the writing in of those silenced in the discourse.

As to those of us who do dare to criticise there are lots of ways of answering, including denying a woman’s right to call herself working-class because of some magical event in her life which wiped out all her previous experience at one stage or because of some behaviour which she displays not commonly associated with being common. ‘You’re not working-class, you’ve …(insert non working-class behaviour)”. If all that doesn’t work, they’ll smile at you with glazed eyes and pat you on the head or pretend they didn’t understand what you said, could you explain again (this is a good one - very confusing on the fiftieth try) or they’ll just pretend they heard what they wanted to


\textsuperscript{88} Phillips, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 135

\textsuperscript{89} Phillips, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 135
hear and leave you believing you actually got through. Very upsetting when you eventually realise you didn’t.\textsuperscript{90}

This quotation is made at length because it highlights the degree of investment many activists and scholars have in controlling concepts and understandings of class and their depiction, identification and explication. The chasm between claiming a commitment to social justice, access and equity, in teaching undergraduates about class inequity, or campaigning in the streets for a wages and conditions for workers, and behaving in the manner outlined above continually seems to escape many such perpetrators.

The project of seeking to change class, or finding it assumed that your class has changed, organically, creates another of those mediated, marginal spaces occupied only by others who have done the same thing. This can be a very lonely space, as social class constitutes for many working-class feminists a huge mystified oppression: many of us experienced this mediated space silently and alone precisely because we thought it (the lack) was us. This sense of inadequacy and failure, even fraudulence, is another widely recurrent theme and constitutes an implicit analogue of the feeling of a class group, such as a family or a community, as inadequate or wanting. Why on earth else would you want to leave? The badges of middle-class-ness which it is assumed we all seek (house, car, job) are really about perceptions of worth and respect: subjectivities built out of re-authoring the self. How can you then narrate your class meaningfully? How can you represent, make sense of, the rituals and customs of your [first?] class, whatever its permutation, when you have no language which allows for acceptance, celebration, joy, that is not treated, represented, pejoratively? That remains untreated and unrepresented. The basis of such a language is respect, self respect and respect for clan, community, kith and kin. But respectability is clearly the province of the middle-class; it is a hallmark therein and all such measuring devices

\textsuperscript{90}Phillips, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 135-6
are devised within the middle-class.\textsuperscript{91} If you are working-class, you can be an \textit{inverted snob}. Inverted snobbery is judged more harshly than middle-class snobbishness, which is constructed as normative. Inverted snobbishness is re-interpreted as ‘a chip on one’s shoulder’. Any classed disdain or discomfort may be labelled thus.

I am alerted by women of varying working-class experiences that my class trajectory and experienced are particularised. Some of these women have only bleak memories of childhood and class. Some were hungry as children. They articulate not feeling valued ‘within’ their class at all. Anecdotally, I have evidence that one’s relation to one’s class background (negating extreme poverty, hunger and danger) is proportional to culture and community. But are values of hope, possibility and aspiration written middle-class? It would seem so. Steedman\textsuperscript{92} reminds us that only dire working-class childhoods attract literary or sociological interest (to describe a childhood as Dickensian is surely definitively the ignorance of privilege?). Yet the palette of human skills and attitudes with which we live in the world includes the colours of all working-class childhoods. We are formed wherever we were; to look back at this for illumination and possible closure need not be necessarily redemptive and certainly not idealised. Much of my childhood was wonderful and some of that was specifically classed (access to concrete labour processes, ways of doing family and community, certain values I hold dear). I determinedly decry that any singular frame can be imposed on a category of social identity; like feminisms, frames must be plural and self-determined. But that we need frames, complex and nuanced, is the underpinning thesis I now bring to this work.

Choice of occupation constructs much of our secondary (changed) class experience, as occupation in the multiply binaried public sphere at least, determines our class. The paucity of limiting class

\textsuperscript{91} Kennedy, “If All We Did”, xiii
identification and background to occupation is well revealed in this example. No nuance, no past subjectivity, is communicated. Outsider status is reinscribed and layers of denying representations continue.

Tillie Olsen argues that, “The relationship between the intellectual and the working-class woman was far more than an academic question for she herself belonged to one world by birth and commitment and was drawn to the other…”. This can be described as a process of straddling; we hold multiple class memberships. Yet for many it is an academic question. The different meanings in theory for those women who have lived its very concerns are potentially threatening to others for whom the theory represents nothing more than ideas about how to transform society and end oppressions. This is not to say for one moment that there are not many activists who sincerely appreciate the injustice done to working people or the physical brutality of sweatshops and occupational health hazards. Yet theory surely carries an additional resonance, a powerful strand of meaning when that which is theorised has been lived and experienced by the reader. The theory thus becomes a form of representation and validation. Or its opposite. Olsen speaks of being ‘forced to combine the two (working-class woman and intellectual)’. This combining creates a space for a kind of praxis which can only percolate where lived experience meets theory. I do not argue that middle-class women can never do this kind of praxis. But only a meaningful engagement with the impact of privilege on lived experience will enable such a resonant praxis to emerge: one that recognises the classed nature of gender oppression and the differential impact of theory on those who are the subjects of it, rather than those who wrote it.

92 Steedman, Landscape, passim
94 Newton & Rosenfelt, Feminist Criticism, 227
...[A]ssumptions are apparent in all areas of the women’s liberation movement, from the revolutionary feminists who insist that all women are equally oppressed and refuse to admit that working-class women are oppressed by their middle-class attitudes, to socialist feminists who cry ‘we must get more working-class women into the movement’, yet refuse to acknowledge those of us who are already here.  

WCWLN Summer 1979

Damousi states that there is ‘no universal experience’ for women who joined the Left, particularly the Communist Party. Feminism has been seen by the Left as bourgeois. This view, sincerely held as it may be, has in many ways made access to feminism for working-class women more complex and difficult. Socialist and communist parties in Australia offered many working-class women an opportunity to be actively involved in ‘public’ politics, but the degree, nature and extent of their involvement depended on a number of factors. What united them was a promise of an imagined utopia and ‘decent world’, which appealed to their political subjectivity.

Kennedy proposes reasons for lesser involvement in the women’s movement by working-class women. Their differential experience of paid work means the women's movement has not 'captured' all sectors of American women and this follows in the Australian context. Feminism has not broadly resonated with working-class women: this is the subject of considerable academic debate. When confronted with this, women’s movement leaders retort that such women are victims of

95 Phillips, Divided Loyalties, 135
97 Damousi, Women Come Rally, 211
98 Kennedy, “If All We Did”, xi
social programming. That is a statement that white working-class women frequently interpret as a slur on their intelligence, efforts and dedication.\textsuperscript{100} Student unions, by virtue of their located-ness to universities, are less likely to draw working-class women. However, working-class women are at any university much less likely to be involved in campus or women's politics.

Different understandings of and attitudes towards work have a profound affect on choices. Many working-class women see freedom from work, as opposed to the middle-class feminist tenet of freedom to work, as a positive goal. Middle-class women often view work in social or psychological terms, as a source of meaning in life. (Many) working-class women see work purely in economic terms, which relates to the difference in the nature of the work, the labour processes involved, their relation to them, the rewards, concepts of independence and so on. Many women of colour identify with goals more consistent with those of working-class than middle-class women. Yet Femocratism\textsuperscript{101} focuses on the same projects and legislative changes, which are at best irrelevant to 'other' women and at worst directly threatening. Spelman refers to the perception, by femocrats, of women of colour or working-class background as ‘inessential’.\textsuperscript{102} This can be multiply interpreted: if we consider the term ‘essential’ in a feminist context, ‘inessential’ can be understood as marginal, Other. Essentialism sees gender as the universal commonality which binds women. In addition, this frame allows the political and social concerns of ‘essential’ women to become the benchmarks of the movement. Whilst essentialism is a

\textsuperscript{100} Kennedy, “If All We Did”, xi
\textsuperscript{101} I use this explicitly pejorative term to describes a particular bipartisan, middle-class feminism which is concerned with equal opportunity, so-called family friendly policies and certain modifications to the (pre 2000) taxation system, all of which depend on an uncritical template of middle-class employment and family relations.
form of gender over-determination, which uses often tacit biological arguments to create public policy change, linguistically it also means ‘crucial, necessary’. As politically despicable as such an interpretation is (and Spelman is highly critical of it) it is nonetheless significant in its revelation. If feminism is a legislative, social policy engine for middle-class women, who have written feminism to have one universal agenda (based on gender) ‘other’ women are inessential. The interests are profoundly different.

Kennedy discusses the historical relationship between middle-class and working-class feminists. Tax describes the middle-class dominance of feminist movement, expressing belief that when the working-class women’s movement within feminism is strong, it effects ends for all women. During weaker times or times of economic downturn, the middle-class dominates. This clearly evidences different interests between feminists of different class. Such an overt difference lends itself to a politico-economic analysis of class at the expense of the social. A comprehensive analysis, which acknowledges all these differences, has not been forthcoming. Robin Morgan sees various pleas for recognition of difference, and the way the denial of that recognition has operated, as constituting ‘shameful competitions’. I think the concept of shame is valid but I would apply it very differently from Morgan, who is famous for saying that childbirth feels the same to every woman. The absurdity of this claim trivialises and weakens the many valid arguments made for sisterhood by Radical Feminism.

seeking theories and languages

102 Spelman, Inessential Women, ix
103 Kennedy, “If All We Did”, 94 -156 passim
104 Tax, The Rising of the Women, 12, 89
106 Morgan, R., in Gunew, Feminist Knowledge, 282
Catherine Belsey describes the complexity within categories of social class, attributing what she calls contradictory subject positions within classes to the class structure and the changes it precipitates in social relations.\textsuperscript{107} This is highlighted for the working-class woman who makes personal choices which blur and complicate her classification.

Feminist theories constantly need modification and adaptation. Unlike theories of class, they do not need women added and stirred. The adjustment required is different. At least we are present, some of us, anyway, although our concerns are chosen for us and their complexity and diversity is overlooked or unacknowledged. I would suggest the diversity of feminist issues for marginalised women is not even recognised by those women who have traditionally dominated the movement. The late seventies and eighties saw a dramatic series of debates and publications seeking to place alternate issues on the agenda, and a response which defended the movement as having one overriding universal concern. Many feminists who identify(ed) with a Radical Feminism have decried postmodernism and poststructuralism as depoliticising and individualising. But so much feminist work that has been influenced by these ‘post’ discourses has been concerned with identity and the reframing of marginality, and challenges the silencing or appropriation of marginal or subaltern voices. Of course poststructural feminism has not so ably addressed the issue of class, but much of the work done under its rubric can potentially be adapted for that purpose. Class, being working-class, being a working-class women, particularly in a scholarly environment, is so much about confusion, the inability to articulate meaning: it is a space ‘unlanguaged’. Phillips believes that

If working-class [as a concept] is to retain its relevance to political analysis, it must capture something of the complex, perhaps muddled

\textsuperscript{107} Belsey, C. “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text”, in Newton & Rosenfelt, \textit{Feminist Criticism}, 51
perceptions through which we define ourselves, for it is these that compel us to action.\textsuperscript{108}

\textit{Constitution Narration Dislocation}

Phillips sees definitions of working-classness as fluid, even ‘schizophrenic’.\textsuperscript{109} Kennedy calls them an ‘ill-defined minority group’.\textsuperscript{110} This inherent problem with the available language does not allow for the lived experience of ‘tension between activists from different class backgrounds. This is profoundly expressed in a number of autobiographical writings,\textsuperscript{111} as well as anecdotally in the discussions undertaken for this study. In attempting to describe and diagnose one of the major traumatic dilemmas facing them, working-class feminists are trapped and undermined by this fluidity. Middle-class theory on class, and the endless debate about definition, actually facilitates moving goal-posts which assist the middle-class defence of the women’s movement’s failures. This is ironic and tragic. If I did not believe that feminism remains a liberating discourse, personally and politically, I would question the significance of my topic and, indeed, much of the work done so far destablises any central claims feminism might make for working-class women. But it remains a premier sense making framework for women in a world where violence and sexuality are trivialised.

Kennedy notes that membership of a working-class group involves more than money: attitudes, cultural assumptions and the strands of a category broadly labelled ‘socioeconomic’.\textsuperscript{112} It is interesting that this common term privileges the social over the economic. For women trying to narrate or re-author themselves in the face of fluidity of class definitions, particularly for those women in a university environment,

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\textsuperscript{108} Phillips, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 22  \\
\textsuperscript{109} Phillips, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 23  \\
\textsuperscript{110} Kennedy “If All We Did...”, xi  \\
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{The Common Thread}, Greene and Kahn, \textit{Changing Subjects}, Mahony and Zmrozcek, \textit{Class Matters}.  \\
\textsuperscript{112} Kennedy, “If All We Did...”, xvi
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the social assumes increasing significance. Salary, after all, depends on appointment. A Lecturer Level B is a Level B, regardless of where they went to school (although the comparative time they take to get there may be significant, as may a class analysis of the process and time involved in promotion to levels C and D, and beyond). But the social markers which differentiate diverse class experiences have immediacy in all and any settings. There must operate an overt and conscious reauthoring, which anecdotal experience tells me many working-class women engage in obsessively, choosing when, where and how to speak and what to say, always thinking how others will receive one’s speech and clothing, always watching the middle-class women from a distance and wondering how, where, they got that knowledge, and copying it and never feeling one has quite pulled it off.

Kennedy acknowledges the difficulty of self-narration, self-constitution, for women who have been discouraged and even precluded from developing a collective voice. She sees the definition of ‘working-class women’ as women who have not yet entered the middle-class, with all the concomitant implications that naturally that is where a woman is headed (which, in my experience, contradicts the subject positions available.). This is an interdependent problem; the conceptualisation of self definition requires some representation of the process, which in itself is dependent on a self definition to initiate such a project. How does the subject of an unconstituted category move towards self definition?

Diane Reay sees [educationally successful] working-class girls working very hard indeed, at learning a new language and ‘undoing the silences of childhood’. Reay quotes Zandy’s idea that working-class people have ‘a language of the body which eludes theoretical textual studies’. The language of the body which textual studies can

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113 Kennedy, “If All We Did...”, xvi
114 Reay,D., “The Double Bind of the ‘working class’ feminist academic: the success of failure or the failure of
grasp is the language used by the authors of the studies, a language of privilege and power, to which Zandy adds 'quiet hands and neutral faces' foreign to working-class people, especially when they are in their own communities.

A new voice is required: to fit in, to feel a belonging, and to replace the original one silenced for the working-class women seeking an education.\textsuperscript{115}

Tillie Olsen reminds us that the simple fiscal imperative creates differential relations for working-class women,\textsuperscript{116} invariably influencing time commitment and the activities in which they can be involved. This was a common experience within the feminist left at university. Working-class women who had to depart to paid work when there was a banner to be painted or lectures to be ‘bashed’ often did not receive the recognition and support they needed. This common ignorance about working-class women’s lives receives multiple anecdotal reference in the literature, and in discussions undertaken for this study.

\begin{quote}
\textit{mediations of class and gender}
\end{quote}

Simone De Beauvoir identifies ‘a troubling characteristic of much contemporary feminist theory is its failure to take seriously the intertwining of sexism with other forms of oppression’.\textsuperscript{117} This is hardly new, but nor is it outdated. Anecdotal evidence and the examination of lived experience of woman of diverse class backgrounds reveals the ongoing tension and discord within many feminist groupings, even though they may continue to function viably, even effectively, within their agendas. Working-class women may understandably seek within


\textsuperscript{115} Reay, in Mahony &Zmrozcek, \textit{Class Matters}, 20

\textsuperscript{116} Olsen in Newton and Rosenfelt, \textit{Feminist Criticism}, 225
feminist groups to extend the political and psychological support often experienced on gender issues, to other experiences of subjectivity. While many in the feminist left theorise the differential impact of gender oppression on women of different classes, this analysis is not extended to their own practice within the women’s movement. This is an issue for all women who fall into a category ‘other’ in comparison to the women who dominate the women’s movement. Weeks describes the work of women with languages other than English as women challenging ‘anglo’ feminists notions of universal sisterhood. Weeks suggests that while this challenge has been acknowledged, ‘anglo’ ways of doing continue to dominate. This could shed light on why feminism is now perceived as fractured. The relation between this

117 de Beauvoir, in Spelman, *Inessential Women*, 58
118 I recognise this is an awkward way to describe a group. I would prefer to use the term Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). However, I accept the response of many ethnic women that to start an identifying term with ‘Non’ is evocative of precisely those silences, deficits and absences they are facing daily. So I choose an unwieldy term until I find a better one. This is indicative of the way margins must develop their own languages and quarry that which is imposed on them.
120 While ‘fractured’ may seem a pejorative word, I don’t think the concept of a fragmented feminism is a necessarily negative thing. Feminism had to become feminisms if there was any hope of its reinvention to a sense making framework (or whatever else was sought) for women outside its historical etiology. The very fact that these fractures resulted, not in a complete rejection of feminism by ‘other’ women but in the development of unique strands of thinking, is a statement of the health of plural feminisms. It is the state of those who position
anglo, middle-class domination and the emergence of the term ‘feminisms’ is clearly a strong one. Yet I do not think this fact is any cause for regret. Diversity is the key to strength. By the development of differing strands of feminism which meet certain political and psychological needs for those who subscribe to them, more women are constituted and the unique, multiply permuted impact of gender oppression is acknowledge and accommodated.

Much of feminist theory has proceeded on the assumption that gender is indeed a variable of human identity independent of other variables such as race and class, that whether one is a woman is unaffected by what class or race one is.\textsuperscript{121}

“denying them [working-class women] a language, banning them, from self expression, labelling them...”. (Marlene Packard, \textit{Trouble and Strife} no 1).\textsuperscript{122}

The traumatic impact of this denial of difference can be seen in the experience of the campaigns for abortion, and against rape, which created enormous painful tensions between black and white women in the UK in the seventies and early eighties. Working-class women, particularly black, could find themselves more threatened by pressures to abort than medical resistance to abortion. White, middle-class women can experience great difficulty in persuading doctors to recommend terminations. White women marched in the streets for more police to combat rape, while women of colour cried that their men-folk were the constant victims of police harrassment. While the differential gender oppression of abortion and the threat of rape is horrifying, the dominant [simplistic] social view of feminism has always been that we seek free safe abortion on demand, and want police educated to arrest and prosecute rapists. Only a scholar of the women’s movement would be aware of the contrary implications around this central issue. Yet the very tenets of second wave feminism

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their strand as central, defining and speaking who need to check their pulses, so to speak.\textsuperscript{121} Spelman, \textit{Inessential Women}, 81\textsuperscript{122} Spelman, \textit{Inessential Women}, 7
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would surely passionately underscore the defence of women’s control over their own bodies? It would appear that when institutional force is classed or ethnically driven, elements with the women’s movement fail to recognise the relevance of feminist principles to those nuanced, mediated struggles in all their forms. That access to or avoidance of abortion (or rape) is a classed, raced, gender issue makes it no less a gender (and therefore a feminist) issue.

Women, according to Nancy Holmstrom, come in all classes, and although all women are oppressed as women, they are not all equally oppressed. Indeed, as Holmstrom saw it, there are significant differences between the ways in which working-class women are oppressed and the ways in which middle and upper class women are oppressed, clearly highlighting difference. This is yet another recognition which a left feminist analysis should surely reveal, even if an analysis of one’s own privilege does not.

\[123\] Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 57
Chapter Three: Narrating the Classed Subject

Subjectivities and Subject Positions

subjectivities

…subjectivity defies separation into distinct selves …our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people…speculative and incomplete. Working-class women are always running to catch up.

As we have seen, only a broadly qualitative, marxist informed analysis of cultural capital and identity can allow the articulation of working-class felt experience. Yet no marxist informed knowledge has yet interrogated the central ‘we’ commonly used in theoretical references to the ‘other’. ‘We’ hear about ‘you’, the ‘other’. The modus operandi in this paradigm requires in part a class analysis for understanding, but is impoverished without reference to poststructural ideas which constitute the category ‘other’ and the distancing process by which ‘otherness’ is constructed and maintained.

We frame and shape our own ontologies in the context of various aspects of identity; the parts that are working-class, half-Irish, Protestant, and so on. Self-classing operates in our assimilation of social arrangements. We make sense of our world in many ways through frameworks we apply ourselves, whether these are stated or covert. One mechanism by which we self-class may be the operation of internalised shame in working-class lives and subjectivities. Dalziell

125 Wilding J. “The Power of Letters and Articles”, in Burnett, J. Cotterill, J. Kennerley, A. Nathan, P. and
describes the shaming impact of the myth of British superiority, which had its historical root in shame around class, status and ‘lack’. We feel this lack as a sense of inadequacy, which is repeatedly articulated by working-class women as operating in their lives.

Guilt tells us that we have done wrong. Shame tells us that we are wrong, that our entire being is defective, that there is no health in us.\textsuperscript{126}

But part of challenging existing notions of class within subjectivity is recognising the dangers of reductionism and universalism which operate so strongly within class political discourses and which have not been subject to the same problematising from which other categories of analysis have benefitted. Gibson Graham et al remind us that we cannot ‘presume any emotions as uniquely class appropriate’; that these typical associations, which often inform an intention of social justice, are unhelpful. Emotions are as much a part of material experience as wages and conditions; we live those experiences through our emotions. Notwithstanding the binaried privileging of the rational over the emotional, a critical practice which seeks to challenge gate-keeping around working-class definitions will decry any particular emotion associated with working-class experience.\textsuperscript{127}

Steedman writes persuasively of the operation of shame in her working-class experience and this is telling; but resonance is not evidence of universality. It reminds us of common practices written large. The very fact that these practices do resonate reminds us of difference, of the chaos of class felt experience and our own felt

\textsuperscript{126} Dalziell, R. 1999. \textit{Shameful Autobiographies: shame in contemporary Australian autobiographies and culture}, MUP: Parkville, 245

relation to it. I did not imbibe my mother’s shame as my own. Steedman describes seeking to avoid the humiliation her mother experienced; she located the experience in the ‘other’, the middle-class health visitor who brought her own meanings to bear on the Steedmans’ lives and environment.128 In my case, I always knew my mother had choices and that our shame was the product of those she made. I have had marxists tell me this is false consciousness. It is not. The choices my mother made, which produced a shame in her that I have chosen not to share, were made to relieve her pain in the moment; she sought a different felt experience. I knew at a young age that I could not change the circumstances but I could change my subject position in terms of receiving the meanings contained in them; this meant rejecting what my mother offered. Reflexivity is what made us different, my mother and I. When she describes to me now the ‘flash motor car’ driven by some acquaintance, I know she does not mean a Mercedes; it may well be a five year old Ford Falcon. There is no shame in this discourse for me, it is done and gone, and my peace is made. But there is anxiety, because of the years of internalised rage at the ‘lack’, and then, at the energy wasted on rage. In the eventual peace, there is always loss. But I can interrogate this as a subject position, which is a profound move forward.

Self-classing operates every-time working-class people imbibe the notion that certain milieus, behaviours and environments are unavailable to them or differential for them. bell hooks describes this pedagogy of the self as ‘internalising the values of this hegemony’.129 Those of us whose life choices have taken us down paths not

previously trod by our families or communities are familiar with the discomfort of difference and the assumption of inadequacy which accompanies the recurrent themes. “You can’t fit in with those educated people”, “that’s not for the likes of us”, “all this reading and writing, but who’s doing all the work?”^130 When this is the reality you see reflected around you and normalised amongst your community, how do you challenge it? The incongruence which often accompanies such a challenge can be psychiatrically gruelling. For many it constitutes a material barrier to aspiration and the fulfillment of life chances. Yet how is this wrongness and limitation expressed, verbally or emotionally? How does the absence of language to conceptualise or express felt experience impact on a subject? Wittgenstein reminds us of the absence (and therefore dissonance) in our experience where we have no naming language.^131 The emotional pain impedes the working-class subject; it underscores the silence and absence around such experiences, which means adding constant, repetitive layers to that painful subjectivity. Given that there is often new, unfamiliar pain resulting from the environment we have entered, in which we are other and see ourselves as other distinctly, there is pain at the parameters of our experience.

“My first real recognition that I could be characterised by others as working class happened when I went to university … and I was identified in a seminar group as ‘oh, you must be one of those working class people we hear so much about’. I was absolutely mortified. I knew what this meant - I had been recognised as common, authentic

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^130 This last statement was made to me by my mother when I advised of my enrolment in a doctoral program and explained what was involved.

and without much cultural value. For the first time in my life I started to feel insecure.”

We know that social class reproduces life chances (affordable secure housing and tertiary education are overwhelming factors in improving life chances)\textsuperscript{133} and we know how to challenge this, notwithstanding the need to be constantly vigilant against attempts by conservatives and free market ideologues to ‘roll back’ gains or extend the free market values current dominating tertiary education in Australia and the UK.\textsuperscript{134} We need a marxist-informed theoretical frame in order to


\textsuperscript{134} In 1972, the federal Whitlam Labor Government abolished all university and tertiary fees. In 1988, the federal Hawke Labor Government introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). The emphasis was on contribution; HECS was charged at a rate of approximately 10-13\% of the cost of a tertiary program. The payments could be deferred and initially were only sought from graduates on incomes over A$28K annually. Labor and subsequent conservative governments have increasingly emphasised this user pays approach; HECS is now repayable at A$22K, is much higher as a proportion of the cost of a program, and elite courses are much more expensive (as in law, medicine, veterinary science). It is not unusual for a graduate to have a debt of A$18K. Up front fees, even ‘full’ fees for domestic students are now a reality and this trend seems set to continue, as Australian university presidents and vice-
understand this political economy. We must beware the contradiction in the applicability of such a frame; when we seek to understand the lived, felt experience, those subjectivities which result from political economy, marxism ceases to be of value and becomes obstructive.

Theoretical concern with the interior experience of social class, as opposed to other sites of identity, is intermittent and flawed. My work in this area started as an attempt to make sense of my own experience of my class; I wanted to map what I saw as the class inflections in my experience, as well as explore the impact on my own subjectivity, which was so seldom reflected in any theoretical or creative material I had encountered. I wanted to be able meaningfully to describe and engage (and maybe reconcile) the contradictions I have encountered, through my own lived experience but also through my scholarship, writing and activism. I was at some level aware of a sense that much of who I am has been unconstituted, and the resulting psychic impact of that. New theoretical technologies have underscored the notion that psychic states, emotions, are just as material as surplus value. Michele Barrett argues that one of the failures of sociology has been the inability of its practitioners to meaningfully theorise (or validate) such psychic experience, indeed the disregard of many sociologists for felt experience.\(^\text{135}\)

What the politics, economics and sociology of class identity has not been effectively able to provide is a framework to talk about interiority, the subjectivity of reconciling our class identities. Various postmodern chancellors have made little attempt to challenge, where they have not sought and welcomed it. The university staff union has not strongly resisted these developments. This is hugely detrimental to students of working-class background. Similar trends are developing in the UK.\(^\text{135}\) Barrett, M. “Sociology and the Metaphorical Tiger”, in Gilroy, P, Grossberg, L & McRobbie, A. 2000. \textit{Without}
knowledges have managed to do this for other categories under the rubric of identity politics. It is within the interior dimension, where the subject arguably does their ‘becoming’, and experiences their relation to the Other, that the impact of social class is differentiated markedly from the external socio-politico-economic environment. While it is apparent that structural factors have a formative impact on the interior, adherence to internalised beliefs and values may cause the psychic injuries, particular when the beliefs relate to constraining aspiration. The importance of understanding the role of classing ‘the self’ in this sense is doubly underscored by the need to maintain two blurred, interdependent projects of resistance to class hegemony. The project of political resistance to those modes of capitalist economy which underpin class injustice is a particular one; it is necessarily very different to that which mandates the creation of emotional and interior space for dynamic, complex challenge to the self constructed (and constrained) through classed discourses.

Much useful scholarly work has been done towards the explication of identity, of the subject self, and the contribution of our social arrangements and values to the constitution of that self. Just as many marxists have failed to recognise the validity of felt experience, so many poststructuralists have overlooked class as an element of identity. Progressive, leftist poststructuralists can dismiss marxism because it has been so ably discredited as a totalising narrative. Yet, as we have seen, the powerful insights poststructuralist theorists have offered into ‘subalternised’ identities have not been extended to class. So where and how is class to be helpfully illuminated? Only through frameworks which have been developed to interrogate and reveal other subjectivities. We must take a framework, a template if you like,

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Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 174
and apply it to an identity other than that for which it was developed. Anne McClintock has described the unhelpfulness of doing this, since all subjectivities are interdependent and mediated.\textsuperscript{138} But for those of us whose interest is classed textuality and literary production there are limited options. It is clearly evident that postmodern epistemologies have provided tools for interrogating complex identities. These can helpfully be applied to class; the critique offered of Enlightenment notions of the subject which so limit much working-class experience have been bent asunder by poststructuralist interrogation. But the technologies we need to employ in order to commence a further project require profoundly reflective, sensitive consideration. We have barely commenced writing class ‘in’; we are still confronted with a point of entry which is defined by absence, both in representation and in literary, critical, theory.

We have seen how the very frameworks which their advocates claim offer insight into social arrangements create obstacles due to the shaping effects of their own discourses. Social paradigms are reproduced through discourse, and Mansfield argues powerfully that this applies to individual subjects.\textsuperscript{139} How then can reductionist and unreflexive discourses challenge these subjectivities given their own role in shaping them? How can feminist discourses empower women of diverse backgrounds, when for many working-class women their very experience within feminisms has been marginal? How can marxists make any sense of psychic injuries while largely silent or dismissive of felt experience and basically unsympathetic to feminism? Paradoxically, in spite of the exclusions through which much feminism operates, it still resonates for many women from working-class backgrounds, even as we see its meaning for our complex lives slipping away. If this sounds inherently dystopic, it is in part a function

\textsuperscript{139} Mansfield, \textit{Subjectivity}, vii
of my concern that neither marxism nor the postmodern (or rather, their practitioners) is likely to enable the self-reflexivity required to engage the diversity of experience which is not only obscured, or un-advocated, by current marxist and feminist norms, but which is in part constructed by the underpinning philosophical notions of both frameworks.

I argue throughout this thesis that personal, theoretical and political reflexivity are crucial to any recuperation of either marxist or various feminist knowledges; theorists must reflect on their own privilege and problematise that which postmodern knowledges have shown to be worthy of deconstruction. It is imperative that we keep in mind the political and activist antecedents of marxism and feminisms. Both are much older than many theoretical frames used in the academy and both claim their activist and social movement historiographies as a form of high moral ground. But political activism has not been written large as the arbiter of theoretical worth or efficacy. In fact, I would argue, that activism must follow a profoundly thought-through and vigilant theorising process, which looks to engage with any potential oversights or reductionisms. How else to enable the self-determination, enfranchisement, or liberation, of a social group but to engage with all the incarnations possible through that experience of marginality? I am conscious that the language I choose here describes the centre acting on the margin; this is a function of the limits of the linguistic frame. How else do we theorise or conceive such a social justice project? This deconstruction will probably best occur through engagement with the resulting subjectivities; the tragic irony is that movements for social change often alienate those they identify as a target group and whose diverse interests are often conflated to the group writ large. Only self-conscious reflexivities, of activists, theorists and their collective movements, can address the social arrangements constructed through discursive limitations.
I seek to evaluate the literature on subjectivities within the matrix of working-class identity, and gender. Gender is not feminism, but for many of us our engagement with its social construction led us to feminisms, where we may often have had confusing, contradictory and destructive experiences. There is a substantial anecdotal evidence that this has been the case, particularly as the ‘school’ of radical feminism flourished in the early seventies, with its severely reductionist analysis and prescriptive agendas. The goals of radical feminism appear to be those of bourgeois struggle\textsuperscript{140}, geared to the freedoms demanded by relatively privileged, western, middle-class women who already have many gains ‘other’ women do not. Ramazanoglu describes prescriptivism in (radical) feminist responses to female sexuality and difference.\textsuperscript{141}

There is no question that the healthy development of personal ontologies is crucial to emotional survival (and is increasingly difficult) within late capitalism.

\begin{quote}
\text{a language provides a provisional ontology- a set of boundaries, contours and emphases- but it cannot tell you what to say … endless…process of meaning-making.}\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

If through language we begin to map our boundaries, we will be able to write into our ontologies a new conception of aspiration, which involves an often painful challenge to the aspiring subject positions offered to us; this pain will likely be a function of challenging where we come from as much as where we seek to go. Much scholarship in the

\textsuperscript{141} Ramazanoglu, \textit{Feminism and Contradictions}, 156
humanities\textsuperscript{143} has evidenced the multiply intersected struggles facing those who are Othered through normalised modes of Enlightenment thought. The tools with which scholars (potentially) challenge the resulting and limiting binaries are vastly more sophisticated and abstracted that those in the non-academic community. Part of our responsibility as teachers is surely to disseminate those tools. Barry tells us that meaning is ‘always an attribute of things, in the literal sense that meanings are always attributed to the things by the human mind, not contained within them’.\textsuperscript{144} One of the primary sites where such tools are powerful is that of our relation to the meanings others project onto us (and which we often engage as valid). My experience in the feminist left has been characterised by this process. Barry’s point illuminates what occurs when you give your ‘power’, your sense of agency, away; psychoanalysts describe this as an ‘external locus of control’. We desire the approval and acceptance of the other, particularly that which is most validated in culture; a Lacanian frame suggests we want to be(come) the other, that which is outside our self, which is represented as so untainted by the struggles we internalise. But we do not have unproblematised access to ourselves; our ‘histories are dislocated’\textsuperscript{145} not just by the non-constitution of working-


\textsuperscript{144} Barry, P. 1995. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, Manchester University Press: Manchester, UK, 39

\textsuperscript{145} Burnett et al, The Common Thread, 324
class womanhood, but by the contradictory terrain that must be negotiated if we seek beyond the normative paradigm of that identity. The simple version of the process of aspiration is to look for role models. A classed, Lacanian frame demonstrates not just the immense difficulty of this but the additional psychic pain and shame, which is necessarily internalised, creating additional layers which must in turn be negotiated. If our subjectivities are made up of our self-esteem, our sense of ourselves in particular situations, then (in part) our feeling states are their measure and manifest.

Finklestein advises ‘the pleasures of fashion include the symbolic replay of this profoundly productive moment when subjectivity emerges”.¹⁴⁶ I am not persuaded that ‘productive’ is always positive; a product may be a deficit in terms of our sense of ourselves. In my experience, at an elite Australian university, fashion and adornment were fundamental sites of subjectivity; we played it all out there and so much of my sense of myself was experienced through what I wore (and could not wear) and what parts of the middle-class others I craved and wished to be able to demonstrate myself. Lacan suggests we seek to fix ourselves in spite of the endless cycle of fragmentation that is identity; we desire the other because that is where we see our (ideal) self.¹⁴⁷ Finklestein describes ‘changing the unclothed, unmade up body into a self-produced coherent subject’.¹⁴⁸ This does describe the practice I was engaged in and which I see operating in groups where definitions of identity are tacitly (and painfully) contested. We are making our subjectivity the way we (feel we) want it or it should be, often through copying the outer presentation of those whose (external) subjectivity we desire. Cixous says ‘fashion transforms her and she is infatuated with its capacity to do so… [this is] a new way of speaking

¹⁴⁶ Finklestein, J. 1996. After a Fashion, Melbourne University Press: South Carlton, 47
¹⁴⁸ Finklestein, After a Fashion, 47
the body and freeing it from silence\textsuperscript{149} and, I would add, inscribing; we can reinscribe through our clothing. The idea that we can try on ways of being and create healthy, personally meaningful ontologies in order to shrug off the inscriptions which cause classed pain and shame is powerfully appealing and clearly possible. But it is fraught, because these technologies of the self\textsuperscript{150} are also inscribed as middle-class. I am aware that a motif of fashion or clothing is easily dismissed as trivial, superficial and requiring substantial resources. Like much of the literary criticism and theory regarding working-class writing, this objection is somewhat essentialist. Working-class women are always poor and they don’t take an interest in clothes or fashion? I don’t disagree that fashion in some aspects is trivial. But the social agendas which operate through it are well documented.\textsuperscript{151} If certain aesthetic values are attributed to an interest in fashion and its role in exploring the (possible) self, once again we have a binary which others working-class women. Equally, powerful tools must thus be reinscribed to problematise the class assumptions underpinning them.

I studied for one year at Oxford...trying to hide my Manchester accent...deep anger at having to deny part of myself to feel acceptable'.\textsuperscript{152}

Dalziell’s thesis on shame underscores this quote. So much of the anecdotal literature on working-class identity talks about material shame (Steedman, Dunbar-Ortiz, Ashworth, Sayer).\textsuperscript{153} Rage at the

\textsuperscript{149} Cixous, H. in Finklestein, \textit{After a Fashion}, 67
\textsuperscript{151} Crane, D. 2000. \textit{Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing}, University of Chicago Press, passim
\textsuperscript{152} Dolan, H. “Curly Cabbages”, \textit{Common Thread}, 304.
injustice and ignorance of (perceived) criticism creates what Luttrell calls ‘split and conflicted selves’.\textsuperscript{154} This shame, anger and the resulting ‘selves’ are continually internalised, and the theories which explicate them are, as we have seen, often far from helpful. In my novel, \textit{Crossing Bowen Street}, Meg reflects that many of her stylish, alternative (middle-class) ‘sisters’ in the feminist left wear clothing which she had never seen in any stores and would not be able to locate. The herculean dimensions of the task exhaust Meg, yet rage that it is this way never leaves her. Meg finds enormous satisfaction in the discovery that an affordable and authentic subjectivity is created when she dresses in the way she chooses, rather than submitting herself to a template. As she says, ‘I’ve discovered my own way of dressing is the one I like best anyway.’ This is definitive of her ‘way of being’. For Meg, ways of being are expressed and explored through clothing. They are tried on, and evaluated for efficacy in moving her towards her deepest personal goals. In Meg’s case, this means finding the ‘self’ which can best create and fulfill her aspiration to life as a scholar and university teacher. Once again, for Meg, the outward expression of this through personal presentation is crucial to speaking in a true voice; finding her preferred subject position.

If, as Campbell says, we are authorised and validated by those ‘in the know’\textsuperscript{155} the risk we run (among many others) is that we will perceive ourselves as always being wrong. Hawthorn describes fraught chaotic

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Campbell, J. 1996. "Teaching Class: a pedagogy and politics for working class writing", \textit{College Literature}, June 1996, 23:2, 5
\end{thebibliography}
self knowledge as being inherent to a definition of the subject. This is a most worrying aspect of the internalisation of dominant views of working-class people, especially those who find themselves in universities. Once you find yourself on an academic trajectory, in my experience, others attempt to deny or negate the meanings of your class antecedents. I do find it greatly troubling that so many scholars who determinedly problematise the treatment of many marginalised groups in our culture, promptly abandon those skills in discussions of (my) class and reduce (my) experience (and more particularly [my] scholarship) to tabloid clichés. “You weren’t working-class; you had books”, “You’re an academic!”, “You’re a writer”, “Class isn’t relevant, now that we have subjectivity”157, and my personal favourite, “but Cambridge let you go there”.158 Yet a category of analysis so vast that it has formed the basis for western social arrangements is dismissed by fierce intellectuals, as it might be by a right-wing radio ‘shock jock’. Aside from the abrogation of responsibility that this entails, (not to mention duty of care to students, ethical practice, and so on), this kind of attitude and expressed belief contributes directly to limitations placed on working-class aspiration, in both psychic and policy terms.

The overwhelming emphasis in this thesis is that reflexivity in all practice, whether it be academic, policy related, or inter-personal, is the only technology which allows the validation of multiple subjectivities, which in turn form aspirations and (re)construct the possible. This is how we enable diverse future ontologies for students of working-class background. We seek to clear out some massive


157 It is frequently noted that the observation and theoretical treatment of subjectivity of the late twentieth century is discursively fused with its inception.
impediments which have existed, and which continue to undermine the explicit equity goals of the [Australian] university sector. The class ‘cross-over’ experience described by Jensen\textsuperscript{159} may hold many attractions; human beings ‘desire’ and desire is a constituent element of aspiration. We know that neutral value-free language is impossible and thus we need be vigilant to the discursive choices which shape so much social experience and reality, validating and denying (or reinforcing) psychic barriers. For those students who identify and seek their aspirations, who attain them, there are additional psychic dangers. Reflexivity creates appropriate intellectual space for the understanding and interrogation of our practice in recognising these barriers.

…over the years I have watched my siblings’ horizons become more and more limited.\textsuperscript{160}

The loss of connection to where we have come from, where we started, is pointed up by what is often vast difference in social and cultural norms, which merely serve to highlight a lack of belonging anywhere. Even as new forms of ‘becoming’ are sought and bring great joy, there is a constant to- and- fro with the past. The US film People Like Us\textsuperscript{161} examines social class identity from within various communities; working-class, middle-class, ruling class. Dana, from Kentucky, talks of the sense of rejection her rural farming family feels at her determination to be a journalist in Washington DC.

\textsuperscript{158} I spent one month at Girton College, Cambridge in 2001 to investigate working-class experience at elite universities.

\textsuperscript{159} Jensen, Across the Great Divide.

\textsuperscript{160} Burnett et al, Common Thread, 323

“When I come home, I consciously change my personality.”

I found Dana’s story the most emotionally resonant in this disturbing and confronting film. Dana identifies her family’s exhortation that she ‘not get above her raisins’ and the constant problem that she cannot talk about her work and the city, and so they all have less and less to say to each other. She is conscious that her decision is perceived as ‘rejecting the essence of who they are’. It is the emotional agony etched in Dana’s father’s face and body language that speaks most resonantly to me. Torn between what is clearly love for and pride in his daughter and her determination to aspire, he conflates the foreignness of her choice with something wrong in himself. The awkward, tense conversation between them on Dana’s trip home is painful enough. The father’s body language reveals how desperate he is to connect with his child and how totally he feels he cannot; the subjectivity of unworthiness is inscribed visibly on this man. I can’t imagine his pain. But I know the pain of desperately wanting familial approval for what middle-class families seem to think is clever and impressive, and receiving only derision and insult. Dana’s father is not derisive. He locates the lack in himself. Dana becomes the other but she is his daughter whom he clearly adores. Working-class subjectivities are not so predictable or universal. While my interest in this thesis has been for the inadequately named ‘crossover’ subjectivity, that of the father in this scenario informs all our understandings. Dana describes being ‘perpetually not in my niche’. That she cannot connect with her roots, where she comes from, causes the kind of pain which is a profound hidden injury of social class. There is little explicit political treatment of the impacts of this kind of injury.

In the last image of Dana, the closing image of the film, the subway train doors close, to the announcement ‘doors close on the Left side’. The image freezes. I was struck as I watched that this was fitting.

Advocacy and struggle on social class has been the political and

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162 Alvarez & Kolker, People Like Us
ideological responsibility of the left. Yet the traditional left offers little, then or now, to help the Dana’s of this world, or their fathers. The experience is largely unspoken and the grief unmitigated. Only those activists and film makers who seek to engage and represent these subjectivities might offer alternative ways of being to Dana and her father, by representing that which is common lived and felt experience, allowing all of us to create and enable a plethora of alternative subject positions, and to accept without pain those we have occupied.

**subject positions**

*Class and Its Others* takes on the task of enriching our understanding of class. It does so by prompting us to see in a broad range of subject positions the possibility of class identifications and the promise of discerning -and protesting- exploitation in places previously repressed.¹⁶³

Textual subject positions construct and allow a subjectivity in the reader in relation to the events described. They offer a conflation of the ideologies and values of a text and a particular engagement with these. It is argued in much literary theory that the ‘rewards’ of a text are available only through the assumption of the subject position on offer; this may be tacit or implicit in ideological terms.

Subject positions inform our engagement in, and reception of, dominant social narratives. They offer us representations of the options available to us of how we may ‘be’ in the world and that to which we are entitled. The unrelenting psychic cost of seeking a diverse validating subject position highlights again and again the chaos of tracing class identity. The growing literature on working-class subjectivities in the academy is sufficiently diverse to write in much of my experience. The trajectory is recognised, the difficulty of traversing it is acknowledged. But is there a naming of the subject positions offered to working-class women in universities? These are obviously multiple, and multiply mediated by those aspects of identity the

¹⁶³ Gibson-Graham et al, *Death of Class*, xi
individual emphasises and which most resonate through the specificities of experiential learning.

Sowinska\textsuperscript{164} describes an experience to which I profoundly related, with “Audrey”, the mother of a school friend. Audrey takes a fascinated interest in the little working-class girl (although she prevents her own child from visiting Sowinska’s home). I experienced this multiple times and I remember the conscious psychic struggle to accommodate myself to the subject positions on offer. I remember the ‘meaning seeking’ in which I engaged, in order to appropriate the experiences I was having. Subject positions are offered to us and we try them on; some encounters are less fraught than others, as our agency in relation to the subject position is in constant flux. McClintock recognises that race, class and gender, along with any other strands of identity, are present in relation to each other in a complex, deeply enmeshed way.\textsuperscript{165} The subject positions we encounter may strengthen or weaken, in terms of their relation to those mediated elements of identity. Gender subject positions are differential according to class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and so on. Class subject positions take on a totally different relation to gender. The very trope that Sowinska seeks to challenge, that of working-class female passivity, is a subject position rarely offered to middle-class women in the same context (although historically, passivity has been sought as desirable in upper-class women). Feminist subject positions available to women of working-class background who become involved in activism are often inadequate to ‘flesh out’ the felt experience of our gender and the specificities of its oppression; so many subject positions created


\textsuperscript{165} McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather}, 5
around marginal groups who seek complex trajectories are part of the ‘writ large’ narrative which actually limits or impedes those aspirations.

There are few subject positions for the working-class woman academic. Sowinska has written a complex one which represents much of my experience, but it also alienates me and denies me the ‘reward’ total identification would offer. Therein is a likely problem with subject positions; although reflexive awareness of them and their operation is crucial to recuperating working-class subjectivities within the academy, total identification is surely not possible for the chaotic, mutable working-class identity.

The psychic trajectory traced by Sowinska is wholly familiar to me: I retrace and reframe it every time I read the weekend broadsheet supplements and marvel over the literary fashions represented there. Yet when Sowinska offers working-class women in the academy the subject position of ‘working-class intellectual’ I am immediately uncomfortable. I do not want this subject position. I want to be class ‘aware’, informed, reflexive. I know I am not working-class now. The emphases I wish to place on my subjectivities are not that of a youth seeking ‘more’ but on the insights gained and passions developed from and through that reflexivity. In accepting the subject position offered by Sowinska I run the risk of simplifying my class as I accuse unreflexive middle-class critics of doing. Subject positions are not fixed and unified; class subject positions in particular are so unfixed, chaotic and fluctuating as to be mercurial. And the contradiction is exposed, further discomforting me, that I do not want my intellectual life ‘reduced’ to my class. I want to be much more than that. I want an unlimited scholarly aspiration, that is not impeded by reductionist or essentialist recuperations but which values reflexively the strengths developed through the psychic fight and recovery working-class women academics may confront.
As I read Sowinska’s chapter I was struck by the similarities in our experience. Her rendering of her mother’s moving but dislocated attempts to show support for her academic daughter resonate strongly, with the revelation of the mother’s construction of her daughter’s role. Much of the experience Sowinska describes of making it through college and graduate school is meaningful to me, although I was never hungry. The differences in our experience are in part attributable to place; Australia still has an accessible tertiary system for someone like me. I could buy my books, support myself and get my degrees, without the kind of deprivation and physical torment described by women in Sowinska’s article. It is my contention that this kind of precarious survival delays engagement with psychic classed pain; it is the initial symptomology of that pain. Perhaps in part that accounts for my discomfort with the subject positions offered me by Sowinska. Australian graduate students simply have a lower cost of living and far more state subsidies than US students almost anywhere. But Sowinska wants to reduce our working-classness to a role and function which is simply not the same. Given that working-class, female subject positions within universities are so few and inadequate, claiming universality for any of them is to merely reframe existing oppressions and impose a different subject position. Yet I am sympathetic that to write a working-class subject position at all constitutes a (possible) point of entry. I reiterate that the this must be the notion of agency; that we will develop our own emotional critique of the subject positions available, and while we must be vigilant that oppression and injustice are not the primary informants therein, there must be value space allowed for the diversity, confusing and contradictory, of the subject positions working-class women embrace.

Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. And since s/he is position in relation to cultured narratives which have been

166 Books written by celebrity chefs, infidelity, dentistry, are examples of recent themes in publishing.
profoundly expropriated, the colonised subject is always ‘somewhere else’….

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Classing Representations, Representing Class

As with all forms and strands of human identity, representation in literary and cultural forms assist in the constitution of a subject self. We need to see ourselves, reflected, to develop a total sense of our being and, more importantly, our belonging and relation to our community and the world at large. It is within this context that we form possibilities for ourselves, which inform our aspirations; texts thus help us initially locate ourselves emotionally, in order to measure where we might possibly go. Steedman sees class as being ‘inscribed in our childhoods’. She has working people, particularly women, in mind when she says

...children learn[ing] about social class through trying to place themselves within a landscape in which they are living, as well as a fantasy world with which they are less familiar".  

One of the fundamental contentions of my thesis is that cultural representations ‘write in’ the experience we need to see of ourselves. Narratives and stories reconstitute us, or at least let us ask the question, who, what, how am I? and begin creating our multiple personal ontologies. Morris argues that working-class women have not had their stories of lived, felt experience told with any nuance or complexity; they are historically unconstituted. This creates a ‘supreme difficulty for the working-class girl of recognising a possibly acceptable self’. Until we are constituted through the multiple narratives of cultural representation, we lack a basis through which to create our ontology, or bring the self ‘into being'. Steedman suggests the devices intended to give expression to working-class lives may

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168 Steedman, Landscape, 14
169 Morris, P. 1993 Literature and Feminism, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 185
170 Morris, Literature and Feminism, 185
Much of this [marxist political] analysis denies its subjects a particular story except when it illustrates a reductionist political thesis; otherwise it remains obscured, dismissed or even denied. Multiple ‘ways of being’ working-class remain unrepresented.

Hegemonic cultural practices determine that the marginalised other occupies a position of lack in relation to the normative state, never seeing herself as those ideals which are written large. Thus the working-class subject is defined by lack; the subject lacks access to frames of analysis through which to recognise the structural factors involved, internalised self-blame is a possible response; as is endlessly seeking the other outside the self. This adds another layer to painful psychic journey. We frame and shape our own ontologies in this context. Probyn describes how the ‘self’ may be sexed [or classed]:

The self that I propose here is a double entity: it is involved in the ways in which we go about our everyday lives,…a [classed] self is constantly reproduced within the changing mutations of difference. …While its [class] is known, the ways in which it is constantly re-[classed] are never fixed or stable. …form and re-form our senses of self.¹⁷²

Narrative theory¹⁷³ offers a useful point of entry to challenge uncritical social reproduction which is allowed by the silence of non-representation. The stories we have about life give meaning to experience and have real consequences in our lives. Recognition of these normative paradigms allows a radical re-conceptualising of social systems and subjectivities. This helps us to re-frame and

challenge dominant practices within our lives; we more easily recognise that individual subjects are affected when they ‘touchstone’ against these meta-narratives. We can receive and critique differently the narratives facilitated by totalising theories such as marxism. Public policy, schooling and tertiary education, welfare and employment policy are all sites where ‘the larger story’ is written, reflected and inscribed on working-class lives; it would be absurd to suggest that these are not also sites of felt, interior experience.

Throughout twentieth century Australian writing, class themes (which usually mean work and unionism) have found their most likely homes in that we call the ‘realist’ novel. Social, even socialist, realism is most identified with didactic or explicitly political writing. Many social(ist) realists concur with this, particularly during the Cold War, when Australian writers such as Frank Hardy claimed their novels were written not just ‘for’ the (singular, unified) working-class but by it, through a network of workers’ organisations. Fiona Capp argues that Hardy’s politics has been conflated with his writing and thus the latter has been dismissed as propaganda and not art. Disregard for any working-class story is disturbing, but it would seem Hardy disagreed with Capp; he himself dismissed Patrick White (Australia’s only literary Nobel laureate) as having ‘bourgeois interests’. This is a classically marxist view (of the period) of culture or art concerned with felt experience, reinforcing the notion that interiority is of concern to middle-class people and that working-class subjectivities are experienced only within political economy. Lukacs describes modernist

literature as bourgeois decadence,\textsuperscript{177} offering a stern corrective to any working-class person with such false consciousness as to engage in bourgeois self-absorption. This deeming of psychic practices according to class and politics offers insight into the failure of marxists to recruit a revolutionary mass workers’ movement in the West. If felt experience is where we discover our resonance with an idea or belief, it surely offers the point of entry to political activism?

Realism has not stood up well to a poststructuralist reading; criticism in the postmodern period has problematised the notion of ‘the real’ in ways which actually allow broader and more meaningful participation of sub-cultures and Others in cultural forms. Belsey argues that ‘the form of the realist novel contains implicit validation of the existing social structure, because realism by its very nature leaves conventional ways of seeing intact and discourages critical scrutiny of reality’.\textsuperscript{178} While I question the attribution of ‘nature’ to a form such a realism, there is consistency with marxist endorsement of the Enlightenment ‘subject’ and social modes. That which is not problematised speaks volumes.

Keating, an Oxford literary critic writing in the seventies, offers a useful measure to determine whether a particular ‘working-class’ text is in fact literature, or not. The crucial point, says Keating, is whether the novel is effectively committed to artistic principles or to an overt class viewpoint (italics added).\textsuperscript{179} This should not be an overwhelming surprise, as we have seen there is only one way to represent working people: depict them at work. But further effective tools for assessment of both class (read political) efficacy and literary merit exist. Only the

\textsuperscript{177} Lukacs, G. 1981. \textit{Essays on Realism}, MIT Press: Cambridge, 1
subject ‘working-class’ implies explicit politics, just as it deems necessary a more rigorous assessment of literary merit. Clearly proper, middle-class, novels have art and no overt political viewpoint. Keating would appear to suggest that a shorthand route to these assessments is to measure art and politics as mutually exclusive. If there is politics (which has somehow again been conflated with explicit class themes), check perfunctorily for art; you’re unlikely to find any. Unfortunately, as we have seen, many marxists agree.\(^{180}\)

In his biography of Jean Stafford, David Roberts suggests that Stafford’s early attempts at novels failed to find publishers because of the purposes for which Roberts deems they were written. Roberts sees an ‘inevitable risk that ‘art will be sacrificed’ when writing for revenge (his assessment of Stafford’s early work). Thus art is constructed as a fragile thing which cannot flourish in or around any sort of explicit ideology or authorial intention\(^{\text{other than to be artistic.}}\)\(^{181}\)

How this operates for a fiction writer I am not sure; we will see that writing is often a psychic, ‘sense making’ process. If we accept the notion that narratives operate, both socially and personally, to reflect or obscure, the concept of an exclusive and explicit intention to produce art is problematised. Is the view here that art is inimical to (explicit) lived and felt experience? Must a writer detach from that, in order to allow this transcendent notion, art, to ‘have its head’? Is it the classed specificity which creates this critical anxiety? Or is it simply that these critics, Roberts and Keating, have additional insight into the writers motivations and judge the work in the light of that which makes them uncomfortable? When we do not know of author intention, critical practices such as these are necessarily curtailed. There are many cases of art in literature where one might speculate on intentions


herewith constructed as inimical to art: I think of Gertrude Stein, AS Byatt, Sylvia Plath, Jeannette Winterson and Virginia Woolf.

There exist many excellent political novelists concerned with all aspects of human endeavour; we could certainly debate just what constitutes a 'political' novel. Tension is demonstrated in Keating’s unproblematised conflation of class and politics in the context of working-class fiction. Indeed, the assumptions embedded in Keating’s discourse themselves point up the likelihood that class anxiety as a theme emerges in texts without the necessary intention of the author. Notions of authenticity and voice, such as those highlighted by the Darville-Demidenko affair, expose our anxiety as a culture about

182 For starters, I would nominate Amanda Lohrey, John King, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and John Dos Passos.
183 Helen Darville won numerous Australian fiction prizes for her novel The Hand That Signed the Paper, 1993. Allen & Unwin: Sydney. including the (most) prestigious Miles Franklin Award. Darville wrote under the name Helen Demidenko and claimed to be of Ukrainian origin when in fact she was the daughter of British immigrants. The novel was concerned with the activities of desperately poor Ukrainians in the Jewish death camps of the region. Demidenko appeared in the Australian media in Ukrainian national dress to plead the role of Jewish communists in Ukrainian poverty and for understanding of her ‘ancestors’ actions in this context. It appeared that she was making anti-Semitic arguments in defence of Ukrainian collaborators in the Holocaust. Prior to her debunking as an anglo, the debate in the Australia media highlighted immense tensions and anxieties around voice, ownership of stories, and difference (not to mention anti-semitism). As Demidenko, Darville argued that her story was part fact, based on her family’s experiences. Many took up her claim. A few critics added that the novel was weak and unconvincing. But the
giving voice to subaltern groups and ‘allowing’ all forms of marginal stories to be told at all. One form of suppression is the critical mode with which work is received and which so governs its dissemination.

Susan Lever argues that women readers won’t identify with the characters in Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin’ Up*, because they are complicit in their own gender oppression. This observation demonstrates the paucity of the class analysis in Lever’s feminist critical frame, by which she attributes gender oppression to the female characters, while ignoring the oppressions of their class and assuming universality for her subject position. I am not sure with critical approaches such as this if an explicit recognition of difference is engaged at all. Can we creatively engage the subject positions of the other? Can we recognise that which immediately resonates as *our response to the subject positions on offer* in a text? Obviously we need reflexive critical modes to do this. The technologies engaged by certain feminist critics necessitate a more protracted and articulated critical framework, which makes more intellectual (and ideological) demands of the critic applying it.

In terms of enabling diversity in fictional representations, I see heterodox, hybrid analytical frameworks as the solution, even if they constitute a form of theoretical scaffolding while space is created. The linguistic frame through which I explore this recuperation is limiting, in that it involves pronouns (we, they, our) which construct notions of ownership and gatekeeping, precisely the value systems by which exclusions occur in the first place. I wish to cobble together an eclectic tensions which emerged around anti-semitism in the Australian community have not been engaged or resolved.

critical mode which pleads for reflexivity, which enshrines the value of checking ourselves and our assumptions. It is one of my observations thus far in this study, that marxist knowledge has required literary work to be adapted to it for critical purposes, as indeed has the canon. But literary work is not by definition teleological and the totalising implications of such backward criticism are sinister.

The stories we find in novels and poems...claim that although ...make believe, the experiences they stand in for and the feelings they evoke are universal and therefore true to life.\textsuperscript{185}

We have seen that marxist analysis has frequently and not always helpfully conflated paid work, union activism and industrial struggle with working-class identity. While it is clearly necessary to have politically radical mechanisms with which to challenge the economic and social structures which underpin class injustice, we also know that ‘hidden injuries’ play a pivotal role in the ways working-class subjects internalise and construct their understandings of their own class. It is in lived and felt experience that class is played out; all social, economic and structural manifests of life are experienced by the subject in a lived, felt sense. Yet this is the realm in which marxist knowledges have been least effective. We are brought up short in terms of meaningful responses to the interior (initial) experience of class. The language of political economy may well alienate many working-class people who seek explication of their identity and its impact; at best, they are simply not engaged by marxist discourses and politics. Susan Holmes argues that conflation of social class with work, and the settings which reflect this, allows the denial that class remains a political issue, as class is left unseen in lived lives.\textsuperscript{186} The specificities which are the inevitable consequence of a conflation of


\textsuperscript{186} Holmes, S. 1998. Blue Collar, Red Dress: a novel and critical commentary, MA thesis, Department of
working-class identity with the political economy, do not allow for the felt experience of so many working-class people, who won’t recognise themselves in the discourse. While I am convinced that a focus on working-class background is potentially essentialist, lived and felt experience is necessarily classed very differently. As we have seen, middle-class people rarely lack representations of themselves in social life, albeit these bring their own specificities. Work, struggle, political activism and intellectual practice all have very different associations and meanings inscribed on them by one’s cultural relation to them.

Tokarczyk talks of the particular (and often negative) experience many working-class undergraduates have of college in the US, including the failure of many teaching staff to engage reflexivities with their students’ particular needs. This creates additional structural barriers to the changed life chances tertiary education may facilitate. Luttrell also considers the barriers secondary students face in school, as they deal with hegemonies in the system.

Personal stories are the means by which people fashion identities. Life stories have a formative- and sometimes deformative- power.

Holmes sees a further concern in the application of political economy as the definitive measure of class identity and it underscores the imbalance in cultural representations. Working-class people, argues Holmes, are ‘more acceptable as recognisable archetypes, sentimentalised portraits or located within a known (industrial)

Communication, Language and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, Victoria University of Technology, 30


While we need to beware of conspiratorialism, we do know that social relations are reproduced, through hegemonies which operate tacitly in many aspects of the social world. Archetypes of working-class identity may reassure the middle-class that theirs is the best ‘way to be’ but they also deny working-class people complex ‘alternative’ avenues. We see the lived and felt experience of middle-class people in film, novel and daily media. We see working-class felt experience judged and found wanting or we cannot relate to it at all, because little interiority is represented.

Daniel Mendelsohn has pointed out that, ‘backstairs’ literature- the help’s insider account of how the well-off live- ‘serves a crucial cultural purpose: not to sell us on the haute life but, if anything, to reassure the middle-classes that the best possible thing is to be middle-class...books like the Nanny Diaries allow us [ie the middle-class] to ogle...even as we sneer”.

Inevitably, an argument for the value of ‘writing in’ must acknowledge the reverse can be invoked; representations write us ‘out’. Canonical

\textsuperscript{189} Holmes, \textit{Blue Collar, Red Dress}, 21

\textsuperscript{190} I think particularly of representations of Bilynda Murphy, working-class single mother of Jaidyn Leskie; Jaidyn was abducted and murdered aged 18 months from the working-class town of Morwell, in Victoria, in 2000. Bilynda was judged for her de facto relationship with her former brother-in-law, for the way she dressed and the names she gave her children. Contrast representation of the Leskie case, with that of the disappearance and murder of Margaret Wales-King, whose wealth, Mercedes and Louis Vuitton handbag were repeated in every media discussion. Class discourses permeate the media presentation of both stories.

\textsuperscript{191} Mendelsohn, D. Quote from “Nannies and the Novel”, review of \textit{The Nanny Diaries}, The Sunday Age, July 21, 2002, p 10
cultural forms particularly work in hegemonic ways, which underscore the necessity of a complex political challenge to them. If we are convinced of the hegemonic potential of dominant and normative stories (the canon) we must then recognise the redemptive challenge offered by subversive texts and stories. Poststructuralist theorists have offered a challenge to canonical texts and culture; the postmodern epoch sees a flourishing of cultural recognitions which write in absence and critique those social paradigms that operate tacitly through their legitimation in culture. Campbell describes the need for a ‘contingent working-class aesthetic’. I am not persuaded that the creation of new hegemonies through aesthetics is a desirable response; Leavis and Bloom imbue aesthetics with certain values. I would argue that recognition of implicit ideologies in any aesthetic is the necessary starting point for a set of (class-) aware critical theories. Particularly helpful is the value placed on ‘our’ own stories, which create space for differences from the reproduced lives of canonical heroes or archetypes, not to mention the plethora of working-class ‘ways of being’ and the complex theoretical practices required to access and make sense of them.

Steedman discusses working-class childhoods which are not ‘bad enough to be …the childhoods of literature’. Representation of

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192 Campbell, *Teaching Class*, 2
193 I offer FR Leavis and Harold Bloom as examples of uncritical adherence to canonical values around literary aesthetics and merit. In the Leavis-Bloom sphere, metaphysical values are assumed to be ‘correct’. Leavis recognised the role of literature in the study of culture; his definition of the cultural (and value for it) would be inimical to my own. See Bloom, H. 1990. *The Art of the Critic: literary theory and criticism from the Greeks to the Present*, Chelsea House: New York; and, Leavis, F.R. 1982. *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher: essays and papers*, Chatto & Windus: London.
194 Steedman, *Landscape*, 9
diversity in working-class experience is mandated, by its obscurity. Steedman believes the emotional lives of a majority of working-class people have been pathologised and marginalised. Certainly this is the experience of many working-class women in the academy, although texts such as *Landscape for a Good Woman* and *Class Matters* are challenging this. Sanchez Eppler argues that class is not inscribed as a ‘bodily bond’ in the same way as race and gender; those measures of class so emphasised by left and right politics obscure emotional lives. Discourses and texts of the body have been of much recent interest to post-metaphysical thought, yet, as with many other aspects of class as identity, the dialogic relation of class and the body has been largely ignored, or essentialised.

When it comes to literary, fictional representations of working-class people, there is still immense recuperative, even investigative, work to do. George Orwell said sixty years ago that if we look for the working-class in fiction, all we will find is a hole. Mahony and Zmroczek advise ‘working-class women’s experience is barely visible and under theorised’. An explicit theme of class is practically unheard of and

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197 Keating, *Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, 1

usually given another name where it does exist, such as grunge, alienation, or populist conflation with football hooliganism in Britain. We have seen the various literary fashions of the recent past which are vaguely invoked when class is raised: novels which take as their themes alienation, unemployment, unemployability.

Keating acknowledges few novels about working-class people actually reflect their lived experience; ‘the most important fact about the fiction working man is [in fact] his class. Writers in The Common Thread describe themselves as ‘…the experts on working-class women’s lives’. While I would be wary of the dangers of speaking such reductionism, I can see that the claim is a function of frustration, pain and even shame. Shame is a resonant theme in any study of the lived and felt experience of working-class identity. Classed shame is also profoundly misunderstood by middle-class critics. Dalziell’s discussion of shame as a subject position is illuminating. She attributes much shame in the Australian context to associations regarding our antecedents (for many this may be silence and inaction over the ‘stolen generation’ of indigenous Australians, as much as the rigid

Class Matters: ‘working class’ women’s perspectives on social class, Taylor Francis: London, 18.


class values of the United Kingdom). Nonetheless, shame offers subject positions and that in turn has informed the development of class relations in Australia.

In a review of Gray’s *The Animal Shop* in *Australian Book Review*, Jane Stephens implies that a depiction of shame is contrived. Cherry is deeply ashamed and uncomfortable when she is visited in her housing commission flat by the principal of her son’s school. While I have reservations about much of the writing, the shame and anxiety which is depicted reminds me of many Friday night visits by the minister of my childhood church and the horror I would feel should he request a cup of tea. To articulate why you feel this way to yourself is fraught with danger and pain; shame is operating. To engage is to articulate the sources of that shame. Steedman describes the health visitor as informing her tearful mother, “‘this house isn’t fit for a baby’; And I? [asks the adult Steedman] I will do everything and anything until the end of my days to stop anyone ever talking to me like that woman talked to my mother.”

Probyn proposes that in a racist sexist society, flawed representations make sense. Horrifying as this is, it does explain why so many working-class women assume that perceived inadequacies are their fault; it is the internalisation of a dominant discourse. This also offers insight into how many scores of unrecorded voices, how much

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203 Stephens, J. “The Difficulty of Class Consciousness”, *Australian Book Review*, 120, May 1990, 10
204 Housing Commission is the common parlance for stated owned and provided housing in Australia. The first providers of public housing, the Federal Ministry of Housing, included a statutory authority known officially as the Housing Commission. Despite numerous changes of name and public policy jurisdiction, the term holds, and communicates considerable stigma.
205 Steedman, *Landscape*, 1
206 Probyn, *Sexing the Self*, 8
207 Tokarczyk, *Promises to Keep*, 4.
felt and lived experience, has gone unrepresented, denying us the tapestry of possibility that human experience might constitute and the imperatives of justice and decency which are abrogated by the absences in our dominant narratives.

Stories provide the frames that make it possible for us to interpret our experience, and these acts of interpretation are achievements we take an active part in.\textsuperscript{208}

In his essay eulogising Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton talks of arriving at Cambridge at much the same time as Williams; Eagleton was an undergraduate and Williams a don. The environment was hostile for both but Eagleton talks passionately of the constituting role William's presence, style and scholarly interests played for him.

“I found myself marooned within a student body where everyone seemed to be well over six foot, brayed rather than spoke, stamped their feet in cinemas at the feeblest joke and addressed each other like public meetings in intimate cafes...through the medium of this authority I felt somehow authorised to speak myself,...\textsuperscript{209} [italics added]

This is a moving account of the process of being constituted, represented, and its implicit analogue, validated. For so many of us, what we read as children, contested as it is, is the first site of our experience of constitution and representation, or not. For working-class students, this process is inherently longer (and more painful) than for students whose experience falls within the broad range of normalised middle-class. Aside from the limited nature of representations, access to those that do exist is particularly complex.

Ian Syson, in the introduction to the recovered *The Copper Crucible*, talks of the significance of finding a novel which actually speaks your experience:

When I first read it in 1988, I felt that this was (at last) a book which was talking about my life, not somebody else’s. It was also a book which put into a literary form my experiences of living and working in Mount Isa. *There was something authentic about it*. Yet it also produced an indignant response in me. Why hadn’t I known about this book before?… Why hadn’t I, and my other school-friends been told about this book? … *The Copper Crucible* would have appealed to us *in a way most of the other texts could not*. … I hope that this new edition can reach even a fraction of the people to whom it is addressed. [italics added]

Representations of class *pride* [the implicit corollary to shame] are not generally seen in middle-class writing; normative templates determine what it explicit and what is coded. Middle-class questionings of [the felt experience of] our class erode and fragment pride. Nickie Roberts describes the role of representations in fiction, particularly autobiographical ones, as ‘part of the desire to establish a sense of history, which is how you know yourself’. Lived experience unrepresented and unvalued, measured against that which is so overwhelmingly valued and which holds no resonance for you, complicates and potentially denies avenues of self-knowledge and aspiration to the working-class subject.

Quite by accident, Brenda had once read a book which voiced all she had ever felt and from then on she had a …very real need for this new knowledge. [italics added]

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211 Roberts, N. “Little Memories of a Lancashire Childhood”, in *The Common Thread*, 47
212 Buddin, S. “Near the Knuckle”, in *The Common Thread*, 210. Brenda’s husband John suggests that Brenda might benefit from a chat with the doctor. The doctor suggests she ‘not think too deeply’ lest she become *dissatisfied*. 
Holmes argues that complex representations of working-class women are available through the depiction of the domestic sphere, which is ‘never trivial…which celebrates ordinary lives’. Holmes offers as reference, Ruth Park’s *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man’s Orange*, as well as parts of Gray’s *Animal Shop* and Hewett’s *Bobbin’ Up*. I am not entirely persuaded that the particular domestic sphere of a Surry Hills slum kitchen is adequate to redress broad, representations of working-class women’s lived experience. But reading through a narrative lens, I am reminded,

> There isn't any 'single' story of life that is free of ambiguity and contradiction and that can handle all of the contingencies in life. These ambiguities, contradictions and contingencies stretch our meaning-making resources. In this process we often elevate or invoke some of the sub-stories of our lives and it is this multistoried nature of life that requires at least a degree of active mediation on our behalf…

There is anxiety for me in the representation of Mumma’s Catholic, alcoholic kitchen as in any way indicative of working-class felt experience (*The Harp in the South*). That it is not my experience of my class background, but would resonate for many women I know and whose work I’ve read, points up the intra-tensions in any dialogue of recuperation. A critical framework for the reception of working-class writing, particularly that of women necessitates a willingness to engage with the diversity within notions of difference, including that of class. Dunbar-Ortiz has a very different experience of class from myself, or Carolyn Steedman, yet many of the subject positions of the ‘Okie’ dust bowl resonate. The anxiety caused me by the array of differences within working-class identity points up in my theoretical (and felt!) response. This is instructive in terms of the reception of *middle-class* anxiety. I am sure it operates in a similar way, particularly in terms of the construction of subject positions. Studies of late twentieth century feminism demonstrate that the subject position

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213 Holmes, *Blue Collar, Red Dress*, 28
214 Bubenzer et al, *Michael White*, 72
woman does not necessarily create empathic recognitions around other subject positions (which are sexed female). The response to this has been to pluralise feminism, rather than to reflexively engage our own anxieties. Of course many feminists have sought to reflect, and the notion of a universal feminism is clearly absurd. But in fact, feminisms have developed in large part because of a belief by many othered women, that middle-class western, (white) feminism could not further othered interests. Thus there could not be enfranchisement of othered women while the interests of white feminism were inimical and so lacking felt empathy (let alone that white western women othered their ‘sisters’ in the first place!). While I fiercely endorse the pluralising of feminisms, I have no illusions that all feminisms are, like marxism, primarily a social movement of interests as defined by the centred group. That social movements might address multiple and contradictory interests simply through a moral compulsion to enfranchise others, through a commitment to social justice, seems unlikely given the experience of marxism and feminism. The value placed on the felt and lived experience of the other (and ownership of that experience by the othered) does not augur well for master narratives, which is why their hollow claims to universality have been so discredited.

Holmes argues for representations which allow dignity in difference, in ordinariness, thereby enabling positive interpellations. We need access to inner life, ways of knowing, so archetypes don’t further dispossess us, in part by reassuring middle-class anxiety but also, by allowing empathy with all the diverse ‘othereds’. Aside from these issues of engaging difference, we need to be reminded of the many guises in which class manifests in late capitalism. Kaufman and Heller argue that cultural theory has to be raised ‘to an entirely new level of abstraction in order to be able to grasp the utter and increasing
concreteness of capitalist power'.\textsuperscript{215} While treading the minefield of over-determinism, we must recognise that diverse stories allow us to see how such hegemonic practices operate on many of us, as well as how they might be resisted. Importantly, representations offer validation and acceptance, allowing classed selves to consider possibility; to develop agency. Thus they are fundamental to this additional, interior component of a social justice project.

Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
Foole, said my Muse to me, looke in thy heart, and write.
Sir Philip Sidney, From ‘Astrophil and Stella’

The Classed Subject as Scholar

Fiction, Theory, Scholarship

This chapter serves as the explicitly exegetical component of the
dissertation accompanying the novel, Crossing Bowen Street. Whilst
there is no one position on what constitutes exegetical practice, I have
included those learning outcomes and insights which result from the
reflexivity I have engaged. Reflexivity is fundamental to my
contentions on social class but it is also an inherent (and highly
desirable) part of exegetical writing.

In this chapter I examine the pedagogical and scholarly processes
emerging from my exegetical practice, in terms both literary and
theoretical. I do this by considering the subjectivities I brought to this
study and the transformation which has occurred in them as a result of
it. In conclusion, I consider the underpinning notions of disciplinary
practice and knowledge production, which operate to classify and
create status orders around knowledge production and scholarship.

meta-writing

The Oxford Dictionary defines exegesis as ‘critical explanation or
interpretation of a text’. In the context of a dissertation in the
‘discipline’ of creative writing exegetical writing can be understood as
‘meta’ writing; it interrogates itself in various generic/discursive forms.
It expands reflexive practice and writer self-consciousness. I argue
that submitting a long fiction project for a higher degree facilitates this
reflexivity in ways that have not occurred (for me) in novel projects
undertaken outside the academy. In considering the psychic,
emotional and cognitive processes engaged, we can explore critical
instances in the felt experience of the writer. This underscores the dynamic scholarly and creative possibility of the higher degree in creative writing. The novel and theoretical exegesis create complementary terrain for consideration of the problematic. This ‘third space’, this ‘praxis’, has allowed me to consider a range of notions pertinent to my own scholarly subjectivity, which is the terrain of the accompanying novel, *Crossing Bowen Street*.

The dynamic reflexive relation between the arms of the dissertation continually shaped my thinking into new territories: the classed subject, the scholarly subject, the many and varied subject positions, and their relation. To say I am transformed by the learning outcomes would not be too strong. I am conscious as I have gained more research experience and confidence that I have tried to do too much. This is a trope in doctoral education; advisors and supervisors encourage their students to narrowly define topics. But there is ambiguity in this. Ambiguity gradually became one of the hallmarks of this study and the research which informs it. As I learned to sit with and accept ambiguity as a form of reconciliation in itself, I made rich and powerful discoveries. While I am conscious that doctoral students are usually advised to limit their enquiries, I would absolutely follow this path again. I would not compromise the companions to a wide net: broader knowledge, critical skills, capabilities, personal traits and insights which I could only gain this way.

The recognition of the role of ambiguity not only makes for complex and exciting scholarship: it bears on the fiction. It is like the theory of researcher causation; the process of exegesis relates to and necessarily affects the fiction, which in turn extends the exegetical process, which continues to inform the fiction. That helix becomes a third distinct entity in a creative writing submission: novel, exegesis, and their relation/praxis. In gauche terms, I sought to explore the theory and the practice of working-class writing, but in the process I
explored the ‘doing’ of fiction and theory while exploring, continually adding additional layers to the process.

This layered model speaks directly to my hostile journey through my own understanding of social class. I have emerged through this doctorate with not just a totally different, fluid, understanding of class and gender, but with an entirely different approach to scholarship and theory and a new set of theoretical tools and technologies. I set out with a hypothesis, claiming I intended to ‘explore’ identity for working-class women in the academy, but in fact I had strong implicit views which I realise now I was determined to underscore and prove. I wanted the doctoral work to redefine the high moral ground on which I had been able to walk as a woman of working-class background. Assumptions and polemic have fallen away, largely because the exegetical process uncovered theoretical tools which resonated for me, but not before the ones to which I had clung were revealed as inadequate. I have even had to raze the way I do theory. While I may be unusual, I have always known that I ‘did’ theory. I understood that my beliefs were values and that others held very different ones. I am convinced that there is no value free space in the social world and therefore we all ‘do theory’ even if we are tacit about it and convinced it’s merely common sense; theory is just the term we apply to consciously engaged values.\(^{216}\) I had intended to rewrite the subject position ‘working-class woman’ through the literary. Now I’m not even sure a limited and bounded subject position exists, nor that there is merit in creating one, if creating bounded subject positions is even possible. I have theorised my own writing, and creatively written out my theories, even enmeshing them in part. While what I have uncovered is all chaos and maelstrom, I have never been more clear.

\(^{216}\) Equally, I am aware many scholars trained in theoretical practice do not extend it to their values or hold values inimical to their theoretical position. This constitutes another profound learning outcome of the research.
Reconciliation can be many things, including ambiguity. The subjectivities of social class create potentially endless complexities as the many permutations of cultural capital and values are engaged. While class is felt as subjectivity, the interior is also where our agency operates to re-author and re-frame.

It is fitting to consider the learning outcomes of the research and reflexive processes; these form the intellectual and emotional ‘working out’ and approximate that which we were required to show in junior maths classes. I now understand my primary teachers’ emphasis on ‘showing the working out’. It shows when, where and how learning occurred. I set out with certain goals, as articulated in the introduction, and throughout the exegesis. These research problems change and shift over time; that is the nature of research. But those goals I have not met I have exceeded (or revealed as irrelevant). Ambiguity has taught me that the ‘how’ this occurred is less important than the ‘why’. It is not necessary to argue for rigid, deeply defined working-class subjectivities; in fact such rigid classification characterises the work of the positivist scholars I critique. Yet when we discuss our class identities, casually, over food, describing experiences in which class themes resonated, we so often locate the point of entry in occupation and income. I liken this to finding purchase on the edge of class identity and lifting it for the rich chaos underneath, like trying to raise sticking plaster. In my frenzy to discredit the approaches of political economists, who were merely uncomfortable with subjectivity, I tried to find points of entry for class through interiority. But as a poststructuralist, I have always been convinced that the interior is a reflection of socially constructed discourses and arrangements. I have found myself taking part in the very discussion I decried, lifting the band-aid as the point of entry, and finding happy validation in the contradictions in individual class positions, interests and cultural capital. If the tangled skein of our class starts in a discussion of economic identities and opportunities, this is merely the social informing the interior. It is only a threat, a limitation, if we accept the
common practice of failure to recognise the subjectivities of hidden injuries. This is contradictory and chaotic. It is also a reconciliation which allows me some peace. It works. Barry allows agency for our personal truths when he says:

Many basic notions are actually givens; fluid and unstable things, rather than essences. No overarching fixed truths can be established.\(^{217}\)

**Fiction and writing**

As described in the methodology section of this thesis, I undertook the novel *Crossing Bowen Street* by identifying ‘vignettes’ I would write on aspects of the character’s trajectory, which I thought would ‘flesh out’ the topic of the novel; the relationship of feminists of different class. As is always the case with fiction writing projects, I found what came out of the pen bore only peripheral relation to what I had intended. Initially, I tried to ‘force’ the fiction I wrote against the conflict I had with the theory. The motifs of class of which I was so critical in others’ fiction appeared repeatedly in my work. When I just wrote, ‘as it came’, I felt great resonance with the metaphors for class I had discovered, but the story seemed ephemeral at best. There was ambiguity again.

I have elected to submit a dissertation which offers ‘balance’ in terms of the weight of its two arms. Normally, an exegesis submitted with a doctoral fiction project would be 20% at the most. This exegesis is substantially longer, because the enquiry which documents the research questions is best presented thus. Were the fiction project 80% of the dissertation, the enquiry would necessarily be very different. This throws into relief notions of disciplinary practice, which I consider again below. The fiction is submitted only in part, whereby the themes of the novel are accessible and the creative and theoretical dilemmas (and resolutions sought) are illustrated.

Whilst the novel is ‘finished’ in conceptual terms,\(^\text{218}\) in the sense that all the geographical and psychic terrain has been graphed and mapped, there is still work to be done to reflect the shifts Meg’s journey takes: how did she change her psychic terrain? How were certain subjectivities transformed? In terms of answering the research questions, it is the fact that this felt experience has transformed in Meg that is significant. The meanings I sought to reach through the fiction are now available to me, and largely, if chaotically, reconciled. The undulating psychic terrain is fascinating, but my study must have some parameters and the fact the terrain undulates will be another enquiry. Equally it is true that the extent and range of the novel are effectively determined by what ‘meaning’ is made through the writing; these meanings I have outlined make it necessarily a longer novel. The research for this thesis has so continually informed the novel, it explores a canvas vastly wider than I could have envisaged at the outset. The transformation of the subject positions I allowed myself in relation to the novel are reflected in the breadth of its canvas.

Late in the fiction writing process I began to introduce journal entries written in an omniscient first-person voice, about the character. I did this as I sought to describe the emotional modes of Meg’s trajectory, partly because it draws on my own, and partly because I felt it necessary to a legitimate fiction project. I was happy with the interior monologues, albeit in this omniscient voice, which I produced. They immediately described much of what I had set out to write, which has not been a common experience in writing this novel. But I felt uneasy; something was missing and I took tactical short cuts to try and include

\footnote{As discussed in Chapter One, I have chosen to submit the novel in a form which illustrates the research and learning goals and outcomes of this program.}
This process is simply an inverted way of doing what I’ve been doing throughout; examining what came out of the pen and finding it wanting, inadequate to the project I had identified. My response, which forms a familiar pattern now, is to be hostile at myself as a writer, to see myself needing to ‘burrow’ into a topic, to write on or around it for sometime before actually finding the voice. But this is not true, particularly for Crossing Bowen Street. What comes out of the pen, and the process of its emergence, is the story. Or the stories, because the dialectic between the fiction and thesis around it is a story in itself. The story doesn’t lie, because it problematises the singular, Cartesian notion of truth; this demonstrates the efficacy of deconstructionist theory; there are multiple truths, contradictory co-existing stories. There are at least three stories, which in turn weave to form one, which is full of contradiction. I am having trouble keeping track of them myself, which must mean an enormous challenge for the reader.

I had a story I set out to write, as described in Framing. And I have a story which I ended up writing; in many parts these two stories overlap and share themes. Yet the written story has much in it that I never envisaged or articulated. I had no idea it was waiting to be written. I resisted it powerfully, raged at it and myself, berated myself; as the fiction began to resemble the heavy-handed ‘shopping list’ type class novels I was critiquing, I was bitterly disappointed in myself. I would sit in my favourite cafes and write and what would happen can best be compared to driving a car with poor alignment (or a flat tyre): it pulled to one side. This was particularly true in the chapters set in Meg’s early university days. I found myself describing Meg’s clothes, in relation to women she met as university, as a way of depicting her class. But I was critical of other work which did this. I could not

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219 These journal entries have been reworked into letters or parts of later vignettes. See Crossing Bowen Street: Letter to Anna? Whom.
220 See Crossing Bowen Street: Acceptance, Arrival, The Ball, Beyond.
make her speech ring true and yet the notion that there is a ‘true’ working-class speech for Meg’s milieu horrifies me; how is this measured?  

On re-reading more recently I felt the mixed working- and lower middle-class backgrounds of Meg’s friends was easily recognisable. Is it their concerns? Their politics? A representation as heavy-handed as Rosemary Marshall’s dislike of private school girls? Rosie is hardly a heroine of the novel, but it is apparent to me now that her fears and inadequacies are laid very bare through her dismissal of Jennifer Wren and ‘all private school kids except Kelly’. I did not at the time recognise myself writing such a subject position. Meg experienced much conflict with Rosie and some of this was attributable to the class images they mirrored to each other. Meg’s resistance was expressed by seeking change and growth and Rosie’s by stubborn rejection of such change, which I now recognise as a way of holding intact the subject position which is familiar. The powerful insights I have developed into classed subjectivities, and the concept of agency help me somewhat with this. I have met many Rosie Marshalls in my life. But the trajectory mapped out for her stings me. It is real, it is what Rosie wanted and what she would have done. But it can also be seen thus; Rosie was very happy to take up the subject position rejected by Meg. The emphasis from Meg’s perspective is the horror of limitation, of settling, of accepting Pete Danville’s minimal aspiration which would stifle and destroy Meg’s own. That Rosie aspires similarly to Pete is potentially dismissive of the fear which might underpin such a subject position. Pete’s aspirations might be described as safe. But the fear of aspiration is a class trope in my experience. This is a recurrent theme in the autobiographical writing of working-class women, that their

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222 Crossing Bowen Street: Going Bowling
communities and families are uncomfortable with choices outside the normative realm of experience. This is a subject position to which I can certainly relate; the literary exploration of it has allowed me to abandon it in my own life.

The pull to one side, away from the centre, was exactly how I felt as I wrote. I intended whole chapters devoted to the friction and rage between feminists of different classes at university. Ironically, when I stopped resisting this ‘pull to the left’, which turned out to be the self, I started writing those originally planned vignettes. But they were secondary, always peripheral. The novel depicts Meg in conflict with middle-class women such as Heloise Waul. But Heloise is an inspiration to Meg and mentors her powerfully. Within a short time, Meg has identified a trail she saw blazed by Heloise. Agnes is also a powerful support in the novel, and remains so throughout Meg’s life. Her upper middle-class background is no obstacle to their friendship; Agnes as a character demonstrates the role of reflexivity in mitigating difference in relationships. This is a fundamental theme of this thesis.

relation, dialectic

The culmination of a critical framework is for me the literary production of meaningful, diverse representations of class in fiction. I know what I want to say and depict but I struggle to find motifs for it, let alone to textualise it. This operates even at the level of describing social and

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224 While subtextual conflict with Heloise is inferred through *Crossing Bowen Street*, it arises explicitly in *Divergence*. 
interpersonal experiences. The finely tuned interbalance of class and gender described by McClintock as coming into ‘existence in and through relation to each other - if in contradictory and conflictual ways’\textsuperscript{226} creates impediments to a dialogue otherwise based on connections: experience of class across gender, and gender across class. I am seeking to write a place and experiences which were entirely foreign to me because women like me had not been visibly written into them, and so there were few ways of knowing how many times ‘we’ may have passed through. I have found myself within others (working class men, middle class women) but there is almost always something without. In Crossing Bowen Street, Meg refers to this as having ‘no safe place’.\textsuperscript{227} It is rare to be able to communicate that (mediated) experience across class/gender lines. My life choices and occupation alienate me from many women with whom I grew up or would have previously connected. The space where I can connect is usually the space of ideas, intellectuals, the academy, where so much disconnection continues to inflect the equation. Every involvement, every access is conditional on loss. Underpinning this is the status order which operates in universities around class; while this is true in many milieus, scholars in the humanities have access to complex frames of analysis to augment reflexivity.

As with every other aspect of this enquiry, there exists a positive dimension. I can find subtle ways to enfranchise those students. Those of us who have ‘lacked’ cultural capital, have little or no language to articulate our felt experience, so sometimes it remains unspoken. This challenge becomes that I most seek in my professional life. I am morally compelled to try to facilitate this dialogue but it is much more than that. Knowledge and education allow us to

\textsuperscript{225} Crossing Bowen Street: Cusp
\textsuperscript{227} Crossing Bowen Street: Divergence
become who we want to be. If our students come from places where that possibility has been prescribed and limited, and I can enfranchise them in the smallest way towards expanding that possibility, then I live these scholarly ideals to the highest level. This may be as simple as refraining from asking first year students what school they went to in a tutorial introduction. It may more esoteric, involving the recognition that possibility merely becomes an open question, a space to be filled with agency, a refuting of pre- and proscription for all the incarnations of working-class lives.

**reflexivity as scholarship**

The richest learning has come through the reflexivity necessitated by all this praxis and interrelation. The novel allowed me to write out the absurdity of one dimensional responses to class. Therefore, with the novel as an emotional touchstone, I finally have managed to fashion from the theory an *enabling* frame which makes sense of my interior experience of class, and my need to seek reconciliation with experience, at least *for now and for me*. This is the *ultimate* point of entry and it has exceeded my expectations for this project. I anticipated a new linguistic framework with which to discuss social class. I have abandoned that; language is not wholly the limitation in this instance (although it is a huge issue). The framework required was really a simple map of where to look. Where to start? *Within*. The interior is not some territory we defend as beyond theory (I am not a believer in anything being outside theory). But we need to reflect a great deal in order to theorise our subject selves. If anything, a fiction project has impelled this discovery for me.

As I have written two novels for graduate research programs, I have reflected on them and sought to create them *while immersed* in theory and analysis pertaining to their concerns. I knew at the outset that I had not previously read representations of class which spoke of me. For me it has been scholarship which made the sense. For my MA, an autobiographical novel which traced a journey of emotional trauma
allowed me to ‘write myself’ creatively out of the subject position I had occupied and into one which brought with it a powerful internal locus of control. Theory taught me how to do this, but fiction was the tool. This time, theory has led me a merry, tempestuous dance. The author is not dead and neither is social class, but my relation to myself as both these things (writer, working-class) has changed irrevocably and I am more able to reconcile it. Perhaps the project of reconciling it has settled in me. Reflexivity has allowed me to meld theory, subjectivity and practice together, because only by reflecting, on the dilemma, but equally on my learning about it, have I been able to see meaning in chaos. The learning which has emerged from this reflexive practice is described through this chapter.

**Discipline(ing) Rigour**

As an only child, I was surrounded by adults throughout my pre-school years and I was known to be ‘precocious’. When I attended primary school at four and a half years, I was horrified by these noisy messy creatures, whom it appeared I was to emulate. I made one friend, Janet, who seemed more sensible than the others. One cold afternoon I went to her house to play and I was invited to have ‘tea’ (the evening meal). Janet was what my grandmother called a ‘change of life’ baby; she had adult siblings. One of these, Karen, was 24 years old and had just graduated with her PhD. The photographs had arrived and I was entranced by the floppy velvet hat and the sober robes. I knew what a doctor was, my mother was a nurse. I asked Karen what sort of doctor she would be. She smiled, came and sat next to me and spoke sentences that remain rich and crystal in my mind. She said, “I wrote a big book, about something that really matters to me, and I know so much about it now, they call me a Doctor of it.” Could there be a better way to tell a five year old about a PhD? The seeking of knowledge

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which ‘matters to us’ is the core of aspiration and possibility, in any context. I carried with me the notion that you can seek things that matter to you. In a world that was terrified of aspiration, I was unusual. Aspiration is so often denied working-class people; I am the first in my family to seek and obtain the education I longed for and that is only by the policy of social democratic governments and the largesse of tax payers. Aspiration sometimes functions for our psychic survival; it did this for me. As this is caught up with the social classifications we experience in so many facets of life, it becomes fraught and contradictory.

We ‘classify’ universities. Throughout my academic career I have had a fascination for ‘elite’ universities. By this, I mean those universities that are famous for academic excellence and rigour: Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, and in the Australian context, the Group of Eight, especially University of Melbourne, which is the richest and most privileged university in the land. I have always assumed that this was driven by my passion for new knowledge, scholarly community and excellence. Only recently have I considered that my uncertainty of my right to be there might be identified as a Lacanian abjection; resulting in a constant need to prove worth as seen in the other. The implicit corollary herein is the demonstration of a greater capacity for rigour. There are also certain ironies in desire for the elite university, like the absence of working-class people within them, and their role in reproducing draconian social arrangements and gate-keeping the very means of changing young people’s life chances.

A hallmark of universities is surely a willingness to facilitate and support enquiry of all kinds, to ‘wonder’ aloud, to value ‘knowing that’ as much as ‘knowing how’; indeed, these are values I hope humanities scholars seek to defend and enshrine, as governments and vice-chancellors reconstruct them. We are all aware of attacks on academic freedoms in the recent past; that awareness begs an assumption that intellectual freedom has at some point characterised
academic life. In the vignette *Courting the Enemy*, Meg discusses with her colleague Janet, the Associate Dean of Health Sciences, their anger at injustices done to fellow scholars. One has lost her email account temporarily, because she used it to build support for a petition against an honorary doctorate granted to a former dictator. Another has lost indemnity, when he criticised a state government initiative within his area of expertise. The Minister concerned sued him and his university (Philip) abandoned him. These examples are composites of events in recent Australian history. They are inimical to collegiality. They are part of the same implicit thinking which classifies knowledge and research in hierarchies, allowing value only for certain performative or lucrative enquiries. Rigour requires open, fearless dialogue to flourish, so we can identify, articulate and defend it in myriad and innovative forms.

Any discussion of rigour in the context of artistic or creative dissertations must necessarily be accompanied by more stringent definition of terms and clarification of concepts. I can defend the rigour of non-traditional higher degree by research submissions passionately, not just because I am about to submit my second such, but because of my experience in the field as an administrator and researcher. The problem that I see, and the strength potentially provided in the exegesis, is the accessible, disseminable *documentation* of that rigour. What are the new or original knowledges, theories or processes that preparing creative work in the academy reveal and enable? They are many, varied and profound. These knowledges and approaches include enquiries such as this one. Additionally, they offer multi-faceted praxis and epistemologies that are the research methodologies of work-based research. They are sites of excellence and innovation, which make our managers happy as well as justifying our continued existence which unfortunately is increasingly necessary. Our issue is to *document* that excellence, innovation and rigour in ways meaningful to the scholarly community *within which we have chosen to work*. It is our unwillingness to do this, as a young
‘discipline’ and practice, which has informed many of the difficulties we have. It is crucial to understanding and respect amongst scholars generally; we must evidence our demands for parity in calculations of research publications and income. But this matters at a moral level; huge technological and scientific advancements continue around us. If social and humanities research does not keep pace with, and continue to problematise and theorise, global arrangements, subjectivities are lost and mistaken. Difference is denied, even constructed as a threat and the world is all too familiar with the consequences of cruelty and injustice which follow. My researches allow me to deconstruct the discourse of our Prime Minister as he vilifies Muslim refugees and indigenous Australians. Our researches as scholars inform, and translate into, social policy. Surely this ‘social’ intention must be part of our motivation in any enquiry?

Classing Knowledge and Epistemologies

We see that trenchant criticisms surround the presence of creative writing programs in universities. I encountered this throughout my MA program, when senior scholars would nod during colloquia, and ask me at the end how a novel could constitute an MA. I was flummoxed by what I saw as flagrantly outmoded thinking. Universities conduct vigorous course approval processes, through committees

₂₂⁹ I would argue that this extends to much creative and ‘project’ based work, particularly in the visual and performing arts. See Perry, G. and Brophy, K. “Eat Your Peas: the creative PhD thesis and the Exegesis”, in Bartlett, A. & Mercer, G. 2001. Postgraduate Research Supervision: transforming [R]Elations, Peter Lang: New York. This is especially the case when the work is submitted for award of a higher degree. Yet non-traditional doctorates are proliferating, along with diverse ways of presenting research outcomes. See Usher, R. 2002. “Diversity of Doctorates in the Knowledge
made up of scholars representing all faculties. The question was disingenuous. Still, I hear scholars at my university telling their creative graduate students to ‘bury the art’ in a research proposal, in order to persuade the engineers and scientists who sit on research committees and have failed to engage with the accreditation of programs which offer artistic submission (let alone collegiality). It is also true that while much of this anxiety is generated by scholars from traditional disciplines, it also exists within creative programs, as to their role, function and epistemology(ies). As a novelist I am convinced that long fiction is the best form of sounding board through which I seek to ‘make sense’ of my class trajectory and subjectivities. I have been constantly aware of the conflicting subject positions I occupy around this choice and of my own contribution to this ‘anxious’ discourse.\textsuperscript{230}

My research (and professional practice) in this area has conflated with my interest in working-class identity and provided the means to an epiphany by which I have reconciled not just the anxiety of my position, but part of my awkward subjectivity in the academy.

Can creative writing be called a discipline? The answer is: of course, and no, not without difficulty. Humanities scholars should be able to reconcile the practicalities of this position (that is, naming programs, providing codes for enrolment purposes) while maintaining a dialogue within their communities of practice as to the intellectual parameters and implications. Interdisciplinary approaches and researches are increasingly the norm in humanities scholarship. For practical purposes we name these approaches: cultural studies, communication studies, gender studies. While they helpfully and rightly draw on the


practices of English, history, sociology, psychology and so on, they also bring to the table specific epistemologies which are arguably their own. It is impossible and undesirable to draw rigid boundaries around these notions. English, which may be seen as the parent discipline to creative writing, was historically berated by elite universities. Many in creative writing wish to eschew the disciplinary tag; equally, there are initiatives in research training which recognise modes of knowledge production which are not primarily disciplinary in nature; these may be referred to as work-place or practitioner-based enquiries and include work such as the novel presented here. I feel loyalty to the discipline of English, for the sheer excitement and joy of texts, that they reflect us, and for the practices of criticism and theory in which I have been so ably trained by English scholars. Yet Foucault’s rendering of the word ‘discipline’ surely resonates for poststructuralists. All the implications of rigidity and punishment might be argued to apply. In Australia, it is no real surprise that only the elite Group of Eight universities have English programs so named. The rest style their programs as communication or literary studies. Explicit adherence to notions of rigid disciplinary parameters, which we know blur and leak, is clearly a form of classifying.

I suggest that much of the tension around ‘creative’ scholarship relates to assumptions about intellectual rigour and epistemologies. This operates on two levels. Firstly, it is based on an assumption that what constitutes rigour is unproblematic; it is known and agreed. Thus

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rigour is characterised by values of ‘universal scientficity’\textsuperscript{233} and truth. Basically positivist in construction, such a definition of rigour lacks any reflexivity, nor does it interrogate its own practice. A further irony is that this is not limited to unreconstructed marxists or empiricists. This value-laden model of knowledge management and ownership in the academy (which is assumed to be the owner), is equally engaged by many poststructuralists and postmodernists, who may argue for reflexivity in their work, but cannot draw on it for their practice, let alone reflect on or problematise their own value positions. Hostility to creative production of knowledge can unite even the most disparate theoretical factions.

The implications of the primacy given to ‘rigour’ are considerable, especially for the creative scholar, as notions of intellectual merit impel our opportunities and inform collegiality in scholarly communities. We can see once again tacit subscription to Enlightenment tropes; academic values of truth, reason and freedom are not interrogated for difference or for their relation to the privilege of the centre. If I endorse these values at all, it is for their manifestation in respect for others’ enquiries, for methodologies and epistemologies unfamiliar to me. Surely the seeking of a dialogue emanates from respect for our shared community of scholarly activities, which enable and facilitate learning?

Edwards and Usher argue that universities must respond to a ‘globalised knowledge market’, switching emphases from ‘traditional academic values of truth and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge’.\textsuperscript{234} The traditional truths of the academy are described as ‘…universal, objective, disciplined, planned, tested and reliable findings’.\textsuperscript{235} Whilst I

\textsuperscript{235} Edwards and Usher, Globalisation and Pedagogy, 87
am sceptical of globalisation as empowerment for working people.\textsuperscript{236} I do believe that pervasive enlightenment values obscure the operation of hierarchies in the academy. This has implications for any creative scholar, especially one undergoing doctoral training, as it informs the intellectual community within which we work. Other scholarly values are destabilised by this phenomenon. Notions of academic freedom, collegiality, value for the enquiries and epistemologies of others, are undermined by this intellectual privileging, and this is the notion that demonstrates the class themes operating herein.

\textit{classifying knowledge production}

Gibbons, Limoges, and Nowotny\textsuperscript{237} et al identify a ‘new production’ of knowledge which they call ‘mode two’ and which is dichotomous with traditional, disciplinary university knowledge, styled as ‘mode one’. Mode one knowledge is described as ‘culturally concentrated’ and subject to the evaluation described above, it is inherently (and intensely) hierarchical. Gibbon’s et al’s notion of knowledge production (in a knowledge economy) is insightful and useful, although I would argue more for the questions it raises than the terrain it seeks to map. While a recognition of power relations informing knowledge production is crucial to an accountable epistemology, Gibbons et al have ironically offered a model which lacks reflexivity in itself, although its authors are critical of this absence in the mode one practices they identify.

\textsuperscript{236} I suspect workers in Nike factories all over South East Asia would also be unpersuaded. The death rates in these ‘sweatshops’ have yet to receive any serious attention from scholar-advocates of globalisation. Yet access to the global economy is frequently cited as the new liberation for workers of developing countries. See Klein, N. 2002. \textit{Fences and Windows: despatches from the front line of globalisation}, Picador: New York.

Mode two knowledge, as defined by Gibbons et al, lends itself to the enquiry contained in this dissertation. It is constructed as ‘socially distributed knowledge’, seen as emerging from sites in (and to) which it is more easily accessible, such as workplaces; it is knowledge which is applied and which seeks social ends. The usefulness of knowledge produced through mode two practices is determined by its performativeness; it is differentiated from mode one in that it is neither hierarchical, nor ‘gate-kept’, although I would argue that many sites of mode two knowledge production involve their own peer review processes. Trade unions are an example of mode two knowledge production, as are special interest social groups such as photography or car clubs. Knowledge is acquired through informal learning, which is arguably a characteristic of many mode two sites. This model attracts me because of my commitment to produce a novel (and research) which challenges limiting representations and subject positions; I am committed to producing socially distributed knowledge.

Mode one is presented in contrast as knowledge produced through traditional academic and disciplinary applications, which relies on peer-reviewed scholarly communities of practice for validation. It seeks to maintain concentration of its knowledges and production practices in the cultural realm of the university, with which ‘mode one’ is apparently synonymous.

My fundamental concern with the Gibbons et al model is that it offers the two modes as dichotomised; as parallel lines which can never meet and which contain in themselves homogeneous practices, not in relation to the knowledge that emerges through them, but in terms of the epistemologies and methodologies they value and employ. Mode two knowledge production is privileged as highly desirable, and as occupying some sort of intellectual high moral ground. Mode one is treated pejoratively, with no recognition of the relation between these two ‘status orders’ or the power relations around knowledge production
which connect them. Yet much scholarship in the arts/humanities is both culturally concentrated and socially distributed. The way we research and theorise is necessarily rarefied. Those abstractions which formed new knowledge 35 years ago now inform and underpin much public policy; rape and gay/lesbian law reform, environmental practices, even seat-belt and drink driving laws, were first explored in scholarly journals. I see many academics who are committed to socially distributed knowledge, who nevertheless engage mode one practices of gate-keeping and hierarchy. I attribute this to the need for status. I have now reconciled the contradiction between this need for status and the excellent, socially powerful research so many undertake, and for which they advocate. Status is a way we resist and challenge those classified subject positions about which we are still defensive. A re-working of the Gibbons et al model has enabled me to reach this reconciliation.

A significant aspect for my learning throughout this project has been my discovery that I engaged these very practices. My defensive discomfort with my chosen mode; my anxiety about being in a ‘writing’ program (as opposed to a discipline) has complicated aspects of my work. How did I conclude that disciplinary work was superior in rigour and critical engagement to work-based enquiry? The answer is that I have imbibed this ‘mode one’ view throughout my academic career. There are examples throughout the novel where Meg tries to give her power away; she is ready to accept the subject position that she is not ‘able’ to be the scholar she wants to be. I could write that position easily because I was the same. By accepting uncritically the dominant paradigm that rigour and excellence can be classified, I tacitly identified with the approved mode. But I need to write and I wanted higher degrees. So my early experience as a creative writing graduate student was at odds with itself.

I have delivered more papers and sought more publications, precisely because at some tacit level (which I did not admit to myself) I believed I had something to prove. My emphasis from the outset has been that I
wanted to write a ‘scholarly’ companion thesis to the novel (the implication being that this is not normal practice for candidates in writing programs). This developed into a powerful, if shrill and unreflective, diatribe on the requirements which should be imposed on graduate writing students. I recollect that throughout my ‘writing’ career in universities, I have been aware that there was an unresolved tension around this issue. Where is it said that any enquiry, any epistemology, might be superior? What is the greater value of disciplinary practice? I have never had a clear answer from a colleague but I have concluded nonetheless: it is because gate-keeping is easier. It is about control, which in turn is about protecting sources of status, which is always about class subjectivities.

I recognised the binaries inflecting my work, and problematised (many of) them, allowing me to locate the class subjectivity operating, and explore and reconcile it. Ironically, I did this by applying my newly articulated critical framework; reflexively problematising my own subject positions and assumptions as I went about critical practice. I interrogated my own tacit construction of ‘rigour’ through an application of (some of) the ideas of Gibbons et al. Rigour, it turns out, is determined through practice; it is situational. It involves exhaustive ‘problematising’, self-interrogation, critiquing one’s own position (all elements of reflexivity). But it can only be defined and demonstrated in the ‘doing’. This is a huge challenge to the notions of rigour one might infer from ‘mode one’ characteristics.

Initially, this model allowed me to frame my anxieties about my own program, its ‘rigour’ and my shadowy definition of this. Yet a new tension appeared. Something didn’t sit. I had problematised my original position and developed a new and authentic one, which allowed for all my scholarly, creative and political values. I could not immediately articulate my discomfort with Gibbons et al and particularly with the secondary interpretations I was reading. Socially distributed knowledge is my raison d’etre, it is the reason I do this work; the social role of
universities and scholars underscores my passion for them and what they do. Why then was I so vulnerable to anxiety around loaded constructions of rigour? Because the associated subjectivity creates an inadequate subject position very familiar to me. It resonates with class. Classifying knowledge is the same hierarchical, valuing process as classifying people. Many scholars who dismiss creative or performance based enquiry use a language which questions the rigour of the scholars whose work they question; it is personalised. I had unconsciously engaged this. Part of the reflexive process of exegesising has been to bring my engagement into consciousness and unpack it. This process repeatedly highlights elements on my own classed subjectivity.

**scholarly subjectivities and elite universities**

Recently, my uncle, who like all my family did not finish high school, asked me what I would do with my PhD. I tried to explain, but as my uncle holds to a right wing, populist political agenda, which is unapologetically homophobic and misogynist, we shared little value for my commitment to working-class education in the humanities.

My uncle went on to tell me about the only other PhD he knows, a scientist who stayed at his home near the University of Central Queensland, where this young man was a student. My Uncle advised me that this man is now a Head of School in Physics at a recently constituted Queensland university. He has, I was told, '20 scientists under him'. Whilst my Uncle decries scientists because they tend to reject creationism and embrace evolution, he nevertheless made it clear that if you must get a PhD, this is the only respectable use for it.

I tell this story at length because my reflection on my reaction has been such a source of learning for me, explicitly in the context of the concerns of this thesis. My feelings as my uncle spoke were fierce and contradictory; as I felt them, and listened to him, I berated myself for them. But I have learned about subjectivities, subject positions, such
as these. They are reactions to the process of classifying, feeling oneself classified.

While I felt devastated that my work in cultural studies and creative writing will never persuade my uncle like physics would, fortunately I also occupied another subject position. I forgave myself, even as I thought these reactive, dismissive, diminishing thoughts of some innocent physics lecturer doing the hard yards of starting up a new school. This fierce, inauthentic defensiveness was born out of being classed yet again and found wanting. I sought refuge in my own status, thereby implying subscription to privilege as status. The class subjectivity resonates as need for approval, affirmation, validation from without. It resonates with the cry of lack: what about me? Another ironic learning outcome; once I railed against the classification of me, by middle-class others. But now I was close to hot angry tears as I was denied the same classification by my working-class uncle, who has never walked onto a university campus and who would withdraw all public monies from disciplines and researches that do not promote his religious values. Such is the power of lack in our subject positions, that I might overlook all this, as emotionally I sought recognition. Leaving aside the vast moral and political chasm between us (which is so much about the educational chasm between us), it is profound to experience these subjectivities so intensely while writing and theorising them. The brief intense rage I felt, even now, with all the privilege an outstanding public-funded education can provide, reminds me of the social and emotional consequences, of the injustices and cruelties of the class system. How deep they run, how hidden they are and how complex is their amelioration. I would not have reconciled this type of emotional pain over my class background, nor the theoretical difficulties and inadequacies which made no sense of that pain, were it not for the praxis of fiction, exegesis and their relation which has so richly informed my analysis and understanding. Good policies can address much of the disadvantage othered students face in tertiary education. But the mercurial, intangible experience described in this
thesis needs a point of entry beyond policy. As arts researchers, we are best equipped to translate subjectivities into public policy responses. As teachers, our insights must translate into teaching and curriculum practice, constantly informed by reflexivity.
Conclusion

This dissertation explicates the ideological and psychic conflicts at the heart of the novel *Crossing Bowen Street*. It considers the subjectivity of working-class women, in the process of becoming a subject. The classing of subjectivity is a theoretical motif of the thesis, as well as the journey of the novel. I have sought to answer the questions I posed about class consciousness in terms of a starting point (of entry) to the subject, the self, who we are or who we seek to become. I have found much marxist, feminist and even poststructuralist work unhelpful in terms of points of entry. Marxism has often lacked a recognition of the interiority of our classed subjectivities. Feminism had to pluralise to allow constitution of diverse identities; the feminism of the ‘second wave’ silenced as much as it sought to liberate. Poststructuralism has offered profound means to critique and deconstruct those theoretical limitations. Yet poststructuralism has struggled with class, as marxism and feminism have with identity and difference. marxist theory and analysis is a vast and complex field. While it has more recently been applied to identity, consciousness and felt experience, gender has continually been overlooked as mediating class positions; points of departure, which are external in etiology, are given primacy.

Reflexivity in critical practice allows us to trace our points of entry; we develop an awareness of the need to evaluate our practice for its efficacy for *difference*, whether that be (in this instance) for class or gender. Points of entry are key to this approach; indeed, to the argument of this thesis. Criticism that lacks reflexivity and self awareness will privilege its concerns accordingly. In scholarly work,
these concerns will likely be inflected with class specificities that have served to devalue the experience of many working-class women.

Cultural forms of representation are key to a project which incorporates reflexive critical practice; inclusive, diverse narratives write in a range of experiences, in turn representing these and reflecting that diversity back. In part, this is how we aspire, how we seek to ‘become’. Possibility is created, allowed ‘through to’ the margins, through representations which expand aspiration, which ask the question or allow it to be asked. Equally then, we need a reflexive theory of literary production, especially within the academy where these things are matters of explicit discourse. We need to understand how fiction (writing) ‘enables’ this. We need a narrative theory of literary production which explores the way fiction (or poetry, drama, reportage) might be applied to ‘make sense’ of the interior. While this project is well advanced, it is also undermined by the classification of knowledge in universities, by theoretical disputes about rigour and scholarly practice. While these debates often have epistemological (and pedagogical) merit, they may also potentially obscure. Value for diverse learning (and research) objectives and outcomes, allows us to move beyond a gate-keeping role, to a reflexive practice which celebrates the emerging and new knowledge located in marginal and subaltern experience. It is ironic to me that the site of enquiry, the university that privileges enquiry, is so often a place where everything is classified. A reflexive critical practice must extend to epistemologies, to scientificity, to discourse. It must *overtly inflect* all we do. This reflexivity allows the flourishing of multiple, chaotic points of entry. Such a practice is inimical to hierarchy. It is the opposite of gate-keeping and the realisation of the highest of collegiate values. Knowledge in all forms is what is privileged, rather than the ownership or legitimation of that knowledge.

When I uncover the resonance in a theoretical frame, when I feel the pulsating of ‘sense made’ it means I know what action to take, what to
do to address that which is theorised. This is the case in terms of improving the access of working-class students to tertiary education, not merely through public policy, but in psychological terms throughout their enrolment. I knew at the outset that asking students in a tutorial what schools they went to or where they lived or what they did all summer was not helpful to those who felt immediately set apart (and of course this is not always a class issue). I knew that constantly enfranchising difference in my discourse was crucial to helping ‘paint them in’ where they may not see themselves. But I did not understand the layers, the necessity to maintain this throughout undergraduate careers and into graduate studies. I knew for myself that subjectivity changed slowly and partially, and this enquiry has allowed me to develop practices to support and facilitate for students who have that experience that I meet in my career. It is because theories of subjectivity, poststructuralist in etiology but tempered and enriched by critical marxist and feminist knowledge, resonated for me, described not only my experience but ways it might have been better.

Theory resonates, allows the conception of change and reframing, which disrupts social practices previously un-interrogated. Then we can re-write them. This in itself is a form of new knowledge, whether we write this narrative with legislation, a policy document, a camera, oil pastels, a conductor’s baton, or a pen. I can not only reconcile my ambiguous and chaotic class journey, but I can theorise and create ways to challenge that for my students. Reflexivity and diverse points of entry allow for the differences within class identity to be validated; there is no one subject position; the reflection of social discourse on the interior, on the self, is what matters. The revelation of this by definition, problematises those subject positions we might have occupied; it throws them into relief. As I wrote Crossing Bowen Street, I was able to gaze back on abandoned subject positions and view them very differently. A reflexive critical practice refuses hierarchy and recognises narrative, which is the interior correlate of our exterior journey in the world, fragmented and fractured as it may be. Telling
stories is constituting, in and of itself; the fragmented nature of the experience, once told, constitutes it own narrative.

The classifications of people, subjectivities and knowledge are significant; they inform the reproduction of our social arrangements and determine our organisational culture and psychology in universities. But where does this significance take us? In terms of this enquiry, it is about the role knowledge plays, the seeking and having of it, the doing of it, in points of entry to who we are. Universities are places where people go to find out who they might become. Our extraordinary privilege as academics is to not only help them discover this, but to support them while they become that person. Life chances are potentially challenged and changed. This may not be so dramatic for those students whose early life has normalised university, but this is a matter of nuance. The responsibility is so vast that it surely requires substantial theorising and reflexivity, which in turn starts with our selves. This thesis has allowed me to develop, from theories of class subjectivity and points of entry, a model of support and engagement with students of diverse working-class (and other) backgrounds.

Significance also resides in what I have learned about class and classification around knowledge, which locates us both within and without the academy. Universities allow something precious and liberating, an ideal of what tertiary education can be, or facilitate; the aspiration and possibility it embodies. As I have been writing, the Australian research science community has had a day in the federal parliament, presenting their research and scholarly needs to politicians, advocating for funding and infrastructure. A completing doctoral candidate in water engineering spoke to parliament of her choice of field. She described a second year lecture in civil engineering. In the course of ‘just another class’, the lecturer mentioned that a water researcher can expect to save more lives in a developing country than a medical doctor. This young woman put
down her pen and chose right then that she would ‘become’ that water engineer. This happens on our campuses every day, in every discipline. Many times it won’t be so altruistic or noble. Choices will be made because they bring joy, because the work of Blake is fascinating, because labour history or gold-smithing provide their practitioners with something very particular that they need. I can never read enough Plath or know enough about Dos Passos’s New York. But the passion, excitement and insight of our work is underscored when we share it and it resonates, makes sense and meaning, for some of our students. And they make it their work. Blake teaches us so much about our condition, about our frailties. Teaching Blake, seeing a student from St Albans starting to realise that they have a passion for Blake too, and that they could aspire through it: this is surely what we reach for? The possibility that people will see and hear themselves in their work, in our work, in the passion we have to teach them, in the history, or the lack of it, holds as much resonance as the work itself. It is the balanced scale of ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’ and it unites, rather than polarises these ways of knowing.

My University, RMIT, was built in the nineteenth century; it was called “The Working Men’s College”, and “The Tech”. It was certainly intended to educate skilled manual workers. But RMIT has repeatedly renewed itself. Like all universities it has a complex internal culture and psychology; it, and its purpose, are contested sites. But it is full of people who understand its origin. RMIT has always educated the children of working people. It has dealt in equity long before the notion was public policy. I have seen life chances changed there every week of my employment. RMIT allowed me a very particular reflexivity, as I saw scarved Turkish-Australian girls with broad accents screaming “I got into honours, mate.” I may see this at the elite universities I’ve attended. But these girls would be so much “the other”, inherently impeding their path. At RMIT, it is what many staff (certainly not all) consciously do; they try to facilitate possibility.
So, I know I want to be at fractious, awkward RMIT, where I sometimes get to see subjectivities changes, ones I recognise, care about. I know that titanium laptops and research infrastructure and exemplar grant applications offered by the Group of Eight are lovely and exciting. But I feel the seductive pull of a different possibility… the assumption that I am this.

But I am already this. RMIT makes me sing because now I know. I’ve felt the shift, I’ve seen it in tiny increments in others, I know. It’s not all about class, of course. Class is a truly split, chaotic, undulating notion. It is the fundamental point and intention of this enquiry, that through such insights we search determinedly for ways to become who we truly are, and if we are so privileged, we try to make that available for others. At RMIT, I can help a tiny bit to split open more worlds, to possibilities that are a further reach from here. To paraphrase Browning, our reach, as educators and scholars, must surely exceed our grasp. Or what’s this heaven for?

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