Creative and Literary Responses to Australian Middle-Class Experiences of Financial Upheaval

by

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I am the author of the thesis entitled *Creative and Literary Responses to Australian Middle-Class Experiences of Financial Upheaval*

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the representation in fiction of economic crises and concerns creates a language that privileges the experiences and capabilities of men and marginalises those of women, in particular women’s capacity to represent their broader realities. This problem is explored through an exegesis and a novel and encompasses the period from 1980, when the Australian Labor government introduced a concept of global financial reform entitled economic rationalism, until 2008, when a banking crisis emerged in the United States’ mortgage market and rapidly spread across the globe.

The exegesis explores the near absence of literary fiction written about the Australian middle class in terms of their responses to financial stress and upheaval. It also extends beyond literary fiction, to analyses of both financial popular fiction and financial nonfiction, due to the fact that there is very little of any sort of literary writing on the subject. ‘The Company He Keeps’ explores the demise of a corporate family that is affected by the socio-economic conditions of the time. Based heavily on the author’s witnessing of and participation in a specific real-world situation, the novel is one attempt to fill the gap explored in the exegesis.

In the exegesis, the middle class is examined from its origins to its contemporary status, in order to determine whom it includes and how its members’ experiences are woven through economic and financial concerns.
The exegesis draws on the work of German political theorist Carl Schmit and argues that what began as a short period of global economic reform can be seen, in retrospect, as a ‘state of exception’, in which normal legal and constitutional arrangements were suspended. These have, however, become a state of affairs—as part of a capitalist/masculine paradigm—that is now the rule. Because of this, the language we use to describe our economic and political system does not match our post-crisis reality. The language of ‘exception’ has drifted over the return to ‘normality’. Especially, the language of economics has triumphed over political discourses, and women (the most financially disenfranchised of the Australian middle class) have thereby been silenced and pushed to the margins.

Feminine and feminist methodology, as expressed in the combined work of Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, along with the joint contributions of Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, becomes crucial as a strategy for dealing with the overlapping public/private elements of the impact of such an economic policy, and its associated language, on the gendered middle class. The work of Hélène Cixous provides supplementary intellectual vision. Her theory gives support to the challenge of presenting a feminist self in a subject area that is central to men but, if only seemingly, peripheral to women. Cixous’ work underpins the notion of writing as an agent of emotional reconciliation and change, providing the impetus for a type of research that can uncover areas of invisibility and silence. Given this, my thesis argues for a non-financial language that might unify the public and private domains, and suggests that, instead of being intimidated by the language of finance, women need to bypass it and use a version of their own, everyday, non-corporate language to express their gendered reality.
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The Company He Keeps

Janice McClennan
In a way that has ceased to be fashionable for women who are more than forty-something, I like myself. Not in a manner that could be labelled narcissistic, but in a way that makes psychologists smile as they appraise the ticks to the multichoice questions and reflect on the value of healthy self-esteem. Over the years, in most self-evaluative situations – other than those intellectual ones when I have been intensely self-critical – I have strived to achieve a healthy balance between overestimating my capabilities and selling myself short. While I have reflected upon myself warmly on a number of occasions for a number of reasons, it is fair to say that a lot of it has to do with honesty.

‘I would rather have a thief than a liar,’ was one of my mother’s favourite sayings, and one that I obviously took to heart.

You could say it follows, then, that when others have coyly turned away from the screen with groans of ‘Oh my God, I look so old’ or ‘Do I really look like that?’ I have always enjoyed watching myself on video. Even in the midst of the grim task of packing, full of fear and false bravado and with a life plan shredded into colourless confetti, today was no exception. There was something pleasing about the image that appeared before me, so much so that I found myself making a mental note to get to know this interesting and attractive woman more deeply. Engrossed in her account of a long-distance university study program that she was somehow doing in her spare time, I almost found myself tentatively making arrangements to ask her to share a cup of coffee sometime and tell her she was doing a really fine job.
And it wasn’t as though I didn’t appraise her critically. In the eyes of her husband, she had failed miserably, having been charged with the sins of the partnership and driven, like a scapegoat, into the desert. Yet her history spoke for itself. Although not one to complain of pain, having breathed her way through thirty-six hours of labour in selfless pursuit of a drug-free birth, she had disgraced herself by becoming homesick on an overseas posting. While attending to nappies and home schooling progeny with IQs that ‘required extension’ (the ‘early parenting’ phase), rewriting and typing business reports (the ‘getting him promoted’ phase), packing up house countless times (the ‘promotion means moving’ phase), feeding out hay (the ‘helping run the hobby farm’ phase), picking and packing fruit (the ‘now it is a hobby orchard’ phase), getting herself educated and teaching part-time, she had also failed by neglecting to get a real, well-paying job.

Fortunately, at the time of this filming she had not yet been condemned for her shortcomings and still retained an attitude of optimism towards the future. As the video machine whirred along, oblivious to the nostalgic part it was playing, I watched myself leave the study and re-enter the living room while being greeted by a then-adoring husband, also with optimism in his eyes.

‘Here’s the old girl,’ he announced, a boyish grin taking the stodginess out of his words.

‘Yes, here I am. I’m going to sit on your knee.’

‘No action without you, huh?’

‘No, I like to get into it.’

‘She’s still around, still around after all these years,’ he proudly revealed to the camera. ‘And that’s not too bad.’

‘You’re now an endangered species,’ the cameraman, alias son and heir with a voice that was beginning to break, added to the production via a commentary.

I watched myself turn to Richard and smile wryly. It was typical of Zach to couch our relationship in such terms. Another child might have phrased it differently, but this was Zachary, a child who tried to instruct us on how to vote,
whose predictable passion for dinosaurs had turned into an unpredictable obsession with the stock market accompanied by a scathing analysis of his father’s financial shortcomings, a child who had discovered the power of language at six months of age and had used it with all the passion and control of a Roman general ever since. I made a mental note to include coping with Zach as another of this woman’s accomplishments.

‘He’s getting a bit greyer than me,’ I said, while affectionately ruffling Richard’s hair. ‘There’s nothing endangered about that.’

‘Get away. I still have my hair, that’s the main thing. It doesn’t matter what colour it is. I’m not bald yet. At least I don’t have all these smile lines appearing as other people do,’ Richard responded.

‘They’re character.’

‘Character? Well I’m doing all the worrying and she’s doing all the smiling, that’s what’s happening. The enjoyment is polarised in our family.’

Polarised. It was an interesting choice of word, but listening to it today, alone and packing, it was an understatement. Yes, we were at opposite ends of the celestial sphere and had created our own semantics. We had become heavyweight polar bear versus wary mother seal, iceberg versus melted snow, shortened days of darkness versus struggling light.

Now it was Rebecca’s turn. I could tell by the soft, quavering voice and the way that Richard’s head had faded out of focus. There had been a scuffle in the takeover bid for the video camera, with the Roman general reluctant to give up his position. The moment had obviously been edited, the way that life should be in a civilised society.

I listened to my daughter, the foot soldier, as she struggled to establish herself with an open-ended question.

‘How is your health? I hear that you have some allergies.’

The formality of her approach amused me. Was it because she lacked the developmental skills to use the appropriate language register or had she pre-empted
that this hands-on dad would one day assume the stance of a stranger? I stared intently at the tall, good-looking, athletic man on the screen and waited for the reply.

‘Well, I’ve just had another birthday, much to my disgust, but I’m still in good shape.’ He patted his stomach approvingly. ‘I enjoy swimming and tennis. I’ve had a few games of golf. The kids are keeping me young, on my toes. I’ve tried to change my diet a lot but unfortunately, it’s true, I still have a few allergies.’

With the advantage of hindsight, I could see the egotism in his reply. Had it always been there?

My grandfather would have said so, had he still been alive, since, in some kind of feudal test of manhood, he had once pitted himself against Richard.

They were both helping my uncle pick up hay. ‘Picking it up’ is a bit of a euphemism. The actual process is more of a snatch and jerk, with plenty of room for showmanship. Firstly, the bales are clasped, two in each hand, so that the biceps bulge in the sun. Then they are hurled, with seemingly little effort, onto the truck. Richard and my grandfather worked together, one with the disadvantage of youthful insecurity and the other with the faltering confidence of old age. Not one word was spoken as they snatched, grabbed and hurled under the summer sky, but at the end of the day there was a grudging respect that ended with a handshake and egos intact.

‘Uh … Where do you work?’

Rebecca’s words brought me back to the screen. It was obvious that this time she had hit the journalistic jackpot. Richard leaned back in the chair, crossed one foot over the other, lifted both hands back behind his head and started talking.
Chapter Two

Richard’s job hadn’t always been that important. Initially, it was eight to five in a food-processing laboratory with little responsibility. Richard would take various samples, fiddle around with a few beakers and test tubes and then, at the end of the day, hang his lab coat over the back of the chair and saunter out the door.

He had wanted to be a commercial artist but well-intentioned people told him that there was no money in that. Maybe they had a vision of him standing on a ladder, signwriting in some shop doorway, not understanding where his passion might have taken him. They obviously hadn’t seen his potential in the seashore portfolio that he produced for me that first summer.

My holiday had been an exciting prospect, since to live in the centre of the North Island of New Zealand is to be deprived of the ocean. It is a ‘green meadows and daisies’ experience with Friesian cows standing – knee deep in it all – waiting to deliver yet another calf and a few more litres of milk. There is no water in sight except for a muddy river, a weed-infested lake and the odd cattle trough.

As a young girl I had made several of these day trips to the beach with my grandparents, always in the back of the car, with a leather strap trailing to prevent car sickness and a Dramamine tablet in my hand, just to be on the safe side. Nobody ever explained exactly what the leather strap was for. It was just one of those things that was accepted, like the plastic bottles on the lawn to ward off dogs. Most of the time I got sick anyway and the Dramamine only added drowsiness to the whole debacle. The number of times we stopped between Hamilton and Waihi Beach
became legendary, with my grandparents concluding that it was the windy gorge that caused the real trouble and making every effort to distract me.

‘First one to see the ocean,’ my grandfather would challenge me at least fifty kilometres before it was possible, and I would peer around the corners excitedly, looking for the first patch of blue, with no idea of where I was or how much of the journey was still ahead.

Eventually though, squinting into the distance, from my vantage point of ‘she who gets car sick gets maximum visibility in the front passenger seat’, I could see the ocean, merging into the gentle egg-shell blue of the summer sky.

On arrival, my grandfather would try to find a place to park, easing the old Zephyr into somewhere suitably shady while my cousins and I pressed against the doors waiting to tumble out. We were always ready to swim, giggling as we wriggled into our costumes behind a towel that we held in place with our teeth.

Once out of the car we would run, nimbly hopping over the hot sand and down to the waves while my grandfather, still fit and agile, with greying hairs on his chest and muscles and skin beginning to sag, caught us up from behind. As we began plunging into the water he would grab our hands to contain us, forcing us to stay in the shallows and jumping with us over the waves. When he could see my grandmother laying out the picnic cloth he would send us back to help while he pressed on further – out to the break line – to take on his own personal challenge with the waves.

The picnic was my grandmother’s challenge to the general frugality of their lifestyle. The Depression of the 1930s, and the way New Zealand entered it without even a modest provision for unemployment relief, had meant that having hungry children was one of her constant memories. Thrift but abundance was the key – everything was homemade and carefully prepared. There were hard-boiled eggs straight from the henhouse, mixed sandwiches cut in triangles and with the special treat of having the crusts trimmed off, followed by homemade ginger cake and a thermosful of tea.
The beady-eyed seagulls circled and my grandmother, in a large hat, sedately situated herself under a pohutukawa tree, her skirt lifted to just above the knees, as she unwrapped the damp tea towels that she had carefully folded over the sandwiches to keep the moisture in.

When I stayed with my grandparents, the days before a trip to the beach were filled with anticipation. I would fire off questions, in quick succession, at whichever grandparent I could lobby.

‘Do you promise we will go, even if it rains?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

‘Even if it is windy?’

‘Yes, even if it is windy.’

‘Even if there is hail?’ I was determined to push it as far as I could. ‘Please, please, even if there is hail?’

I would demand an answer, jumping up and down on the spot in an effort to keep them committed. By the time the allotted day arrived, the atmosphere was more electrically charged than the fickle summer weather itself.

Now there was to be another holiday at an East Coast beach, this time with my uncle and aunty (the custodians of the notorious bales of hay). Richard, having worked for my uncle on the farm for a bit of spare cash, was invited along, bringing extra transport and helping with the luggage.

‘Hi, I’m Richard,’ he had simply said as he had reached for my suitcase.

‘And I’m Jane.’

Everything was in the eye contact.

Once again the atmosphere was highly charged with excitement but for all of its intensity, it was low voltage when compared with the electrical charge between the schoolgirl and the laboratory technician.

At first we gave each other anything that we could find: a smooth piece of stone, an unbroken shell or a piece of driftwood.
As one of his offerings, Richard created a gallery of art for me in the wide sweeps of damp sand, drawn with a brittle twig. We were beginning to fall in love but we were young. We had nothing and no prospects, so he drew a place for us to live.

‘It will be a stately home,’ he told me as he dug into the sand.

‘It doesn’t look like a stately home,’ I remarked, as I watched the thing take shape. ‘It’s not a house at all, it’s a cave.’

‘An elaborate cave.’ He drew some animals in our backyard. ‘And look what we’ve got on the walls, Jane, our very own rock art.’

I marvelled as he proceeded to etch salacious drawings on the cave walls, based on the beginnings of our newly acquired sexual repertoire, formulated with fumbling excitement and innovation. I wanted to add some captions to reveal what the etchings did not show: the friendship, the mutual aspirations and idealism, and the way that, although every new day meant a new discovery, the pattern remained the same.

He wanted what I wanted and my hopes were his dreams too.

We revelled in the ease of it all: our quiet assurance that we had found the scattered clues to the meaning of life, our calmness as we began piecing them together, and our joy at never having done anything like it ever before. We gave our bodies with a tenderness that quickly transformed into explosive passion. On the timber floor of the old whitewashed beach cottage, with its faded lace curtains and threadbare rugs, in the back seat of the car with springs that creaked at every sigh and groan, and in the private shadowy crevices of the rolling sand dunes.

Eventually, however, it was time to share our happiness. There were formalities to attend to and some introductions to complete so we reluctantly made time for a short journey to another nearby East Coast beach where, in the tradition of many families of the era, Richard’s parents camped in the same spot every summer. This summer, however, the monotony of the annual pilgrimage was to be broken, with everyone being forewarned that Richard was visiting with his new girlfriend.
‘There is bound to be an element of resistance from my mother,’ he said.
‘Although there have been girlfriends before, I’ve never been really serious about anyone else, so it’s going to take her a little time to adjust. And you’ve also got to remember that Dad isn’t home much and so she’s had me all to herself.’

I proceeded with caution. ‘Why isn’t he home?’ I asked.

‘Because he drinks a lot.’ Richard frowned and looked troubled. ‘I think he’s addicted to the stuff. They’ve had a lot of problems.’

I was surprised. Things had sounded solid and respectable. Not that it mattered, but as the parched trees dropped their needles to sew a tapestry of pine needles on the ground, Richard wove his own tapestry with hunched shoulders and weighted words. He introduced me to a family who had experienced too much of their own emotional pain to be of much support. Appearances were everything and you covered up to hide a multitude of flaws. And now it was time to meet them.

When we arrived at their camping ground, we parked on the nearby roadside while I instructed Richard on how to approach them.

‘I need to wear appropriate clothing,’ I insisted, having spent days in a bikini and sarong, and trying to drum up a sense of protocol.

‘You’re fine,’ Richard argued. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you,’ he said, casting an appreciative eye over my scantily clad body.

‘Then I need to pin my hair up. With a big clip. So that I look a little older.’

‘You’re overreacting. Stop worrying. They’re going to love you. Look, why don’t we have a swim first and you can grab a skirt out of the suitcase and fix your hair later. When it’s hot like this they’re probably out of the tent and down on the beach themselves.’

So we headed down to the ocean. Richard hoisted me up and balanced me on his shoulders. Wading through the crashing waves, he took me out beyond the break line where the water was deep, where he could practise saving me in a grand, mock rescue – where I had wanted to go with my grandfather.
I came up spluttering from beneath a rogue wave. Then he said, ‘Time to teach you to body surf. We don’t need boards. Come on, I’ll show you.’ He effortlessly caught the next wave for a perfect ride. He was athletic, he was good at it. I wasn’t, but I listened and followed. Soon I was right there beside him, trusting, comfortable and riding all the way in.

Only hours later, totally exhausted and dripping wet, but proud of my newly acquired skills, did I decide it was time to quit. So we staggered back to shore and found our way to the family tent.

My eyes scanned the formations of canvas with a certain amount of curiosity. I was unfamiliar with camping. My father had had a seasonal job at a local processing plant and the crucial season always seemed to coincide with either the school or statutory holidays. When I complained, I was lectured about my father’s lack of opportunity – how he had begun his working career as a jockey, riding horses for his father and how, too heavy to ride and without any qualifications, he was lucky to have a job at all.

As we approached the tent my thoughts crossed to Richard’s father. ‘What does your father do for a living?’

‘He’s an auctioneer,’ Richard said. ‘He sells fruit and vegetables.’

Having been earlier that day to a market that sold baby carrots, string beans and fresh strawberries, I marvelled to myself that this man could be enjoying a holiday at such a crucial time of the year. He was definitely not seasonal. Perhaps he was more assertive than my father, or just lucky.

As we approached the tent I regretted that I hadn’t taken time to change my clothes. The entire family was there. They were sitting outside the tent in a formal line-up. From left to right there was a grandfather with farm boots and black singlet, a grandmother in a crocheted shawl who was methodically shelling peas (no doubt bought at auction), and a mother, with pursed lips, who looked like the Queen. She sat regally alongside her husband, who put down his beer, lifted his head and
showed immediate interest. Seemingly unaware of their expectations and the solemnity of the occasion, Richard pushed me forward.

‘This is Jane,’ he announced. ‘My girlfriend.’

I stood there wet and flatfooted. Under such conditions there were few options, but I did manage to respond with something that combined the Japanese bow and the British curtsey. As I lurched forward the grandfather sat up in the chair, looking decidedly more alert, the father fastened his gaze firmly on my breasts, the grandmother never missed a pea and the Queen was not amused. It was time for Richard to intervene.

‘We’ve just come over from Waihi,’ he explained. ‘Jane is staying over there.’

Smiles and nods from the men. Silence from the women.

I helped him out. ‘I’m over here for the Christmas holidays.’

More silence.

‘On holiday from what?’ Richard’s mother finally asked.

‘From school.’ I desperately wished that I had begun some sort of employment.

It was obvious that the men were delighted at the prospect of having a South Pacific Lolita in their midst, but the women took the vetting of potential gatecrashers seriously, with a sense of morality that belonged to a disappearing era. They eyed me up, down and up again, with raised eyebrows. Finally, however, after exchanging a few more glances with each other and including a couple more pleasantries, they asked me in.

What I stepped into was a valiant attempt to create a camping home away from home. What was missing in luxury had been made up for in ingenuity, during a period of more than twenty years of driving to the same spot. The centrepiece was a caravan, peeling but functional. Attached to the caravan, in a haphazard manner that reminded me of the structures I used to create, as a child, out of a pack of playing cards, there was a tent for sleeping, a tent for socialising and a tent that
acted as a dressing room. As I stepped over the gas bottles and cold storage bins, and ducked under an array of string, rope and wire clotheslines, I noticed that each section of the tent house was a different colour, none of which softened the expressions on the two women’s faces.

Richard thought it was simply a problem with my bikini and he could have been right. It was the year of the bikini after decades of the one-piece swimsuit and, although they were still modest, to wear one was a daring move. My bikini had been purchased with money acquired from the sale of an old-fashioned black-and-white pushbike, which in turn had been saved for and purchased out of money earned by a job at the corner store. Had the women known of these entrepreneurial activities, they may have been impressed. But as the questions regarding our future became more gruelling, Richard began looking more and more uncomfortable, and it was obvious that the greatest favour I could do him was to get us both out of the tent as quickly as possible.

I blurted out the first thing that came into my head. ‘Let’s go down to the boat ramp. I haven’t seen the harbour yet.’ Richard took the cue, grabbing me by the hand.

‘We’ll be back,’ he told them with a quick look back over his shoulder. ‘Maybe later this afternoon.’

We wove our way through the maze of tents, caravans and caramel-coloured bodies, down to the boats. There we lingered at a stand of Norfolk Island pines, where we spread out our towels and sat down to reflect. With the sunlight softened by the mass of fine green needles, Richard seemed to relax.

‘I’ve only just started working,’ he said. ‘That’ll also have something to do with it. They’re old-fashioned, Jane, and probably already racing ahead and wondering how I’m going to financially support you.’

In hindsight, Richard had definitely been in need of a mentor or two: one to guide him through the minefield of his family’s emotional issues and another to
smooth the way between his accumulation of science subjects, talent for art and the workplace.

A computer program or a book that matched his personality and talent to a job would have helped, but there was nothing available. His approved choice had been veterinary science. There was money in that one but while he slogged it out every spare minute, others around him partied hard and still came in with higher grades. Indeed, his self-esteem took a few bruises when the results came in after the first round of examinations. With a little advice he might have hung onto those credits and changed courses. With a little advice he might have cut himself some slack until he got the hang of living away from home, but there were fees to be paid through part-time work that was physical and demanding.

Commercial art went, veterinary science went, and I remained.
Chapter Three

It was definitely time to replace the wedding album. Out of all of the items that were coming along with me on this miserable exit from the family home, it was in the worst condition. As I packed it into the tea chest, brown stuffing like carpet underlay bulged from between the yellowing, quilted felt cover and the black, dated pages. There were gaps, some created by photos that had refused to remain captive and others caused by forcible removal to show new friends or work colleagues.

I had always had a favourite, characterised by its imperial eight-by-five measurement and the novelty of colour. It had been taken in a nearby park with a backdrop rich in dark-crimson camellias and forest-green leaves. I was wearing a white sheath dress under a lace coat that had been carefully arranged to show its trim, but the photo only revealed the two of us from the waist upwards. The photo was perfectly proportioned with Richard’s height complementing my smaller frame and his dark hair and skin contrasting with my blonde hair and fair complexion.

As he held one of my hands in both of his, his unswerving gaze seemed to promise undying love, unproblematic children, financial security and indefinite companionship. As I looked at it again, I tried not to fast-forward to the years ahead and see the meshing of acquired gestures, movements and habits of speech. I tried not to see the entirety of one to the other and the strength of the reciprocal love, but I could, it hurt, and all I could mutter was that it had all been idealistic, naïve and short-sighted.
Zachary thought so too, but for his own reasons. Now a handsome young adult, he had grown into his Roman general role in physique as well as continuing to have a great deal to say.

‘Are you taking this old album thing?’

‘Yes, I am, for some obscure reason. Any objections?’

‘No, I don’t suppose so. Pretty stupid though, wasn’t it? The age, the lack of money. That was just before you got married, wasn’t it? I suppose you do realise that a wedding comes with a pretty hefty price tag today – as much as a house deposit actually. You would need to put a fair bit of thought into it and be a lot more financially aware than you two were. None of this racing off into the sunset like the old days.’

‘Well I don’t think I’m going to get married so it won’t bother me.’ Rebecca tried to change the direction before he lurched off on one of his lengthy, historical comparisons.

I was not surprised. Her trust had been totally severed. She might be still playing the foot soldier but my lovely young daughter had developed her own view of the world.

‘Marriage doesn’t work anymore. People don’t try to get through things, especially men when they get older. I’ve seen it with my friends’ fathers. They walk out of relationships without a second thought.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the idea of marriage.’ Zach’s voice was getting louder. ‘People just shouldn’t have children unless they are financially secure so that this sort of shit doesn’t impact on them.’ He stared at me accusingly before reaching for the photo.

‘No, Zach.’ I quickly moved in to rescue it as he waved it around. ‘Give that to me right now. We’re not going there. This whole thing is still far too damn raw to listen to you blaming it all on money.’

He hesitated for a moment, holding the photo above my head and out of my reach. I struggled to get it, standing on tiptoes and making wild swipes yet trying
not to rip it. He stood there taunting me with a smirk. Then suddenly he let it go and sauntered out of the room. It floated to the floor and I breathed a sigh of relief, before trying to reassure an anxious Rebecca.

‘He’s still angry, Bec, that’s all, and he’s not handling things well.’

I placed the photo back into the tea chest, feeling frustrated that the one image that I had decided to keep had become an issue but determined to stand up to Zach.

I glanced down at the photo. At the time, this picture of us had been regarded by Richard and me as having captured something endearing and rare amid the more formal, routine shots. For that reason it had always been given pride of place, at first on the opening page of the album and later, in whichever frame suited the current decor.

In our first bedroom it had been hung on a knotty timber wall in a brick-and-timber home on a small block of lush farmland. The house had turned out to be more comfortable than we had anticipated – not a stately home but definitely more than a cave, and affordable only because we had built most of it ourselves.

Every weeknight, after finishing work at our day jobs, we drove the fifteen kilometres to our land, exchanging Richard’s white lab coat and my office skirt and blouse for builder’s overalls. We plastered and painted, and on the weekends dug drains and laid bricks. We wanted to carve out a better pathway and create something out of every opportunity in order to disconnect from our working-class roots. Acreage was very middle class. Richard’s sand-drawn animals had come into their own. Hobby farms were in.

Yet although we tackled the building project with patience and good humour, the auction and the actual buying of the land had been a lot more stressful. It had been conducted on site, with a large timber board erected on the front of the farm showing how the land was being subdivided into its various allotments. Somehow it didn’t look the same as it had on the paper plan, and so we weren’t exactly sure which block we were bidding for. More by luck than good design, and completely
overwhelmed by the frenzy of the bidding, we ended up with one of the better ones; but it was serious business and, although we had been fortunate, we came away feeling subdued. An auction, we had discovered, was not something that you could simply turn your hand to, like hammering and nailing. You could not pull out the nail, straighten up the wood and have another try.

We had attended a couple of auctions since and both had ended disastrously. The first was at a sale of Charolais cattle. They were beautiful white animals, no doubt happy in their native France until some animal husbandry genius decided that it was time for them to visit the Antipodes. Almost at once they had become a desired commodity. Hobby farmers who didn’t know a bottle of Chateaubriand from cheap Moselle, or a French loaf from a standard sliced white, suddenly wanted one. We had gone to an auction to see why. I had persuaded Richard to take an interest in these animals since their future happiness seemed unassured at the time, with bull semen being extracted at an alarming rate for IVF programs.

‘It’s not natural,’ I reflected with passion. ‘They should be allowed to run with the heifers and frolic in the grass.’

‘There is nothing natural about farming,’ Richard said. ‘You’ll find that out. Even when they do mate naturally, there are very few pure breeds around and the calves are often too big and have to be born by caesarean. Most people on the stud farms are doing transplants. It’s all about dollars of course.’

He stopped suddenly at the mention of the dollars. It was a source of great disappointment to him that an economically sustainable farm was well beyond his reach. He also realised that he shouldn’t have been telling me this.

‘You’ve always had a problem with farming techniques haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I have. I was once considered culpable for trying to bankrupt my uncle, rescuing calves from pens as they waited for the slaughterhouse trucks. There is also a rumour circulating, somewhere in the family, that I reunited calves that had been removed from their mothers.’
‘Then a dating business or an adoption agency is what we need, not a hobby farm,’ Richard remarked dryly. ‘You have some transferable skills.’ But he shared my sentiments and it was said with a good deal of affection.

When we had foolishly visited a bullfight in Madrid during the obligatory ‘OE’ in the rusty VW campervan, I had shouted out every Spanish expletive I had learned in order to shame the Matador and encourage the bull. Richard had stood to his feet and joined me, shaking his head in disbelief as ‘Little Ferdinand’ (as I had dramatically named the proud, velvety, black creature) staggered again and again to his feet, blood pouring from his botched wounds, as he tried unsuccessfully to match his aggressor. Now here I was trying to protect ‘Le Blanc’, a white ‘brother’, peering anxiously into the crowd to see what kind of owner he was about to go home with.

‘The bidders all look the same, Richard,’ I whispered. ‘Every one of them is in a tweed jacket and little tartan cap. They have thin, mean lips and none of them look very compassionate.’

‘How can you tell that?’ Richard scanned the crowd. ‘They don’t look too bad. That guy over there looks alright.’

He raised his hand and pointed to an elderly gentleman in the corner who had been bidding consistently.

‘Going, going, gone,’ we heard over the microphone. ‘Sold to the man on my right.’

Richard went pale.

‘We have only just purchased our land,’ he explained to the auctioneer, who wasn’t the slightest bit interested in our life story. ‘It’s a small block. We don’t need a bull. We can’t afford one. We haven’t got enough stock.’

The auctioneer rolled his eyes.

‘Our fences aren’t high enough.’

We took the white one home anyway, to frolic in the grass with the heifers.
‘That’s the last auction I’m ever attending,’ Richard announced. ‘We’ve got
the land. I’m never going again.’

But we did.

The next one was to sell – definitely sell, we assured ourselves – and this time
it was an inanimate object: a friend’s horse float and nothing to become sentimental
about as the horses were long gone. All we had to do was accompany our friend
Brian and offer him some bidding support.

Brian had certainly been in need of support throughout our friendship. He
had been looking for the right lady as long as we could remember. Not particularly
good-looking, he nonetheless had a certain style and was convinced that he was
worthy of nothing short of a supermodel. Richard and I had discussed his situation
at length. Usually I initiated the conversation just as Richard was dropping off to
sleep. There was a time, before it was too late, after the first body twitch. Richard’s
body twitches fascinated me, since I was convinced that my body never did them.
There was no way that Richard could contradict me, as he would always drift off to
sleep first.

We had a routine. At first we both faced the wall, the one with the large bay
windows that overlooked the bush-clad hills. I pulled up my knees and Richard
curved his body around me, his right hand draping across my shoulders to cradle
my breasts. After a few minutes he turned to face the opposite wall and I followed.
Then we reversed our positions. This meant serious sleep. No more fondling,
murmuring or wriggling. But I had trouble following the rules. Before the first
twitch, and facing Richard’s back, I invariably thought of something to say –
something urgent, like a question about Brian’s love life.

‘Why do you think he doesn’t know that he’s not going to marry this new
supermodel?’ I asked.

The reply was garbled, like someone who had drunk a bottle of wine with
dinner, then jumped into a cold swimming pool to sober up and was trying to talk
underwater.
Undaunted, I continued. ‘It’s not going to last you know.’

Richard grunted, grabbing the top sheet and trying to bury his head underneath it.

‘It’s fascinating really, isn’t it, how most people seem to find a partner at about their own level of attractiveness, except for Brian.’

‘Fascinating,’ Richard mumbled, still intent on sleep and twitching.

‘Supermodels aren’t necessarily the best choice either,’ I persisted. ‘They are too self-absorbed. Do you think it’s just the sex?’

Richard sighed, uncovered his head and gave himself up to the conversation.

‘It could be, I suppose, although I don’t think there’s anything particularly sexual about her. She doesn’t appeal to me in that way.’

‘But nobody ever does. You’re strange like that. You’ve said so yourself. You don’t even respond to those magazine pictures in the lab lockers at work.’

‘No I don’t,’ he retorted. ‘They irritate me. I’ve actually asked the guys to take them down. I’m not interested in that sort of sex, Jane. You know that. I need the whole package.’

I smiled in the darkness. Contentment and a sense of security came with this statement. And it was genuine. It was one of the things that I respected. Our sex life was immensely satisfying but it was emotional closeness and quality that drove it.

I tucked my head affectionately into the nape of Richard’s shoulder before posing the next question. ‘Where exactly did Brian meet this latest supermodel?’

Richard hesitated, suppressing what sounded like a chuckle. ‘Elaine’s not a supermodel, she’s actually a funeral director.’

A funeral director. Now there was a subject worthy of breaking the serious sleep rules for. ‘Where do you meet a funeral director?’

‘He met her at a club, actually. A funeral director would have a need for entertainment, don’t you think?’
I was impressed with the sarcasm. After all, he was only just conscious. ‘And she doesn’t like horses?’

‘No.’ Richard was beginning to sound more awake.

‘Why not? What is there not to like about horses? The Houyhnhnms were a little too rational, a bit regulated, I’ll grant you that, but Gulliver wanted to be one and they weren’t that bad.’

Richard sighed at the literary references. Finishing off my education was also part of the ‘join the middle class’ plan.

‘There’s nothing wrong with them as far as you and I are concerned, but a lot according to Elaine. They’re big, they kick and they’re expensive to own. Brian hasn’t been winning much with them lately and Elaine thought they should go.’

‘Go where?’

‘I honestly don’t know, Jane.’ Richard sounded troubled again. ‘Brian sounded vague.’

‘Vague!’ I was incensed. I’d seen more animals than I liked to recall being sold for pet food once their winning days were over and I had made a firm resolution to find out what had happened to them. In the meantime, however, I wasn’t going to jump to conclusions. Richard assured me that in the next few days he’d press Brian for a few extra details if I would just promise to go to the auction and simply give him some support.

The following Saturday I trudged along in gumboots and raincoat to the auction, which was being held at a nearby farm. Brian greeted me and introduced me to Elaine, who did indeed look like a supermodel in a British-looking belted coat and matching rain hat. While I chatted to Elaine, Richard and Brian worked out a sale strategy.

‘You need to bid it up,’ I overheard Brian telling Richard. ‘We have to get it to a point where people think there’s a lot of interest and then all you need do is come in now and then with a quick bid once you can see that things are moving.’
It wasn’t the kind of support that either of us had had in mind. I’m still not sure what Richard had intended but I had packed a morning tea in a nice little cane hamper box and was going to produce it after the sale. I was also going to be pleasant to Elaine whether I liked her or not and resist all questions about dead people and dead horses.

The bidding began and Richard came in with an offer. It worked. The next offer went higher and the price for the float was looking good. Brian nodded approvingly and Richard went again. More success. The bids kept coming: another from Richard, two from out in the paddock, one from the shed door, another from the haystack and then back to Richard.

‘The price is more than Brian paid for it,’ Elaine whispered. ‘Richard is a good friend.’

‘It’s on the market,’ the auctioneer boomed. ‘It’s going to be sold. Once, twice, three times.’

Bang went the hammer.

‘A nice float. Congratulations.’ The auctioneer trudged across the mud to shake Richard’s hand. ‘The horses will enjoy that one, Sir. It’s well made and very roomy.’

We took it home. Brian and Elaine broke up shortly after. Brian went over to the States – Texas – to look for beef and for another supermodel. In the meantime, we used the float to transport our one and only French bull, Le Blanc, whom I affectionately named Snowy.
Chapter Four

It was on the top of a pile, put aside to pack with other ‘personals’. The title was large and in bold type, the newspaper yellow, ripped and faded.

**Youngsters take over at Southern Dairy Company**

BRINTO is projecting a bright new image with the appointment of a new management team for its largest Dairy Company. Spearheading the company’s operations is Mr Richard Collins, Works Manager. At twenty-eight years of age, Mr Collins is one of the country’s youngest top executives.

‘Spearheading,’ I mumbled to Rebecca. ‘What is it about these organisations that they always refer to themselves in terms of warfare, and not even modern warfare at that?’

‘Oh don’t worry,’ Rebecca replied, equally disdainful. ‘They include modern warfare as well. My commerce textbooks are full of it. The corporate organisations set a goal and achieving it is just like killing the enemy. Everyone in the company is supposed to bond and go into battle and the language helps to motivate them and keep them all thinking the same way. Some of the companies go even further. They actually leave the office and go out onto some military obstacle course for a few days.’

‘To do what?’ I asked, before continuing, ‘No don’t tell me. I can guess. To find themselves?’

Rebecca grimaced. ‘Yeah, which is quite difficult sometimes, especially if they’re blindfolded on the way out there.’
I smiled at the gentle humour, grateful that it had managed to surface, grateful for the easy way that we communicated, grateful for her very existence. These days, feeling numb and alienated from my surroundings, I faked my way, conscious that there was a need to go forward as if I had a direction, yet all the while feeling that I was shuffling through scrub in a drying wind that had leached all the moisture from my bones. Trying to contain Zach was exhausting and often beyond my capabilities, but connecting with my daughter was something that made it a little easier.

‘The idea, Rebecca, is that they try to justify it as taking people out of their comfort zone to break down the psychological barriers.’

‘Whatever,’ she shrugged. ‘But they end up as clones of each other and you don’t need to do it like that? It’s a joke. You should hear what Zach says about it. Real life is what takes people out of their comfort zones and for a lot longer than seven days.’

She had a point.

‘It’s not a good picture of Richard though, is it? I’ve never seen him with a beard before. It looks ridiculous!’

I noted the omission of the word ‘Dad’.

‘It was his Russian period,’ I remarked dryly. ‘Inspired by an actor whom I made the mistake of admiring.’

‘I thought only artists did that sort of thing,’ Rebecca mused.

‘Did what?’ Zach walked into the room, all six feet four inches of him, tripping over a suitcase and scattering our two cats at the same time.

‘Had a specific period of time that they produced something, became something,’ Rebecca said. ‘Picasso had a blue period.’

Her eyes lit up as she made a mental switch from commerce to art.

‘Picasso was a fuckwit,’ Zach said. ‘He lived in poverty and painted tramps, drunks and blind beggars.’
‘Only for a few years,’ Rebecca protested. ‘Anyway, that period was good for
him. He called it his shelter of success. After that he was able to do anything he
wanted. He ended up with plenty of money.’

‘Great stuff Rebecca,’ Zach exclaimed. ‘A shelter of success. What kind of crap
is that? Right now, considering the way we have come out of this financial crisis, I’d
be happy with a decent bit of shelter, never mind the success. After not listening to
my warnings that the property boom was coming to an end, what are you telling me
now, that we can solve our financial problems by sitting around and painting in
monochrome?’

I knew I should explore this idea further. I needed to be open to suggestions
since, having blindly followed Richard and his financial advisor, who aggressively
persuaded us to leverage into a property portfolio and then borrow against it into
indexed share funds, I now had neither money nor answers. I looked across at the
two children. Was there a way to make money by combining the two: Rebecca’s
artistic streak with Zachary’s harder edge?

I cast a quick glance at Zachary. Better to leave it alone. His lips and jaw were
tight. There was pain in his eyes.

I had a painting with a similar expression. It was a portrait. The subject was
ethnic, maybe American Indian. His forehead was broad and black hair hung down
heavily upon his shoulders in determined strands. His jaw jutted out in a gesture of
defiance, but it was his eyes that both disturbed and fascinated me. Pain and anger
fused together in the coldness of his dark-brown pupils. Revenge had overcome
defeat and lay smouldering as it waited its turn. So confronting was his expression
that I had had to hang him away from the other pieces. Now, here it was, etched on
the features of my son as he stood with shoulders squared, staring down at his fists.
Clench, unclench, clench.

I grimly folded the paper back into its creases. There was nothing I could do. I
was beyond comforting anybody. My days as ‘Mrs Ramsay’, soothing and placating
as the centre of fecundity, were over. It was everyone for themselves in this
lighthouse. As memories of Virginia Woolf’s novel, complete with phallic symbol,
flooded back, so too did the images of Mr Ramsay, the husband, in need of continual restoration, renewal and support in order that he not feel like a failure.

I had given Richard this. When he first took on the job at BRINTO his confidence had failed him many times, and indeed long before. Right now, it was becoming increasingly important to pinpoint when the cracks had begun to show. I suspected it was as far back as at school, when he had repeated his final year. I still had the evidence. The year master had couched it delicately, as I would now do myself for a pupil in a similar situation, dredging up phrases like ‘by dint of perseverance’ and ‘conscientious attitude’ but with an uncomfortable and euphemistic repetition of the word ‘sound’. I noted, however, the ‘considerable powers of leadership’. How often my teacher colleagues got it right.

It had been recognised by his employers and he had been rewarded with a new title and domain: ‘Research and Development’. I had been there, well before he was in management, right beside him, smoothing the way and offering encouragement. There were reports to be written, visionary accounts that required not just logic and statistics but imagination, insight and flair. Words were my passion, the job was his, and so our upward mobility continued. Richard fast became ‘the young man with potential who deserved substantial ‘backing’ and so he was able to re-acquaint himself with his old university; not in our home town, but this time with the courses and accommodation paid for by the company. He was studying for a diploma, with entry to the course granted by his in-house working experience and the power of wearing a suit.

The Mini Minor had only just made it, loaded up as it was with boxes on the roof and suitcases in the back. Richard drove, more with his knees than his hands, while I sat in the passenger seat, navigator and helpmate, now officially unemployed and with the cat in a cage on my knee. We needed a temporary place to live for the few months of the course and I found a house, even before university orientation. It was old but it was also large and central. Unfortunately it was also divided into four, and our budget would allow us only one furnished quarter.
We were never alone. The northwest wing received no sun and the gentleman residing there had developed a chronic bronchial condition that deteriorated alarmingly until his coughing and spluttering became more of a crisis than whether Richard passed or failed. The northeast wing was less distressing. The couple who lived there sat in their sunny corner, which backed onto ours, reading out loud to each other from the morning tabloids.

‘Elvis has been found. I was always sure he was alive and well,’ one proclaimed one Saturday, after which we were treated to a medley of old records to celebrate the occasion, most of which seemed to get stuck at various stages in the vocals.

It was the couple in the southwestern corner that saved us. Phil attended the university as a full-time student. His wife Annie was an artist. We could hear far too much of their conversations, but they were stimulating and covered just about everything from early settlement to empirically based arguments about the merits of passive euthanasia. We had exchanged a few pleasantries, first at the letterbox and again at the clothesline, when I decided to invite them over and get to know them better.

‘How about you invite them at the same time as Brian and Elaine?’ Richard suggested. Brian had returned from Texas alone and subdued and had reunited with Elaine, after which he suddenly phoned to announce that the two of them were about to take a journey south to catch up with us. I had welcomed this; with auction day such a disaster and her intriguing job, I was keen to get to know her better.

‘I could try,’ I demurred. ‘But they’re very different aren’t they: a funeral director, a farmer, a sociology student and an artist. I’m not sure it would work.’

I invited them anyway. Brian and Elaine were the first to arrive. Brian looked relaxed and tanned. He was attentive to a glamorous Elaine with neither of them showing any evidence of the split. We invited them in and sat them down. I had hoped that the four of us would have some time together before the other two turned up, so that we could discuss Elaine’s job or even what had happened to those
horses, but we were barely past the greeting stage when Phil and Annie presented themselves.

Richard began the introductions while I looked on anxiously, holding the flowers and chocolates they had given me and watching for the first sign of hostile body language.

Between the entrée and the main everyone seemed determined to get along despite the diversity. The conversation flowed smoothly – Brian took a dutiful interest in Annie’s painting, Elaine seemed genuinely interested in Phil’s current course and Richard relaxed, throwing me a smug smile across the table. A few issues began to surface between the main and the dessert. Surprisingly, it was not my vegetarianism or involvement with animal rights, Annie’s nude studies or even Elaine’s approach to the dead that did it.

In one corner of the ring stood bellicose Brian, a conservative National voter, a heavyweight, no-nonsense man of the land. An ‘earn your living by the sweat of your brow’ sort of guy. In the other corner stood bantamweight Phil, with not much of a punch but with a headful of academic theory, highly critical of the current, neoliberal-capitalist system. Richard, still being promoted up the corporate ladder and holding firmly to his belief that he could balance work and family, was well suited to the role of referee.

Brian was the first to lead with his chin, complaining that the downsizing of a New Zealand processing plant was affecting not only his transportation costs but also his shares.

‘Norfold is in trouble,’ he announced ‘facing its first annual loss since listing on the stock exchange. The new CEO Bruce Pascoe is looking at closing more plants in the future,’ he continued disgustedly. ‘He’s blaming overcapacity, falling stock numbers and inefficient work practices. Shit, I’ve only just bought those shares.’

Shareless Phil quickly picked up on the social element.
‘Hey, hang on. You’re talking about the devastation of thousands of jobs here, not to mention the decline and death of some fine rural townships. It will affect a lot of people more than you.’ He glared at Brian, who folded his arms in defiance.

‘The working class has been relying on this export industry ever since the introduction of refrigeration,’ Phil continued.

Elaine, who had been looking uncomfortable, took up the refrigeration cue and launched into a detailed account of how to make chilled pineapple shortcake.

I warmed to her immediately. She definitely wasn’t self-absorbed, no matter how glamorous she looked. But both men ignored her and Brian resumed the argument.

‘Sounds like sociology has got to you Phil. Makes me pleased that I stuck with the basics of food and land.’ He leant back on his chair as if to demonstrate how comfortable he was with his decision.

Phil spoke calmly. ‘You can’t separate food and land that easily. The two of them are linked.’ Annie smiled apologetically across the table at Elaine and me.

‘Social stratification is part of it all,’ Phil continued. ‘Inequalities exist in a wide range of areas of social life. Job security is just one of them.’

Richard finally stepped in as mediator.

‘The working class may have job insecurity Phil, but they don’t have the responsibility that management has and some of them have transferable skills. They are not specialised like I am.’

I had heard this before. With every rung Richard climbed he felt he was leaving more possibilities behind. It was not unusual to hear him fantasise about other options. I waited for him to list them but Phil jumped in again.

‘If you ask me, this new style of management that’s being set up around the place has nothing but transferable skills. These new guys with their MBA’s don’t know anything about the product, the supplies or the customers. It doesn’t matter
what the company is, they could practise management anywhere by outsourcing everything. If you ask me they’re going to get us in the shit.’

‘Well, I envy those who have a trade, any trade. How free you would feel with just a spanner or a pair of scissors in your hand, always assured of a living anytime, any place.’

In the past, a comment like this from Richard would normally have been enough to steer the topic away from the political to the personal. Richard had a happy knack of toning things down. But Phil was fired up with a cause.

‘Then why don’t you get out of what you’re doing and take a trade? There’s nothing stopping you.’

Brian agreed. ‘There must be something holding you in, old boy – some kind of payoff. I’d be damned if I’d commit myself to a career that was cutting off my options.’

Richard’s face whitened.

‘That’s a hypothetical for you, Brian. The farm has been in your family for the last two generations. It’s always been there as a fallback, no matter what you decided to do. We’ve just been playing with our lifestyle block. It’s not financially viable.’

Annie tried this time. ‘Painting isn’t viable either. I can’t make a living.’

Once again there were no takers.

I stepped in to help Richard out. ‘There’s no easy way to combine what you like doing with what will earn a living.’

‘And even if you eventually like what you are doing it may not help, Jane.’ Phil spoke more gently this time. ‘Social class is defined by whether or not you own the means of production. It sounds as if you do Brian. You may qualify as belonging to the land and gentry but that’s not true of the rest of us.’

I looked around at the rest of us to see who was hurting the most. In many ways Brian and Phil had been perceptive. Despite having reduced his options
Richard did seem to be enjoying the privileges, if not the demands, of his rising corporate status. There had been other evenings when men had begun to defer to him as if his journey was a step towards the Golden Fleece.

Our families also supported him in the way that the working class tends to live vicariously through the rising status of others. His mother would lean towards one of her friends with a confidential, hushed tone as she proudly announced the latest title and new responsibilities.

‘Richard has another promotion,’ she would beam, pulling out some article that she had cut out from the local paper. His father, when sober on Saturdays, would throw in a few clichés about how he had always stood behind Richard and not in front of him. My parents were equally impressed. My father was incredulous at the fact that Richard had joined the ‘big bugs’.

From my perspective things were simpler. Richard was earning more than me and his job was fast becoming financial security for us both. I felt happy, trusting and confident, whether we owned the means of production or not.
‘Look at all these stamps,’ Rebecca said. She grabbed a letter from a pile that I had gathered and labelled ready for packing. Their exotic stamps and airmail envelopes revealed many origins.

She pulled a letter from an envelope labelled ‘8’ and began reading, ‘Dear Mum and Dad… your parents or in-laws?’ she queried.

I glanced at the page. ‘In-laws,’ I replied.

‘They kept all of these?’

‘Yes, they never had the opportunity to travel.’

She continued reading, ‘As you have probably heard from my letters to others, Europe was fantastic, we survived the Middle East, but Kenya topped it all. It was a fascinating introduction to Africa and out on safari we were lucky enough to see nearly every species of big game at close range.’

She thumbed through the pile while I felt the blood drip from the wounds that remembering happier times had opened.

She frowned. ‘Why are all of these in your handwriting?’

‘Because I was the one who kept in touch.’

‘What, with his parents as well?’

‘Yes, with his parents as well.’

Rebecca sighed.
'It was fine back then, Rebecca. As I said, none of them had been out of the country and, at the time, I was happy to do it.'

'How did you pay for the trip? How did you get time off work?' Zach chipped in.

'Well,' I began slowly, trying to be mindful of walking into a Zachary trap, where a deep hole was dug, complete with bamboo spikes, and his questions were laid across it like lush jungle leaves.

'We saved for it, after the house and land were paid for. And our employers gave us a few months’ leave without pay. We’d been married for twelve years, the house and land were debt-free and I’d been working since the age of sixteen.'

'Baby boomers,' Zach muttered. 'It was the heyday. Do you really think, Mum, that any employer would hold a job open for me like that?'

'No, probably not,' I admitted.

'And do you know what it would cost me to go on a bloody safari?'

'A great deal these days,' I conceded.

He grabbed some letters from Rebecca.

'Christ Mum, look at these. How many places did you go to?'

'Quite a few.' I visualised the bamboo spikes. 'But in a Volkswagen Kombi van, Zach, shared with three others. Or in North America, in cars that we moved for rental companies.'

'I may have to buy one of those vans,' Zach said. 'But not to holiday in. I’ll have to buy one to live in if I want to stay in Sydney. You guys have had all the benefits. Despite the crash, I still can’t afford to buy property, nor can I afford to pay those rents.'

I was aware of the rents and Zach’s bitter disappointment that we hadn’t read the market better in Sydney. Nevertheless, the idea of Zach climbing out of a Kombi van to catch the train to some financial institution or law establishment in Martin
Place sounded extreme. I did not want to debate the issue. I remembered my time in
the van with a great deal of affection and wanted to keep it that way.

We had purchased it in England. Our house was built, there was some money
in the bank, we were enjoying the freedom of overseas travel and it was time to do
some more. Brian, his brother Tim and Tim’s girlfriend Marie were already over
there and Richard and I had joined them. We had only met Tim once or twice but
were familiar with what Brian called his down-to-earth manner. He didn’t aim high
enough, was Brian’s main complaint. But I was never sure just what that statement
referred to. He had gone overseas searching for work and not wanting to rely on his
father who, according to him, used the farm as a means of control.

I could see that he and Marie were well suited. She was the perfect camper, a
practical type who would roll up her sleeves and get stuck into whatever presented
itself. She was also attractive; not up to Brian’s standards, but she had an open,
honest face and a jolliness that had apparently developed over a number of years at
boarding school. She could be relied on to produce lollies at midnight, tissues for the
homesick, and matches and candles during blackouts. She gave me the impression
that while her trips to the tent may be frequent, her activities while in there would be
short and purposeful.

Having left the farm and completed an apprenticeship, Tim had spent some
time pumping beer in a London pub, where he had created his own Kiwi clientele.
Marie had sauntered in there one evening and asked for a pint, stressed out and
straight from the local hospital, where she worked as a midwife. The trip around
Europe was going to be a test of their relationship; if they survived it, they would go
back to New Zealand together.

When we arrived, they had proudly introduced us to their van at the house
they were renting in Maidenhead.

‘Well, what do you think of it?’ Brian asked, standing beside it protectively.

I looked at the van and at the five of us and back at the van, but the only word
that came to mind was ‘small’.
‘We’ve also got a tent,’ Marie began, only to be interrupted by Tim.

‘You and Richard and Marie and I can take turns in it whenever we get a bit horny,’ he added, casting Marie a libidinous sideways glance. I wondered if he was going to begin pegging it into the nicely manicured lawn on the spot.

Brian looked uncomfortable, not having anyone to take into the tent.

Richard also looked uncomfortable. I made a mental note to tell him that we could always meet in the camping ground shower.

The trip was a turning point for Richard and me: a move from being childless to considering the prospect of having a baby. For twelve years there had been constant pressure on us to reproduce; male success seemed to be linked to a station wagon, 2.5 children and a dog, and it was surprising that Richard had progressed as far as he had without such trappings.

‘Up the duff yet?’ one of my male co-workers would crudely ask as I turned up for work each Monday morning.

‘No, something to do with intelligent planning,’ I retorted sharply, in an effort to defend myself against the sexual harassment that had yet to be named.

‘I reckon he can’t do the job. Must have blanks. Tell the old man to send you on to me.’

We had discussed the children issue at great length, calling ourselves child-free for emotional protection and to get ourselves some privacy and space. Not having children equated to social maladjustment in the eyes of those committed to children. It was also akin to other even more disturbing traits like kicking helpless animals and elbowing elderly grannies in the supermarket. We, however, remained happy and except for momentary pangs at Christmas when we strung up the cards with their gilded images of red robins, falling snow and rosy-cheeked children opening oversized parcels, we were unfazed. In many ways it had proved to be an advantage.
'Are you on honeymoon?' a taxi driver asked us on a wild ride through Wellington one day as we took full advantage of being thrust together on the corners.

'No, we’re an old married couple,' Richard informed him, smiling broadly. 'We’ve been together ten years.'

'Ten years!' the driver echoed in a thick European accent, waving his hands. 'You look muchly in love. I think you still kids.'

'I guess we still feel like kids and kids having kids isn’t a great idea in New Zealand,' I informed him.

'Ah, so how many years are you?'

'I’m thirty and my husband is thirty-four.'

'Very old for having kids.' He shook his head. 'I think you should get hurried up and started.'

'We’ll get started soon.' I could see Richard smiling. 'Just going to do a bit more travel first.'

A number of signs showed that we may have made a head start on the project before leaving the country. Richard chided me gently for my failure to keep up on the daily pre-breakfast run. My athletic prowess had never matched his and it was a source of amusement to us both, part of the attraction of opposites that remained a dynamic but enigmatic part of our relationship.

'Why don’t you join a team?' Richard would ask as I stood in the backyard shooting baskets after he had finished practising.

'Because I like to relax while I’m out here. The rhythm of the ball on the backboard is soothing. Having to perfect my skills to compete would spoil the experience.'

A few days later, he tried again. 'Come for a swim with me.'

I refused once more, for while there was nothing I enjoyed more than watching Richard’s strong athletic body break smoothly into the water before
striking out in even measured strokes, the monotony and the problem of how to occupy my brain while completing the laps was alarming.

‘You could do a marathon,’ he informed me after we had towelled ourselves off, having just completed a leisurely jog. ‘You need a goal. You can compete against yourself. It’s a challenge.’

I declined. But now the challenge had shifted. The pressure was not an external one coming from Richard, but was formulated somewhere in the internal crevices of my own body. Something was different and that something had to be addressed before we tackled the terrain that stretched out in front of us.

Initially we passed it off as travel sickness. The plane trip to Singapore had been turbulent, the Sea of Japan had sent our ship lurching and the train journey across the Soviet Union had swayed and writhed its way across the tundra. With feet firmly ensconced on the pavements of London, however, the argument for travel sickness had lost its weight. We were told that a pregnancy test was a simple procedure – just a urine sample handed into a chemist and a short wait. We felt irresponsible, anxious and reckless.

I smiled sheepishly at the memory. It was not supposed to have happened that soon but the idea of making a child had swept us along. There was a new purpose, a new promise and an excruciating closeness.

It must have happened a week before we were due to fly out, in the middle of the day, on the lounge-room floor. We had been lying on our stomachs on the thick cream carpet, sprawled out reading the Sunday newspapers in a narrow patch of winter sun. It had started as a game, with Richard’s paper overlapping mine as we turned the pages. Then as the papers became more entwined and entangled so did we, rolling over and over. Within seconds the excitement had built and the feverish unbuttoning had begun. I had felt the softness of the carpet on my breasts and on my back as my shirt slipped off my shoulders.
And when we stopped rolling and that strength and weight slid across my body and pinned me to the floor, I had managed to whisper, ‘We need protection, Richard. It’s still too early.’

‘No, Jane. Not this time.’ He covered my protest with his open mouth before leaning back to look at me.

‘I want to feel you this time – really feel you. I want to explore all of you – I want what I have to give you to be deep inside you, as far as I can get, beyond what I can feel.’

And I had nodded, waiting for the thrust, without dropping my eyes.

And so it was.

Or was it? Two months later I stood holding my breath in that London pharmacy, waiting for the result while Richard grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

‘I’ll be right here by the counter,’ he said, gently touching my cheek. ‘Don’t panic. Either result will be fine. I’m ready to be a father.’
Chapter Six

I could not decide what to keep: Zach’s bear, the rag doll or the blue gumboots. Maybe ditch the lot. By now there was not much room left in the top of the packing trunk anyway.

I decided on the tiny boots, given to me at the time of Zach’s birth, when his feet were kicking and moving aimlessly and could be fitted into the palm of Richard’s hand. I picked up a pair of Zach’s gym trainers that he had left lying on the floor beside some dirty gym gear presumably headed for the washing machine.

I stood them alongside the blue boots and felt an uncomfortable mixture of feelings. I could have handled the boy in the blue boots by myself if I’d had to but I was a lot less sure, and even afraid, of how to handle the hunk of masculinity that worked out at the gym.

I ran my fingers gently over the plastic of the tiny blue boots. They had been a present from a relative with a vision of Zach trying to negotiate our muddy paddocks. And he did get to wear them, but not to plod through fertile farm soil. Instead, he wore them to toddle after his dad, between the heavily laden fruit trees on the newly acquired orchard where rows of trees had replaced the herd of cattle and a tired, lopsided cottage had replaced our spacious modern home – a job in management had replaced research and development for Richard.

He had been called into the office to consider the proposal.

‘It’s another promotion,’ the ‘powers that be’ had informed him. ‘You’ll be in charge, actually running the show this time. Shouldn’t be a problem for the wife, but tell her it requires a shift.’
Running the show, Richard impressed on me later that night, was heady stuff, suggesting more autonomy and power. It was proof that the argument for meritocracy was valid. You could work your way to the top, regardless of your background, in a South Pacific version of the American Dream. Once you put your counter on ‘Start’ and threw the dice, it wasn’t all luck. You could survey the board, put your shoulder to the wheel and make your way to the finishing line, gathering rewards commensurate to your effort. Not only that, but once the die was cast, you could manipulate the game from behind a mahogany desk in a swivel chair.

Richard’s chair now swivelled in a complete circle and took in a view, modest admittedly, but a view nevertheless. Every morning I drove our family car to the conglomeration of brick-and-glass buildings that provided employment for most of the rural community of Kaikohe. On arrival, Richard would kiss Zach and me goodbye, walk briskly towards the entrance, give us a final wave and stride into the building, towards his new office and swivel chair.

‘What on earth do you do in there?’ I wanted to know on the first day, not failing to notice that the person whom I picked up at night looked considerably more strained than the one I dropped off in the morning. Richard searched for words.

‘What exactly is ‘management’? What does it consist of?’ I persisted.

He replied slowly in a managerial tone. ‘Well, basically, I have to make decisions, formulate policy and organise, plan and direct resources to achieve the company’s objectives.’

I rolled my eyes and, sensing my dissatisfaction, he tried again.

‘I just have to know what to do, Jane, how to do it and then I have to get it done I suppose… through people.’

I nodded. At least that was delivered in a Richard voice.

‘Is anyone going to teach you?’ I asked, aware that the previous manager had left the week before Richard’s appointment.

‘Not really. I’ve got a thorough understanding of the product, the customers and the production. I guess that’s one of the advantages of working your way up.
There’s a loose job description and when things get rough I will just use my common sense.’

This comforted me. Richard had a lot of common sense and I was hoping that he had passed his genetic share of it on to Zach. It was reassuring to know that it was still a useful commodity.

‘What I don’t know, I will learn from my own experience,’ he continued. ‘A lot of the job is dealing with the unions and I’m actually looking forward to it, seeing how they will respond to rational and fair decision-making. Don’t worry about it, Jane. It’s early days and you have enough on your plate looking after Zach and the orchard.’

He was right. I was also required to run my show, which wasn’t doing very well since it was compromised by Zachary, who showed an extraordinary sensitivity to the inconveniences of his new world and didn’t sleep for any longer than three hours at once. I reflected on Richard’s so-called ‘loose job description’ longingly, but remained hopeful that mine would somehow reveal itself along the way.

Marie was keen to share some of her midwifery skills to help me increase my performance rating and she and Tim became frequent visitors to the orchard, sometimes with Brian and Elaine. The orchard was an intriguing place to visit, Brian told us. There were no scissors or spanners but we were on the right track since we now had a packing shed full of equipment and, if Richard’s job failed, had the potential to diversify.

Much of this equipment was under my jurisdiction but before I could begin to use it I needed to familiarise myself with the trees. In the top paddock, or block as I began to know it, there were navel oranges. Alongside those were satsuma mandarins (the easy-peel variety) and then the clementines (the little ones with the thin skin). Next to the packing shed were the tamarillos, more commonly known as tree tomatoes, and on the north-facing slope that ran down to the river there were kiwifruit.
Getting acquainted should have been, I naively thought, a much easier task than dealing with cattle, for both practical and philosophical reasons. Firstly, instead of having to be rounded up, the trees remained stationary, in tidy little rows. Secondly, there were no sensitive bits containing nerve endings that had to be lopped off in the name of hygiene or safety. And finally, there was no conflict when dealing with the end product. Instead of having to listen to the brays of a mother who had been forcibly separated from her calf, I could see that the laden boughs became a burden. While I couldn’t exactly have a relationship with these trees in the way I had committed myself to the animals, I decided I could co-exist with them in a peaceful, symbiotic manner and protect them from pesticides and heavy chemical sprays.

The only problem was that in order to do them justice I soon found that I needed to protect them from more than just the sprays. There were many other hazards, like potential droughts and floods and, more frequently, the arrival of winds, which had a habit of blowing in during pollination and shooing the much-needed bees down to the end of the South Island. There were also freak hailstorms in the middle of summer that could ruin the tree’s offerings in five minutes. Having identified and familiarised myself with all of these nasty obstacles, I learnt that the only way to beat them was to involve myself in a number of expensive and complex projects such as installing irrigation, producing better drainage and planting crop covers. Only then, I realised, was it possible to focus on the successful removal of the fruit and subsequent grading process and begin making a profit. By which time, I figured, Zachary would probably be at university.

In the meantime, however, I bumbled along. When I carried Zach on my back it made the picking cumbersome. Assembling the boxes was also a problem. It was noisy and my hammering seemed to confirm to Zachary that the world was, indeed, a hostile place. But if I positioned him near the steady vibration of the grading machine, it accomplished what all else had failed to achieve and he slept.

We had our favoured positions in the packing shed and, frequently, I would find myself sandwiched between Marie and Elaine, both now firm friends. When the
car pulled up, Marie would spill out with a basketful of food and a kit full of miscellaneous baby gear for Zach. Within minutes she would take control, either bustling around the kitchen, whipping up something for a snack, or unstrapping Zach from my back at the crucial time when my muscles were beginning to ache. There was an air of authority about her that came from decision-making under pressure: making the kind of decisions that resulted in life or death.

I was reminded of the comments I had heard about the war when I was a child – not about those who went to fight but about those who stayed home in what was called ‘essential industry’. I had been told it referred to food and clothing, but Marie and Elaine had pared it back even further to assisting with our entry into the world and helping to ease us out of it. Was it possible that everything in between was superfluous?

Just how fundamental these women’s services were had become glaringly apparent at the moment of Zach’s birth and resurfaced again the first time that he became ill. He had been off colour for a few days, more irritable than usual and with an erratic feeding pattern and discoloured nappies. Richard, who had always made it a habit to bathe Zach in the early mornings, became alarmed as his temperature continued to rise. It was normally an appealing picture: Zach lying back in the water supported by one of Richard’s hands, his other hand squeezing water gently out of the sponge so that it would trickle onto the top of Zach’s downy hair. Richard had insisted on bathing him to ensure that they bonded, aware of the fact that my dedicated breastfeeding distanced him from much of the physical contact. The drying process extended their contact: Richard preparing himself by spreading out an oversized bath towel and lifting Zach gingerly onto it before carefully wrapping him in the large, soft folds.

Richard’s hands were another attraction. They were strong, square, steady hands, tanned from outside work, competent in their approach but with a capacity for great tenderness. With his body decked out in an oversized, chequered windbreaker and jeans, his hands became a crucial part of the landscape, as he painted, constructed, dug post-holes and swung heavy tractor wheels. In a white
shirt and cufflinks they shuffled paper, thumped the office desk and were extended to business colleagues. In moments of sexual passion his right hand would seize both of mine and raise them powerfully above my head, only to trace the lines of my body in supplication a few minutes later. Richard’s hands were, in my opinion, a microcosm of the man, and never more attractive than when nurturing our son.

I watched him as he spread his hand across Zach’s forehead.

‘He is still too hot,’ he muttered, ‘despite the cool water.’

I could tell without reaching for the thermometer that he was right. Zach’s face was definitely still flushed and his eyes were heavy-lidded.

‘I’ll take him to the doctor this morning,’ I promised. ‘As soon as I drop you off at work.’

Before Zach was born, there had been a choice of only two doctors in the small town. One was an elderly man, immaculately dressed and conservative. The other was young and at the extreme end of the alternative medicine continuum. Richard and I had visited them both in a pre-labour interview before Zach was born, unsure of which one would best provide safety but accommodate our desire for flexibility.

The elderly doctor’s surgery was impressive. According to some locals, it was befitting of his experience and accomplishments: a gracious old building in the tree-lined main street, in heritage colours and with a waiting room that played classical music and displayed tasteful impressionist paintings. I liked classical music and impressionist paintings but was nervous at the idea of ‘conservative’. However, Richard told me, it was reassuring that this man had managed to make so much money out of obstetrics, since it was obviously a sign that he had participated in hundreds of birthing procedures without any serious mishaps or breaches of medical ethics. He was confident that this man was the right choice.

Richard’s judgment, I later realised, was still being affected by swivel chairs; the doctor’s unsuitability was declared unanimously by both of us when, after greeting us, he patted me condescendingly on the shoulder and asked me why I had
brought my bodyguard. The following ten-minute consultation therefore became nothing more than an endurance test. During this time the bodyguard and I tried to find a way to make an exit that would be civilised and gossip-free, before racing down the road to the more modest building in which resided the doctor with the bare feet.

Today I was back there again, only this time his shoes were on. His face lit up as I anxiously carried Zach into his surgery.

‘Gidday, Sunshine,’ he greeted me, addressing me by a name he had contrived ironically at two a.m. during Zachary’s birth, when the yoga and the controlled breathing techniques were wearing thin.

‘Hi,’ I responded, still falling short of the name, and wondering if he would ever adopt a tone appropriate to the occasion.

‘How are the two of you doing?’ he inquired, before picking up on my stress and taking stock of the situation. ‘What’s the problem with Tiger?’

I managed a wry grin, despite the anxiety. Tiger was a name that I had adopted for Zach due to his fiery temperament and John (there was to be none of this ‘Doctor’ business), a bestower of nicknames himself, had picked up on it with relish.

‘Tiger is not doing so well at the moment. It’s the first time he’s been this sick and he’s got me worried.’

‘Let’s take a look then.’ He took a limp and ailing Tiger out of the carry cot.

I watched as he performed his routine, checking Zach thoroughly for signs of an illness that might explain the flushed face and languid body.

‘It must be some sort of virus,’ he announced apologetically when he had finished, knowing that I was hoping for a more definitive diagnosis. ‘I could give you some antibiotics but they wouldn’t do him much good. You’d be better to try some of your herbal remedies. They’d probably relieve his discomfort. But in case they don’t I’ll include something on a script to keep his temperature down.’
I left the surgery feeling better. Zach might be ill but he did not have any of the diseases I had found in the medical encyclopaedia and, although not exactly anyone’s ‘Sunshine’, I managed a warm ray or two for Richard when he walked out of the company’s gates.

The strained look was there again.

‘Unions?’ I asked immediately.

‘No, not the unions,’ he replied. ‘They seem to accept what’s going on. It’s the staff I’m having trouble with. But that’s not important. How’s Zach? I tried to call you.’

I filled him in on the afternoon’s consultation while he listened intently.

‘So are you giving him something?’

‘Marie is getting something homeopathic for him this afternoon. She said she’d stay with him so that I could pick you up. I didn’t want to leave him but she said he’d be okay for a while. She’s the only one I trust with him. She’s a gem, that woman.’

He nodded in agreement.

‘Tell me what happened with the staff? How did today’s meeting go? What happened?’

‘It’s change, Jane. They don’t like it.

‘What about it don’t they like?’

‘It’s the threat of restructuring, Jane. There’s a lot of it happening in the dairy industry. Twenty years ago there were about 180 cooperatives and about 270 factories. Now we’re down to 42 co-ops and 90 factories.’

‘And so there’s going to be more?’

‘Well, at the moment, the biggest worry is that we’re going to be trans-national with head offices overseas. The company is the backbone of a rural area like this and the staff are spreading rumours about people having to move. They want assurances and everything that happens these days is seen as some sort of threat.’
‘But it’s easy to sympathise with their feelings, isn’t it?’ I pointed out. ‘It’s not pleasant living with insecurity.’

‘Of course it isn’t. I agree with you and I don’t have an issue with that. We just have to take these things in stages. It’s no use causing panic.’

‘So did you smooth things over today?’

Richard sighed. ‘No, it’s still unresolved. I’ll get up early in the morning.’

‘You’ll need to be in the office first thing,’ I said. ‘It’s important.’

‘Not as important as you and Zach. Let’s see how he is first,’ he said quietly, as we pulled into the driveway. ‘When all is said and done it’s only a job.’

I moved towards him to push the hair away from his forehead and to look directly at his face, which had softened at the mention of our family.

‘What would I do without you?’
Chapter Seven

‘Ode to a Vacuum.’ The title caught me off guard. It was obviously a poem and something profound but it was in a pile of unrelated papers, ready to be packed in a briefcase full of essential documents. Perhaps it was the work of a melancholy Keats, but I couldn't recollect it. All that came to mind was a nightingale, the season of autumn and some urns. I began to read.

Thou empty space of wonder and quietness
Thou deserted room and table bare
No scholar lost in sweet contemplation
But books, forsaken and vacant chair.

This was definitely not an English poet. Indeed, the amateurish nature of the lines made me doubt that it was a poet at all. I continued to read.

What cerebral spirit haunts this space?
Ye fair beauty and elusive sprite
Your lover came to seek your favours
But you were nowhere in his sight.

I felt a stab of pain as I folded it back into its long-established creases. It was from Richard.

I wanted to reach for his hand but he was now no more than the haunting spirit of the poem. The reality was that I had been severed from him with the quick, brutal cut of a scalpel.

The poem was proof of how things had once been. Having a minute with neither Zachary nor Rebecca hovering, I could easily slip it into the back of the
wedding album. I remembered it so well. Richard had come home for an extended lunch hour, something that he did with increasing frequency despite the fact that the trip took at least forty-five minutes from the city. I was missing and he was disappointed – the lunch visits were a special time. With Zach starting school and Rebecca at kindergarten, there was an opportunity for some time alone together. It was something that we looked forward to.

I had gone to pick up Rebecca. On completion of a bright-yellow finger painting of her mother in a dark-green forest, she had decided that she wanted to see her real Mummy in the flesh and nothing could be done to dissuade her. Unlike Zachary, whose first task at kindy was to divide the children between those who were keen to play Incy Wincy Spider and those who wanted to build an Egyptian pyramid to scale under his direction, Rebecca had made an inauspicious start. Lured by the idea of holding a paintbrush, she had agreed to walk in the door but, in these early days, she remained unconvinced that there were any additional benefits for being there.

As I walked into the kindergarten she ran to greet me, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the painting she had just completed. There I was in all my glory, looking like an egg yolk with a halo, or in Rebecca’s teacher’s terminology, like an Inca sun goddess.

‘Tell me about your painting, Becky,’ I suggested in my best politically correct language.

‘Well,’ she began, ‘That’s you in the middle.’

‘Wow,’ I replied. ‘I look amazing.’

‘And that’s Zach over there.’

She pointed to a splodge on my right that appeared to be divided into two differently coloured halves.

‘Tell me what he is doing,’ I prodded, at the same time receiving a warm, approving nod from her teacher.

‘Well, that bit is being kind and helping you find the way out of the forest.’
'And the other bit?' I asked, holding my breath.

'That’s the mean bit. That bit is angry with you.’

‘Why is it angry?’ I was genuinely interested now and trying not to sound indignant.

‘Because you got lost,’ she answered with an exaggerated sigh.

‘Right,’ I acknowledged, suddenly feeling lost and starting to appreciate that there was more to this morning painting session than met the eye.

‘And that’s Daddy there,’ she pointed.

I couldn't see anyone else. ‘Where?’

‘In the corner,’ she whispered, becoming aware that she was now the centre of attention and beginning to look overwhelmed.

I pulled her close while at the same time screwing up my eyes and peering at the painting. In the left-hand corner I eventually made out a tiny stick figure.

‘Is that Daddy?’ I asked, trying not to sound incredulous.

She nodded.

‘Why is he so small?’ I could feel the teacher’s eyes burning a hole in the back of my neck.

‘Because he’s far away,’ she whispered again. ‘You know why, Mummy.’

I looked confused. I should have known but I didn’t.

‘Why is he far away?’ The teacher coughed but I ignored her.

‘Because of the aeroplane,’ Rebecca said quietly.

‘Ah, the aeroplane.’

Aeroplanes, actually; they were definitely plural. They flew mainly to Australia and the United States and took Richard away from us for the first time in our lives.
Richard was now in the Auckland head office, in position number three. Annie, in her artistic wisdom, said that this was a good number, with significance that was numerologically favourable, being the trinity of the sun, moon and the earth.

Zachary, who had a habit of eavesdropping on adult conversations to make sure his contribution was included, knew nothing about the sun, moon and earth but was emphatic that three was an amazing number with lots of power and that many of his fairy stories repeated the number three. In order to demonstrate his point he began to dance around the cat three times, attempting to cast a spell on it with one of my wooden stirring spoons. Because I was busy rescuing the cat, I did not bother to contest the issue.

Besides, it was true that the number three was proving advantageous. Three was neither robbed of the ability to act independently nor the villainous, faceless bureaucrat of a number one or even a number two. Three had more responsibility but not enough responsibility to consume it. Three was invited to every meeting to help outline goals on the basis of accumulated experience. Three had the respect of its subordinates on the supposition that people near the top know more than those on lower levels. Three could refuse to stay for drinks on Friday nights, turn down Saturday golf and still have a job to come back to on Monday morning, something that was not a guarantee for either number one or number two. Three had a swivel chair that also tilted and a water view. Unfortunately, however, sometimes Three had to travel.

One dominant player now controlled over ninety-five per cent of the dairy industry and saw itself as global. The mission statement contained a reference to the fact that the most successful managers in the twenty-first century would be those who would carry the least national baggage. The goal therefore, was to create senior management with the capacity to transcend cultures.

I liked our culture. I was studying it at university, among people who didn’t believe that it needed transcending at all.
One of them was the numerologically conscious and artistic Annie. She and Phil had moved to Auckland to accommodate Phil’s postgraduate work in sociology. He was working on a thesis that hypothesised about the gender-specific effects of workplace relocation. Annie had joined him at university to add some academic weight to a natural artistic talent that was beginning to bring in a little money. Her nude sketches, which were roughly presented in pencil and charcoal, were becoming popular with some of the Auckland urbanites who lived in restored timber villas on the North Shore. Richard envied Annie’s transportable talent and I had been supportive of both their efforts and, in particular, of Phil’s research project, his hypothesis, his method of collecting data and the potential of his conclusions.

Only a few weeks prior to Rebecca’s painting, Number Three and I had been invited on a harbour cruise with some of the other executives and their wives. These were usually strained outings with a prescribed format. Firstly, we lined up on the pier with nametags securely fastened and in an orderly line. A headcount was then performed by one of the female secretaries, whose job it was not only to ensure the comfort of her boss, but also to ensure that the embarkation went smoothly, before fading discreetly out of the picture. At the appropriate moment, the rope barring our entry onto the vessel was unclipped and we boarded in partnered twos, like animals approaching the ark.

Once on deck, the couples quickly split into gender groups, in which the men’s conversations focused on business and the political and the women’s on the personal. As a wife of a senior executive, I was expected to circulate between the two groups, without saying anything confronting. With Australian visitors present, I was given instructions to stay away from anything to do with the Aborigines. And with some cooking contestants on board, courtesy of a promotional food competition, food was also a taboo subject. Being a vegetarian, I was gently reminded by Richard to find some discreet means of disposing of any flesh on the plate but also to steer away from any discussion of dairy food, the Japanese or heart attacks.

As the meetings and greetings proceeded I congratulated myself on doing well, moving around the upper deck at appropriate time intervals, smiling on cue,
biting my tongue when necessary and generally creating a good impression.

Eventually, however, it was time to go down below where, following the usual round of longwinded speeches, dinner was announced and everyone made their way to the cluster of small round tables.

After an awkward search, complicated by the fact that we were bumping into each other as the boat lurched in the choppy harbour, we found our names and settled into our seats and unfolded the napkins.

The main was either steak or seafood, both with some kind of cheese dish accompaniment. I opted for the prawns because they were lighter and they would be easier to slide under the salad when nobody was paying any attention.

When the side dishes arrived at the table, my first thought was that none of them looked capable of winning anything, but the others seemed to think otherwise and were anxious to hear what everyone thought of their taste and chances. They were therefore delighted when a company spokesperson made an announcement that everyone was to take a portion of the main to try with a portion of the side dish, to test for enhancement of flavour. The announcement obviously fired an alarm bell in Richard’s brain because his head came up with a jerk and he immediately tried to get my attention. In a manner less than discreet and verging on the brazen, he held his hand to one side of his cheek and mouthed to me, ‘At least eat the prawn.’

I stared at him blankly, unsure if he was serious. But he was and he repeated it: ‘Eat the prawn.’

But I didn’t. I did not eat any prawns, not even one. Maybe, as I later pointed out to Richard in a discussion about just how much should be done for a job, it was because I was underwhelmed by the occasion, or maybe it was because I was still thinking in terms of the obligations of a Number Three, in which having a wife who ate prawns didn’t seem to be high on the agenda. Indeed, instead of eating them, I pushed my plate to one side and managed to entertain our table with a story that involved Zachary, our cat and a recalcitrant mouse that had resisted all our attempts to catch it until the introduction of a trap and a particular type of camembert. It worked, capturing the attention of a director and his wife who, by the time the story
was completed, along with a description of Rebecca’s anxious drawings of dead mega-mice and Zach’s prototype of a radically new, ultra-efficient trap, had all consumed far too much wine to care what I was eating or which of the contestants actually won.

I congratulated myself silently and when dinner was finished and the winner was announced, I got up, left Richard and excused myself. Repeating the mantra ‘real estate is a safe topic, real estate is a safe topic,’ I negotiated my way through the dinner suits and wine-flushed middle-aged female contestants and tried to mingle again and bring in a little conversational diversity.

I began with Michael, recently been appointed Senior Marketing Manager, who was feigning an attempt to laugh at the notoriously boring jokes of one of his colleagues.

‘Hello Michael,’ I began in my most charming voice. ‘It’s nice to see you.’

‘It’s nice to see you too, Jane,’ he replied, wasting no time in turning his back on the joke-teller.

I was wondering how soon I could throw in something about the rising interest rates when I recalled something about an overseas posting. There were two locations, Riyadh and Tokyo, but I couldn’t recall which one the family had been sent to or, more accurately, ‘applied for’ as a three-year contract. I was favouring Riyadh because of the tan that showed beneath Michael’s open-necked designer sports shirt but decided to continue with some non-specific questioning.

‘You’ve been away for a long time?’ I continued, the rising intonation formulating a question that required an answer.

‘Yes. Just got back last week.’

‘Oh, that recently. How was it?’

‘It was fantastic, Jane,’ he enthused. ‘Once we had settled in, we loved the place. And the bonuses! They were enough to get ourselves some more prime real estate.’
'That's great,' I responded, still unsure if we were in the land of chadors and cloaks or of the kimono.

‘Any problems with the culture?’

‘None at all,’ he replied. ‘The company took care of everything. I had an interpreter, a chauffeur, free rent, telephone and medical expenses. When our middle child got sick we had all our expenses paid.’

‘Madeline got sick?’ I recalled a robust tomboy who outstripped the boys at the company’s sports days.

‘Yeah, she developed a few problems, we dealt with them. It was nothing important. Nothing we couldn’t handle.’

‘How were the other two?’

‘They were fine. We put the youngest into an international school but the eldest came back to New Zealand. We sent her back to boarding school. She got a little bit homesick. Both our parents are getting on a bit and unfortunately, neither of them was up to having her. She was happy to come back though. She’s very adaptable.’

I ploughed on. ‘What did Penny do with herself? Did she come back too?’

Michael looked uncomfortable, casting what I believed was a longing look at the joke-telling colleague.

‘No, she decided to stay with me.’

I was taken aback. I knew Michael’s wife, Penny, and from what she had told me her relationship with her oldest daughter was an extremely close one. I excused myself and edged my way over to the women’s group.

For the first few minutes I couldn’t find Penny. A quiet, softly spoken and well-educated woman, she usually sought out the less flamboyant group. Then I spotted her, an untouched drink in her hand, standing to the side next to a cluster of artificial palm trees, staring above the sea of faces to the dark water of the harbour.
‘Hello there, stranger,’ I greeted her, pleased to see someone with whom I could have an honest conversation. ‘Welcome back.’

She looked startled before managing a smile.

‘Hello, Jane. It’s been a long time.’

‘Yes, it has.’ I touched her on the arm.

‘Where was it this time?’

‘Does it really matter, Jane? It was Riyadh but it’s all pretty much the same, isn’t it?’

I felt a bit taken aback. This wasn’t the mild mannered Penny I knew.

‘Then how was it?’

‘It was difficult.’ She looked over her shoulder. ‘Really difficult. Don’t say anything to Richard though, will you?’

I shook my head, hating the way these functions pitted company loyalty against loyalty to family and friends.

‘What was the problem?’ I asked, moving from role-play to concern.

‘Well, I’d like to blame it on the location. After all, the Middle East has a completely different way of life in which expatriates are all forced together. But it wasn’t that. I’ve also tried blaming it on the fact that we now have children. When we did those years in Asia there was only Michael and myself and even though I was often homesick and unhappy, I was able to put strategies in place to compensate. I’ve tried blaming it on a lot of surface things but it’s a lot deeper than that and this time it just felt like too much of a struggle, with, once again, Michael being the only one who was happy.’

‘I’ve just spoken to Michael.’ I was still struggling to resolve the loyalty issues. ‘I must say he did make it all sound rather easy.’

‘He would.’ She nodded with a new bitterness. ‘He had plenty of support. The company protects them, Jane. They live in a glass bubble that is secure, sterile and sanitised. By the time the sunlight reaches them it has been filtered for
impurities. In the meantime, the children and I were being scorched and seared as we scrambled around looking for the sunscreen.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said quietly, feeling inadequate and aware of how close she was to losing control. ‘Maybe we can say something. Maybe next time things can be improved so that the needs of the family are more catered for.’

‘There won’t be a next time, Jane.’ She lifted her eyes to meet mine. ‘In fact, on second thoughts, don’t worry about what you tell Richard. How about we join them instead?’

There was no time to act surprised as she tucked her arm under mine and hauled me along with her. In the centre, in the distance, I could see Richard and Michael engaged in earnest conversation.

‘Gentlemen.’ She addressed the group in an uncharacteristically loud and buoyant manner. ‘Good evening to you all. I haven’t seen some of you in a while.’

They looked up startled. ‘Michael and I have been overseas, you see. Again! I didn’t do such a good job this time though. Michael may have told you. But in case he hasn’t, you all need to know that I seem to have let the side down – been a bad little wifey.’

‘Have you been drinking, Penny?’ Michael tried to salvage the situation and come up with an excuse that would exonerate his prize asset of a wife.

‘No, Michael, I haven’t been drinking. In fact if some of you were a little more observant and pulled your heads just an inch out of company business, you would have noticed that I never drink on these occasions. Too much of a risk, you see. Can’t make the mistake of getting a little tipsy and ruining a possible promotion. But tonight I would like you all to raise your glasses in a toast. To the company!’

I watched as they all looked at each other for support, some of them actually raising their glasses in a half-hearted manner and others, like Michael, looking at Richard for some kind of lead.

‘To the company.’ Penny lifted her glass high in the air in a celebratory manner. ‘May it become insolvent, may it go into receivership and may it be
liquidated. And you Michael, may you find yourself another wife…’ she paused to
heave her drink into the circle, ‘…and fuck you all.’
Chapter Eight

I folded the T-shirt carefully, determined to pack it despite knowing that I would never wear it. The illuminated letters emblazoned across the faded cotton read THE POWER WENT OUT!

As I placed the T-shirt in the suitcase, I thought how ironic it was that I had moved from a position of feeling sorry for Penny, to now envying her for at least being back in a place where she had the support of family and friends. It was a given that with Rebecca and Zachary finally settled in Australia, my life would be spent in Australia too, even without Richard.

So, with no New Zealand, I wanted something as a keepsake that was more significant than a rugby shirt or a silver fern flag. The T-shirt fitted my needs perfectly: a combination of the affection I had for the smallness and inadequacy of my birthplace as well as the pride I had in defending it. ‘A statement of the obvious,’ a cynical bystander had remarked, when I had worn it sometime after the event, before adding that I needed to be careful of ‘that glow in the dark stuff’.

The words on the T-shirt mocked the two blackened islands that were roughly sketched on the fabric and signified the plight of New Zealand at the time. Journalists with little imagination described it as ‘the Great Auckland Blackout’. They informed us, in print that was inconsiderately small given that most of us were using candles, that it was because the last of Mercury Energy’s four main power cables into the city had failed. ‘Not surprisingly,’ they had continued, ‘the power outages affected an estimated 50,000 inner-city workers and 6,000 city residents.’
Richard and I were included in their statistics. Richard’s office was plunged into darkness. ‘It was like the world had changed’, a more poetically inclined journalist reported. ‘Everyone looked stunned; there were no computers, no scanners, no lights, and people started talking really quietly.’

Not so in Richard’s building. In fact, some of his colleagues began talking loudly. I heard it said that Michael, who was beginning a messy divorce from Penny, lost his composure and began shouting when his lawyer’s voice faded out during a crucial discussion of settlement figures. Apparently nobody in the office let on that they had heard it. It seemed that nobody wanted to discuss Penny – not Michael’s colleagues, nor the wives. It was as though it hadn’t happened. I could understand it from a company point of view – it was easier to trivialise her as having become unstable than dare to look at the issues. But I suspected that the other wives were also under some kind of company instruction.

I, however, did want to discuss Penny with anyone who would listen. I wanted some changes made: more assistance for families while they were away and debriefings when they returned home. When I brought it up repeatedly with Richard he told me that I was the only person who cared. There was a general consensus that it was all a lot of nonsense and that wives should put up and shut up if they wanted a share of the spoils. Richard framed these sentiments in language that was a lot more sensitive, and with a rider that excluded me from their implications, but the message was there all the same. I needed to realise that they were all busy dealing with the blackout – a much greater thing than Penny’s public tantrum – and that they were leaving Penny and Michael to sort it out.

Above all, I needed to understand that there were urgent meetings to attend, and on the Saturday that followed the blackout Richard was given the task of ringing around the staff and instructing them to remove any files and materials they might need from their city offices. Before the weekend was over, however, the chaos was under control, with the company’s document system being run off a server at a venue in the outer suburbs and phone lines, personal computers and other office equipment operational. It was crowded at times and it was understood that a lot was
being asked of the staff but, as management saw it, the team placed professionalism and loyalty to the company above personal inconvenience.

I decided to have another try on Penny’s behalf, but had to put it aside as unfinished business – there was now another series of urgent meetings to document the positive aspects. I recall typing out the review when Richard’s secretary couldn’t be tracked down. It was headed ‘Leadership in a Crisis Makes the Difference’. There were also bullet points: short, sharp notations about hard-and-fast decision-making, correct structures and not overreacting.

On the home front, everybody was overreacting. Rebecca developed a darkness anxiety, became frightened of robbers and obsessed with the colour black. In place of the Inca sun goddess, she had progressed to drawing dark figures, which frightened other children. She had trouble sleeping and was only happy when all our family members were safely inside the house.

Richard showed his usual concern by excusing himself from some of his urgent meetings to show her that he was available and able-bodied enough to protect our limbs and assets. When he arrived home, Zachary insisted that he didn’t need protection. When Richard refused to go back to work, Zachary’s time with his father was spent railing firstly against ‘monopolies’ (a new word that he liked to play with even after finding out that it had nothing to do with his expertise at the board game) and then against the stupidity of those who installed a new extra cable that was too finely tuned, tripped a circuit breaker and shut off the line. To illustrate his point, every time we had generator power, he switched on all of the appliances until he blew the fuses. As we plunged back into darkness, I informed him that we had more immediate things to deal with, one of which was the fact that the fridge was defrosting water everywhere and ruining the carpet, something that I needed to attend to promptly before Rebecca developed a drowning anxiety.

After five weeks of this domestic chaos, Richard and I felt that we needed some time-out. To get away from it all, we decided to risk a trip into the city to one of our favourite restaurants. It was on the first floor of a high-rise building but we
had heard from good sources that they were flaunting a sign that said WE’VE GOT POWER. I phoned around to see who wanted to go with us.

First on the list were Phil and Annie, but they had attempted to go on a similar excursion a couple of weeks previously and had no heart for a second try. Eventually they agreed to come when we told them that Richard would drive and we would pick them up.

Next I phoned Elaine. Brian had been dehorning cattle, she said, and was spending far too much time on the farm. She could probably convince him to come but she had nothing to wear. I listened as she began going through her wardrobe. Half an hour later, I suggested that she go out and buy something. And I went onto the next call.

Marie was not at home. She was out delivering a baby, according to Tim, who was not working and tried to engage me in a conversation about how inconvenient it was to have Marie discussing the dilation of a cervix with a labouring mother when he was trying to sleep. I was not sympathetic, but he agreed to come anyway as it would give Marie a break, and he said that they would meet us there. Neither seemed daunted by the challenge of the city in darkness but then neither had been scalded by a previous attempt.

‘What went wrong last time?’ I asked Phil as we pulled out onto the motorway to head for the restaurant, with both of them sitting comfortably in the back seat.

‘Everything,’ Phil replied. ‘Everything that could have gone wrong did. Trust me, you’ll see for yourself.’

Richard smiled confidently and again I noted the difference between the two men. I couldn’t imagine Richard admitting defeat and sitting in the back seat of another man’s vehicle. It wasn’t his style. What is more, his practical skills, his determination not to lose face and a great deal of sheer bluff often ensured that he succeeded where others failed. Tonight he was weaving competently in and out of the traffic on the darkened motorway with patience and good humour. At various
points we could see that delays had spread outwards to reach some of the motorway ramps and that cars had overheated. In other places the traffic was being diverted into lanes that seemed to be heading in the opposite direction.

‘Can you believe this mess?’ Phil shook his head as he looked at the traffic jams around him. ‘The others will be lucky to make it. It’s still not under control. No wonder people are losing their temper.’

‘We’ve been told to keep out of the city,’ Annie informed us all. ‘The mayor has been telling people not to go in unless it’s absolutely necessary.’ She changed her tone. ‘He obviously doesn’t know what an accomplished driver you are, Richard.’ She leaned forward from her seat and smiled at him in the rear-vision mirror.

Well how about that! She’s flirting with him, I thought, surprised – not that another woman would find him attractive, but that this someone was Annie. Richard didn’t seem to notice and neither did Phil, who continued with his diatribe.

‘No matter how they tell us to deal with it, and what excuses they come up with, while I can make allowances for the first power cut, the digger blade and everything, I can’t for the life of me excuse the second one and how long it’s taken to make any progress.’

Richard had stopped weaving now. The traffic had been reduced to a crawl. He turned his attention to Phil.

‘It’s about risk management. It needs to be applied into the structure of the organisation as well as into all of its products and services, but it isn’t an easy thing to do. You see…’

Phil didn’t give him a chance to explain.

‘They didn’t even try,’ he interrupted. ‘Their primary objective was profit, not maintenance of an adequate supply of power.’

His voice began to rise as an ambulance screamed past with a police car following. Richard pulled over to the side before responding.
'I’m not sure that I agree with you on the profit argument anymore, Phil. What I’m seeing in my company has made me rethink a lot of my old views. Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ can be a pretty powerful metaphor when you see it in operation – I mean, as a force that directs self-interest to contribute to the common good.’

There was silence. It was obvious that these days Richard was relying on more than common sense.

We had begun to move again and were edging our way into the city. I could see candles burning in high towers where couples were dining on their balconies. I could also see the silhouette of the glass tower that housed the restaurant. Richard headed towards it and followed the road down into the underground parking area. As he tried to enter the parking lot, a yellow ticket arm that was locked across the entrance obstructed him.

Phil indulged in some gloating. ‘Didn’t I tell you? The whole thing is impossible. It’s a bloody nightmare.’ With sufficient time to digest the content in Richard’s ‘justification of profit’ speech he had worked out a sociological comeback. ‘Mercury Energy is a monopoly and a public utility so it’s got to have different responsibilities to a normal commercial organisation, don’t you think?’

Richard didn’t comment. He had changed the gearshift, placed his foot on the accelerator, reversed the vehicle and found us a parking space. He was disproportionately satisfied with himself for completing the task. Now all he had to do was successfully lead the way to the venue.

We stumbled through the darkness with Richard playing the Pied Piper, trying to miss the potholes caused by workers who had ripped up the road.

‘Where exactly are we supposed to meet the others?’ he asked me as he guided us towards the restaurant.

‘Outside,’ I replied. ‘I told them to wait, that we’d arrive around eight.’
He lifted up his arm to get a better view of his watch. There was nothing more to illuminate it than some watery moonlight that kept disappearing behind dark, thunderous-looking clouds.

‘The Auckland weather is about as reliable as Mercury.’ Phil was more relaxed now that we were out of the vehicle. ‘I thought that this was supposed to be a long dry summer.’

Richard rolled his eyes at the unlikelihood of it before squinting at his watch face.

‘They should be here. It’s well past eight. Where’s the entrance?’

I peered into the darkness. ‘Around here somewhere, but I can’t see a thing.’

We made our way past empty spaces and frozen elevators until we finally found it. The place looked forlorn. The tables and chairs were stacked up along the wall, the doors had been boarded over, and shamefacedly on the pavement was the sign WE’VE GOT POWER.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Phil, clapping his hands together in a dismissive gesture to put paid to the evening.

‘Not necessarily.’ It was Annie. ‘Maybe when we find the others we can go somewhere else. We haven’t got dressed up and come all this way for nothing.’

‘My thoughts entirely,’ a glamorous and glittering Elaine echoed as she stepped out of the darkness and began embracing everyone.

For the next few minutes there were the usual greetings with Elaine pressing her cheek against the cheeks of others and kissing nothing but the cool night air, Marie crushing everyone with her warm, generous hugs, and the men slapping each other anywhere that was sexually safe and couldn’t be misconstrued.

‘So where’s it going to be?’ Tim asked finally, looking at me as the person responsible for the mess that we were in. ‘How about a club? I don’t care how late we are. I’m just back on the farm. It doesn’t matter if I don’t turn up until lunchtime.’

Brian pulled a face. The rivalry between them could be intense at times.
‘I think we are all a bit past the clubbing scene,’ Brian said. ‘Besides, Tim, you may not feel the need to turn up early tomorrow, but Dad and I are carrying on with the drenching.’

I waited for one of the women to defuse the tension yet again. A survey had been carried out by a major company into the smiling and facilitating behaviour of receptionists in one of the New Zealand cities. Apparently these women were asked to desist from smiling for just a single day. They were instructed not to be rude or unhelpful but just to stop smiling. Some of the male clientele became petulant, others angry, but the obvious thing was that everything stopped functioning.

‘We’re all going to be drenched if we stand out here all night,’ Marie quipped, having become used to intervening between the brothers. ‘I’m not keen on clubbing either, Brian, but it could be a matter of what we can find.’

‘How about a strip joint then?’ Tim undid all of Marie’s smiley good work. ‘We could find one of those. We can divide up and drop you ladies back at home.’

He wasn’t joking. I reminded myself that it was Marie’s company that I enjoyed, not Tim’s, but there seemed to be an unwritten rule that stated that all couples should socialise with other couples. Sometimes it worked, other times it didn’t; but even when it did I suspected that it had to do with posturing and sexual tension: you belong to me, we have sex together, others are attracted to you but they must go home and have sex with each other. I also suspected that the sex between each couple was better after such a night out. You belong to me, we have sex together, others are attracted to you and that makes you more desirable.

‘How about karaoke?’ I suggested, anxious not to have the evening or the sexual issues complicated any further. ‘That could be a bit of fun.’

‘There’s a place about a block away. I noticed it on the way in. It looked like the building had its own generator,’ Richard volunteered, knowing how much I enjoyed singing and demonstrating the nice ‘I’m the person on your side’ bit of coupling.
'Karaoke it is,' announced Marie, grabbing my arm and taking charge. ‘We can walk,’ she continued, pulling me along.

There were no further arguments and the others followed as we headed off in the direction of the karaoke bar. Marie and I led the way, Elaine squeezed herself in the middle of Brian and Tim, Phil walked by himself and I noticed Annie positioned close to Richard’s left. I pondered over what they had in common. It was the art, I consoled myself. I needed to recall what had he told me. It was something about his interest not being personal – nothing more than envy at her ability to take a chance on her own talent. There wasn’t a lot of time to dwell on it anyway; Marie wanted to practise her singing as we walked, to work her voice in.

Having attracted more attention than Marie’s voice deserved, we made it to the venue and, as usual, Richard had been right. The place was lit up, neon lights flashing. We decided to take a private room. Drinks were on the house. False courage. We swaggered in. Tim had his thumbs in his belt and was ready to launch into anything. Anything turned out to be Kenny Rogers. He didn’t sing it; he crooned it.

‘Oh Ruby, don’t take your guns to town. Oh Ruby, for God’s sake turn around.’

We applauded.

It was Brian’s turn. He stuck with the theme. ‘You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille…’

It was bad. We pretended not to notice but Tim told him to stick to dehorning the cattle. He gave the mike to Elaine. I heard the opening strains of her speciality.

‘Hey big spender,’ she swirled her scarf in one hand. ‘Spend a little time with me. Dum dum da dum da dum.’

She was polished. She was like a professional. She thrust her hips forward. Brian loved it, so did Tim. I did the smiley thing.
It was Annie’s turn. What would she do? She made a choice and her voice softened. ‘I felt all flushed with fever, embarrassed by the crowd. I felt he found my letters and read each one aloud.’

She kept turning to Richard, as if directing her words to him.

‘Killing me softly with his song. Telling my whole life with his words…’

I was uncomfortable.

Then it was over. Richard took the microphone, standing by my side. ‘I’ve got you to hold my hand,’ he sang, handing the mike across.

‘And I’ve got you to understand.’ I grinned at him.

‘I’ve got you to hold me tight.’

I put my head on his shoulder. ‘And I’ve got you to kiss goodnight.’

‘I got you babe. I got you babe.’
Chapter Nine

Some people learn their telephone number while some learn their passport number. Others learn their tax file number. The number that I had memorised was my student identification number. I had written it at the top of my cover sheet for twenty-four subjects, four assignments each, then again and again during my postgraduate studies: 86794630. I had begun to like the number and I liked the grades that it returned me.

Now every assignment sat in front of me in a cumbersome, bulky pile, defying any logic that would include them in a shift from a large family home, to an apartment. And yet I intended packing them all, even though they looked peculiar—handwritten, antiquated and with a great deal of lecturer attention paid to the content. There was no reason to revisit the lengthy comments in the margin, no reason to ponder whether the lecturers were less busy then or whether the system was just more personal. I had a job to do. We had a deadline to get out of the house. Yet I continued to leaf through them all.

‘It is most exciting to see the detailed, specific analysis you are carrying out with regards to the writing of Woolf,’ one lecturer proclaimed in bold red ink.

‘This is a splendid, admirably researched essay that I read with profit, and you did well to observe the experience and dramatic method of Brecht’s Caucasian Chalk Circle,’ encouraged another.

‘You perceptively exposed the fact that we were duped, that it is a farce placed upon the question of human survival like a mask, a comic mask which belies our existential despair.’ That from the German department.
‘Jane, I’m most impressed. Your essay in which you state that the *Parable of the Emperor’s Death* is the key to the Great Wall of China is a creative and thoughtful attempt at defining the tenuous relationship between report and parable.’

‘Would I be allowed a copy for inclusion in the brochure of essays to be shared with the members of the subject?’ yet another asked in a tone that was both eloquent and flattering. At the end of my first year, I was invited to enter the 100 level Professor Ryan memorial essay competition.

I had not been confident that I could produce anything worthy of such comments. Indeed I had not been confident that I was university material at all, but with no land to work on, the children now both at school and Richard advancing up the corporate ladder, there was, for the first time, an opportunity to find out. I expressed my trepidation to Richard who, as usual, was encouraging and supportive.

‘I’m sure that you’ll handle it,’ he said. ‘You’re academic by nature. Look at the books you read. I’ve watched you preparing meals with Rebecca on your hip and a book on the kitchen bench. You actually love learning stuff just for the sake of it. It doesn’t matter what it is – history, politics, you name it. It’s not like that for me. I only learn what I have to for the job.’

I smiled. We had even eaten a few burnt concoctions to prove it.

‘And then there’s all that talk. How many nights do I go up to bed and leave you downstairs with friends, debating the finer points of something that I can’t get my head around and actually don’t even want to?’

‘True, but after-dinner conversation is one thing, serious academic analysis is another and I haven’t done any study for years.’

I expressed my doubts to Elaine, who promised to pick out some designer jeans for university that would look deceptively casual. Marie offered to help me with the practical side of things and, if needed, take care of Zach and Rebecca. I didn’t bother to telephone Annie. We were feeling our way after the karaoke incident and vulnerability on my part didn’t seem to be what was required. With
regards to the other men, Brian and Tim were too busy feuding to pay attention to anyone’s educational prospects, but Phil was encouraging.

‘You should’ve gone straight from school,’ he insisted. ‘It’s perfectly obvious you’re capable. Why didn’t you?’

‘Neither Richard nor I had much help with that stuff, Phil,’ I said quietly. ‘To use your language, it takes a bit of cultural capital to move a non-dominant person upwards doesn’t it?’

He nodded. ‘So how did you do academically at school? Not that I really need to ask.’

‘You’re right. I did really well. In the top few per cent. It was a state school and they had this nasty streaming process. You know, some, like me, with French, Latin, maths and physics, and others all the way down at home-craft. We were tested all the time. I remember that as clear as day, especially the Latin. We all sat in these mind-numbing rows in the main hall and my percentage mark was compared with the average mark for the whole year in this ghastly report book that came home to my parents.’

‘So you were in the Latin class?’

‘Yes siree, along with the sons and daughters of lawyers, doctors and all the other professionals. My father, of course, had never heard of Latin, let alone considered the value of it.’

Phil grunted in disapproval.

‘And because of the Latin class, because I lacked the kind of commercial skills my mother had and because I cut short what would have been an academic career, I have ended up in an occupational void.’

‘Which is about to be sorted out,’ Phil reassured me.

‘True.’ I was confident now, eager to see my life as a part of a larger pattern and thirsty for more.
When I enrolled at the university the children were intrigued with my enthusiasm.

Rebecca packed me a lunch. ‘And don’t eat it all at once,’ she advised solemnly as she handed me the lunchbox. ‘That’s what I did on my first day and then I didn’t have anything left later when I was hungry.’

I thanked her solemnly and promised to eat it in careful rations. I would be the only adult eating a Nutella sandwich and a biscuit in the shape of an elephant, but the fruit looked good.

Zachary was also solemn.

‘The dropout rate for mature-aged students can be quite high,’ he said. ‘But you can actually pass the exams by only going to sixty per cent of the tutorials. Your assignments are worth a percentage of your total mark and if you need any help with working this out I can do it. Dad has bought me a new calculator.’ He beamed proudly.

Zach’s well-intentioned assistance was not required. University was a place to which I became instantly attached. The old sandstone building with its heavy wooden doors and well-worn corridors seemed to nod with approval when I entered it in the early autumn. It was a meeting house where I spoke among my own tribe. It was a spiritual home where I felt reverential. It was my home ground – the space in which I excelled, not only for the joy of giving my personal best, but because I could relish the cheering of the crowd and the demands of the coaching. Here competition was an attractive notion with worthy opponents. I wanted to enrol in everything and my enthusiasm was embraced.

As I stumbled around, dealing with timetables and course outlines, I passed other mature-aged students in the corridors. We stood out from the rest, working harder than we needed for a pass, aware of the work world that kept a wary eye on us, waiting for us to return. Many were other women, taking courses in feminist papers. I spent time with them, listening to their stories and trying to grasp the implications of what they were learning. I was unsure of how much we had in
common. They spoke in an academic language that linked the political with the personal and, perhaps as a result, the majority seemed to be single. Despite their advice to enrol in their papers, I attended an eclectic mix of lectures, unsure of where my strengths were and where I should be heading. This was the time to experiment, before committing oneself, the course administrators advised in the brochures pinned on various notice boards around the place. But everyone had a different opinion. It was rather like having a baby, I thought, or buying a car.

‘Tell her to stay away from the humanities,’ came out of Richard’s workplace when he mentioned that I was embarking on university study for the first time. ‘Tell her to do commerce or law.’

‘Who said that?’ I asked.

‘Vincent. He’s just finished a business degree and now our company is supporting him through an MBA.’

‘Well, tell him that law is a possibility but that I’m not attracted to commerce.’ I felt like I was engaging in a game of Chinese whispers in which the message was doomed from the start.

‘He said it’s not a dating service, it’s a career plan,’ Richard reported the next day.

‘Tell him I’m aware of that, but that I need to do something that I will stick at. And if I like it I will be good at it. And with all due respect to his MBA, I’m more interested in the people part of the economy than pushing numbers around and managing large pools of money. Maybe if more people queried the idea of mathematical models running organisations, we’d all be better off.’

‘I might need to edit some of that but I’ll put him in the picture,’ Richard laughed.

‘How do you know that you won’t stick at commerce if you haven’t been to a lecture?’ Vincent replied.

I had to concede that Vincent had a point.
On Monday I trudged over to the business department to listen to an introductory lecture on financial analysis. I slipped into a seat at the back where I would be inconspicuous. On the podium stood a youngish woman in a dark skirt and crisp white shirt, stockings and court shoes. She opened her briefcase and began to remove sheaves of paper.

She didn’t have to wait long. In strode a middle-aged man, in a dark suit with a white shirt, but carrying his jacket over his shoulder with one finger and whistling casually. They were cut from the same cloth and it was pure Italian linen. Their eyes connected and I got the feeling that this was to be a tandem act. I was right. They finished each other’s sentences in a smooth, polished manner that would have made Tweedledum and Tweedledee proud.

‘This is a difficult paper,’ Mr ‘Armani suit’ announced. ‘It is going to be a heavy workload. It will take more effort than any other first-year paper. If you’ve got a problem with this you have until week three to get out.’

Ms ‘Armani skirt’ nodded approvingly.

‘How many of you are doing this paper as an elective?’ she asked the room.

Eventually a few hands were tentatively raised.

‘Well, what are you still doing here?’ she mocked.

The students lowered their hands, looked embarrassed, and that was the end of the preliminaries.

‘Everyone turn to page six in your text.’

There was a PowerPoint presentation with information and page numbers. Ms ‘Armani skirt’ began whizzing through chapters one and two while I watched the students frantically turn the pages in their textbooks, trying to locate what she was talking about. It was impossible. There was no time to write anything before the next chapter came along. After thirty minutes, she took a break and he began.

‘Now for the assignment. How many people think that they have time to analyse a hundred stocks?’
Nobody spoke.

He waited, tapping his fingers impatiently until finally someone got brave.

‘I wouldn’t have time to do that,’ a young man mumbled.

‘So we have one honest participant,’ Mr ‘Armani suit’ observed. ‘Okay. So we’ll halve it. How many of you have got time to do fifty stocks?’

The same brave soul shook his head.

‘Then how about twenty-five?’

Nobody spoke.

The duo sighed and exchanged an ‘aren’t students exhausting’ look.

‘Well, I’ll tell you what. You’re lucky. You will be in teams and we’re only going to make each team analyse one stock. Just one. There are fifteen categories by which you must analyse it and the stock itself must satisfy five different criteria. You’re lucky. You’re getting a bit of moral support. Last year students had to do it on their own.’

They smiled, without their eyes.

‘You will have to choose this stock based on these areas of criteria,’ she repeated, while indicating towards the PowerPoint. ‘You all have to do different stocks, so this booklet [he held it up and she pointed to it] will be in the School of Accounting and Finance on a first-come first-served basis. If you get there and someone has already written their name on it, you can’t do it. You might think it prudent to try to see which stocks are good. But if you try to see which is the best one and you want it and a name is on it then you can’t have it.’

They shook their heads to emphasis our dilemma.

And there was more.

‘And if you come to me in week eight and you have been working and doing well but your stock doesn’t meet one of the criteria and you can’t do that part of the question, what am I going to tell you?’
There was another silence. I hated this ‘question and answer’ routine and wondered if the lone participant would be brave enough to answer.

‘Don’t worry, mate, that’s all right,’ he suggested hopefully.

I began to smirk.

‘No, not “don’t worry mate that’s all right”,’ came the thunderous reply. ‘You know what I’ll tell you? I’m going to tell you to go right back to the beginning and start again because if you hand it in you will be getting a fail.’

They paused for emphasis before walking towards the whiteboard. Then for the next two hours they not only finished each other’s sentences with accuracy and precision, but expertly polished off each other’s equations as well.

The numbers and the tension grew. It was a bizarre symphony. His black hand-held marker punched out some numbers and her red marker punched them back in reply. He inflicted his solutions upon her and she dealt with them unflinchingly. I wriggled with discomfort, hoping that it would soon stop. More feverish scribbling and grim glances, then a semi-colon, a dash and a triumphant percentage sign, and it was over. They stopped abruptly, panting gently and moving apart, before turning around to face us like exhausted lovers.

‘Did you get all that down?’ she demanded.

More silence.

‘Are there any questions?’

It was his turn to make the closure now. ‘I hope not,’ he announced, indicating once again that their questions were rhetorical.

‘Because this,’ he continued, pointing to their joint contributions. ‘This is year eight maths and if you are having trouble with it then there is no point coming back next week.’

Chairs scuffed and squeaked on the freshly polished floors as students began to file out. I scuttled back to the humanities building, with its soft sandstone, to take refuge in antiquity, where the Greeks were doves and even the Romans seemed
gentle in comparison. I sat on a bench, under a tree, with a copy of the Iliad, formulating a new hypothesis about suit-clad bodies being dragged behind a chariot. It was here that Annie discovered me.

‘You look jaded,’ she said. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘I’m recovering from financial analysis,’ I told her.

‘Oh, so you’ve met the gruesome twosome.’

‘Is that what they’re called?’

‘Among other things,’ she said grimly. ‘Why did you go over there?’

‘To prove something to myself,’ I told her. ‘And to someone in Richard’s office.’

‘You shouldn’t have wasted your time. How is Richard, anyway?’

‘He’s fine,’ I replied cautiously.

She didn’t seem to notice the hesitation. ‘Now, why don’t you come over with me? I’m here three days a week for contemporary art. We’ve been studying postmodernism. At the moment we’re doing a group installation of chairs – you should come in and have a look. No one would even notice you.’

Over the past few days I had seen her strolling arm-in-arm with Phil around the campus. They looked happy. Maybe I had overreacted.

‘Okay, but I don’t know anything about practical art.’

‘It doesn’t matter. When can you come across? We’re doing installation art on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.’

My first opportunity was the following Wednesday. I had no lectures or tutorials scheduled and so I made my way to the Arts Faculty. It was a new, postmodern construction that blended into the environment in a hybrid of forms and materials. It was also postmodern in its complexity. The building might have been stimulating but the entries and exits were not clear and the ambiguity was disorientating. It took some time, but I finally found my way in.
The room was crowded with mostly young people, carrying art materials and wearing black. Rebecca, just coming out of her robber phase, would have thought that they were all afraid of something; but if they were, it was dressed in layers of carefully constructed self-confidence. Annie saw me coming and beckoned me over. She and someone called Trent were helping to position a chair in the installation. Trent was introduced as an art technician who helped students with their projects. He was paid, which gave him status, but did not exempt him from the non-optional black jeans, T-shirt and boots. He had also found a place in which his tattooing and piercing were mainstream – something that could alone have been the subject of a lecture.

Mandy joined us, also tattooed but in different places and on a smaller scale. Obviously, a huge shift had occurred within the tattooing industry, which had once catered almost exclusively to the dominant groups of bikers, sailors and topless dancers. It was just another thing that had occurred while I was at home having children, I told myself. Whereas Trent’s tattoos were in places such as the back and arms, Mandy’s were in more sensual places such as the shoulder, ankle and lower back. And while his designs were powerful and bold, hers were small and intricate and more of a natural and social fusion.

Mandy, I was informed by Annie, was not being called Mandy today – she wanted to be known as Phoenix. She had also shaved her head. I felt hopelessly conventional, but she and Trent did everything they could to make me feel comfortable; I also wanted to understand the conception of the chair.

‘It’s a nature chair,’ Annie said. ‘It has been designed and constructed by Chrissie.’

‘Where is Chrissie?’ I asked, hoping for some relief from the army of black swarming around the chair like worker ants.

Annie looked over her shoulder to a young woman tottering over to us in shoes that were designed for less practical purposes.
She was humming, which was infinitely better than whistling, and I was excited to observe that she was also a risk taker who had wriggled out of her black, standardised skin and transformed herself into an ethereal butterfly.

She had come to supervise the inclusion of her chair into the group installation. The chair itself had a backrest constructed of peacock feathers with various items of fruit woven into the seat. Trent was trying to hang some hemplike curtain material around it, from which hung hundreds of tiny paper flowers.

I was intrigued as to how the lecturer could assess all this artwork objectively; after all, there were many pieces placed within the installation. I was interested in not just for their construction but also the social and political points that many of them were making. Unfortunately it was too late to gain anything from the birthing chair, but there was a wishing chair and I wasn’t too old for wishes.

Although the electric chair looked formidable – a product of a long and complex history – another little chair in the opposite corner of the room caught my attention. An old bench was painted in orange and yellow flames and covered with coiled, ringed elements. It was hard-edged and metallic, without being too confronting, and THE HOT SEAT was written in unobtrusive letters on the wall above.

‘What on earth are these people going to do with their talent and creativity when they get out of university?’ I asked Richard later that evening, when we had finished dinner and were sharing the ups and downs of our day. ‘I mean, I know that some of them are a bit extreme. But overall they were happy and collegial, and there was such a lot of talent in that room. You should have seen the chairs they produced. Some of them were quite exceptional and yet all that’s going to happen is that they’ll end up sitting on someone else’s.’

‘Most of us end up sitting on somebody else’s chair eventually, Jane.’ He sighed.

‘That sounds pessimistic.’
‘Well maybe it is, but recently mine has felt much more like that hot seat you just described than any sort of nature chair.’

This was news to me. ‘What’s wrong? You’re not dealing with the unions anymore. I thought you were feeling okay, on top of things.’

‘Well I have been, relatively speaking,’ he admitted, ‘but things have altered radically at work this week and to tell you the truth I don’t want to be there anymore.’

He now had my complete attention. When Richard became unhappy at work it usually meant that we were about to undergo some radical change, not only geographically but also emotionally. I had a mental picture of a happy Rebecca turning cartwheels at her new school, only just settled after so many exhausting weeks. And Zach, so hard to place but doing so well. My stomach knotted. How do some people manage to stay in the present while others jump straight into the future? It was a curse, this tendency to race ahead – not even something I could get money for by draping myself in a scarf and peering into a crystal ball.

‘They’re restructuring again.’ Richard’s shoulders drooped. ‘Remember me telling you how they were advertising for a new CEO?’

I nodded.

‘Well, he’s been appointed, but what I have only just found out is that he’s had no industry experience. He’s an outsider and he’s making major changes in the cost structure. He’s getting rid of middle management – you know, the ones who actually remember the problems and how they were solved. He’s already selling bits off and sees the company as a collection of financial assets. He wants to get rid of the old style of management. Anyway, he spent his first day at work today and he’s re-organised things. I’ve lost my office and I’m back on the first floor.’

My thoughts raced, trying to digest it. I had been preoccupied with children and chairs and had forgotten windows. Richard had enjoyed a view of Auckland Harbour: the bustle of the shipping yards and the ferries busying themselves in the
foreground, with the entire frame completed by the volcanic cone of Rangitoto in the
distance.

What killed me was the fact that somewhere, within that picture frame, was
Richard’s self-esteem. And now it had disappeared. He looked tired and middle-
aged. I felt the old familiar desire for him, the kind that ignites and then flares on
fuel from a deep emotional source. I wanted to reconstruct the manhood, piece it
together the way I had many times before – the way he did for me when I fell apart. I
pushed my plate away and placed myself behind him, nuzzling the nape of his neck.

His response was instant. He pulled me around to face him and I caught my
breath as the first flush took hold.

‘We will do this slowly,’ I whispered. ‘Very slowly.’

I took each piece of him and turned it over gently in my hands, knowing his
colours and patterns, the jagged tears and the smooth edges, the way to entice and
the way to restore. He moaned and reached to take me with him but I pulled back,
kneeling above him, prolonging the moment. I continued to watch him, caught in a
tide of surge and suction, ebb and flow, until we were joined together in a rhythmic
journey and there was no longer any chance to resist. My body began to flail until
his hands gripped mine. I held on tightly as he pulled me into the undercurrent.
Together we became engulfed, conscious only of our own united force.

‘It will be alright,’ I told him. ‘It will be alright.’
Our packing styles were as different as our personalities. My tea chests were gradually becoming sorted in an orderly manner. Generally speaking, my method appeared to be working. Although I sometimes wavered, I could eventually choose and discard objects efficiently. I was coping.

On closer scrutiny, however, I was only just making it. Packing was a naked confrontation with reality and my skin layer seemed to be missing. I was too finely tuned in a composition of many things, including something Aristotle once called melancholy, a gentle word that did not do justice to the condition.

Zachary, however, was taking his own approach, grabbing, flinging, swearing and then finally dumping everything he owned into bulging cardboard boxes.

Rebecca had her own agenda and, as a result, her suitcase was still empty. Every time I began to sort I was embroiled in a silent emotional battle, while Zachary refused to sort at all and Rebecca became overwhelmed. It was an inconvenient time to move, she had told me, but with anxiety rather than irritation, since she understood that we had been dictated to by an efficient, autocratic and impersonal process over which we had little control.

Some called it ‘the legal process’. I preferred to call it a runaway train. This was not an accumulation of brightly coloured little carriages with plastic wheels and a perpetually smiling face on an engine, though, which jumped off the tracks and clipped a few trees as it cavorted over the gentle green hills. This was a bullet train with the ability to go straight for the heart. A sleek, metallic machine designed as the fastest way to get from A to Z and in the process leaving you crushed.
The machine had now impacted on Rebecca’s ability to finish her commerce assignment as she sat amid the chaos of what used to be our family room, biting her nails.

‘What’s the case study?’ I asked, leaning over her shoulder.

‘It’s a European executive search and selection company,’ she said, ‘focused on the European IT industry and opening a network of offices in key European countries. The expansion has created a need for two additional consultants and I have to work out an expansion strategy.’

‘Executive search and selection company?’

‘Yeah, another word for headhunters,’ she volunteered. ‘And I’ve got no interest in it. Poaching senior personnel from another company is just one more unethical activity.’

Zach snorted, stood up and moved to the centre of the room.

‘An unethical activity,’ he mimicked. ‘It’s a fucking fact of life. Almost ninety per cent of the top thousand companies use it to find senior people – even local authorities and government departments.’

I should have rebuked him for the language but I was becoming used to it, and reacted more dramatically to the numbers, always surprised at how readily they came to hand.

‘Where do you get your information from?’ I asked.

‘You just learn this stuff,’ he scoffed.

‘What, like car engines?’ Rebecca asked.

I smiled. Zach had been teaching her all that he knew. He had told her that they should never waste money on a car but should buy them cheaply at auction and do them up. I had watched them, out on the front lawn, Zach’s bulky body squeezed into the front seat of the old car they had bought and Rebecca’s in the passenger’s as he hunched over to pull out some wires. And on other occasions, the
two of them, heads deep down under the bonnet, with Zach insisting that Rebecca learn the finer points of the motor. He ignored the engine comment and continued.

‘There’s a formula to it. You start out with a large international company, ensure that you are noticed by your superiors, make an impression outside your company and when you’re ready to move, make it known.’

‘Well, I think it’s sick.’ Rebecca argued, uncharacteristically. ‘How can anyone want to take on a person who has been secretly lying to their current employers as they put together a CV and go to interviews? You should never behave like that.’

She stopped and looked over at me for support, but I tried to stay out of it, all the while painfully aware that Rebecca was just one of many from her generation who rejected the values of the baby boomers.

‘It’s not a matter of what you should or shouldn’t do,’ Zach said impatiently. ‘It’s what happens. They cultivate people, keep visible and drop hints.’

‘I don’t care. I would never do it.’ Rebecca was implacable.

‘It’s called self-interest,’ he said scathingly. ‘If you don’t do it you’re just a rabbit in the fucking headlights,’ he added, ‘like Mum.’

‘Hey, hold on a minute, Zach. Watch that tongue of yours. There is nothing weak about behaving ethically.’

‘How can I get it through to the pair of you that, in the corporate environment, nobody fucking cares?’ Zach continued. ‘There is nobody sitting out there judging you if you stuff up or patting you on the head when you do the right thing. Nobody fucking cares.’

‘Well, I care,’ Rebecca said. ‘They’ve been telling me in therapy that it’s all about being authentic. It’s like Mum says – to thine own self be true.’

Well, well, I thought to myself. An old school motto from Hamlet. When had I resurrected that one? I could see the problem – raising children on old school mottos, ethics and classics, year after year pointing out allegory and symbolism and translating the Latin. It had backfired and now what were they to do? Cling
desperately like a kitten to a swirling plank that has been dropped into a dirty creek, or sharpen their claws on the plank, hiss and leap off?

Zach saw me lose attention and sharpened his claws.

‘You lived in a purple haze,’ he said. ‘A fucking purple haze.’

Rebecca would like this one, I thought. It was her favourite colour. So did Jimi Hendrix. I opted for another approach.

‘Well, there you are,’ I said, hoping to avoid any more conflict.

Zach stared at me accusingly. ‘What do you mean, there you are?’

He kept glaring at me, for once in his life unsure of which way to direct the conversation. Then he recovered.

‘There you are,’ he muttered. ‘Yeah, here I am and here we all are, and if you and my father had sorted out your fucking financial lives then he could have told the fucking headhunter to go fuck himself and none of this stuff between you would have happened’.

‘Too many fucks to be effective,’ I told him. ‘You need to use the word more sparingly or it loses its effect.’

‘Like in war films,’ Rebecca was white-faced.

‘Exactly. And it’s all water under the bridge now anyway. And if you have anything to say about your father’s own financial management, then I suggest you address it to him directly, Zachary. You are not only being disrespectful but you think you have the answer to everything. You might be interested to know that when I first married your father, married women were discouraged from even working, let alone sorting out their own financial affairs.’

Zachary stormed from the room.

I had used up all the energy I had.

Sorted out our lives, eh? Well I guess there’s some truth in that. Maybe your life should be sorted out after forty. But which bits should be sorted? All of it, according to Zach. Well, I had honestly tried, and yet as someone who hated the
prospect of defeat, as some idealist who had believed in hanging on in there beyond the point of rationality, I had still failed miserably.

Anyway, Zach, I reflected silently in self-defence to the empty space where he had been standing, you never get it all entirely sorted out. It’s like the dry Australian bush in an electrical storm. You put out one fire and another one ignites. And maybe you’re right, Zach: we should have had it sorted out – should have had an alarm system installed, a fire extinguisher in every room and an insurance policy for the heat damage. But we didn’t. At over forty, he should have had something put aside – had a financial plan. But he didn’t. And when the headhunter came, not only did he not put up a fight, Zach, he went willingly.

I had been in the middle of Feminist Literature at the time, having made my own decision that the courses had a great deal of merit. Not much help financially, but gaining skills to contribute later. We had been studying women as writers, women and madness, women alone, women and motherhood, and most importantly, women and the romantic myth – the myth that created the purple haze, the myth that placed importance on women’s conformity to male values at the expense of undervaluation and even erasure of their own intellect.

I watched with fascination as the make-up disappeared, the hemlines dropped and the intellect sharpened. I watched as women struggled to become defined, not by their possessions and appearance, but as authentic and independent identities. I watched as they evaluated their status or lack of it, and the realisation came about that it was bestowed upon them only through the success of the males in their lives, be they fathers, husbands or sons. A minister’s wife abandoned her role of typing the Sunday sermon and got herself a paying job. Another woman took out a domestic violence order against her barrister husband. An elderly woman in retirement refused to leave the course early to go home to make her husband’s lunch. Women rebelled, women became enlightened, and many of them packed their bags and left.

How well equipped were these women to evaluate my position? These women who were confronting and asserting their own newly acquired reality?
I decided to put it to them one lunch hour, in the university canteen over mushy peas, mashed potato and a burnt lasagne stack, which sat in the middle of our plates like a pile of discarded car tyres.

‘Richard’s been headhunted,’ I told them. ‘For a CEO position in Australia – Sydney.’

The knives and forks went down immediately as they tuned in. They were familiar with the name, the man and the marriage. I was happy and had told them so.

‘I’m not disillusioned with anything,’ I had insisted during long-winded discussions on the evils of patriarchy. ‘I actually love this man. Don’t think that I am going to put on some overalls, sling a backpack on my shoulders and go off to seek my fortune like a female Dick Whittington, because it’s not going to happen.’

They had shrugged their shoulders. Now they looked dismayed.

‘Headhunted’ – the word lay before us like a rock that had been catapulted over the castle walls.

‘Australia?’

The word was repeated in a mystified tone, as if offshore, no matter where, was considered to be a radical option.

‘Yes, that little continent to the west, lying just off our coastline,’ I quipped.

‘Does he want to go?’

At last, a logical question. ‘Yes, he says it is an opportunity of a lifetime, an adventure, and an equivalent of the education he didn’t complete.’ I left out the crucial details of the lost office with the window.

‘I’m sure he does, baby, but do you want to go?’

‘No I don’t, actually,’ I replied cautiously, digging a symbolic grave for myself in the mushy peas. ‘I’m happy here and so are the children. It’s my home. My family and friends are here. There is a lot of community support…’ My voice trailed off.
‘So did you say all that? I hope you did because all of that stuff is important – more important than any job.’ It was a younger woman.

‘Of course I did.’

‘And?’

There was a pause.

‘He still wants to consider it.’

‘Oh, he still wants to consider it. Well, I’m telling you, girl, you need a little sisterly support.’ An arm went around my shoulders. ‘If you go over there you will lose everything that you define yourself by. You will be trapped in a false image, an inauthentic role. Just another bimbo who defines herself by her husband’s job at the expense of her own identity.’

‘But there’s a contract – for three years.’ I was sounding a bit desperate now. ‘He says that if he gets the job, then after three years I can decide where we will live and come back if I want to.’

The eyebrows lifted.

‘I don’t want him to resent me for not giving him the chance. We’ve been thrashing this thing out for days. I need a solution, a compromise, some kind of unity.’

‘Compromise – now there’s a word that is suspect to all minorities, achieved at the expense of their silence, I do believe.’

‘But I haven’t been silent,’ I protested. ‘I’ve been speaking out for days and I’m beginning to think that maybe the three-year thing is a solution.’

‘It’s too simplistic. Things change, people change – and just another small point: how are you going to finish your studies?’

‘I guess I’ll have to do it externally by distance-ed. At least I’m not giving up a job.’

‘If you had a job, you would have some bargaining power?’
‘Have you been over there?’

‘Only on holiday and not for a while.’

‘So you’re going for a look?’

‘Yes, next week. Richard is going over and they want to meet me.’

‘Huh, that’s a joke.’ It was the young woman again. ‘Do you think this company will give a fuck about you? Phallocentrism, babe, gives ascendancy to male interests and achievements only – all on the basis of the penis. How do you think he got this far in the first place? Because you’ve held his hand and written his bloody reports.’

‘The money’s great,’ I finished lamely, looking at the sceptical faces.

‘Who’s paying for your university fees?’ Another probing question.

‘He is.’

There was silence again as the group considered the implications.

‘Well, I’m sorry, Jane, but it seems that you’re pretty well screwed.’

I didn’t feel screwed – caught between tradition and a new wave of feminism, I felt disappointed that our goals and values weren’t coinciding and even a little scared, but not screwed. Richard and I had compromised all our married life and it happened naturally. This was just another compromise, I told myself – born out of a lengthy negotiation in the lives of two mature, caring adults. We were both willing to make concessions. We had not locked ourselves into any position where we could lose face and we had a fallback. In the short term, we were going to try to meet both our interests by combining work and family, and in the long term things would be reviewed. Quite a complex process really, nothing simplistic about it.

After a series of interviews, Richard was now the ‘preferred candidate’ – this was a crunch time when wives and children could present unnecessary complications. It was the Executive Search Consultant’s job to bring the deal to a satisfactory conclusion, so it had been agreed that I would accompany Richard on
the last crucial phase – while he assessed the job, I assessed the lifestyle. And they
looked me over.

We were allocated a week for the task, staying in the penthouse of a hotel
with bridge and harbour views. It was a luxurious suite, filled with antiques, but
with our two small suitcases standing in the middle of the room it looked absurd.

‘I think we need to do something to make things look a bit more homely,’ I
suggested, spreading out my books and placing a picture of Zach and Rebecca on
the bedside table, but feeling disconnected anyway. ‘I don’t feel comfortable in here
at all. It’s far too opulent and there’s too much space.’

‘You could try unpacking,’ Richard smiled. ‘That usually helps. Once you’ve
put your things away, you usually start to feel less alienated.’

I began hanging outfits in the wardrobe but a dozen coathangers later there
were still a couple of metres of space. Richard unzipped his suit carrier and began to
hang up his suit and jackets. The distance between the two sets of clothing looked
ominous. As well as that, everything I had brought looked laid back and Sydney
resistant, while Richard’s clothes looked ready to begin striding out onto the
pavement without him.

Richard began to unload his briefcase on the bed, the way he did at home.
This was familiar. I sat on the edge of the bed to watch him, but it was a new
briefcase with stiff, unforgiving leather. It had an elaborate combination lock that
clicked into action before the case efficiently snapped open. It was precise,
aggressive and not reassuring. The bed was definitely larger than king-sized. I
measured it with my feet, walking deliberately heel to toe. Richard watched me with
amusement. Right now I would have been happier in a hammock.

Phil, with his academic background and social theory, could have come up
with any number of jobs for Richard whereby my leanings and interests would be an
advantage. I tried to think of some of them. An investigative journalist or maybe
something connected with animals or the planet? I could imagine Richard as an
environmental scientist. What about some kind of humanitarian aid position or
working for the UN? If it had to be another job, then it needed to be something worthy. Maybe it wasn’t too late to suggest a career change. Things were still in review.

I was running out of time. I had been invited to make an appearance with Richard in the boardroom the next morning. It was in a building overlooking Hyde Park, where his office was going to be. Hyde Park had status. It had mature trees and a European style that gave it sophistication.

I shuffled through some of the papers that were spilling out of Richard’s briefcase, looking at the ‘package’ they were offering. It included a car park. We hadn’t needed a car park before – we could usually just angle in, in front of wherever we wanted to go. Then there was the telephone. This was to be paid for if I wanted to call home. Quite thoughtful since they didn’t even know me yet, but something else I hadn’t thought about, since my parents used to visit me whenever they felt the urge. What about the school fees? Ah, those were going to be salary-sacrificed. Very taxation-savvy, but I’d heard that they were twice the amount of those at home. I thumbed through a few more pages of the proposed contract. International carrier to transport furniture, all expenses paid, accommodation in a hotel of choice and twelve months’ paid rental. Interesting. After a long struggle, our home had just become freehold. Now we were going to pay rent. Richard’s salary began to look smaller, but I said nothing. It was too early. According to the executive search consultant, my role was clearly defined. I was to meet the directors, assess the lifestyle, let Richard sweat the figures and the details of the job, and we would confer at the end of the week.

We set off in a cab for the boardroom the next morning, after a continental breakfast and an exhausting night of trying to find each other in the bed. The middle-aged men were already waiting for us around the oval table, but after a brief greeting we were expected to go our own ways. Richard looked apologetic as he was guided out of the room by an older-looking man with glasses and a neatly trimmed moustache. I made an attempt to follow but was tapped on the arm and led towards the executive search consultant to whom I was assigned.
‘You’ll need to visit the schools,’ he told me. ‘And look at housing. I suggest that you stay in the eastern-suburbs area as Richard needs to be near the city and not far from the airport.’

Not far from the airport! I looked down at the smiling picture of Rebecca tucked into the front of my wallet. She wouldn’t be impressed.

‘Now, if there is anything you want, just phone me on this number.’ He gave me his business card.

‘In the meantime, you’ll require this for the week. You may need to buy a skirt out of it – for the Sydney Club tonight. They don’t like women wearing trousers.’ He looked down at my casual pants, tied with a drawstring.

‘You’ll also need some cash while you’re out there.’ He thrust a chunky bundle of notes into my hand. I tried not to look surprised. They were hundreds. I wasn’t sure what to do with it all. It wouldn’t fit into my wallet and it was too big for my hand. I shoved it into my handbag with the map he had given me as he stepped onto the roadside and hailed me a cab.

‘Good luck,’ he said.

I climbed into the cab and tried to settle into the back seat as the taxi lurched into the line of traffic.

‘Where to?’ the driver asked, as I fumbled with my list of private schools and real estate agents.

‘The eastern suburbs. I need to find somewhere to live.’ I leaned over and pointed to the first name at the top of my list. The driver nodded and began the stop–start journey.

‘Gunna cost you a pretty penny,’ he observed.

‘Oh, we’re not going to buy straight away,’ I blurted out. ‘Initially, we’re just going to rent. My husband’s company is going to help us out.’

‘Good one,’ he remarked dryly. ‘I’m sure they can afford it. You’re from New Zealand aren’t you?’
‘Yes,’ I replied, bracing myself for a sheep joke.

‘Mm.’ He threw a quick glance over his shoulder as if trying to assess me before taking on a European car that had somehow edged its way in front of him.

‘Well, I don’t want to put you off, but it’s going to be a lot different.’

I let the comment go, telling myself that it was my fault for starting an unnecessary conversation when I needed to concentrate on what was soon to be my route in and out of the city. It was not to be; the conversation gained momentum. Eventually I decided to deflect the probing, and found out that he lived in the western suburbs – Campbelltown – and that after being recently laid off, and with four kids and a hefty mortgage, he was having a go at driving as a way of making ends meet. It all seemed sobering, so for the last few minutes we lapsed into silence.

‘Well, here you are,’ he announced eventually, throwing both hands up into the air after pulling in between a patisserie and a couple of up-market boutiques.

‘You should be comfortable in something around here. Don’t know how you’ll go with the schools and all that, though. I reckon you’re more of a Balmain sort myself. But there you are. Nice to meet you. Have a great day.’

It wasn’t a great day. It wasn’t a great night. And the next few didn’t measure up either. Every morning we got up, reviewed our schedules and disappeared in different directions. Every night we resurfaced only to find that some social activity had been organised on our behalf. After beginning as strangers, Sydney and I rapidly became acquainted. We got on talking terms, even had a friendly chat, but always with an element of distrust. The city smiled and it dazzled, its panache as alluring as its blue skies. It offered a rhythm, an upbeat mode that many cities lacked. I clutched it around the waist at the front of the conga line as it snaked and weaved in front of me, luring me to explore its harbour and its restaurants. Richard did his own exploring, not in a conga line but in a well-organised goosestep, moving from one glass partition to another as he familiarised himself with his duties and the staff. At the end of the week we were left alone together, sitting on the edge of the orthopaedic mattress, suitcases repacked, airline tickets in hand.
‘I want this job, Jane,’ Richard said, with more conviction that I had heard in years. ‘I want it really badly.’

He turned to face me.

‘And you?’ he asked. ‘What about you?’

‘There’s nothing I want here, Richard,’ I replied quietly, my eyes avoiding his. ‘It may not be helpful and it’s not what you want to hear, but I just want to go home.’
The farewell party wasn’t Annie’s idea but Annie made the sign. She had arranged the futuristic silver letters on black cardboard – ‘Bon Voyage Richard and Jane’ – and hung it across the front of the basement, along with tinsel, falling stars and swirling planets. It looked as though we were ready to launch into space. We were engaged in an elaborate countdown, simply to propel ourselves across the Tasman – a notoriously small stretch of water we knew affectionately as ‘the Ditch’.

The party was a surprise. I had insisted that I didn’t want farewells. After all, this wasn’t necessarily a permanent move. Nothing was being sold, just rented out.

‘It’s a three-and-a-half-hour plane trip,’ I told them, ‘less if there’s a tailwind. They speak English over there – no need for a fuss.’

But I realised that I had lost the battle when a band turned up, assembled its gear and began playing music in the garden. The band was followed by some clowns in full costume – ‘we knew you would want something for the children’ – with the caterers close behind. Instead of being launched skyward, however, I felt as though I was falling down a tunnel like Alice, and nothing made sense. I was the reluctant participant, wandering around with no Queen of Hearts, but feeling as though my head was going to be chopped off at any minute.

A few of my university friends arrived. They could see my detachment and said it could lead to madness.

‘Madness,’ they said, ‘is an intense experience of female biological, sexual and cultural castration and a doomed search for potency. It begins with disconnectedness.’
I did not find this helpful. I had a lot to worry about and going mad would unnecessarily complicate things.

There were other warnings.

‘What you mustn’t do is to change from disconnectedness to a lack of authenticity. What we call normal,’ they quoted, ‘is nothing more than repression, denial and other destructive action. It is completely estranged from the nature of being. If you act in a way that everyone accepts but is not authentic, you will be subscribing to the sanity of the superego.’

It was all heavy stuff for a farewell party, but I was relieved to have moved beyond the feminist arguments that had never been resolved.

I moved past the hors d’oeuvres. The band music was drifting into the garden. People danced: couples, parents and children, children and clowns. The caterers were scuttling backwards and forwards from the kitchen to the tables set up under umbrellas in front of the house, carrying various dishes that had been thoughtfully selected by Marie. I sat down. There were expectations. I had a history of being socially engaging, of filling up gaps and silences. But I was not sure of how to conduct myself – I was anxious, I suppose now, to hide any potential madness.

‘This is such a lovely party, Jane. You must be so happy here among your friends.’

‘Yes, it is. Can you believe that Marie found time to organise it? I can’t imagine how she located some of these people – I haven’t seen some of them for years.’

I cast a glance at my bridesmaid, rarely in my company since the wedding. I wondered what she thought of all of this. She seemed to be having a good time in a circle with some aunts and distant relatives. They were doing the hokey pokey and she was about to put her left foot in.

I excused myself and tried to find Richard. He was engrossed in a conversation with Brian in a corner of the garden. They acknowledged me and I stood beside them, waiting for a time to jump in, like a skipper in a rope game. They
were discussing feedlots – Brian somehow imagined that we might come across a few while in Australia. I wondered whether he’d forgotten we were going to Sydney, not outback Australia. I also knew feedlots are confined yards with watering and feeding facilities where cattle are mechanically fed and watered for production. I had not seen any from the taxi and wanted to tell him this. But he seemed so keen on the idea that I heard myself promising to have a look.

I decided to look for the children. I could see the clowns painting faces in the corner of the garden and they weren’t among them.

I considered engaging Richard’s attention but Phil had joined them and the conversation had turned to methane gases and global warming. Brian had recently told Richard that the amount of methane produced by feedlot cattle depended on the characteristics of the feed and the amount eaten, but Phil wasn’t convinced. He believed that Australia had an obligation to compile an annual greenhouse-gas inventory. Men! I thought – concerning themselves with the gas problems of cattle when we were about to embark on a monumental journey.

I touched Richard on the arm and mouthed the children’s names to him silently, knowing that my voice would be lost over the noise of the band. He nodded and pointed to the house. I began to weave my way through the tables and the trees, but didn’t get far before I bumped into Annie.

‘It’s a fantastic party isn’t it, Jane? Can you believe how well things are going? All these people. Look at Richard over there. You must be so proud.’

I didn’t feel proud, but I wasn’t going to tell Annie.

‘I’ll come over to see you both,’ she continued. ‘Very soon.’

I had another problem with ‘both’. It had too much stress on it and it made me nervous.

‘I’ve got some paintings to bring across. I have a contact at The Rocks.’ She smiled at me. ‘Richard’s helping me out.’
Ah, the throwaway line. It could be heaved into oblivion as far as I was concerned. I had no intention of catching it. I, who had once refused prawns under pressure, could also be fake if required.

‘What a wonderful idea,’ I enthused. ‘Perhaps I can help to find some other outlets for you when I get over there.’

I was still unsure about Annie. I would ask Richard about The Rocks later.

‘Thank you so much for the work you did on the sign,’ I told her, ‘and the garden.’ I looked up at a miniature Jupiter fastened to a tree branch. It was definitely handmade. ‘It must have taken you ages.’

The food came around again just as she was about to reply. I recognised one of the pastries – I had taken a tiny bite out of it and put it back. The stress of leaving was interfering with my digestive system and I hadn’t been able to eat. How strange that my pastry was being recycled. I needed to take it off the plate and maybe drop it into the garden. I grabbed it, just as it recommenced its circular journey.

Annie was distracted talking to the caterer, who was admiring Jupiter. Someone, perhaps Richard, had told him it was her creation.

‘You could have a future doing this sort of thing,’ he told her. ‘A lot of people like a theme on these sorts of occasions.’

I wondered what theme I would have chosen if someone had asked me, and what he meant by ‘these sorts of occasions’. How often do people leave the country? Maybe he was just speaking loosely. I resumed my journey up to the house, brainstorming as I went. I decided on something Aboriginal, to do with boomerangs and their ability to return. It was an original idea, I thought, and proved that I was still extremely sane.

I sidestepped the clowns, who were juggling on the steps. They had an enraptured audience of children including Marie and Tim’s daughter Sarah and Brian and Elaine’s three, with painted faces, sitting at the front on the grass. Disguise could be an option, I mused – it was more acceptable than disappearing. I looked for Rebecca, knowing that Zach would have found his own niche. Richard must have
been right – she was somewhere in the house. I searched the lounge and the living room but couldn’t find her. Instead I found Marie, who stretched out her arms for a hug.

‘I know it’s a bit overwhelming,’ she said, ‘but I started with the right idea. It just got out of control. Hey, are you okay?’

I nodded, forgiving her instantly for her part in the fiasco, and gulped. It was not a time to fall apart.

‘I’ll come over,’ she assured me, pulling back to arm’s length and looking uncharacteristically serious. ‘And you can come back to stay, any time that you like – you know that. I’m not happy about it either, Jane. I’ve been close to you and the kids for a long time.’

I hugged her again. ‘Where are the kids? Do you know? Richard said they were in the house but I haven’t been able to find them.’

‘The last time I saw Zach he was in the study with the grandparents and I think Rebecca is in her bedroom.’

I hadn’t looked in either place so I set off again to find them, noticing a surprisingly intimate exchange between a caterer and a clown in the hallway. You never can tell what will come from this sort of thing. People had a way of pairing up with incredible speed.

I followed them down the hallway, after they had disentangled themselves, keeping my distance as they proceeded, arm in arm and giggling as they wore one large floppy clown shoe each and took turns fitting on the big red nose. They were happy, wacky even, and free from the need for any kind of control – content in the belief that life could be embraced with a hop, skip and a jump.

I could hear Zach’s voice as I approached the study. I had put everything personal away and shut the door when the house had begun filling with people, and so I didn’t expect to find anyone in there. I realised my mistake. The study was Zach’s favourite room. He had sat in there, among the files and the technology, since he was small, pretending to make business calls with a toy phone and creating his
own empire. He used to drag Rebecca in as an assistant while she, dressed in a white apron and with a little starched hat, protested that she would rather be a nurse. I hadn’t mentioned it in feminist literature. It was a huge omission, like my failure to relate Richard’s reaction to losing his office view of Rangitoto. Today Zach was distributing copies of his new school prospectus to a group of elderly relatives. We had brought a pile of these back from Sydney and he was putting them all to good use.

‘This is the chapel,’ he was telling everybody. ‘It’s next to the Grand Hall.’

The aunties began reaching for their glasses.

‘I’ll be in a house now, as well as a classroom.’

They looked confused.

‘Not a house like this, but a house that is a group of students whom I’ll be with until I graduate in Year 12.’

They looked even more perplexed.

‘There are no “forms” over there so I will be measuring my school life in years.’

They looked at each other blankly, as if they had forgotten being at school at all.

‘I think it is a better system myself. Don’t you?’

This time, with no consistency, they all nodded agreeably.

‘Now, you’ll notice that my school is a single-sex school. Most of the schools in the inner city are. They are in very good positions.’ He held up a brochure to point out the view. ‘So this setting will be very different for me. Sport will be compulsory, two nights a week and on Saturdays, which is demanding. But I’ve qualified for the Latin class.’

Oh no! Not the Latin class again. I shuddered in my position outside the doorway.
‘I’ve never done Latin before. It’s a dead language but I’m told that it’s useful for English.’

I watched as they pored over the glossy brochures, doing their best to support Zach.

He cleared his throat to regain their attention. ‘Now, before you go…’

They were totally absorbed and not going anywhere.

He raised the volume. ‘Before you go, you might like to take one of the magazines on the other desk. This is a monthly magazine put out by my father’s new company and he is on the front cover.’

Richard’s mother was the first to get one, having successfully won the grandparents’ dash. I was shocked at how many copies there were. I wondered what Richard was thinking of. What had he intended to do with them? None of the grandparents seemed to mind. They just joined the queue and filed past like consumers at a trade fair. Zach resumed his sales pitch.

The detachment had vanished again at the sight of him, but in its place was something deeply painful, reminiscent of the eve of his first day at school, when his expectations ran high and his faith in adults and their systems remained intact. Was I letting him down by not acting on something that was nothing more than intuition? Probably. But it had to be couched in terms that would be understood – things like accuracy, precision or a controllable set of experimental techniques – not to make my feelings more truthful but to provide people with a set of guarantees about the stability and certainty of my position. Anyhow, it was too late. As had been said in the best of distinguished households, my face was already on the tea towels.

I chose not to go in. We had been close, this son and I, similar in appearance and in some fundamental ways, but he was at an age that demanded separation: he was ready for the ritual in the hut before being taken out with the tribe to prove his manhood. And where was he going to be taken? To an urban jungle and a very British school. I didn’t like his chances. It was depressing.
Rebecca was obviously not with the grandparents. I had done a head count at the starting line of the magazine grab.

Off I went again, down the hall to her bedroom – the room closest to ours but a big step for her when she moved into it alone. She loved this house. It was her ‘very favourite ever’, she had told us solemnly, and she had relaxed into her surroundings, curling up on windowseats with her crayons or arranging her soft toys in a sunlit corner so that she could read to them all at the same time. As I opened the door quietly, I was struck again by her love of family, the drawings of the grandparents and our photographs in collages all over the walls. Today she lay in the middle of them all, on her bed with her eyes half-closed.

‘Rebecca,’ I whispered. ‘Hi, darling. I was worried when I couldn’t find you. Are you okay?’

‘I’m okay, Mummy,’ she responded sleepily. ‘I just got really tired, and worried because of all the thinking about Sydney, and I wanted to go to sleep.’

I kissed her forehead and lay down beside her.

‘Let’s have a nap together, Bec,’ I suggested. ‘It might do us both some good.’
Recipe books. Was I going to cook for the three of us in the new apartment? I guessed so, in the interim. And then eventually, I supposed I would be only cooking for one. I was not even sure that there was any point in packing them. I had not felt the urgency of appetite for days. I was thin, not sleeping much and all my actions had slowed.

As I looked around at the family kitchen, each item carefully and lovingly chosen, I shook my head, wondering whether I would ever willingly cook or even eat again in a way that was more than perfunctory. My senses had deserted me, with taste being one of the first to go. Food was fuel, something that someone reminded you to put in the refrigerator, no more exciting than shopping for washing powder. If you didn’t eat it then your energy deserted you and depression crept up to your hideaway, pulled back your curtains and enveloped you like a dirty, swirling fog that, like TS Eliot’s cat, licks its tongue into every corner of your existence. When the veil of depression lifted, it was replaced by anger and then more pain, alternating like traffic lights. The difficulty was that I couldn’t spot it coming since the images had changed to black and white – and not an artistic black and white, with sharpness and definition, but everything a muddy, sloppy grey with no distinctive boundaries.

There were a number of recipe books to choose from, many purchased for the sole purpose of company entertaining and others just for the family, meatless, fresh and fast, with a selection from Italy and Mexico. I tipped them all out of the drawer, threw out the elaborate ones and, in an uncharacteristic act of faith, dropped the family ones into the chest, where they fell with a thud. I looked at the other recipes
in handwriting, pressed into an old exercise book. They had been handed down from my grandmother and they represented a lost past of Christmas cake and homemade almond icing.

I thought about my grandmother. Until my grandfather had recently died, she had always had him opposite her at the table, carving the meat while she served the vegetables. I shrugged my shoulders. The children and I would have to reinvent Christmas – maybe help feed the unfortunate at a homeless shelter and babysit for young couples in the New Year.

‘No more Christmas cake,’ I chanted as I began shredding the pages. ‘No more moderate oven, no more greasing the tin and wrapping it in greaseproof paper.’

‘No more vegetarian shit either,’ Zach added, leaning into the trunk and removing the collection of recipe books from the bottom of the chest. ‘It’s rabbit food.’

‘I want those recipe books.’ Rebecca grabbed them. ‘I’m never going to eat animals and I’ll start making some of these when we get settled into our new place.’

‘You should send them back to that chef at the hotel in Bondi,’ Zach sneered. ‘He ran out of options in less than a week.’

‘It was six weeks, Zach,’ I corrected him. ‘And you could hardly blame him. He wasn’t used to having to cook for the same people for anywhere near that long.’

‘What he did cook was disgusting,’ Zach complained. ‘You’d have been better to have had the regular dishes and just left out the meat. And then there were those cardboard cake boxes that he put our lunches in. I had to take those ridiculous things to school.’

‘So did I,’ Rebecca added.

‘You didn’t go to school. Remember? You ran away. They couldn’t get you in the fucking door.’
Rebecca flushed and I winced. I didn’t want her to feel embarrassed. I was sure that there would be a day when she would look back on the incident as one of her finest moments, marred only by the fact that she hadn’t hurled the cake box into the rubbish bin.

We had been in a Sydney hotel before the incident, waiting for the furniture to arrive and the new winter school term to begin. It was a long and tedious wait – the novelty of hotel living wore off after the first few days. It was around that time when, pretending to demonstrate gravity, Zach taught Rebecca to drop toilet-paper water bombs off our balcony into the hotel pool. I discovered that the only place to give him time-out for his foolhardy behaviour was in the ballroom.

As a distraction, I encouraged Zach to read his Latin text, provided by a housemaster who informed us that the class had already covered the first half of the curriculum and that the exams would be held in a couple of weeks. It was one exam of many that Zach had no chance of preparing for, exacerbated by the fact that the years between the two school systems did not run parallel. He had been thrust, halfway through the year, into the senior school. As I helped with the Latin, it felt oddly comforting being back in the Roman forum again. But it did nothing for Zach. When his stress levels increased, he reacted by moving from water bombs to tennis balls. He spent a lot of time-out in the ballroom, the only empty place in the hotel, and the guests began avoiding both me and the pool.

When school began, he marched through the school gates every morning, carrying texts that he hadn’t read, with the cake box stuffed into a corner of his schoolbag. Richard had advised him to act like a soldier – something I didn’t agree with and Richard soon learnt to regret. I wondered how Richard knew what being a soldier felt like.

Zachary advised me to think about the Vietnam War. ‘You’re the right age to remember it,’ he informed me.

He had been forced into studying history in the classroom and saw some advantage in Richard’s analogy.
‘I’m not trying to overestimate my case,’ he protested, ‘but you need to realise that I am being conscripted here. I am not going to this school of my own free will. Australia did that, did you know?’

He watched my dismay as he continued. ‘Conscripted. You should have thought about it. You will probably lose me as soon as I’m old enough. They will send me away somewhere to fight for an unjust cause and all of this money you are spending will have been a waste.’

I discussed it with Richard, who muttered ‘I’ll handle him’ in a manner that inspired less confidence than usual.

Rebecca and I retreated to the foyer, where the piano player made Rebecca feel calm.

‘I’m not going to school tomorrow,’ Rebecca announced quietly that afternoon, when the music finished. ‘I don’t like it there.’

Some of it was a problem with the uniform. She could get into the shirt and tunic but had problems with the tie and the stockings. We practised repeatedly. But there was also a problem with the classrooms. She said they were old and creepy and she didn’t care if people booked their children to go there at birth.

The following day, Richard insisted on taking her before work. He had a thirty-minute timeslot and felt that she needed a firm hand. As my hands had become shaky, I had no cause for argument, but I insisted that I would trail along as a backup, just in case anything softer than firm hands could be of some help.

I watched the two of them disappear into the turret. It was an ‘evil castle’, Rebecca insisted, and as bad as Zachary’s war zone. Her stockings kept wrinkling and she made a desperate attempt to hitch them up, while at the same time struggling to take two steps to each of Richard’s. The bell rang and I watched the other girls file into order, until I was eventually left alone on the oval. The views were spectacular – Richard had videoed them and already sent them home.
I just need to concentrate on the Sydney skyline, I told myself, instead of hopping neurotically from foot to foot. I kept looking at my watch, wondering whether she was settling. Fifteen minutes was a good sign.

Suddenly Rebecca burst out of the doors, her plaits trailing behind her like a comet’s tail in the sky. She saw me in the distance and began heading in my direction while behind her ran Richard, pounding over the cricket pitch in his three-piece suit. He was angry because she had left and because he couldn’t catch her, and they competed for my attention as I walked towards them both. Rebecca got in first, being the one doing the least puffing.

‘I couldn’t help it, Mummy. I couldn’t stay there. My tummy felt sick and I vomited in the toilets.’

‘She did,’ Richard echoed incredulously. ‘She actually vomited. Can you believe that? One of the teachers had to clean it up. You’ll have to deal with her I’m afraid, Jane,’ he said briskly. ‘I’ve done all I can and I’ve run out of time. I have to go.’

Richard had to go a lot these days. He was required in a number of different cities in a round of introductions. A great deal of power had been handed over to him with the keys to the brand-new Volvo. It was heady stuff and his dry-kindling enthusiasm provided the fuel that he was ready to light with pure adrenaline. He began commanding large audiences and I found myself staring at him in moments when he wasn’t aware. I scrutinised him in the morning as he woke up with creases on his cheeks, as he held down the loosening skin on his neck so that he could control the electric razor and as he clipped his toenails with a pair of scissors. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was looking for, but I suspected I was checking for some charisma or talent that now set him apart from the Richard I had known.

Yet individual power was definitely not something that we had subscribed to. Power, as we had once seen it, and as I had explained to my university peers, should be cooperative control: power with another not over another. We had an understanding that instead of one person taking orders from another, they should agree to take orders from the situation. We conceded that there were situations that
required different kinds of knowledge and that the person possessing the knowledge demanded by that certain situation should be recognised, but only as the leader of the moment, not as some kind of guru.

We had both had our share of being leader of the moment. Richard had established himself as an expert on carpet raking. When the fashion dictated that it should be shaggy and free of footprints, he had come into his own, vacuuming to remove all the hidden particles and then raising the pile so that it lay in the same direction, like a windblown field of corn. Ears were another of his specialities. For some unfathomable reason, he could spot an ear infection in a child’s ear using nothing more than a torch with fading batteries. His precision and accuracy had saved Zach and Rebecca a lot of trauma and I was happy to defer to him as an expert.

To my credit, I was deft with a trowel and cement, and better than Richard with a paintbrush. I had also proven myself capable of retrieving baby lambs from labouring ewes, although possibly advantaged by smaller hand size. Now, however, despite our best intentions, we had moved into the traditional zone with separate spheres of influence and responsibility. Instead of leader of the moment I had become ‘it for whatever is happening with the children’, while Richard had begun drawing on competitive instinct and aggression in order to bring in the money. And, when he wasn’t psyching himself up to meet the pressures of the day, he was expounding on his personal vision of where the company was heading. Everyone wanted to hear what he had to say, but in all of the talk there was little discussion of how to develop a vision. Surprisingly, the belief seemed to be that it could be developed rationally and speedily in the mind of a single CEO.

Knowing that Richard was more practical than imaginative, I wondered how he had acquired this vision. I also wondered, when I wasn’t dealing with the war zone and the evil castle, just how it could be that a vision would be accepted so readily when it was nothing more than an accumulation of thoughts by one individual. Wasn’t a vision an evolving process rather than something that one could conjure up in order to ensure the loyalty of a collective? It was perplexing, and
I once expressed this to Richard when he was walking out the door with his airline tickets in his hand, just before I began an account of why Rebecca was not going to school.

It was always a telling moment, with Richard packed and prepared and Rebecca still in her pyjamas. I tried to give a succinct account of it on Rebecca’s behalf, but it defied the timeslot. Indeed, Richard found it most inconvenient.

‘She spent half a day in class last Thursday,’ I informed him proudly, walking beside Richard to the taxi that had pulled up outside the hotel, ‘and she is doing another half day tomorrow. The school counsellor has given her a photo of the girls in her class and she is trying to learn their names so she won’t be anxious.’

He kissed me hurriedly.

‘They’re not really sure, but they think it may be school phobia,’ I went on, in the belief that things gain credibility when they are given a name. ‘Phobias are difficult to treat. You have to desensitise. It takes time.’

Richard looked at me and then at the ticking meter.

‘You’ll have to handle it,’ he said apologetically. ‘I’m late for my flight. I’ll give you a call when I get there.’

He kissed me a second time, with his eyes still on the taxi, climbed in and shut the door.

I watched the vehicle pull away and walked slowly back to our children.
Chapter Thirteen

Rebecca still wanted to go back to Auckland. Her stockings were staying in place, she had learnt to do a Windsor knot on her tie and she had adjusted to the ivy that draped itself imposingly on the outside of the classroom walls. By the teaching fraternity’s standards, she was making excellent progress. She had moved into an accelerated learning group and had accepted that ‘young ladies do not use the wrought-iron gate at the main entrance as a climbing frame while waiting to be picked up by a parent in the afternoon.’ Overall, things had improved. Yet despite her perceived adjustment, she still wanted to go home to New Zealand.

Richard was sure it was just the impersonal nature of hotel living and that things would improve once the furniture arrived. So with his optimism setting the mood that my failed attempts at house searching had not dampened, we continued trying to organise a place to live in. This should have been a simple process, since all we required were three bedrooms and a yard for the dog, but it turned out to be an extraordinarily laboured task. First came the adjustment to the fact that our New Zealand villa with swimming pool and changing sheds would never be possible – at least not without some family members donating vital organs. Then came the realisation that for the privilege of living within commuting distance of the city and the airport, and in a neighbourhood that was not part of a major arterial route, one needed to be grateful no matter what the dwelling.

Unfortunately, however, neither of the children appreciated the fact that our living space had shrunk dramatically for the privilege of living in something with stained-glass windows, high ornate ceilings and a Federation veranda. Zach pointed out that while he was now subsumed in homework, we hadn’t done any of ours
with regard to our domestic arrangements, while Rebecca became spooked by the
darkness of the rooms and refused to enter most of them.

‘People have died in here,’ she announced after taking a couple of steps into
the hallway of the house that we had just leased. ‘This is not a good place.’

I was not psychic, but had once been friendly with a girl at school who swore
she could wake me up in the night by communicating through my cat. She had
insisted that she would do this at midnight and that she and the cat would rouse me
from a sound sleep. I had been sceptical, and it was therefore a shock when I found
myself staring at the ceiling, with eyes wide open, at exactly midnight, under the
weight of the cat that was sitting on my chest and glaring at me with intense,
unblinking eyes. I had not thought about the incident since, but Rebecca jolted the
memory.

My curiosity took over despite the irrationality. ‘Where did they die?’

Rebecca began checking the rooms cautiously, standing in each doorway and
surveying the room.

‘In your bedroom,’ she announced eventually. ‘It was an old lady. She’s still
around.’

She stopped and looked back over her shoulder.

‘Well, I’m not worried about her,’ I told her as casually as I could.

‘But I am,’ she insisted, ‘because she will be walking down the pathway
outside my bedroom window.’

‘I didn’t see a pathway down that side.’

‘Well, there is. Come and have a look.’

I followed her to the old sash windows on the outside wall of her bedroom,
unclipped them at the bottom and lifted them up.

‘See,’ Rebecca said, ‘there is a pathway.’

Overgrown as it was, with a myriad of shrubs and small trees, the remnants
of a concrete pathway could still be seen between the fence and the house wall.
‘We’ll put some heavy curtains up,’ I said cheerfully. ‘And get a lovely lamp for your room so that we don’t need to worry about her. There’s not much light that comes in from the windows anyway.’

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. ‘We can do that, I suppose, but she is not going to go away.’

We didn’t need an additional complication. Having just conquered the school phobia, with Zach still in soldier mode and Richard absent most of the time, I didn’t need the reappearance of a dead lady.

As a diversion, I decided to accept an offer of help from my parents. Neither of them had spent a lot of time in Australia and it seemed that I could now provide them with the perfect opportunity to visit and satisfy Rebecca’s need at the same time. My mother was delighted to help, being saddened that we had put the advancement of Richard’s career before the joys of extended family. She missed Rebecca as much as Rebecca missed her, so my parents agreed to make the trip.

They arrived on a Sunday: the only day that Richard had to spend with the family.

‘The airport is about ten kilometres from the city centre and is well served for transport,’ Zach informed them, as soon as they were seated in the car. ‘You could have got to us by the airport link, a bus or a taxi but…’

‘We wanted to pick you up,’ Rebecca interrupted.

My mother patted her hand.

‘The harbour divides Sydney into north and south, joined by the bridge and the tunnel,’ Zach continued. ‘We will be travelling east so you won’t see them today but we could take you later if you like.’

Richard shook his head quietly and pointed to the rear-vision mirror where he could see my father already beginning to nod off and my mother folding up her cardigan to use as a pillow.
I sat quietly as Richard wound his way through the urban streets. As I smiled at him appreciatively, he winked and reached out to cover my hand with his own. I felt the five quick squeezes, an old code that had become part of our married routine. It was a reassuring gesture that signified the old Richard. When had the new, more distant Richard first appeared and what had happened to the old one? It was as absurd as trying to pinpoint a particular moment of ageing; to add to the complexity, unlike ageing it seemed reversible. I decided that I was making too much of it. People have moods and preoccupations, periods of enthusiasm and remoteness. I was being hypersensitive because I had no peer group to bounce things off. My reality check had been set against a new reality. I wondered whether it was seeing my parents again – a sample of a country and way of life that had begun to fade – that had made me more analytical.

Later, when we were all seated in the lounge room, I considered whether my parents would notice any change. I studied my father’s face and listened to their dialogue.

It reminded me of the first time Richard showed Rebecca how to play tennis. I recalled her running over to me and defecting from the game.

‘He’s hitting too hard,’ she complained. ‘He’s doing it on purpose.’

‘Daddy’s not doing it on purpose,’ I said. ‘He just doesn’t know his own strength.’

Now it was happening again, in a linguistic rally. He served, but my father, with his limited education, couldn’t even see the ball and at times was not even in his correct place on the court. Richard would reposition him, try again and eventually, with a gentle lob, would direct the ball into the centre of his racquet at which time my father would swing wildly and miss. He was tired, this older man, and although he tried to keep up with the politics and scope of Richard’s position, his experience of work belonged to the manual labour of another era. Richard, on the other hand, was an accomplished player who was at his peak, still on the youthful side of middle age, with a serve that had the ability to ace. My father stumbled again
with a question that wasn’t on track and I hoped that he would put down his racquet and take up a position on the bench.

‘So, what is on your list of key profit drivers?’ My father recovered with as much confidence as he could muster.

I watched as the Richard I knew so well continued his transformation. Although he remained seated, I could see the spring in his step, the pulling in of the gut and the squaring of the shoulders as he got ready to return-serve. We waited as he drew in his breath, but Rebecca interrupted.

‘The dead lady has just walked down the hallway – just now. I saw her.’

The room went silent. I smiled, my grandmother sat forward in her chair, Zachary frowned and Richard looked disappointed that the result was game set match with the advantage going to a hovering spirit with no direction or job title.

I explained about Rebecca’s vision, conscious of the dramatic nature of the turnaround. Now everyone’s attention was engaged except for Richard’s; he drummed his fingers on the side of his chair.

‘Have you ever seen a spirit before, Nanna?’ Rebecca asked, with a confident assumption that her Nanna would not let her down.

‘Of course I have. After my mother died, I saw her standing at the end of my bed every night for over a year.’

Rebecca looked fascinated. ‘What did she die of, Nanna?’

My grandmother’s eyes misted over despite the distance of the memory. ‘Influenza,’ she replied. ‘There was an epidemic and she was only very young.’

‘It will happen again, any day,’ Zach informed us. ‘It will cross over from some other species to us, any time soon, probably from birds – and kill millions.’

Rebecca looked startled. ‘What did the ghost look like, Nanna? Was she white?’

Richard’s fingers picked up their rhythm. ‘Why don’t we go and do a bit of sightseeing?’ he interrupted, half-rising from the chair. ‘It’s a great city, Sydney.'
There’s a lot to see. Zach, how about you make a list for Nanna and Grandad so that we can tick things off? We can start from the North Shore and then work our way back.’

I shook my head at Zach. The mention of a list disturbed me. I didn’t want to undermine Richard but lists seemed to have been appearing regularly and expanding into memos, instructional paragraphs and rambling essays. My parents were well past the notion of lists. Life had ceased to have accountability and had transformed into a voluntary activity in which one participated if it felt right.

‘Why don’t we just take a drive and stop anywhere that interests us?’ I suggested.

My father nodded and extended his arm to my mother. He helped her up and together they began walking down the path towards the car. Richard shrugged and then strode ahead, swinging the car keys in circles. I watched him lower himself into the driver’s seat, belt himself in and turn on the engine, while the rest of us followed behind. I held the rear doors open for my parents and then eased myself into the front passenger seat. When I checked the back seat, both parents were buckled in and I felt pleased I’d saved the situation. I reached across for Richard’s hand, hoping for a replay of the five quick squeezes, but it didn’t happen. He stared straight ahead, fingers drumming on the steering wheel.
‘It’s either a feast or a famine,’ was another of my mother’s favourite sayings and the cliché still applied. The famine had been a long period of adjustment to our new surroundings in Sydney without support, and the feast had begun with the arrival of my parents, followed by Phil and Annie.

‘We wanted to surprise you,’ Annie burbled as she wheeled her suitcase into the middle of the lounge. ‘Or rather I did. Phil thought that we should have given you a call first but it wouldn’t have been the same.’

Phil smiled apologetically, seemingly aware that the neighbourly habit of popping in and out spontaneously could not be extended across the Tasman.

‘Phil has brought his research and I’ve brought my sketches. We’re having a midyear break,’ Annie explained, gesturing through the open front door to a pile of cardboard folders leaning against the veranda railings.

‘I’ve found an outlet for the nudes,’ she continued. ‘Sydney is such a sophisticated market that I think they’re going to do well here.’

She stopped. ‘But what about you?’ she asked, while giving me another hug.

‘How are you?’

I noted the elongated vowel designed to sound sincere, but negated by the fact that she was looking over my shoulder at Richard.

‘We’re fine,’ Richard said. ‘We’re all doing fine. Just finding our feet and having our first visitors. Jane’s parents are here at the moment. They’re in the back room having a rest.’

‘I told you we should have called.’ Phil frowned at Annie.

‘Don’t worry. It’s not a problem. You know them well and we’ll find room,’ I reassured him, thinking of how to rearrange the sleeping situation.
‘But how did you find us?’ I felt guilty that Marie was the only one I had given our address to. ‘We’ve been in a hotel for months before finding this place. I was going to let everyone know, but we’ve been a little unsettled.’ I pulled the appropriate face. ‘So I’m amazed that you managed to track us down.’

Annie looked at Richard expectantly.

‘I faxed the address,’ he said. ‘After Annie phoned to — —’

Quickly she interrupted. ‘I needed some assistance with contacts in the art world. Richard helped me out.’

I looked at the new Richard in astonishment, unable to conceal my surprise.

‘But you don’t have any contacts in the art world, Richard,’ I blurted out. ‘So how could you help?’ I was conscious that I was doing Annie’s vowel thing again.

Richard threw me a ‘this is nothing that you have to worry about’ look, one that we had perfected in the early years of our marriage, when youthful insecurities were running high and we had needed something to accompany the five-squeeze hand gesture.

‘No, I don’t,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘But Monica does. She has a brother who is an art dealer and he was able to help Annie out.’

I uttered a flat sounding ‘Oh’ as I struggled to create a picture of Richard’s personal assistant in my mind. I remembered that I had met her at a dinner put on at the home of the Managing director, not long after we had arrived. It was a ‘welcome to Sydney and the company’ evening apparently created to allow me to meet the wives of other senior personnel along with some of the ‘indispensable staff’.

Personal assistants, upgraded from secretaries, were definitely in this category, wedged in some blurry space between their boss’s domestic lives and the tasks that the job officially required of them.

The evening had not started well. The home that we were invited to was on the North Shore and in order to calculate how long it would take to get there, we had made the mistake of using the kilometres as an indication. I could still recall the strained reception when we walked in, over an hour and a half late, apologising for
the horrendous traffic. The atmosphere was formal and we did the rounds of introductions, where I was introduced as ‘Jane who is doing some postgraduate study through distance education’.

It was quickly apparent that studying at home was acceptable for a chief executive’s wife. The men nodded in approval and I was placed beside another wife who was doing the same thing. As the evening progressed I got the feeling that such a pursuit was rated highly by the entire group – a substantial notch above charity work and not as troublesome as occupying an actual job. The groupthink seemed to be that it allowed one to run the household and nurture the husband and children while indicating that one had a brain.

The academic success of children was an extension of this concept and I recall that we spent a lot of time discussing the merits of selective schools as opposed to those that were private. I tried to stay with this topic since this was an area in which I normally had a lot to contribute. Unfortunately, I did not have quite so much to say when it came to advantages of the ‘old boy network’ versus the advantages of mingling with the academic elite, which dominated the discussion. When, however, it was established that Zach had been accepted at his private school because of his academic achievements at school back in New Zealand, I realised that I had been accepted into the group.

As the evening progressed, the wives discussed how they filled their days and the secretaries/personal assistants found their occupational niche in the conversation. While in some cases their positions had indeed evolved to that of a para-professional (a title that was supposed to reflect the changing office environment and its transition from typewriter to computer), they conducted a relationship with their bosses that had a disquieting familiarity, offering comfort and compassion when it came to the exhausting workloads, and conducting conversations with them in a workplace jargon that excluded the wives and partners. It gave them a disproportionate amount of power.

Monica, Richard’s para-professional, did not leave much of an impression. Perhaps Richard had not been forthcoming about Rebecca’s homesickness and
Zachary’s soldiering capacity and her knowledge of him had been confined to his base salary and nontaxable perks. Whatever the reason, she appeared as someone one meets and promptly forgets because of their ordinariness.

Annie, however, with her nude sketches and avant-garde approach, was anything but ordinary and I wondered whether Richard had known that she was coming as well. It wasn’t the fact that he had sent the fax but the fact that I didn’t know, and it indicated a shift in the way things worked. Normally, Richard would have shared it over the evening meal – opening with something like, ‘By the way honey, guess who phoned me today?’ – after which we would have chatted intimately about how different the old friends were from the new ones we were meeting.

But Richard wasn’t home often for the evening meal anymore – nor beside me when it was time to sleep. More frequently, he was eating and sleeping in some other time zone. It was another part of the agenda and something that Phil might be interested in – perhaps an extra dimension to his thesis on the gender effects of workplace relocation. I was pleased that he had brought his research. There was an irony in the situation that needed documentation: family moves to relocate with primary earner who is now absent! I could see why it hadn’t been spelt out in the first place. There was no marketing potential in it.

Annie was chatting to Richard about the plane trip over.

‘The fare was cheap, the service was good and the journey was so fast, you could easily commute,’ she said.

Now there was a radical suggestion that we hadn’t considered. Richard could devote himself to his work throughout the week and fly back across the Tasman on the weekends with cheaper accommodation and no disruption of schooling and friendships. But I hadn’t even considered it as an option. It felt too risky. Too far removed from what our marriage was all about. There was too much time to grow apart, not to mention the fact that I would miss him.

Annie, however, was giving the idea quite a lot of thought.
‘I may need to come over regularly,’ she said, ‘to assess the market. Good nude paintings are experiencing a renaissance. People have money and the demand is much higher than the supply. Younger buyers are moving in on the scene and want contemporary works for their inner-city terraces.’

As far as I knew, Annie had never had any exposure to inner-city terraces, whereas Richard and I had explored a number of them when we first arrived – made of sandstone, with fashionable courtyards and displaying on their tastefully painted walls anything from a print of a nineteenth-century Goya to a more erotic Courbet.

‘Paddington is a good market,’ I began, eager to ensconce myself in the conversational triangle and tell her about some of our finds, but Rebecca interrupted and pushed a piece of paper into Annie’s hands.

‘Look, Annie,’ she said. ‘I’ve been doing some nudes too.’

I peered over Rebecca’s shoulder, unsure of what was in front of me.

‘It’s Kimba, without her hair. Zachary said that maybe I could make some money drawing nude animals but they wouldn’t let me sketch any of the ones at the pet shop.’ She looked crestfallen. ‘So I only drew three.’

‘Three?’

‘Yes. Kimba and our two new cats.’

I looked at the scrawny, furless creatures on the page and then accusingly at Zach, who grinned and shrugged his shoulders in his typical ‘don’t blame me, she was gullible’ fashion.

‘So, I’m not doing them anymore,’ Rebecca continued. ‘Zachary said that it didn’t work so now I’m drawing ghosts.’

‘On black paper, I hope,’ Zach chimed in again.

‘Ghosts can be interesting, Bec.’ I gave him a withering look. ‘You can represent them in a number of shapes and forms.’

‘Rebecca is going to camp soon,’ I told Annie and Phil. ‘In the Blue Mountains. And she’s allowed to take her sketching pad.’
‘There will be plenty of ghosts at night for her to draw.’ Zach grinned again.

I watched as Rebecca turned pale.

‘I don’t want to go to camp,’ she said predictably. ‘It’s too long and I’m not allowed to phone anybody.’

‘But people can visit you, Bec,’ I reminded her, ‘and they need some parents to help with the food, so I will come out there.’

‘And I’ll visit you too,’ the old Richard volunteered. ‘Your mother gave me the dates,’ he told her, putting his arm around my shoulders in a show of affection. ‘I have a conference to arrange that week. I could probably organise something out there. If I can, I could come and see you in the evenings. Maybe Annie and Phil would like to come out and see you too.’

Phil, feeling guilty about the accommodation shortage, picked up the cue.

‘Sure, Annie can do what she needs to do before we go and I can work from anywhere.’ He ruffled Rebecca’s hair and smiled down at her. ‘We’d love to come.’

‘There’s actually some wonderful art deco guest houses and some great artworks,’ Annie informed us. ‘A collection of nineteenth-century Australian art, if I remember rightly, and even some cave walls with Aboriginal hand stencilling.’

Rebecca began to brighten up.

As the discussion continued, the momentum began to build. Although it was still a little way off it became obvious that it was an excursion to look forward to – not only would everyone get their needs met, but it would break up the time of Annie and Phil’s stay into manageable segments and give everyone some breathing space.
Chapter Fifteen

Richard’s conference brochure was laid out on the table. It was an impressive document entitled Financial Expansion in a Global Market: An International Forum.

As we all gathered around to look, it was obvious that Richard’s company was doing well. What was not so obvious, however, was the fact that, as the company expanded, we were trying to financially expand with it. Richard’s salary was higher than we had ever imagined and, under the guidance of a financial planner – who justified his existence on the basis of the deregulation of the financial services sector and the range and complexity of financial products – we were taking on the market. We had begun with purchasing the property we had been renting and then aggressively borrowing on the fast accumulating equity in our new home, thus negatively gearing ourselves into any property with potential, thereby reducing Richard’s tax rate.

The result was that, just like Richard’s conference document, we were beginning to look good on paper.

Not only was Richard’s brochure impressive, helpful and detailed, but it was an odd mix of business topics and leisure activities. The first page, entitled ‘Directions’, gave a clear and succinct account of the way to get to the destination, complete with mini-maps. More comprehensive, however, were the pages entitled ‘Facilities’. As we leaned over the table we scanned down the list. Floodlit tennis courts, sauna and spa, resort shop, wine boutique, hairdresser, three swimming pools, a practice putting green, beauty therapist, masseur, health and fitness centre, health retreat. There was more but Richard flipped the page over. ‘Dress code and climate.’ This looked short and straightforward. Maximum fifteen degrees, minimum eight and ‘smart casual’. He flipped again to an elaborate description of the five-star villas (it was obvious that he wasn’t going to be suffering!) and then on to a number of colourful pages entitled ‘Competitions’, where his hay-throwing days
were going to stand him in good stead. The first was golf and contained descriptors of the course rules and dress regulations. There were twelve teams and the names of the employees were listed along with their handicaps. Tennis was next (not as popular), followed by another list of activities for those who could not hit a ball of any kind.

After leisure activities including such choices as the scenic railway and skyway, rock climbing, abseiling, canyoning and caving, I looked at Phil’s face, which was changing from surprise to incredulity.

‘Hey, what is this? Work or Outward Bound?’ he asked Richard. ‘Are you sure that you don’t want to trek the Kokoda Track or swim with some great whites? Just as well you didn’t end up throwing it in and taking up that trade.’ He grinned to take away the sting.

I watched for Richard’s reaction but he seemed completely unfazed as he turned to a page entitled ‘Foreign Market Cycle’, with his name alongside it as the person to open the conference. I could see the first subtitle, ‘Creation of a Need’, and smiled at the irony, hoping that Phil would miss it.

This was followed by ‘Promotion Strategy’, ‘Bonuses and Incentives’ and ‘Overall Market Entry Decision’. I noted the announcements and times of the golfing and tennis prizes – none of us were going to see much of Richard then or during the pre-dinner drinks at 1900 hours on the veranda of the main building. ‘Pricing and Payoffs’ was next on the agenda (at which time I thought it would be a good idea to go caving).

I liked the look of ‘Avoiding Local Hazards’. It included a presentation on ‘Kidnapping, Terrorism and Civil War’. I wondered if the others, like me, were wondering where on earth they were thinking of marketing their product, and noted a session on that day with the intriguing title, ‘Watching out for Dirty Tricks’. Perhaps I could attend that one too, in the hope that it would make me capable of handling Zach.
The most intriguing part of the week, however, was the final day. At first I thought it was nothing more than a promotion for the resort, but on further inspection I could see that it was actually an integral part of the organised activities. It appeared on the second-to-last page, before the instructions of where the group photos were to be held and where to deposit your luggage for pick-up. It was entitled ‘Baking and Bonding’. In the middle of the page was a photo of a group of financial advisors from a well-known Sydney company standing around in aprons and hats, looking like trainee chefs.

As Richard flicked on past it, Phil was the first to speak. ‘Hang on. Back to the cooking bit.’

Richard immediately obliged.

‘What are these people doing?’

‘It’s something we’re experimenting with,’ Richard replied. ‘Everyone has a role to play in the preparation of the food and the theory is that it improves the relationships back in the office.’

Annie looked up at him. ‘You can practise in my kitchen before you go if you like,’ she quipped.

‘In what way does it improve things?’ Phil interrupted, interested now.

‘Well, different people react differently in the kitchen and sometimes they learn something valuable about themselves or how they react in group situations.’

‘What, while slicing and dicing?’ I asked.

‘Yes, exactly,’ he said in a no-nonsense tone. ‘And in the past people have been known to have a personal breakthrough.’

‘While cooking?’ Phil again.

‘Well, if you get bored with it, then you can come and give the parents some help at camp,’ I said. ‘There will be a lot of slicing and dicing going on out there.’
‘I’ll be hard-pressed for time at the end of the week,’ Richard informed us briskly, conscious of the fact that we had not been instantly converted. ‘I have to be there to close the conference as well as open it, but I’ll keep it in mind.’

He began to pack up the brochure, pressing down the creases in a manner that left no doubt that the subject was closed.

I kept my eye on this brochure during the following week and just like the magazine that had announced his appointment to the job, it mysteriously multiplied. By the time we were ready to go out there, there was a copy in every room in the house and it was overshadowing Rebecca’s prospective camping trip with its spartan list of clothing and postscript of banned items. Instead of displaying her list under the fridge magnet as was typical, Rebecca was carrying her list with her everywhere and had taken to sleeping in her tent, in a different room every night, with a goal of moving onto the furthest corner of the yard. This was going to cure any anxiety and was encouraged particularly by her grandmother, who kept her supplied with hot drinks and homemade cookies. Fortunately, the ghost of the elderly lady hadn’t been seen in a few weeks and so the tent began to move a respectable distance from the house. At this stage, we took turns to visit her. She also had a flashlight, a walkie-talkie and her sketching pad.

Having only just recently survived his own camping experience, Zach had lots of brotherly hints – some proved helpful and some (such as what to do for snakebite) resulted in the tent reappearing in the lounge as the process of desensitisation began all over again. This was difficult to explain to Richard’s colleagues when they were forced to position themselves around the tent one evening to discuss the conference.

Phil seemed to be writing prolifically and, like Richard’s brochures, his notes began appearing on bits of paper in various parts of the house. I would come upon him scribbling away in some quiet corner when I was tidying up.

‘Can I read some of it, Phil?’

‘Sure. Help yourself. It’s going to be published soon so it’s hardly a secret.’
I pored over it for hours. There were gender differences to relocation, alright, and they had huge implications for future generations – according to Phil’s statistics, young women were no longer going to follow their partners around the globe in pursuit of the men’s career opportunities. I admired his research tremendously but had to wonder how much of his material he was obtaining from our house.

‘Am I going to be slipped in there somewhere?’ I joked. ‘Or am I going to have a formal interview?’

He laughed. ‘No, sorry Jane. You’re too old. I’ve got enough data on the patterns of the baby boomers. Unfortunately, you’re just a typical example of what happens in a sex-differentiated labour market. No offence of course.’

‘None taken.’

But I wasn’t used to being described as typical and I wasn’t sure if I liked it, feeling the old familiar tug between the modern trends of academic research and the practicalities of everyday life and trying to stay grouped as a family.

Meanwhile, Annie had found her own quiet corner and when she wasn’t off in search of auction houses or stopping at Richard’s office to try to squeeze more artistic connections out of Monica, she was in that quiet corner painting nudes. I found myself wondering exactly what to say as they took their form. Perhaps it was because they were all of the masculine gender. The latest one had begun as a charcoal sketch in which the strokes were bold, strong and distinctly masculine. Every day I had watched it transform until now, at the painting stage, I thought it had begun to look like Richard. Of course Richard could not see the likeness and as I watched his response, in my own mini-version of Hamlet’s Mousetrap, I was sure that he was telling the truth.

‘Jane, my darling,’ he said, holding my face in his hands, ‘you may be wonderful with words but your imagination is overactive.’

When the actual day of the excursion finally arrived, the notes and canvas were packed away and we set off in various stages, Richard being the first to leave.
the house, complete with matching casual luggage and some expensive sporting equipment.

Rebecca had to meet up with her bus, so after saying a loving farewell to the grandparents, who had bravely taken on the task of being in charge of Zach, and after a long lingering goodbye to each animal, we set off for the school. Fortunately the traffic was light, and we arrived in plenty of time to find little groups of girls carrying clipboards, with their packs and neatly rolled bedding in a central pile, waiting to be put on the bus. I helped Rebecca with her luggage, while she gave me my instructions for how to follow.

‘Don’t let us get out of your sight,’ she said. ‘And if we do, then go through an orange light if you have to, otherwise you’ll lose us.’

I remembered her recent anxiety at the way Richard volunteered to lead us to new locations in Sydney and then, as we tried to follow him, began passing everyone.

‘I will go through orange lights but not red ones,’ I said. ‘So don’t panic if you can’t see me sometimes. I’ve got a map and there are a number of parents coming, so we’ll be following each other.’

She stopped biting her nails. I gave her one last hug before watching her board the bus.
I still had the notes that Rebecca had made in her scrapbook from the camp and parts of the plaster mould that her friends wrote on when she broke her arm. They were in a new ‘sentimental to be sorted’ pile – a large group of items that I would have once held onto for a lifetime.

Giving up on that notion had once again exhausted me and I wondered at my extreme reaction. Was it normal? Was it a behavioural syndrome, an artistic, neurotic, sensitive way of experiencing things, an active flight of imagination that made it so hard to let go?

But there was no point analysing it. The children needed a functioning parent, a parent who could pack up a house and one who understood when it was time to let go.

Rebecca had been conscientious, I could see, observing the relationships between the vegetation and soil, noting the limestone outcrops and obviously listening in earnest to the choruses of the birds. She had made neat little drawings on each page of her diary, under the titles of geology, flora and fauna, paying special attention to the stinging nettles, which she had reproduced with detailed accuracy and skull and crossbones.

This camp was designed to take the children out of the classroom and into the wilderness in order to stimulate a new way of learning – about themselves, their abilities and the way in which they responded to the challenges of their environment.
The environment covered an area of 2,416 hectares and some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in Australia. Walking tracks meandered through elevated and undulating plateaus of lush pine forest and across a labyrinth of creeks, rivers, deep-water pools, gorges and ridges beneath. While they were monitoring their physical skills, the girls were also supposed to identify and develop their own special talents in the context of the group.

Each small group shared a bunkroom with either a parent or a teacher was assigned to it. I had thought it might have been school policy that I should be made to avoid Rebecca and her friends so I was surprised and pleased when I was assigned to them. Rebecca was part of an eclectic little group that had come together out of instinct rather than design.

Still, their backgrounds couldn’t have been more different.

In the right-hand-corner top bunk was her best friend, Emily, an attractive, athletic girl with a strong body and a feisty nature. She had wanted to be Rebecca’s friend from the start, defying her family’s reservations that we be approved of only after the obligatory routine visit from her mother, complete with thinly veiled questions about what Richard did for a living.

Aside from her tendency to gossip, she was a spunky young thing who often demanded to spend time at our house in lieu of skiing on Swiss slopes or a Parisian shopping trip. She amused us with her many stories of feuds in which her parents would fight with their neighbours and then buy them out to get rid of them. On other occasions, her parents would spend months renovating a property only to demolish it later and totally rebuild.

‘I can’t remember how many million they paid for it,’ Emily told us nonchalantly, ‘but it was something big that ended in point two five.’

When not relying on such stories, Rebecca came home with her own tales of being taken to the Opera House in a water taxi and being ushered in after the doors had closed – something that drew gasps from those not similarly privileged. Emily, according to Rebecca, returned the favour with tales of hopscotch drawn on our
uneven backyard concrete and accounts of being pushed for hours by both Richard and me on a homemade swing.

On the bunk underneath Emily, because she was afraid of heights, was Amy, a girl with long straight blonde hair and an angelic appearance that inevitably assured her parts as the romantic heroine in school plays. She had smuggled chocolate biscuits into the room and hidden them under the lining of her cosmetic bag, another forbidden item that, in turn, was hidden in the lining of her suitcase to avoid detection. Her mother was a successful model, according to Emily, and despite her tiny, slender frame Amy was supposed to be on a diet that eliminated all carbohydrates. Her mother had written it out for her under daily headings on sheets of perfumed paper.

‘She’s not allowed to eat rice or potatoes,’ Rebecca had announced solemnly before leaving for camp, ‘because they take longer to burn off and make her fat.’

There were rumours that she had been diagnosed with bulimia at some time, and she was taken every week to an eminent psychologist for sessions supposed to flush out the cause of her overeating; a situation that, according to Emily, put a great deal of pressure on her because she had to fit it in between after-school Italian classes and flute practice. I worried about how Amy would cope with the camp diet, which was full of tins of baked beans and spaghetti, so I put aside a few items that I knew would meet her mother’s requirements.

While the girls settled into their cabin I became acquainted with the other parents, most of whom already knew the procedures. ‘We do this every year,’ they told me, carrying in the cartons of food, equipment, first aid gear and some smuggled bottles of wine. ‘For our sanity,’ they smiled as they stacked the bottles in the fridge. ‘The nights can get rather long.’

But for the most part, my nights were pleasantly short and I slept soundly, once the chatter of the wine-sipping parents settled down.

On the first morning I awoke to a medley of sounds and smells – the high-pitched cackling of the kookaburras, the steady jet streams of the showers and the
heady scent from bushes growing wild under open windows. I ran a comb through my hair, brushed my teeth in a cup of water and splashed water over my face, then made my way to the large communal kitchen.

The place was bustling with mothers and teachers – filling bowls with cornflakes and milk, doing this and that – and with a couple of fathers who had arrived the previous evening and were getting the outdoor equipment ready for the day.

I began to help with the breakfast and preparations for the morning activity. I could see some of my group leaving the toast queue and I gave them a wave. Amy was leading the way, spaghetti piled high and with a look of triumph on her face. Emily had abandoned her breakfast and was striding around the kitchen with some ropes that she had managed to tie in a lasso. She was trying to catch Rebecca, who took refuge behind the benchtop.

Emily quickly caught up and, still puffing, repositioned her ropes into a more conventional format.

‘What are you doing with those, Emily?’

‘They’re for abseiling. Look, this one is a harness and you attach this clip onto here, and then you go over the side.’

‘We’re going to learn a self-rescue technique in case we get our hair jammed,’ she informed me.

I looked at Rebecca’s flowing tresses and shuddered.

‘There are helmets outside,’ Rebecca pointed out, as if reading my thoughts. ‘Amy’s got some elastic bands in her cosmetic bag, all in different colours.’

‘Where is Amy now?’ I scanned for the blonde ponytail and the pile of food.

‘She’s over there,’ Emily announced. ‘She’s feeling sick because she’s eaten too much. It’s her third helping.’
‘Third helping?’ I was staggered at how much I had already missed and made a mental note that I would have to do a lot better in the days ahead if I wanted to stay on top of things.
A routine was quickly established. After breakfast, I would help with the equipment and attend to the personal needs of the girls. After that I would make my way to the assembly point to watch the groups leave, place a phone call to Richard, and then return to the kitchen where as much food as possible was being prepared for dinner that night.

This, our third day, was another glorious morning and I watched from the veranda as the winter sunshine filtered down in long delicate fingers, feeling its way across the forest floor. In the morning light, I couldn’t help notice that the ‘respectable building’ looked a little less respectable, its paintwork peeling and shafts of sunlight picking out the cracks in the windowpanes. The veranda, however, retained its appeal.

I was reluctant to go back inside, so I made my morning phone call from a swing seat that had been hastily constructed by one of the fathers and hung from the veranda rafters. Richard took a long time to answer. No problem. I was already used to it – our schedules didn’t neatly coincide. Breakfast at his resort, he had told me, was a long-drawn-out affair that involved sampling different buffets. It also involved organising the whiteboard that outlined times and room allocations. It had already become a time when a few of the staff found a chance to get a word in, buoyed up, I imagined, by the familiarity that the evening drinks in the Sunset Room had generated the night before.

It was always difficult to hear him, his voice competing with the background burble of the rest of the staff, who sounded irritatingly jocular floating past in ‘smart casual’ preparing for the hype of the day. I had been following his program – today was the ‘Introduction of Marketing Plans and Costs’, with a guest speaker and role-plays.
He sounded efficient and capable when I finally got through: ‘Richard Collins. Can I help you?’

I had tried various responses to compete with the jocular staff but they usually fell flat. This morning I tried again. ‘I would love you to help me. I am doing a Houdini act in a swing seat. It’s not stable and I’m about to flip out onto the concrete.’

‘Jane, darling,’ he responded with enthusiasm, and I felt a ridiculous surge of warmth at the instant recognition, despite the years of three telephone calls a day. Unfortunately, though, it was immediately followed by ‘What’s up?’

This was a bad beginning. I just wanted to hear his voice. I didn’t want anything to have to be ‘up’. At this moment, if we were going to be precise, I was holding my mobile phone in one hand, flailing about with my legs, with my back heading downwards, but I didn’t want to disappoint him.

‘Nothing’s up. Just checking in again. Everything’s fine.’ I straightened out my legs, squeezed them together and swung them over the side of the seat to sit up, ready to concentrate.

‘How’s the camping going? Did you get any sleep last night?’ Richard was oblivious to my swing-seat antics.

‘Not a lot, but it’s beginning to settle down a bit as some of the girls are less homesick. Rebecca is doing so well, Richard. She liked the archery and she was really good at rock-climbing. They’ve just left again a few minutes ago to do some orienteering and this afternoon they get to try the flying fox.’

‘Sounds full-on to me.’

‘It is, but you should see her. She’s full of confidence outdoors. I wish you could watch that little face when she returns at lunchtime. She’s good at this stuff – a leader and not a trace of the old anxiety. She’s in her element. Do you still think you’ll be able to get here one evening?’

‘It’s not looking good. I’m up to my ears in it.’
There was a pause as he gave out instructions. ‘A couple of tomatoes and two eggs, no toast. Oh, and orange juice – a large one.’

I could see him clearly in his grey pinstriped suit and crisp, freshly laundered white business shirt, the cufflinks I had given him for our last anniversary resting on his tanned wrists, his hand covering the mouthpiece of the mobile.

‘I’ll see how I go, Jane. Once things settle down. And what about Zach? No, no. No tea and no coffee either. Sorry, Jane. Is there any more word on him?’

I waited while he called out to someone across the room. ‘In the left-hand corner, Nick. It’s too far away. They can’t see it if it’s over there.’

‘Not since yesterday,’ I replied. ‘I phoned my parents in the afternoon and Zach had just walked in from getting off the bus. Apparently he is devouring Mum’s cooking faster than she can produce it and is talking compulsively about the Punic Wars. He’s discovered military tactics, provocation and the element of surprise. Mum said she doesn’t feel safe anymore, but I think she was only joking.’

Richard fitted in a laugh.

‘How about you?’ I asked? ‘Bonuses and incentives? Sounds expensive!’

‘Not at all. I’ve been benefiting from my bonuses, Jane, and other people need incentives to push the product as well. Marketing is the creative side of this business.’

‘I was just concerned about the overheads.’

‘Doesn’t matter. There’s a lot to it. In this case, external factors – the type of market we are about to enter, consumer perceptions of our prices. It’s an enormous challenge and it takes special people to do it.’

‘So you’ve done the research?’

‘Yeah, we’ve done some research, but an artificial research environment is not that helpful in terms of figuring out how our customers will perceive value. It means different things to different people and this is going to be a completely different
environment. When we get over there we have no idea how we will be viewed and so we need to take some short cuts and it’s really important that we — —’

‘I miss you.’

There was a long silence.

When he spoke, he sounded surprised. ‘And I miss you too. Is anything wrong?’

‘No, there’s nothing wrong.’

There was no point trying to explain something that didn’t have a name or a rationale, especially in between orange juice and whiteboards, so I played it safe.

‘Have you heard anything from Phil and Annie? I hope they are managing to find their way around the place. They’ve never been up here before.’

But it was too late. I could hear them – the flock. They were circling, claiming him for their own, sensing his potential to leave the senseless flapping of the mob and to fly, like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, to an open sky where none of them had any power.

‘I have to go, Jane. They’re waiting for me. I’ll try to call you later in the day. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I echoed.

I would forget about gulls and spend some time with the kookaburras, those socially adept little birds live in pairs and share their lives with other family members. As usual they were sitting waiting for me, knowing that I would make a trip into the kitchen and return with some meat. I liked to watch them as they sat along the powerlines that led to the buildings. They laugh to establish territory, someone once told me when I was newly arrived. But today they wouldn’t oblige. Instead of laughing they just sat there with smirks on their fat little faces, no doubt at the stupidity of those like Richard who can’t differentiate the needs of others from those of their own kind. I fed them eventually, to show that there were no hard feelings. They had a right to be smug and I was simply envious.
When they did decide to laugh again it was when the group was returning from orienteering, something that their instructor had described as ‘running while playing chess’. This had appealed to Rebecca because she was a good chess player; Zachary had taught her after Richard had taught him. Richard had sat patiently for hours with Zach, quietly correcting him, passing on his knowledge and gently replaying parts of his game. He had wanted to do the same for Rebecca but Zachary, consistently beating Richard by this time, had laid claim to the tutoring process. Zach insisted on teaching us both: Rebecca the fundamentals and me the finer points of the game. To Rebecca’s credit, aside from pulling a few faces, she lasted the distance, whereas I didn’t even hang in there to the Middle Game.

So orienteering was going to be a cinch for chess-literate Rebecca, according to Zachary, who had traced its Swedish military origins and modifications and called it no more than ordinary exercise with an intellectual bent. And he was right. When the reports came in, Rebecca had handled it beautifully, visiting the controls in the correct order, making intelligent route decisions and doing it all in a minimum of time.

Emily was beside her, dishing out the praise. ‘Rebecca helped us win,’ she told everyone. ‘She found the best way to get there. It was awesome.’

I watched Rebecca blush as she continued but Emily was not content to leave the matter there. ‘One of the groups cheated,’ she announced. ‘They took a short cut and they’ve been disqualified.’

I looked around for the culprits. It wasn’t hard to identify the other group or the fact that Amy was a member of it. I gave her a smile and tried to make light of it as we walked beneath the cackling kookaburras towards the ‘respectable building’, to sit down for lunch.

Today, as I surveyed the fruit in front of us, I could see that although there were a lot of my favourites on the table, even in my food choices, I longed for what was not there – in this case bananas – so I busied myself helping Amy sort out the protein from the carbohydrates. At the same time, I urged Rebecca to forget about
the stinging nettles she had seen on the orienteering course and Emily to forget about the cheating and focus on the afternoon activity, which was the flying fox.

The girls were looking forward to it. Rebecca had already had a lot of experience with the flying fox – not only had she and Zach played on one regularly before they came to Australia, but Zachary had actually constructed one in our front garden. Although his construction was not strong enough to take their body weights, he had rigged it up as a useful device for taking Rebecca’s favourite toys for a ride, in a cardboard box gondola, over our swimming pool. The last time he was allowed to use it I had discovered Rebecca’s latest birthday present, a Cabbage Patch doll complete with birth certificate (as was the order of the day), swinging precariously over the water, while Zach sat in a little rubber dinghy below, writing out the death certificate.

Today the flying fox was again over water, but in a delightful part of the surrounding countryside, beginning at the top of a hill and following the natural inclines of a stony, rippling stream. The girls were instructed to line up on the hill and, when the rope came their way, sit on the knot and hold on tightly as it slid along the steel cable. At the same time, another couple of the girls were to stand on a sandbank at the other end to catch them. After a couple of turns, it was obvious that Rebecca had mastered the skills required and she volunteered to stand at the catching end. At first, most of the girls were reluctant to lean out and grab the rope and, when they did, they completed the journey shrieking and with their eyes tightly shut until someone at the other end yelled at them to let go. Rebecca began to develop a catching rhythm in which she took responsibility for the disembarking and the girls fell in a heap into her arms.

Unfortunately, however, most of them still hadn’t lifted an eyelid after half a dozen turns and Amy hadn’t even been persuaded to climb the hill. The teachers agreed that Amy needed to achieve a positive outcome after the cheating experience, so much effort was made to coax her into position. She was worried about her weight, whether the rope would hold her and whether Rebecca could manage when the time came to get off.
Finally, after one brave and very large teacher risked her body in a demonstration, Amy was convinced of the rope’s durability and, in a half-hearted attempt that made me catch my breath, she took a feeble hold of the rope. The knot was big and, as knots go, relatively comfortable, but Amy didn’t seem to be in position and without using the knot for support, curled her legs around the rope awkwardly. It seemed an excruciatingly long journey because some momentum had been lost at the beginning and she lurched along in first gear with her eyes wide open in terror. I watched Rebecca at the other end as she stood hunched and ready, like a shortstop with all bases full, as Amy slid erratically down the cable.

‘Now!’ we all screamed, aware of the report on Amy’s physical progress that would ultimately reach her mother.

‘Let go!’

But having taken a long time to get on, Amy also took too long to get off and Rebecca couldn’t perfect the catch. Instead they stumbled together on the uneven ground, entangled by the rope, until Amy finally let it go. Unable to steady themselves, they crashed down in a heap with Rebecca underneath and everyone else rushing to their rescue.

Amy was fine, shaken and never to attempt the feat again, but fine nevertheless. Rebecca, however, looked pale and strained when she got herself upright. Not wanting to be overprotective, I tried not to give her too much attention. But I was immediately concerned when she greeted me with the words, ‘I’m really tired, Mum. I think I want to have a rest.’

It was her arm. It felt ‘weird’. We unanimously decided to go to a medical clinic in the nearby village.

Leaving the rest of the girls to get on with the activity, her class teacher and I accompanied her down the hill. She was consoled by the fact that Emily was allowed to come with her and that Cuddly Monkey had also been thrown in. When it came time to leave the main building, her arm was still troubling her but some of the colour was returning to her face.
'Will I have to go home now and miss the camp?' she asked as we got her ready for the car.

‘I’m not sure. It will depend on how bad your arm is and whether it’s just a strain or a break. If we can get you fixed up then maybe you can stay.’

‘Have you told Daddy?’

‘I’ve been trying to reach him but his mobile is switched off. I’ve left a message for him though. Would you like me to go and get him? We could meet you at the clinic.’

She hesitated, trading off the two choices before deciding that it was a good idea.

‘Okay then, I will drive to the resort and you go with Ms Christie and Emily. Daddy and I will meet you there.’

She looked satisfied with that idea and so, after a long hug, with Emily’s arm around her shoulders and clutching Cuddly Monkey, I helped her into the car. I waved them off, grabbed a few personal items for myself and a few for Rebecca, and left the camping site almost immediately.
Chapter Eighteen

I had never been to the resort but I had Richard’s brochure with its mini-maps and knew that it was only about a thirty-minute drive. Under different circumstances I would have enjoyed motoring through the old historical villages with the winter sun casting shadows on the colonial heritage hotels, guesthouses and post offices. But I was concerned about Rebecca and my pledge to myself to return to the clinic before any major decisions were made about her arm.

When I reached the resort I was taken back. It looked imposing – more spectacular and even grander than it did on the brochure, as it wrapped itself around the cliffs overlooking the vast, wooded valley. I entered slowly into the sweeping driveway, feeling less sure of myself. As I noticed the guests strolling under the stately trees, playing tennis or a round of golf, I looked down at myself and realised I was wearing an old tracksuit that deemed me ‘casual’ without the ‘smart’.

I gave myself tasks, in order to still my mind’s nervous chatter. The place was huge and I had to find the company. This should also have been simple, but it wasn’t. There were many companies having functions and a lot of resort staff looked at me distastefully, then offered to help me with the enthusiasm of a Royal Master of the Household finding a commoner lost in Buckingham Palace.

Trying not to be daunted, I located one of the whiteboards listing companies registered in the resort and where they could be located. Richard’s organisation was in a conference room near the Lake Lounge. My timing couldn’t have been better. There was a break between ‘Hybrid Marketing Systems’ and dinner.

I made my way through the labyrinth of luxurious spaces, all thematically designed around the mountain landscape. The carpets were plush and the log fires authentic. Classical music wafted from piano players whose baby grands somehow managed to blend into the surrounding décor. Every now and then I thought I had
found Richard, but each time it turned out to be another middle-aged man of similar height, greying around the temples.

When I approached the Lake Lounge, I bumped into Richard’s secretary, Monica. She was walking briskly and carrying a clipboard that gave her a definite air of authority. She looked startled to see me and then stared at me for a long time before speaking. At first I thought that perhaps she hadn’t recognised me in that attire. We had only met once or twice and most of our interactions had taken place on the phone, when Richard had left his office. When she recovered, however, she was courteous and polite.

‘Hello Jane, are you looking for Richard?’

It was a safe assumption and a standard beginning.

‘Yes I am. Nice to see you, um, ah, Monica. There’s been a small problem with our daughter and I need to get hold of him if I can.’

She looked concerned. ‘I thought Rebecca was at camp. Is she alright?’

This time it was my turn to look startled. It was her familiarity with the camp and the ease with which she said Rebecca’s name when I had searched my mind for hers.

‘Yes, she has been at camp, and it is nothing serious but I think that Richard would want to know.’ I didn’t want to begin sharing details, despite her obvious interest. ‘Do you know where I can find him?’

She hesitated again.

‘Well, he’s been flat out all day but I think he’s taking a break now and the last time I saw him was around the indoor pool. There’s a lounge and bar down there. That’s the first place I would try.’

‘Thanks a lot.’ I strode off in as dignified a manner as the tracksuit and road shoes would allow and began negotiating the polished floors.

Soon I could see the pool and the swimmers: mostly men with strong, smooth strokes who completed their laps, flipped and turned in unison. None of them
looked like Richard. I scanned the bar and its surrounds, where a few company staff were relaxing in deep bottomless chairs, but I still couldn’t see him. As I walked further into the room he became visible, sitting on a stool, stirring a glass of something red with a swizzle stick. He was nodding and leaning over to talk to someone who, leaning forward with her back to me, was difficult to identify. Our eyes met and his expression changed. The lady on the other stool responded to his change of expression and turned around in curiosity.

I stopped immediately. It was Annie. She slid off the stool and came forward to greet me but I kept my eyes on Richard, who looked uncomfortable. He waited for Annie’s flamboyant display to be over before coming forward to place his hand on my shoulder.

‘What are you doing here, Jane?’ he asked gently, gesturing to my clothes. ‘Is something wrong?’

I looked down at myself.

‘Sorry for not dressing up but I didn’t know it was going to be an occasion. What are you doing here, Annie?’

‘I was in the area, that’s all. Is it a problem?’

‘Yes, actually it is a problem. I don’t even visit Richard at these sorts of conferences and I would expect you to tell me if you were going to. Maybe you could have dropped in on Rebecca’s camp and lent a hand, instead of entertaining yourself out here. Or is that idea not glamorous enough for you?’

‘You’re making far too much out of the whole thing, Jane. I have not been entertained by anyone. I have only just arrived and Richard was just offering me a cold drink.’

‘How hospitable of you.’ I turned back to Richard. ‘How very bloody hospitable of you.’

‘I am not going to be part of this overreaction, Jane. Not in this hotel with other people looking on. We can talk about this at another more suitable time.’
‘I think that the two of you need to be alone,’ Annie excused herself.

‘Yes Annie, we do need to be alone. Right now and in the future. Every time I turn my back you seem to be targeting Richard. “Richard, you are such an accomplished driver. Richard, you have such an amazing voice.” What is it now, Annie? “Richard, you are so good at your job?” Yes, how about you go and leave us completely alone.’

I turned my back on her and tried to begin filling Richard in with the details, but Rebecca’s arm, the imposing resort and Annie – all began to take their toll. I sat down and tried to gain the necessary control. By this time Annie was making her way towards the door.

‘We need to talk about Rebecca,’ Richard insisted.

‘No, I need to talk about it now.’

‘We can’t talk about it now. Take a look around you. Have some consideration for my position here, Jane. We’ve attracted enough attention already. Can’t you wait until we get home?’

I looked around at the staring faces. Not satisfied, but without the luxury of time or place, I let the matter go for then and began tracing the details of the accident. Eventually, I came to the crucial question. ‘Our daughter is hurt. She is waiting for us. Are you coming back with me?’

Richard looked tortured out of all proportion to the question, running his hands down each side of his cheeks to give himself extra time.

‘Why wouldn’t you?’

‘But she’s alright, you think? Maybe a severe strain or, at the worst, a broken bone.’

‘I suppose so, but I don’t know yet. She’s going to have an x-ray at the clinic. If it’s broken we’ll have to take her to have it put in a cast.’
‘So you could phone me at that point,’ he rationalised. ‘I have a presentation to give before dinner. There’s nobody else that can do it. Once it’s over I can join you then.’

‘What presentation? A golf trophy?’

‘No, it isn’t,’ he responded in a detached, corporate way that made me want to scream.

‘I have some vouchers to give out for the group that came up with the best solutions for our product on the day.’

‘And only you can do that? You must be joking. No different to a golf trophy,’ I continued, digging myself into a deeper emotional hole. But it was obvious that he wasn’t going to come at that point and, even though Rebecca’s arm turned out to be broken, he didn’t come later either.
Chapter Nineteen

When we returned home, the household was tense. Phil and Annie stayed mostly in their room and I could hear Annie packing up her things and telling Phil that she wanted to leave. Initially I was swamped – taking my parents to the airport and tending to Rebecca’s arm and Zachary’s stream of demands. Then with Richard arriving back, parents gone and Phil and Annie’s suitcases packed, it looked like time for another showdown. But Richard had other ideas.

‘There is no need to leave this early,’ he reassured them. ‘Jane just overreacted to Annie’s visit out there and that’s all there was to it. She was exhausted from the camp and worried about Rebecca. It was totally understandable.’

‘It wasn’t just an overreaction, Richard. My response was based on more than Rebecca’s arm.’

‘Well, let’s not argue about it,’ Phil chipped in. ‘I have spoken to Annie and told her that she was insensitive in thinking that she could just breeze in and out of Richard’s place of work like that, so I don’t have a problem with the way that you reacted.’

I decided to be more direct and get back to the issue. ‘I’ve already told Annie. It’s the flirting that she does. I don’t like it.’

‘What flirting? I wasn’t flirting with Richard. We were just having a drink together.’

‘What flirting are you talking about, Jane? I haven’t seen Annie flirting.’ Phil looked puzzled.

‘No you probably haven’t, Phil. Men never seem to see these things. But I am sure Annie knows exactly what I am talking about. I expect more from a friendship, Annie. Women can be their own greatest enemies and they need to give each other support, not undermine each other or threaten relationships.’
‘Maybe that feminist stuff has got in the way of some clear thinking here.’

‘How dare you blame it on that, Richard. Feminism! My God I’m sick of feminism always taking the rap. How could you be so bloody short-sighted? This is not about feminism, Richard. This is just about decent behaviour.

‘I agree with Jane,’ Phil said. ‘Men generally do a better job. We stand by our mates and we don’t let that stuff come between us.’

‘What stuff?’ Annie wanted to know. ‘The flirting? So you do think I have been flirting?’

‘I haven’t seen it but I am sure that Jane is being honest in telling us how she feels.’

‘Well maybe if Jane is such a wonderful, upright, honest person, you would be better off with her!’

‘This is getting silly,’ Phil said. ‘There are obviously some issues that we have to deal with in our own individual relationships and I think that we need to deal with them privately before we go any further. In fact, I think it probably is a good idea that we do leave and that we all give ourselves some breathing space.’

I watched Richard toss a quick glance in Annie’s direction and she nodded.

‘I could drive you to the airport,’ he volunteered.

‘We’ll call a cab.’ Annie began gathering up her folders. ‘I think you have all done and said quite enough.’

They left in strained silence.

I needed time alone and wandered out into the garden. For a while I sat quietly on the seat under the jacaranda, admiring the shades of colour and the carpet of lilac left by the petals on the ground. Then I made my way to the garden shed, found a trowel and gloves and began the systematic weeding that would continue to calm my mind. I focused on the groundcover, taking care not to disturb the roots of the tiny daisies as I tugged gently around them. For a few minutes I remained absorbed, enjoying the spring sunshine, until Richard’s voice intruded.
‘Does that have to be done right away?’ he asked, his large black leather shoes appearing on the cobblestones beside me.

‘No, it doesn’t have to be done right away. It doesn’t have to be done at all, actually. I just wanted to do it.’ I kept my head down.

‘Hmm, well, I’m not sure if you’ve forgotten, Jane, but I’m leaving for Dubai tomorrow. So, if you want to talk about any of this stuff, and I’m sure you will, then there isn’t a lot of time. I’ve got to start preparing for the meetings.’

‘So cool and smug these days aren’t you, Richard?’ I aimed a clump of weeds in the direction of his shoes. ‘Knowing that I need to talk when you can just ignore it. No, I haven’t forgotten about Dubai because I have seen the packed suitcase but you’re right, I do need to talk about some of the things you said back there and we need to talk about Annie.’

I stood up, shook the dirt off my gloves and began to peel them off as I sat back down on the garden seat.

Richard shrugged his shoulders and sat down beside me. ‘What about Annie?’

‘About how she was at the resort with you when I arrived that afternoon – obviously.’

‘So? Do you think that something is going on between Annie and me?’ He sighed. ‘Haven’t we just had this discussion?’

‘No. We’ve haven’t. We have discussed Annie, but not seriously.’

‘So you think that this is serious?’

‘No, not serious, and I don’t think that anything is going on. But as I’ve already said, I am beginning not to trust Annie. I think that she is attracted to you and that she doesn’t give us consideration as a couple.’

‘She was at the resort,’ Richard began coldly, speaking as though to a child, ‘because she had been in the village getting art supplies and simply decided to drop in for a chat. Nothing more and nothing less.’
I bristled, closing my eyes and clenching my fists in a struggle to keep calm. ‘Well, that’s great for her, but it’s difficult for me to get hold of you and when I do, most of the time you can’t talk.’ I repeated the voicemail message, mimicking Richard’s dispassionate CEO style. ‘You’ve reached Richard Collins. I’m sorry I’m unable to take your call right now but if you’d like to leave your number and name and a detailed message, I’ll — —’

‘I don’t have a choice,’ Richard interjected, giving me a scathing look. ‘I have to turn it off when I’m in meetings.’

‘Or preparing for meetings or recovering from meetings or in planes or different time zones or when there is no service or when you can’t recharge the batteries. The other day I heard the children dreaming up messages to leave you on your voicemail just to try to get your attention. Zach told Rebecca to say that she was on drugs and pregnant and that he had killed someone and was in jail.’

Richard smirked.

‘It’s not funny at this end, Richard. You always tell us that you’re busy, but when I arrived that day you were sitting around chatting.’

‘So what is the issue here? Is it Annie or is it the job?’

‘It’s Annie because of the job.’ I was pleased that at last I was getting a chance to voice my fears.

‘That doesn’t make sense.’ He shook his head. ‘Annie has got nothing to do with my work.’

‘I don’t mean it that way. I mean that if the job wasn’t intruding on our lives so much, I wouldn’t feel so threatened. Before we came over here we used to support each other, take walks together in the evenings, talk for hours and hold hands. Now the children and I hardly ever see you and you didn’t even come to the hospital.’

I watched him flush with guilt and felt glad.
‘It’s not the job itself, Richard.’ I struggled to explain. ‘Most of the time I can handle the job. It’s the way that you view it. Instead of looking through it or down on it you look up to it. And there are times when you seem distant and withdrawn. It doesn’t feel like we’re on the same side anymore.’

‘I don’t look up to the job. We need the money,’ he responded flatly. ‘We have two children and a long way to go with their education. At my age, what else is there that would make this kind of money? I am coming up to fifty, Jane. What are we going to do for our retirement? I have no formal qualifications. This is what I am good at. What else do you suggest that I do?’

I paused before answering, aware that, in being consumed by the needs of the children, my study and moving, I hadn’t anything particular in mind.

‘I don’t have an immediate answer,’ I said. ‘It just seems to me that the job is becoming your life, rather than our life being supported by the job.’ I watched the irritated tapping of his foot, which looked incongruous in the midst of the garden, before continuing. ‘I don’t care about it like you do. It just isn’t that important to me and nor is the money. It’s a food product, for God’s sake. You’re not out there doing noble deeds, Richard. You’re just a worker.’

‘A worker?’ Richard repeated, raising his eyebrows at the term he thought he had left behind long ago.

‘Yes, a worker. You may have a company car, gold cards and air points but it is still just a job. I understand that we need money but there must be other ways to make it. Not everyone takes this path. If we lose our direction and our relationship together then that is more damaging to everyone in the end. We need to do something different, together – maybe some kind of business. I don’t care what it is.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know – maybe management rights or something else in tourism, where we can work together. Something entrepreneurial. Anything. A complete change of direction.’ I watched his face as he considered the idea. ‘I think we should
do it before I have to land on the roof of your office building in a helicopter to
debrief you and get you out,’ I laughed, beginning to gain momentum.

I stood up and tried to pull him to his feet.

For a short time he seemed to respond to my mood as he allowed himself to
consider alternatives. His eyes lightened, his body relaxed and a boyish smile
appeared as he allowed himself to be dragged off the chair. For a moment he was the
man I had first met. Encouraged, I kept on going.

‘So, let’s do it – something that we believe in – take some risks and have a go.
I don’t want to sacrifice our health, family and peace of mind for a pile of laminated
cards and mission statements.’

I stopped to wait for his reaction but was dismayed to see that as quickly as I
had engaged him, I had lost him. His face clouded over and he sat back down.

‘It’s not that simple,’ he said. ‘I know that it’s difficult and I know that it’s
hard for you to understand, because I seem constantly stressed, but there are
actually a lot of times when I enjoy the job.’

I sat down beside him, feeling crushed by the arrival of a more insidious
combatant.

‘You enjoy it,’ I repeated, aware that it was me who now sounded flat. ‘But
it’s beginning to change you,’ I protested. ‘Subtly, like ageing. Sometimes it seems
that you need the adrenaline rush to feel alive. I watch and you become harder and
tougher the longer that you stay away from the family. There are days when I don’t
recognise you. Today was an example. You sounded pompous, Richard, speaking
for me as if I was a child and then undermining my commitment to equality issues
in such a superior way. You may be getting used to having power over people but I
am not prepared to be spoken to like that.’

There was a long silence.

‘Not prepared, eh? So what exactly does that mean?’ His voice became louder
as he pulled himself up to his full height.
‘It means that although you may be earning more than me, I need to be respected as an individual. It means that your comment about ‘feminist stuff’ was a low shot and one that I didn’t expect from you. Feminism is not a dirty word, Richard, nor is it something that you should ridicule. And as far as you and I are concerned, I have always put your needs first – never going out on some feminist limb.’

‘Maybe not, but I still think it is an indulgence. I don’t want this Annie stuff or any feminist stuff to become the focus here. I need some more time to get on top of this job. At the moment things are difficult and I expect some understanding. The Middle Eastern market is new to all of us. There are new regulations and the ground keeps shifting. As well as that there’s a lot of internal politics. It will settle down eventually and so will the borrowing. It is only for a short time. The properties are inflating. The Sydney market is on the move. It won’t be long and we’ll be out of the woods and then we can take a holiday. In the meantime, it’s the way things are and I need you to support me and get used to it.’
Chapter Twenty

I didn’t have the luxury of packing all the books. There simply wasn’t enough room, so I had tried to sort them into categories and then selected a few from each pile. The first pile consisted of works that were not from my university major, but from the electives. This pile was substantial. Early on I had been presented with a poem called ‘The shield of Achilles’. It was an unlikely title for something that evoked the barrenness of modern life. But it served as an indicator that if I wanted to be serious about literature then Thetis and Haephestus were going to have to become part of my repertoire.

I could have done with Achilles’ shield, I thought as I waded through the Greek pile. Richard had covered himself in iron from head to foot, whereas every time I marched to the plain to face him I stood naked, unarmed and with my skin layer missing. I fingered my copies of Homer, Plato and the plays, and decided that I couldn’t relinquish any of them. I could identify with too many of the characters, I reflected cynically – Oedipus’s blindness in particular.

Moving over to the pile under the window, I was working with the books more closely related to my major. I took a leap forwards to the Middle Ages: to Mallory, his knights and his queen. I found an old poetry anthology that had lost its cover, with underlinings and pages folded over like a well-loved Bible. I rescued it.

I searched again. Perhaps there was an entire historical period that I could dispense with, seeing as there was no way that I could escape from my own. I thumbed my way through a few of the other piles – Romantic individualism, Augustan order and precision, Renaissance conceits and Victorian doubts. I took
satisfaction in the Victorian doubts. What was it that encapsulated their mood? Dear God, if there is a God, please save my soul, if I have one. And why shouldn’t they be doubtful? Still I felt no sympathy. Nothing in my world was secure either. I decided to keep some from each period, on the rationale that it all represented various tortuous parts of the human condition. I would squeeze them into a bookcase or keep them in boxes under the bed if I had to.

I moved onto the next pile containing a selection of soft covers – self-help and New Age.

‘What are you going to do with this lot, Mum?’ Rebecca knelt down to help with the sorting.

I scanned some of the titles. In retrospect I saw them in a totally different light. How could I not have been aware that they all focused on the needs and wants of other people: how to raise boys, how to develop the brighter child, how to recognise stress, how to create twenty-five investment properties in three years.

‘Get rid of the lot.’

‘All of them?’ She looked incredulous.

‘Yep. They all depend on other people’s cooperation. I only want stuff that I can do on my own. Is there anything in your pile that could just be applied to me?’

‘It doesn’t seem like it.’ She looked at me quizzically.

‘So definitely get rid of them.’ I started to help her scoop them up and stuff them into plastic bags.

‘What about the philosophy stuff? It has its own separate pile?’

‘Keep it. I’m probably going to need it.’

‘And the general fiction?’

‘It can go. I’ll get another plastic bag.’

I headed towards the kitchen, stepping over the piles. Zach was helping himself to everything left in the fridge.
'Here's one among the fiction that you might want to keep,' Rebecca called out.

'What's it called?'

'The Power of One.'

'It isn't mine,' I yelled back. 'Somebody gave it to me to pass onto Zach.'

I turned to him. 'Can you remember that woman's name?' I asked, but Zach had sat down and, using the table as a footrest, had begun shoving the food from his plate to his mouth, so all I got was an unintelligible mumble about not wanting to go in the first place. I silently agreed with him, but we were all a bit desperate at the time.

'I can recall her face but not her name,' I told Rebecca, as I brought another bag back into the room. 'It was a kind face. She looked like an elderly hippy with grey hair tumbling around her shoulders.'

I had forgotten about her and her book until now. We had paid her a visit when we eventually had a holiday back in New Zealand.

Richard had stopped taking any kind of holidays at that point, including weekends, so the children and I had made the trip back on our own. We had never had a holiday away from Richard before, but after he returned from Dubai we reached a number of agreements in which, as I tried to make more allowances for the job, Richard tried to pay the family more attention and be more emotionally available.

The separation of the business trip had, this time, done us good. I had missed him desperately and he told me he had missed me just as much. When I was tucked into the familiar curve of his shoulder at night, he had reassured me that he was not in the least interested in Annie and I had believed him. We were not sure how it was going to work but we agreed that our love and long history made it worth giving it a try. We also agreed that my going back to New Zealand for the holidays would not do our relationship any harm and that the children would be relieved to free themselves from the pressures of our inner-city lifestyle.
On arrival in New Zealand, before rekindling our relationship with family and friends we had visited a friend of Marie’s – a wise elderly grey-headed lady. Her speciality was ‘guided imagery’ and Marie had recommended her when she had invited us to stay, after supporting me for weeks from afar as our family lurched from crisis to crisis. Marie had had a lot to do with this lady in the midwifery practice – she was good with children and young people, she had helped Marie’s daughter Sarah, and Marie thought that she might have something to offer Zach.

Zach had relinquished his role of ‘soldier’ designated by Richard and had even gone as far as saying that he wanted to desert the school altogether. ‘It has been given a good trial,’ he announced. Although he recognised that it was inconvenient to desert at midsemester, the place had a number of inadequacies that could no longer be tolerated.

The main problem was that the school was just for boys. Despite researching the origin of these schools and gaining an understanding of the Judeo-Christian background and the insistence on separation at puberty, Zach considered that such a system penalised the boys. Instead of receiving more egalitarian and moderate treatment for misdemeanours such as forgetting textbooks or failing to do homework, the boys were required to do press-ups and suffer other punishments that Zachary believed were sexist. He had researched this by delving into one of my university courses on the education of women and using my own assignment material as evidence.

Wealth was another issue – not the other parents’ abundance of it but our relative lack of it. This was a difficult one to fob off since, at a dinner that the school had provided to support the new parents when we arrived in Sydney, there had been a public announcement that tonight was the time to consider bequests or donating some land. I had been forced to agree with Zach that in this respect we were out of our depth.

The good thing about all of these complaints was that Zach had investigated other Sydney schools and found two that suited him. The first required him to speak fluent Hebrew upon entry and the second, which he conceded might also create a
few difficulties because it didn’t take boarders, required him to travel eighty
kilometres to school a day – each way.

Reluctant to embark on either path, and tasked with finishing a wordy
linguistics assignment and spending days in hot property areas with
overenthusiastic real-estate agents as we moved from renting into home ownership,
I had settled for the more wacky option of guided imagery as a temporary solution
that might allow us to limp on.

The grey-headed lady lived in a delightful part of Auckland’s North Shore. To
get there we rented a car and wound our way out onto a peninsula on an unsealed
road. We arrived a charming cottage tucked into a sheltered part of the valley and
surrounded by an English-style country garden. Rebecca had come along because of
her anxiety. She was highly impressed, even more so when we were served
gingerbread in the sunny timber kitchen.

The guided imagery itself, however, was less successful. The children were
asked to lie down on the floor with cushions as they allowed music to take them on a
journey, guided by the grey-headed lady. During the journey they could be anything
they wanted to be, not necessarily a person. Rebecca went first, to encourage a
sceptical Zach, who thought he was too old for such nonsense. She had problems
relaxing, but when she did, she went on a watery journey as a dolphin, gliding
smoothly through the ocean and temporarily freeing herself from her fears. She also
visualised a safe place where she could retreat whenever she felt overwhelmed by
social expectations.

I was persuaded to have a turn, partly to convince Zach that this was a
worthwhile experience and partly out of curiosity. Unfortunately, no relaxing
journey was forthcoming. I visualised myself as a rubber ball being bounced on
gravel in a game being played by three faceless people. The game went on for much
longer than the grey-headed lady felt comfortable with but finally, after a
particularly heavy-handed bounce, I flew into the air, over their heads, and rolled
away into a drain.
This left Zach, who visualised himself as a Kuwaiti oil fire. As the woman
tried to guide him through his experience and introduce him to the healing notion of
water, he kept sabotaging the process by telling her that he had the potential to burn
for a hundred years and that water would never be enough to put him out.

‘You need an explosive to suck the oxygen away and starve the fire,’ he said,
‘or a tube to channel the fire away so you can get closer.’

Sensing that guiding Zach anywhere was not working, the lady thanked us
for coming, terminated the session with another piece of gingerbread and presented
Zach with The Power of One.

Later that evening, staying with Marie and Tim, I conveyed to them our
limited experience. Marie was apologetic but I reminded her of the help it had been
to Sarah and Rebecca and waved away any guilt that she was feeling.

‘We will feel better simply from being here,’ I reassured her. ‘Being back in a
relaxed environment is tonic enough.’

The New Zealand landscape of bush and hills, along with cool evenings,
immediately calmed me. I sat on the veranda, as the temperature dropped and the
last rays of sun withdrew from the valley, and marvelled at the twilight air, so still
and silent. And when I awoke in the early morning, the mist was still clinging to the
trees, shrouding them in a healing gauze and shielding the dew, which sat on the
leaves in suspended droplets.

Every day I was taken care of by Marie. I had forgotten how safe it felt to
watch her bustling around the place, full of competence and nurturing graces.

Yet she had a large load herself. Frustrated with the hierarchical hospital
system and determined to become more autonomous, she had taken on a job against
Tim’s wishes with a new private clinic. She had her own clientele of women whose
demands were high. They tended to be well-educated people who had made their
choice after a great deal of deliberation and who wanted an optimal experience.
Although she found the job intensely rewarding, her responsibilities and duties were
immense.
On top of this Tim was out of work again, and sitting on the terrace in the long twilight, I listened to news of his family and his current plight. I learned that his brother Brian was still on the family farm and thriving. For his loyalty and effort, their ageing mother and father had sectioned off a parcel of land and Brian and Elaine had built on it. It was an ideal situation as his parents also helped out, looking after their first-born Madeline and later Jordan and Donovan when Elaine returned to work as a funeral director. Sadly, Marie and Tim felt that they still could not afford to have more than one child – disappointing as they had both wanted a large family.

‘I’ve been out of work more than I’ve been in it recently,’ Tim said disgustedly. ‘And when I get anything it’s always casual. The country has gone to the dogs.’

In his last job, in the concrete industry, he had been employed for just over a year before being laid off. He blamed his situation on the Employment Contracts Act, which had replaced the national system of award coverage with individual and enterprise employment contracts. He had always been a strong supporter of trade unions and in his words was ‘thoroughly pissed off’ at the decentralisation of the collective bargaining process.

‘The last company wanted to extend my hours,’ he told me, ‘way beyond forty per week, with no penalty rates and with a whole new range of tasks that I was expected to perform. With Marie out delivering babies at nights someone has to be here for Sarah. When I wouldn’t sign up they put me off. If you ask me, all that talk about free trade was just an excuse to get rid of the unions. They’re stuffed.’

‘In what way?’

Marie began explaining patiently.

‘Well, now the trade unions have to get written authorisation from members in each workplace to negotiate on their behalf, which has placed them under strain. As well as that there has been an abolition of their tax-exempt status so that the unions have to pay taxes on the income derived from membership fees.’
‘So they’ve had to cut back on their services?’

‘That’s right. The employers no longer have to negotiate collective contracts with the unions and the unions have had to compete with each other, which has usually meant amalgamate or close. The other problem is that while the unions have been busy shoring up support, many of the workers have felt abandoned and have drifted away — —’

‘Productivity may have improved but the wages and conditions of the workforce have turned to shit,’ Tim interrupted.

‘It’s been hard for both of us,’ Marie said, ‘but while I’ve been able to negotiate myself an adequate individual contract, the system hasn’t worked for Tim.’

‘That’s a bloody understatement.’ He stood up and began pacing. ‘I need to talk to Richard. Maybe he can get me a job in Australia.’

I was unsure of whether he was joking, but was pleased I hadn’t disclosed that, although things were looking good for us, they were a result of a great deal of risk and a fair bit of emotional pain. I didn’t want to destroy Tim’s faith in the ‘lucky country’.

I tried to discuss the matter with Richard when he phoned that evening. Despite his intentions to keep some distance between himself and his work, the phone calls varied in tone, depending on the stresses of his day. If the company had a hiccup at the same time as a Reserve Bank announcement of another interest rate rise it was bound to be a bad one, but such things had been happening so often that I was beginning to get used to the inconsistencies and was becoming more adept at dealing with them. On good days, I dealt with the old Richard and on bad days, I dealt with the new one.

This call began on a reasonable note. On a colour scale from yellow to black, I gave Richard’s mood a dark green. There was none of the new and frequent irritability that would have given it a grey, just the indifference and the ‘we all have to do it hard’ persona. As I listened to Richard, I wondered if it was just because I
was back in home territory that I was so acutely aware of how far he had shifted from his former self. Probably not.

No longer the socially conscious young man I had married, or even the middle-aged fence sitter, Richard had firmly aligned himself on the unsympathetic Right. Tim needed to wake up to himself. The changes that he was bemoaning were necessary, couldn’t come soon enough and were welcomed by anyone with a brain in Richard’s company. They improved the flexibility and the efficiency of the labour market.

‘For Christ’s sake, Jane,’ (dark green still), ‘you must realise that employees need the means to respond flexibly to changes in the supply and demand for labour. You’re a fool if you can’t see that. There will always be unemployment, but the level is lowest if economic growth is sustained. What we need is for the impediments to the free operation of the labour market to be removed. Which is, of course… are you still there, Jane?’

I had lost concentration, dismayed at how far Richard was sliding down the rainbow. I must have said something.

On he went. ‘Which is of course the abolition of national-award fixing systems, government wage fixing and compulsory union membership. And as for giving Tim a job, tell him to stay right where he is. I’ve got nothing for him over here.’
Chapter Twenty-One

The first couple of weeks passed with the three of us doing nothing more than readjusting to our old lifestyle and soaking up the support offered by friends. Although we were all anxious to visit Richard’s and my families, who lived a few hours’ drive away, Zachary and Rebecca were keen to ease themselves back into the more relaxed New Zealand lifestyle. This they did with very little effort, announcing that they were never going to leave. I had no time to process this information since I was too busy transporting them, taking a summer course at my old university, attending to Rebecca’s orthodontic work and helping Zachary practise driving on a tractor.

Early in the piece I had a call from Annie. It wasn’t an easy call – stiff and formal – but she apologised for being at Richard’s workplace and said that it wouldn’t happen again. I accepted her apology and we made polite conversation about the children, about Phil’s job opportunities, but with much of what we had to say a strain. The call ended with me making a loose arrangement to drop in at a waterside café on the North Shore and look at some art that she had on display. It was progress, and I decided to share it with Richard on the daily call.

I had been trying to stay in touch with Richard daily since leaving Sydney but he was increasingly difficult to get hold of. I tried to phone him before work, since he seemed refreshed by sleep. This was something that he was beginning to recognise, and when I had missed him in the mornings and he was at work, he would get exasperated with his lack of concentration and ask me to phone him back early the next day, when he was less tired. I filed it mentally under ‘new Richard’ and created a shimmering colour gold for his times of self-recognition.
But making contact with a self-aware Richard was not the only incentive that I had to try to catch him at home. If I did have to ring the office I had to partake in chitchat along the way with the receptionist who, without having met me, always recognised my voice.

‘Is that you, Jane?’ she would ask and then leave me hanging endlessly after my identity was confirmed.

I found this difficult – I wondered what she was doing and why it took so long. In my deluded self-importance I imagined that, having established that Jane was Richard’s long-standing wife and partner, she would rush me through the system. But it wasn’t to be. Typically, after the long wait, and knowing that Richard was not available, she would then put me through to Monica, after announcing robotically that this was ‘Jane calling from New Zealand for Richard’.

When it came to efficiency Monica was in a category of her own. If there was a file on me anywhere in the office, Monica would have compiled it. She was a reservoir of information, from the murky pools of gossip to the sediments of company policy. She had a strident voice and a brittleness that made her unsuited for the task of answering for Richard, whose voice I had once described as rich and mellow.

‘Oh, Jane,’ she would say with the air of someone in the ‘in’ crowd. ‘I’m sorry but maybe you forgot, Richard’s out with those gentlemen from COZAC. He’s on a really tight schedule at this time of the month and as well as that it’s Tuesday. No possible chance of getting hold of him today.’

I had not forgotten for, as she already knew, one has to have the knowledge in order to forget, and I had no idea what COZAC was. I had long given up on acronyms, despite the fact that they were bandied around by everyone in the company in a jargon that rendered conversation useless. So I didn’t know who the gentlemen were, either. And what was it with Tuesday? I went to university on a Tuesday and left my mobile on. It rang frequently. Last Tuesday Zach crashed the tractor and the Tuesday before, Rebecca had developed food poisoning from a takeaway in the shopping mall. Yes, Tuesday could be a very busy day.
‘Just tell him I phoned and that I’ll call him tonight.’

‘Certainly,’ she replied. ‘I will pop into his office or pass it on when he phones in.’

Popping in was an obvious winner and with a few thousand kilometres between us she had presented me with her green card, which gave her unquestionable access and the ability to stay. In response, all I had to offer was a losing hand – my refugee status with its continual assessments and zero chance of being let in.

I hung up relieved that even though I hadn’t been able to get Richard, the game with Monica was over for the day. I stood staring at the phone, musing on her mode of operation and her attitude to male power.

Even though we had begun phoning each other again, I was still struggling with the tension in my relationship with Annie, but when I tried to make sense of Monica’s behaviour and translate it into concrete terms, she seemed to be indicating that to be chosen by a man in the corporation, in whatever capacity, conferred privileges on her as a woman that she could not earn by herself. Unfortunately she viewed these privileges as something that pitted us against each other. It was another sorry state of affairs, not only because of the wasted opportunity to be mutually supportive, but because I was not interested in the procurement of this deferred power. I was not interested in the type of job that existed as a symbol of success in men’s competition with each other, nor the mediating role and social lubrication that such a job required.

I was still pondering the subject, and whether I could use it as an opener to improve my situation with Annie, when the phone rang again.

‘Mum!’ I enjoyed the new intimacy that my mother and I seemed to be forging as adults and delighted in the novelty of having her so close by. But she was quiet and unresponsive and I knew that something was wrong.

‘What is it?’ I asked, then, ‘Who is it?’ when she didn’t reply.
She finally spoke. ‘It’s your grandfather. He died of a heart attack this morning. He was lifting the lawnmower into the boot of the car.’

I struggled to take the words in. My grandfather was dead; not a tragedy, but a predictable life event. He was an old man. Yet his dying came as a shock and regret grabbed me. He had been like a father to me, but I had yet to drive down to see him and had only spoken to him by phone. I needed some time for the news to sink in.

‘Why was he lifting the lawnmower into the car?’

‘He was going to mow the lawns of one of his neighbours.’ My mother spoke in the calm, flat voice of one who has broken such news before. ‘Mrs Morrison, in number forty-three. Her husband walked out on her last year and Grandad didn’t want her to be out there mowing. She’s only middle-aged, but he thought that she was too old to do that kind of thing.’

She gave a sad little laugh at a value system that was disappearing; at the chivalry of a man who not only mowed women’s lawns but insisted on tipping his hat and opening doors as well.

Overwhelmed, I searched for something to say. ‘He called me “treasure” and his face lit up when he saw me.’

‘I know, Jane,’ my mother sympathised. ‘He cared for you a great deal.’

Her compassion jolted me. After all, this was her father and she needed my support.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, I’m doing okay. It’s Nanna that I’m worried about. She’s lost a partner of over sixty years.’

I shuddered at the implications. The longevity and familiarity of Richard’s and my relationship already felt like a blood tie. I immediately wanted to touch him, to reassure myself of his presence in the world, to take him away from the turbulent world in which he was now engulfed and keep him physically close. Instead, I made an effort to focus back on Nanna.
How could anyone comfort my dear Nanna? She had been rescued from a housekeeping job by my grandfather, married him at seventeen and he had protected her ever since. She didn’t drive, she had never written out a cheque and she still resisted decimal currency. Yet she had raised her children during the long years of the Depression, all the while nourishing my grandfather’s spirit.

At least they had made it to their sixtieth anniversary. I had bought them silver goblets with their names engraved on each. We had wanted to take them to a restaurant but my grandmother had discovered the new chicken that was cooked in herbs and spices and could be taken away. She had requested that we eat it at home. Hardworking people with simple tastes. The meal had turned into a family party and my grandfather had sung old Scottish songs, his faded blue eyes misting over as he sat on the couch with his arm around my grandmother.

‘I’ll be right down.’

‘Just get here when you can.’
Chapter Twenty-Two

The Hamilton church, in the centre of the North Island, was only moderately full. Most of my grandparents’ friends had already died. The Christmas card list that my grandmother used to produce each year had kept getting smaller as they attended funeral after funeral, until there was hardly anyone left on it.

Elaine handled all of the arrangements. Rebecca and I were in the front pew with our immediate family. Richard’s parents and his grandparents sat close behind. In the remaining pews sat a mixture of some of my friends, a few grey heads, and the spikes and curls of the very young. I scanned the church as best I could, wondering if Richard would surprise me by catching an early flight over or whether Annie would be somewhere in the crowd.

Zachary was to be a pallbearer. It was the first funeral he had ever attended. I consoled myself by thinking that this was the way it should be – a gradual introduction to the process of death at an age when one still feels invincible. Despite my sorrow, I knew that I should be grateful that nobody was dying out of time. But I was worried about Zachary. On occasion he had been known to have a peculiar reaction to stress and he had exhibited some of the symptoms on the way down from Auckland in the car.

We set off early in the morning and we were minus Richard, neither of which was acceptable to the children. Rebecca was hurt that he wouldn’t take time off to be with us, while Zachary had reached a point of intractable anger, frustrated that his father was concentrating too much on the company without adequate monetary results. Despite my reassurances, I was saddened to see that they were losing respect
for their father. When my answers to Rebecca’s questions about why we were not doing things together as a family proved to be hollow and inadequate, she turned to Zachary, asking him detailed questions about bereavement leave and who actually had to die before companies encouraged people to be together. Zachary deemed grandparents to be peripheral, which made me wince, then interrogated me about how much of his father’s time was spent looking after our family’s financial wellbeing. His questions about Richard were posed with an undertone of aggression. I wondered if the day was coming when he would lock his young, velvet-covered antlers into Richard’s dying ones, in a last battle for supremacy.

On the financial side, my answers were also woefully inadequate, for although I hastened to defend Richard, I was well aware that the greater the workload, the more our financial security was left to the control of others, who were pressuring us into areas we had never ventured into before. The increased expenses and high taxation requirements needed time and deliberation, but Richard was never in a mood to tackle them. And when I broached the subject, his impatience only highlighted the fact that this was his earning power and his domain and that my criticism, while well founded, provided no immediate solutions.

Zachary was initially withdrawn, then began making pig-grunting noises to alleviate his stress. Annoyed with me for stopping his driving practice after the damage to the tractor, he refused my request to act as navigator and positioned himself in the back seat with Rebecca, with whom he had suddenly developed an impenetrable and exclusive friendship. This left me behind the wheel alone, a chauffeur in the front seat, trying unsuccessfully to catch Rebecca’s downcast eyes or frown at Zach, all the while acutely feeling the lack of Richard’s presence.

Every now and then Zach would let out a noise, sometimes that of a pig and sometimes more deviant and outrageous. It was always just a single word or sound, and it was both unnerving and disruptive. After the first few kilometres I diagnosed him as having Tourette’s Syndrome, but as the journey progressed and I saw him grinning at Rebecca, I became unsure about any lack of control he had over it and began to think that he was just doing it for effect.
Carrying a coffin was stressful and one of those occasions when, regardless of their individual quirks and idiosyncrasies, you just wanted your offspring to be normal and perform. I felt vulnerable and emotional as I reached out to a daughter, a mother and a grandmother. When the coffin appeared, with my grandfather’s Scottish tartan draped over it, I felt estranged from the reality. How could he be in there? I cast a quick look at Zach who was the youngest of the pallbearers. I could see the strain, not only on his young body but also on his face as the coffin made its way to the front of the church. I tried to catch his eye but he was focusing on each slow, deliberate step.

I comforted those around me as I listened to the timeless hymns and the Bible readings. My grandparents were not particularly religious, but my grandmother had been raised in a convent, having lost her parents at an early age, and this was the way she wanted it.

Eventually the readings were followed by the eulogy and my cousin rose to her feet. ‘It is my very great privilege today to stand in front of you to honour the long life of Alec MacDonald, whom we fondly knew as Mac.’

I kept my eyes to the front as her solemn words filled the building, lost in my own grief but catching fragments of information.

‘Born in Eureka…. had to give up his education to look after his brother’s farms when they were sent to the First World War…’

I had heard this part of his story before and had relayed it to Zach and Rebecca whenever I wanted to impress upon them the study opportunities they had. I remembered emphasising the fact that, because of his hard work on the farm, this bright young man had kept falling asleep in class. Rebecca obviously remembered it too, so I squeezed her hand and gave her a tissue.

The eulogy continued – it was all about hard work. I glanced towards the back of the church. Richard was obviously not going to come now, so I listened with a more unconcerned mind. When his brothers returned from the war there was work in the South Island mines, in Glen Afton and Waihi. Then work on the railway was
followed by driving trucks and, after that, standing in the pre-dawn queues hoping for work through the Depression years.

‘Too young for the First World War and too old for the Second…’

I recalled his disappointment at missing the chance to fight or to apply for one of the farms that the government allocated to those soldiers who returned.

Then more hard work. ‘Share milking that got him enough money to buy a section to build a house… He helped to build it, assisting with the labour, while at the same time working in the sale yards on the outskirts of the city.’

I had spent my childhood weekends in that house. The outside walls were white and the windowsills were a fashionable new colour called turquoise that my grandmother loved and my grandfather didn’t understand.

My cousin moved on to my grandfather’s time as a dispatch manager in a furniture shop. I recalled the pungent smells of the polish as I wandered in and out of the rows of furniture. Many a Friday night I had packed my small suitcase and caught the bus to his workplace, where I would watch him in awe as he worked in his dispatch office, answering the phone, writing out tickets and signing dockets, before taking me home for the weekend to be with my grandmother.

‘He was a wonderful husband, a great father and a good provider.’

I noted the anachronism of ‘good provider’. Maybe this was all that Richard was trying to be. Things were much simpler then. God was in his heaven, we stood for the Queen, the flag fluttered proudly and we were supported by our communities in our rigid gender roles.

I tried not to look at my grandmother’s crumpled face. She was such an integral part of his story.

‘Mac was a friendly man – many here would attest to that. He could talk to everyone and often did. Gift of the gab, they called it.’

He brought people home. My grandmother would welcome them and put another cup of water in the mince.
'It was a partnership – always – a lifelong partnership.’

Those words resounded in my head.

There was another reading, another hymn and then it was all over. The coffin slowly edged its way behind the heavy curtains, leaving Zach to rejoin us as we stumbled out onto the church steps.

People shuffled along in a line to pay their respects, my grandmother receiving them with my mother’s support. It seemed to comfort both of them and after the condolences we made our way along the concrete path, past the rose gardens, where Richard’s mother was the first to seek me out.

‘I’m so sorry, Jane.’ She kissed me on the cheek and patted my arm.

I was delighted to see her. We had developed a strong relationship over the years. She still looked like the Queen, I noted, despite the hardships of her unprotected life, but unlike the Queen, once she had realised that Richard was serious about me, her natural response was to welcome me with warmth and graciousness.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she repeated.

‘I will miss him. He was a good man and I loved him very much.’

‘Yes, he was a good man, but I was not just talking about your grandfather. I am also sorry about Richard. My son should be here to support you and the children.’

I welcomed the solidarity. ‘He couldn’t make it.’ I was trying to sound conditioned to the situation. ‘He had too much to do.’

‘Not overseas again?’

‘No, no. He’s in one of the other Australian offices this time. He’s got important things to do in Brisbane, the Queensland office. He’s staying in a hotel on the river.’ The words sounded feeble.

‘But this is important,’ she insisted. ‘It’s happening too often. What do you think is behind it, Jane? Do you think it’s an addiction?’
Addiction or desire? Good question. It reminded me of the condition of madness – how the insanity of war, the production of missiles and the existence of starving children were considered normal, and that to accept them you had to be insane. Somehow the word ‘workaholic’ hadn’t attracted the same negativity as other ‘holic’s. After all, one brought home money for a family and another hid whisky bottles in a toilet cistern.

The question put my brain into overdrive. I wanted to tell her that sometimes it didn’t seem to be either and I had put it in a new category all of its own. How else could I explain his fatigue, the fluctuating moods, the lack of concentration, the periods of numbness and the increasingly impersonal nature of his interactions with us.

But she wasn’t waiting for a reply. ‘Just how are you managing with the children?’ she asked. ‘They’re at an age when they need their father. Look at Zach’s height. I can’t believe how much he has changed in the past couple of years, and your mother said that they are doing so well at school.’

I looked over at Zach, who looked handsome in his white shirt and dark suit. Beautiful Rebecca engaged with the relatives in her compassionate way.

But it didn’t tell the whole story. Intelligent and attractive they both were, but not without their problems – more things that I couldn’t discuss with Richard’s mother without seeming to be looking for sympathy. Problems like Rebecca’s first panic attack under the pressure of our Sydney life, which engulfed her in one chaotic rush. And the holes that a mostly fatherless Zachary had been punching in our walls, in a blind rage that turned my bewilderment into fear. Their emotions were not measurable or controlled, and couldn’t be set aside until the meetings were over. Those deft, attractive hands of Richard’s were now full, but I had never needed them more. However, there was no point telling her this. She had enough to contend with.

‘Well, I think you should call him,’ she finished. ‘Tell him that his mother said he should be here.’
I smiled that she thought it would make a difference. ‘Maybe I will,’ I reassured her, returning her hug, before walking across to the rest of our relatives and friends.

I could see my grandmother again, being buoyed up by the support of a few old friends who had been through the process before her. Just to the left of her were some university friends of mine and next to them was what was commonly known as ‘the group’. I clapped my eyes on Annie. So she was here. But I didn’t feel in the right frame of mind to be in her company; I had planned to talk to her on my own first.

At least the sight of the others was a comfort. From a distance I could see that they were attending to each other’s needs: Phil bringing Annie another drink; Elaine, looking stunning in black, taking time from her official duties of the day to brush some fluff off Brian’s pristine white shirt; and Tim lifting Marie’s heavier-than-fashionable, ready-for-delivery bag off her shoulder to carry it. At another time I wouldn’t have noticed it but today it accentuated the absence of Richard. They had been chatting but when they saw me coming a hush fell.

Marie was the first to greet me, embracing me warmly and linking her arm through mine. I hadn’t seen her for a few days. I had left Auckland early so that I could assist my mother with the preparations. Tim put Marie’s bag down and came forward to hug me. I had always been close to Marie but, while staying in their house, I had more understanding of what lay under Tim’s facade of roughness, becoming more mindful of his background and his issues.

They pulled me into their circle, seemingly at ease. All of them had met my grandparents but I had to concede that Phil and Annie seemed particularly affected by the loss, having spent the most time with them.

‘What a great man he was, Jane. So fit and active,’ Annie remarked. ‘One night, when we were at your place, he showed me all these photos of himself walking the Milford Track. How old was he then – eighty-something?’

‘Eighty-six,’ I confirmed.
‘And the horses,’ Phil remarked. ‘Did you know, Brian, that he was so involved with horses?’

Brian shook his head.

‘He trained them through his later years,’ I said. ‘He was something of a legend at the racecourse. He used to turn up to the track early in the mornings and, until a few years ago, he was still riding his own horses.’

There was not too much said about the horses in the eulogy. My grandmother used to worry that he would get hurt.

I directed the conversation to Elaine. ‘Thanks for having my two out at the farm. They’ve had a great time with your kids.’

‘It’s a pleasure, Jane.’

‘As you know, they haven’t settled easily in Sydney and whenever they come back from being with you they look a lot more relaxed.’

‘Well, they’re welcome at any time. Just say the word… But you’ll have to excuse me for a minute. Looks like I am needed.’ She gave me a quick hug. ‘Back to my duties.’

‘I just can’t believe how much your kids have changed since being in Sydney. They seem more sophisticated somehow,’ Brian said.

I pulled a face.

‘They had to grow up fast,’ I said. ‘They catch trains when they want to go somewhere and now they can both get themselves around the city. All the young people do it. It’s a different lifestyle. I think most of the children in the eastern suburbs seem older than their years.’

‘Sounds great – no more chauffeuring,’ Brian remarked. ‘Our problem is that being so far out we have to drive them everywhere.’

‘Don’t worry. We have our own problems. There’s a lot of pressure. Our weekends seem to be taken over. There’s a lot more homework – hours of it every night and most of the weekends. Then there are the clubs – Zachary was starting to
stay with friends and we would find out later that he had been to them. In the end
we just took him ourselves. Early in the piece, Richard would sit up late and then
drive over to the North Shore to pick up a group of boys and drop them all home.
The whole entertainment thing is a bit of a nightmare.’

‘How is Richard?’ Annie used the mention of Richard’s name to jump straight
in.

‘Can’t you remember, Annie? Busy. Frantic. Driven,’ Phil said, before I had a
chance to speak.

‘Yes, he’s certainly got his hands full.’ I tried to sound light-hearted.

‘Couldn’t make it today?’ she persisted.

‘No, he’s in the middle of a round of meetings,’ I repeated. ‘I’ve just been
explaining the situation to his mother. It’s a really busy time. They have been doing
this big restructure and — —’

I could hear my voice beginning to crack – I couldn’t complete the sentence.
‘I’m sorry,’ I apologised. ‘It’s just Grandad, I think. And everything.’

Marie moved forward protectively and cast a grim look at Annie, who turned
away. As I tried to compose myself, I wondered if Annie had spoken to Richard
recently, or if she knew more than I did about his work situation. No, it doesn’t
make sense, I corrected myself, remembering Richard’s words of reassurance. How
ridiculous can you get? After all, she is here and he is there. If there was anything
going on between them he would have wanted to come over.

‘It’s just been a big day today,’ I said. ‘It would have been nice to have had
Richard here with us.’

‘Then phone him, Jane. Why don’t you give him a ring? Where is he staying?’
Marie asked.

‘At the Hilton.’

‘Then call him. If you phone Directory you can get the hotel number.’
‘No, that’s not necessary. Just give me a second. My phone is on roaming so I can call his mobile. Just give me a second.’

I stepped to one side, still trying to compose myself, before walking back out to the rose gardens. When I had recovered I decided to take Marie’s advice. I dialled the international code and Richard’s number on my mobile. The familiar ring went on and on. There was not going to be a reply. I prepared to leave a message, but before the phone switched to voicemail it stopped ringing and I heard a woman’s voice in the background say ‘You’d better answer it. It could be Jane.’

‘Richard Collins.’

It was as though the two things happened simultaneously. For a minute I couldn’t speak.

He repeated his name.

‘Richard. I had just about given up. I didn’t think I was going to get you. Who was that?’

‘Jane,’ he responded, sounding surprised. ‘I wasn’t expecting to hear from you today. Aren’t you at the funeral?’

‘Yes, I am. I am here now, with the family, but I needed to call you. Where are you?’

‘At the Hilton.’

‘Then who was that in the background?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I could hear a female voice.’

‘It was just someone I was walking through the door with… from work.’ He sounded short and irritated.

‘Who from work?’

‘Nobody you know, Jane. It was just one of the office girls. She’s been typing up some of the notes and we were going back to our rooms. We overheard some
people talking about the banking stuff in the US and were going to try to get an update. Surely you’ve heard about it. What’s so urgent, anyway?’

‘Nothing is urgent.’ I struggled to condense it. ‘My grandfather is being cremated, probably now while we speak. Zach was a pallbearer but he made those weird noises in the car again this morning and Rebecca started to hyperventilate before the funeral. Your mother is here. Everyone is here, including Annie. Elaine handled the funeral and people are asking after you. I just wanted to talk to you.’

I could hear my voice rising with emotion; I moved further away from the others. Our conversations used to be as perfectly timed as our waltzes. We would move together in synchrony, each one anticipating the needs of the other. Now I was trying to pull my dancing partner into a jerky, unsynchronised tango.

‘What is the name of the girl?’

‘I don’t know her name.’

‘But you just said that she was from work.’

‘She’s a temp. I got her in.’ Richard had changed his story.

‘So she’s not from work?’

‘Yeah, well she is sort of from work – just not from our company, that’s all. I made a mistake. What’s the problem, Jane? I can’t believe that you’re going on about this kind of stuff when all these other things are going on. I don’t know if you’re aware of it but we haven’t just got the death of an old man happening here, we have the death of the entire financial system. It’s about to go under. Doesn’t anybody listen to anything over there? Bear Stearns has collapsed. Can you believe that? Bear Stearns. One of the largest and oldest investment banks in the US. It’s unbelievable – historic stuff. The global markets are reeling. They are saying the entire financial system may be on the verge of collapse. Christ, Jane, do you know how much we’ve got borrowed out there?’

‘Yes.’ I was now the voice of sardonic calm in the conversation. ‘I certainly do know how much we have borrowed and no, I haven’t heard the news. I have been at a funeral of my grandfather – an old man who helped raise me, you may recall? And
a funeral is a venue not generally known as one to be interrupted for financial announcements, wouldn’t you agree? Should there have been an announcement between the hymns, do you think? But believe me, I do understand the seriousness of it all and I will get myself informed and discuss it with you when I am in a better position to do so. You are right. This isn’t the right time. It was a mistake. It is too difficult on the telephone and I’m too far away. But hey, I will fix that too. A couple of days to tidy up things here and then I’m leaving.’ I paused for breath.

‘I will get on a plane and say what I want to say to you then.’
Chapter Twenty-Three

I was not going to pack all the jackets – some of them could go to a charity. They were heavy and I had too many. They were a product of the New Zealand days and the Sydney climate was mild. Besides, I needed more than just a jacket. I was in the middle of a storm, flapping like canvas in high winds and needing safety and protection.

I began to rummage systematically through the rack in my wardrobe, taking the jackets off the hangers, trying to create a sense of normality. Out of habit, I checked the pockets and found the usual mixture – movie passes, a parking ticket, a few coins. The parking ticket was well overdue and I wondered if I had paid it before leaving the country.

All I could remember was the traumatic trip back. True to their word, neither Zach nor Rebecca wanted to return and I was placed in the unenviable position of having to convince them. Richard’s response was cynical. He had no tolerance for their feelings, believing that they were spoilt. We now had greater things to worry about, he informed me. Having given the power to financial experts in the past, he conceded we now both needed to be involved. Indeed, we needed to pay less attention to the children and concentrate on what was happening in the financial markets of the US.

Phil, who prided himself on not taking on excessive debt, resisted the temptation to say ‘I told you so’.

Besides, from what he had seen and the limited amount that I had told him, he believed that Richard’s state of mind was less to do with the global financial crisis
and more to do with workplace burnout – a condition he had considered researching for his masters. This, however, meant that I was less certain of my ground. If it was burnout, Phil said, my anger would need to be replaced by compassion. Not such a bad thing since deep down I wanted to have compassion. Compassion meant that the two young people I loved the most in the world still had parents in a loving marriage that functioned. Compassion also meant that decades of Richard’s and my history remained entwined and that for every future family occasion, from Christmas through to weddings and births, we would all be together.

And then there was the big one. What I had had for so many years with Richard was something that I desperately wanted back. Yes, burnout was definitely the better option.

Because Phil was so sure of himself, he had tried to steer me into convincing Richard to get some counselling. Turning up alone at the airport to say a final goodbye and to tell me how pleased he was that things were patched up with Annie, Phil speculated that the changes in Richard had started long ago, due to the energy that he had expended and his compulsion to prove himself. He not only attributed Richard’s behaviour to part of the burnout process, but was adamant that I should become familiar with it. I listened and promised to investigate it further when I arrived home.

As we descended into Sydney, I leant over to the window to catch the first views of the dark brick houses and the dull red roofs that appeared through the wisps of cloud. Each of us took a different approach – I tried to pre-empt the landscape, Zach clenched his jaw in defiance, and Rebecca rubbed her hand in circles on her stomach. It should have been a gradual process of adjustment and planes didn’t make it any easier for anyone. There must have been a time when each hour helped one make the transition, perhaps riding along on horseback, trotting at a gentle pace, watching the changing scenery as you got closer to your destination. Even a car journey was easier. It gave you time to adjust.

He was at the airport waiting to meet us, but when I saw him my heart sank. Instead of waiting at the exit where others were leaning over the rails or watching
the TV screen to follow people through, he was standing at the back of the crowd, leaning against a concrete pillar with his arms folded, like a bouncer outside a nightclub. I weaved in and out of the crowd with the loaded trolley, making my way towards him. As I raised my hand in a small wave, I saw him rub the palm of his hand across his forehead and shut his eyes, as though summoning the energy to face us.

‘Hi, sorry we’re late. It took a while to get through. Somehow, I always take the wrong queue. Have you been waiting long?’

He said nothing. I gave his greeting a grey on the wellbeing scale, which, I noted soberly, matched the colour of his face. He looked sick and my confusion turned to concern. ‘Are you okay? Aren’t you going to give me a hug? Or the children?’

His attempt was wooden and perfunctory. It was a dismal start.

Walking in the front door was equally dismal. It didn’t look as if he had been there much. The flowers on the dining-room centrepiece had died and the house felt stuffy and unlived-in.

Zach, hungry as usual, went to the fridge.

‘There’s no food,’ Richard announced in a monotone, looking across at me. ‘I’ve been doing twelve-hour days.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I can get some this afternoon,’ I replied.

I needed a way to ease back in and shopping for supplies was one way. The return felt like a pair of new shoes that caused discomfort before settling in. I was at the formation of the blister phase and still had a long way to go.

I moved to the dining-room table and began opening the stack of envelopes that had been left in a bundle on the kitchen bench. Some bills needed urgent attention and I began sorting them into piles. Rebecca retreated to her room and Zach, after grabbing whatever he could find to eat, disappeared into his headphones.
'The telephone bill came while you were away as well,' Richard said. 'It arrived at work. I’ve paid it this time but the amount was excessive. You’ll all have to cut down the calls to New Zealand. I’ve written you a memo about it.’

I looked at him with astonishment. He had written me a memo!

‘How much was it?’ I asked.

‘I can’t remember. It doesn’t matter. It’s there somewhere. The point is that it was too much and in the current financial climate, the directors are not going to keep approving something that is unreasonable.’

He sounded irritated. ‘Things have changed, Jane. The good times are over.’

Somehow I had managed to miss the good times. I decided to put the memo on hold and continue with the task. The stack of bills was high and some of them had missed their discountable date.

‘Many of these are overdue,’ I told him. ‘They need to be paid.’

‘You don’t seem to realise that this is the first time I’ve been home in days,’ he said, raising his voice. ‘There hasn’t been a chance. I just came past on the way to the airport, dropped off my luggage and took this stuff out of the box. I’ve been working every day that you have been gone – long, grinding hours – and I haven’t had time to think, let alone look at personal mail.’

‘You seem to have found time to think about the telephone bill.’

‘I told you, Jane. The telephone bill came to work.’

‘And you seem to have had time to have done a bit of socialising with girls in the office.’ I had lost the compassion.

‘Socialising? What socialising?’

Was this how my husband acted dumb?

‘The phone call, Richard. The one that I made to you when you were at the Hilton. The female voice I could hear in the background.’

He threw his head back, rolled his eyes and looked up at the heavens.
‘And I told you that she was just a temp that I had employed from the agency, walking through the door at the same time.’

‘Then how come she was so close to the phone that I could hear her?’

‘She wasn’t close to the phone. She’s just got a loud voice.’

‘But I heard her speak before you answered! What were you doing and what was the delay?’

‘My God, Jane, how many times do I have to tell you? We were approaching a door. I was reaching over to take hold of the handle when the phone rang. I was carrying folders in one hand as well as the phone. I managed to turn the phone on and then reached over to open the door before answering it. I suppose you must have heard her speak during that short time.’

There was silence while I digested what he had been saying. It was starting to make sense, but I still had one question to go.

‘Then if she was a temp, how come she knew my name?’

There was silence again as he lifted his head and stared at me in surprise. He hesitated for a second before answering and when he did, he had reverted to anger.

‘Because I told her your name, okay? Because I guessed that there might be another family crisis and you would call. Because I wanted to prepare her so she would know who it would be on the other end if we were in the middle of something important. I need peace and quiet to get on with the job, Jane, because I am so tired. I don’t get enough sleep anymore. And, if you really want to know, I am over the whole damn thing: the bills, the school fees, the mortgage and every other bloody thing it takes to create financial security for this family. And you know what else? I’ve begun asking myself just where it has all got me and the answer is nowhere. I am just out there trying to create money in some stuffed-up system that is crashing around my ears. I don’t need questions. I need a desert island. I need an island, Jane, so that I can get away from temps, from you and from the children, so that I can sleep. Because I am exhausted. I am so exhausted providing for all of the people in this family.’
I listened to him, stunned and shocked. I had never heard him shout like that.

I felt powerless. Zachary and Rebecca were in one of the most demanding phases of their lives and were only just coping, battling their own pressures. I had been doing some work at Rebecca’s school, but even with the summer course behind me I was still a couple of subjects away from completing the qualifications that would make a real financial difference.

Like it or not, Richard had become the maypole around which the three of us stumbled with our increasingly twisted ribbons. Like it or not, just as the maypole was wobbling, the financial markets had shifted ground.
As the weeks rolled by, everything deteriorated.

On the financial side of things we had the harsh reality of facing our large debt and diminished equity. Theoretically it should have been possible to hold onto our properties and tough it out, but the interest on the borrowing had been coming out of Richard’s annual bonuses and these were now a thing of the past. Night after night we watched the crisis unfold: Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac being rescued by the US government, Lehman Brothers filing for bankruptcy with no bail-out, the Bank of America takeover of Merrill Lynch – on and on it went.

And as the subprime-mortgage-backed securities were discovered in portfolios of banks and hedge funds around the world, we were forced to face the fact that we had our own toxic assets, in which each aspect of our financial portfolio was dependent on something else. As the defaults continued, we realised that we would also have to start selling and as the stock-market indexes around the world started to plummet in fear, we had fears of our own.

Our financial advisor was now difficult to get hold of and short on advice. When I reviewed the fine print of what we had signed up to, there was nothing helpful in the disclosure document. We had no redress, just the feeble excuse that we had been encouraged along the way and the comfort that maybe the Australian Securities and Investment Commission would end up banning commissions and kickbacks. I did what I could to help with the sales of the properties, playing a game of snakes and ladders in which, having climbed the ladders with a great deal of effort and concentration, and been within sight of completing the game, I was now
tumbling down the longest snakes on the board, back to the starting line. For Richard, it was less a game of snakes and ladders and more of a circus act as he walked the tightrope of trying to hold the company together.

Energy-wise he seemed to be caught in emotional quicksand, struggling to get on top of his job but sinking into a sea of unfinished tasks and working harder to accomplish less. And as his energy continued to fluctuate, so too did his moods. What had been principled became opportunist, what had been measured became extreme, and what had been gentle became ruthless.

During the day his stress built up as he reduced staff, not in the name of economic rationalisation but to ensure that the company would stay afloat. At night it didn’t end. I would be aware of him sliding out of bed and hear the flick of the switch as the light went on in the study; or I would wake, look over and see that he had turned on the bedside lamp and was busy writing lists or making notes. And it was not just an overactive mind that kept him awake. Also stopping him from sleeping were the tension headaches, the aching muscles and the burning in his stomach. When I tried to intervene, to draw attention to the physical symptoms or suggested getting help, I was met with thinly veiled hostility. Sometimes the hostility was directed at my suggestions and sometimes at the bail-outs, but at times it was misdirected at our family. At these times, the injustice and irrationality of his accusations frustrated me and I lost my compassion and struck back.

‘You have been the captain of this ship,’ I protested. ‘And now, having steered it into some rocks, you are blaming the ocean and the crew when the ship has begun to take in water.’

‘And just where were you in all of this?’ he demanded. ‘You signed the documents. You looked for the properties. You were part of the deal. You might not have been the captain but you sure as hell were a willing first mate.’

It was no use arguing. We were going back over old ground.
Feeling increasingly isolated but at the same time disloyal, I eventually confided in Phil. He called late one evening, hoping to catch Richard, who was still at work.

‘How are you guys surviving? How’s the house selling going?’ he asked straight away.

‘You don’t want to know. There are people out there, cashed-up people, who are taking great delight in trying to pick up places like ours. Their only stress is trying to make sure that the market is at absolute rock bottom.’

‘Ah, the bottom feeders,’ he sympathised. ‘It’s interesting that there’s so many buyers out there. It’s one thing to take on the debt but it’s another to get out and have some money tucked away, ready to strike.’

‘Interesting for you, Phil,’ I gave an unconvincing laugh. ‘I wouldn’t call it interesting from where I sit. Many of them do seem to be bottom feeders, but some of them seem to have just been lucky. They had just sold their properties to move or upgrade and this thing came along at the right time.’

‘Well a few of them, maybe. It’s a bit of a game. Despite all the economic theory that’s out there, as far as I’m concerned there is still a lot of luck in it. Judging the peak is just as hard as judging the bottom. Everybody acts so knowledgeably when the prices are going up but nobody knows how to read the markets, not even Greenspan. Did you hear him sounding off? Telling everyone that it is very regrettable that his model of the world is wrong. Model of the world! Makes you wonder doesn’t it? Still I guess the good thing is that Richard must have changed his views. That must help, surely?’

‘Well, you would think so, but actually, he hasn’t changed his mind one little bit. He’s clinging to his beliefs, still holding onto his efficient-markets theory, unwilling to move from his position.’

‘So he isn’t prepared to admit that there was greed in this?’ Phil sounded astonished.
‘No, he isn’t. As far as he’s concerned we just had an overheated economy. He was in favour of deregulation Phil. Don’t you remember? The foreign banks had access to wholesale funding, the new players had undercut their competitors, there was a wider array of products, growth had given more people access to credit. Can’t you remember all that?’

‘Sure, I can, but it was a screw-up. The free market was illusory. The banks exploited it for their own advantage. It didn’t work.’

‘Well, you need to save that argument for him, Phil. I’m not even going to try raising it.’

‘Okay then, I will, but what about you, Jane? What do you think?’

‘I don’t even think about the money anymore. I’m over it – the whole damn thing. If I’m interested in anything, it’s the human aspect of it – like how we got ourselves into this mess in the first place. Why we abandoned our judgement and followed what others were doing like a flock of New Zealand sheep. I have to take my own share of responsibility for that.’

‘But you protested, about all of it. I remember that too.’

‘Yes, I did. I protested about a lot of things, but I still went along with it all, first in coming to Australia. I had a head full of feminist theory and plenty of women warning me but I still went along. And then when it came to the finances, I guess living where we do there is a lot of social pressure and because everyone else was doing it he did it too – and I participated in that as well. For some illogical reason, we believed that house prices wouldn’t go down this time. I guess people ignore the obvious in booms and what surprises me is that some people still want to ignore it when the bubble’s burst. And even beyond that, some of them are already planning for the next round. Well I’m not one of them. Not anymore. The one thing I’ve learnt is that suspension of disbelief doesn’t just apply to fiction.’

Phil agreed with me, but it wasn’t the comfort that I thought it would be. He had an academic explanation for Richard’s behaviour and an academic explanation for what we had done. The former was definitely burnout and the latter was based
on Keyne’s theory of ‘animal spirits’, in which the so-called rational expectations of efficient markets fail to take note of our changing thought patterns, the fear and greed and the stories that we tell one another along the way. In fact, when I thought about it, he seemed to have academic explanations for everything, and although it was nice to have someone who often shared my point of view, emotionally I still felt isolated. Phil had never taken a risk financially. He didn’t have children. He had never felt the kind of pressure that Richard was under.

I told myself all this and so eventually, to get some comfort, I broke Richard’s new telephone rules and phoned Marie.

‘We’ve been a loving, tight-knit family and now it’s different – he’s different – irritable most of the time, exhausted or absent,’ I complained. ‘The problem is that he also seems addicted to corporate life. When I talk about it to you, it all sounds pretty normal, but actually it isn’t. It’s like there’s something fundamental about him that has changed. Then there are other times, when he’s rested, that we reconnect and Marie, do you know what? I actually get him back, the Richard that I have known and loved for years. You have no idea what it feels like and when it happens, I think that his bad patch has to be reversible. Phil still thinks it’s burnout.’

Marie offered her usual mix of sympathy and practicality.

‘He has changed, Jane. Everyone can see it. I worried about where it was heading, back in New Zealand, before your family moved to Australia. Remember those brochures with his face plastered all over the front? That wasn’t the Richard that I had known. That wasn’t burnout. And then there was the fact that he went and pushed ahead with it all. You weren’t happy; Rebecca wasn’t happy. I couldn’t understand why he did it. God knows, Tim and I might have our differences, but something like a change of country and job should be a joint decision. And with the kind of relationship that you two had, in my opinion he had everything to lose.’

I wanted to move on. ‘So what do you think I can do to turn things around?’

‘Well, I don’t know much about burnout but he probably is running on adrenaline, Jane, and not wanting to give up his fix. Adrenaline takes away
depression and since the global financial crisis I would imagine that many executives are struggling. After all, the spotlight is on them. They are not as popular as before. And then there is the financial failure. Maybe his life seems pointless. Guys can go through this kind of stuff, especially at Richard’s age. If it’s not adrenaline then maybe it’s testosterone levels. I’ve got some stuff on that as well.’

‘What about testosterone levels?’ I asked.

‘They might be low. That can make a difference to moods.’

‘So how do you measure them?’

‘Through a blood, saliva or urine test, I would think.’

‘And can you treat it?’

‘Well, yes, but he’ll have to go to a GP. Do you think he would do that?’

‘No,’ I admitted.

‘Then maybe you can just have a read of the stuff first. Do you want the information on adrenaline or testosterone? Which one do you think?’

‘Both. But I’ll read about the adrenaline first.’

‘Okay,’ she agreed. ‘I’ll dig it all out and send it over.’

When it arrived I skimmed most of it until the ‘burnout’ subheading caught my eye. The list of symptoms seemed to match Richard’s. I studied them. Burnout can develop in anyone who is subjected to persistent and unrelieved stress as part of their job, it said. I phoned Marie again.

‘Some of this looks promising,’ I told her. ‘It looks as though Phil was on the right track.’

‘That’s great, Jane,’ she said, sounding pleased yet still concerned. ‘If I remember rightly there’s also a chapter entitled ‘Fight, Flight or Freeze.’ I think that there’s more adrenaline stuff in there – something to do with the stimulation of the adrenal glands. I can’t remember what it was exactly but I remember that it’s connected with adrenaline. It makes you fight and there’s something else – norasomething.’
‘Noradrenaline.’ I flipped the pages and continued reading. ‘Can you believe this? This is exactly what I’ve been looking for! It says that prolonged stress actually damages and changes the functioning of the neurotransmitters in the brain. This is so useful. Richard’s moods have had me really worried. And Phil is right. It isn’t just the financial stuff. I’ve been thinking all sorts of crazy things but if I can understand it then I should be able to take care of the children better and also get Richard the right kind of help.’

‘Well, I hope you’re right and he’ll listen,’ she said cautiously. ‘From what you’ve told me, Richard stopped listening a long time ago.’

‘I’ll make him listen.’

‘Then good luck,’ she encouraged. ‘And phone me anytime, Jane, whatever happens.’
Chapter Twenty-Five

Nothing helped. After talking to Marie I had been sure that I had some answers; I was confident that, once we all knew exactly what we were dealing with, we could address the situation constructively. But Marie was right; Richard wouldn’t listen.

The children and I battled on. They came out of their private schools and went back into the state system and I took on a full-time teaching position.

Zach had become disgusted with the whole family mess, angry about the sale of the properties, and even more angry at the disruption of having to leave his private school. He was convinced that Richard and I had failed in all directions. With the stresses around him multiplying, he added his own brand of spices to the bubbling pot. He was going to get out of it all, he told us, through his subjects of law and commerce, disassociate from all of us in the family and then, one day, we would see how it should be done.

Rebecca’s anxiety became more difficult to control and although she tried a variety of behavioural techniques, the changes were too much and she continued to struggle. For my part, I was stretched to capacity: being back in the workforce, dealing with Richard’s new symptoms and worrying about the effects on the children.

But we limped along, watching as the stimulus package was thrust into operation and noting ironically that, contrary what we were being told in the media, we had not been saved by either the mining resources boom or by what was going on in China. In fact, with so many internal stressors Richard gave up on the global forecasts and channelled what little energy he had into saving himself, finessing his
tightrope act and becoming an expert on the high wire. I had begun to get used to this circus act, knowing that it was abnormal but unable to get Richard to come down.

As I watched him stretch out his arms for balance, I knew that the old attraction remained. When he was rested, the spark rekindled and we reconnected instantly. Like a neglected plant it would wither, but when given a drop of water and a little nourishment it would lift its head and turn to face the sun. And it wasn’t just the sex. It was the old joy of the communication, the old friendship and compatibility, the old ease.

Then there was an important directors’ meeting, with more rumblings of dissatisfaction and this time Richard believed that it might be his turn to go. He dodged the bullet but the fear of retrenchment had intensified his stress and I began monitoring his reactions. He would sit hunched in a chair in the corner of the lounge, by a stained-glass window, as the sun filtered through onto his drooping shoulders.

One winter afternoon, I had lit a fire. The place was cosy and we had all assembled for some homemade soup. Richard enjoyed soup and I felt quietly satisfied, working on the premise that, if nothing else, I could keep his physical body healthy through nutritional care.

Everyone had finished and things had gone reasonably well. Rebecca had returned to her homework and Zachary to his headphones. I cleared the table and left the room. When I returned I was halfway across the floor before he looked up.

As he saw me he jumped – not just a little startle but a full-body response that lifted him out of the chair.

‘How long has this been happening?’ I asked.

‘What?’

‘You jumping like that?’

‘I didn’t see you, that’s all.’
‘No Richard, it wasn’t normal. Has it happened before?’

He looked uncomfortable. ‘Once or twice.’

‘When? Was it a few months ago or just lately?’

‘In the last few days.’ He began to sound impatient.

‘Richard, you really need to see someone. I’ve spoken to this burnout specialist in the city, someone Phil knows, and he says that all you have to do is call him and he’ll fit you in.’

‘Now you’ve been speaking to Phil and a burnout specialist? Leave it alone, for Christ’s sake, Jane. I’m not going to see anyone about anything. You know what they’re going to do. They’re going to tell me to take a holiday or leave my job!’

‘And they’d be right,’ I said quietly. ‘That’s exactly what you need to do.’

‘Well I can’t.’ His voice sounded flat.

‘Why not? Some of the pressure is off. You could at least take a holiday. Go into the outback by yourself, ride some horses or something – rediscover who you are. I don’t understand.’

‘That’s exactly right. You don’t understand. You have no idea what happens in the company. How could I enjoy a holiday knowing what is going on there? We’ve been through so much together. They’re like a family.’

I bristled at his misplaced loyalty. ‘Then, as I’ve said a hundred times before, we need to work out a plan so that, instead of fearing redundancy, you can just leave the job. It’s insane for anyone to be this pressured all the time. In fact, it’s all insane, Richard. Governments are in debt – spending their way out of this crisis – and everyone is sitting around waiting for the next burst of growth. None of it is sustainable in the long run. There are not enough resources on the planet. We need to stop consuming, live more simply – not just by taking the kids out of the schools but something more radical, a complete change of lifestyle, together, before it completely ruins your health.’

‘I don’t want to leave the job! If I lose this job, I’ll take another one like it.’
This was new. The last time he had erupted he had threatened to find a desert island.

‘Where? Where would you try to get such a job?’

‘Anywhere. Anywhere in the world. I don’t care.’

‘So what are we supposed to do?’ I was terrified that if they put him off he would simply apply for something else and want to pack us all up again.

‘I don’t know and I don’t have enough energy to care.’ He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes.

The situation was alarming and I wasn’t the only one who thought so. Others were increasingly in the picture now. I received regular phone calls from Richard’s mother who, hoping that Richard would follow, wanted me to come home with the children. My own parents felt the same way. Each member of ‘the group’ had their own opinion. Phil added to his own previous analysis, believing that underneath the burnout a deep insecurity fed on the status of the job. Annie disagreed and thought that Richard might be having an affair, creating another twist to our relationship and another dent in my trust.

Having had difficulties with their own offspring and knowing the energy it took to deal with both children’s problems and Richard, Brian and Elaine tried to come up with some advice. When things had got rough for them, one of their children had moved out and stayed with a close friend for a while. This had worked, but they admitted that with no such extended network accessible to me, it was hard to come up with practical alternatives.

Tim remained noncommittal. Because Marie and I were such close friends, I think he still harboured the notion that eventually Richard would get back on top of things and place him in a job.

Marie, however, continued to be there for me constantly, without qualification, bolstering me when I was weary and trying tirelessly to help me with both Richard’s irritability and Rebecca’s symptoms.
Ironically, through it all ran the universal thread that ours was one of the best marriages that any of them had encountered, that all of them had been through more serious ups and downs than I realised, and that if any marriage would survive then it would be ours.

Then came another turning point. Early one Sunday morning we were lying in bed together. It was chilly and I was snuggled into Richard’s back. I moved in closer and pressed my body up to his, knowing he loved the feeling of my breasts on his back. I reached down to fondle him but instead of responding and turning to face me, he pulled away.

‘Don’t, Jane,’ he said sharply, moving closer to the wall.

‘Don’t what?’

‘Don’t touch me.’

‘Why, what’s wrong?’ I asked him, confused and hurt at the same time.

‘I just don’t want you to, that’s all.’

‘But what have I done?’

‘You haven’t done anything. I can’t respond, that’s all. I haven’t been getting erections lately’.

‘Oh, so what?’ I was relieved that that was all it was and underestimated the seriousness of his tone. ‘It’s not important. You’re tired, that’s all. You’ve had some rotten weeks.’

‘It is important. I’m not even getting them when I wake up. You don’t understand.’

‘I do understand and I don’t care. I’m happy just to do something else instead.’ I moved my hands across his chest but he jumped up and, with his back still towards me, picked up a towel from the floor, wrapped it around himself and walked towards the bathroom. I lay there for a few minutes, wondering why he had reacted in such an extreme way.
I was half hoping that he would reappear, but it didn’t happen so I got up and followed him into the shower. It was an activity that we still liked to share, lathering each other with soap and touching playfully as our bodies slid against each other in the warm water. I could see him through the misted glass, his face upturned to the rosette as he let the water spray on his shoulders. I took off my pyjama pants, slid back the door and stepped in to join him.

‘Get out of here!’ He covered his genitals with his hands. ‘Don’t look at me. I don’t want you here.’

I stood there frozen.

‘I mean it, Jane. Go! Do you hear me?’
Chapter Twenty-Six

From that moment, life changed. When there was an opportunity for reconnection, instead of reaching for me, Richard pulled back. It was as though he had a glass barrier around himself and I was left beating frantically on it with my fists, trying to get in. In the past, despite his commitment to work, despite the irritability and despite the ongoing physical symptoms, we had remained fundamentally intact. Now, however, for the first time in our long-standing marriage, I was alone.

‘I know what you’re doing,’ I told him soon after, in desperation. ‘You’re making sure that you don’t get emotionally close to me because whenever this happens and you want me physically, there is nothing you can do.’

He didn’t reply, but as the colour grew from his neck up to his face, I knew I had my answer.

‘It’s ridiculous,’ I told him. ‘I not only love you, I like you. I don’t care about it.

‘Well I do,’ he said scornfully. ‘After what has been between us how can you pretend, Jane? How could that ever work?’

‘We’ll make it work,’ I vowed passionately. ‘Just promise me that you won’t shut me out.’

‘I have to protect myself.’

The words jarred painfully and, over the following weeks, so did his actions. I turned again to Marie.
‘When he’s functioning normally I can survive. When it’s not normal I just feel like an object and when he can’t function at all, he withdraws from me completely. It’s not about love anymore. It’s now about raw sex drive and his need to prove his masculinity.’

‘You have hung in there longer than most, Jane. Many people would leave. What do you think your university friends would do?’

‘Probably leave,’ I admitted. ‘But those who have left don’t seem any happier and their children certainly aren’t. They haven’t got all the answers, Marie. It was the older generations who knew how to get through adversity. Rebecca is right: our generation doesn’t put up with anything. We have a preoccupation with our own happiness. Being passionate about equality and human rights doesn’t mean you can’t show loyalty and support. Look at the war vets. They changed and went through all kinds of stuff and their wives had to deal with it.’

‘Richard hasn’t been to war, Jane. He has made a choice to work in a highly paid, high-stress environment.’

‘But I remember how he used to be.’

‘But you’re telling me that he’s not like that anymore, Jane.’

‘No, he’s not right now, but I don’t believe in walking away as soon as things get hard. That’s not what marriage is about for me. He’s not drinking or gambling or hitting anyone. We swore to stand beside each other in good times and in bad and I believe that there should be a way of sticking together when there is a challenge.’

‘I know that, Jane,’ she said softly.

‘And you know what else, Marie? Underneath it all I actually love him. I still love him, Marie, and how often in a lifetime do you fall so deeply in love?’
Richard had begun to pick arguments with me, as if to justify the emotional and physical separation. It made me miserable. He also began looking for reasons to stay away. While it had been one thing to deal with his absences because of the legitimate demands of the job, it was another to watch him leave the country for some made-up cause.

When he wasn’t overseas, he was travelling interstate. Often it was Brisbane. He would give instructions that he wasn’t to be bothered and that family matters were to be handled with a minimum of work intrusion. These instructions were delivered in a cold monotone, around which Zach became more cynical, Rebecca became more anxious and I became less sure that staying with him was the right thing to do.

This time it was Brisbane again and for the first few days we managed to comply with Richard’s wishes, but on the Wednesday his mother became ill and I needed to contact him. He had said he was staying at Rydges and, not being able to reach him on his mobile, I decided to phone the hotel.

‘Good evening, Rydges Southbank Brisbane.’

‘Hello, I wonder if I could speak to Richard Collins.’

‘Richard Collins? Just one moment please.’

I waited.

‘I’m sorry but there is no one of that name staying in the hotel. Are you sure that you have the right name?’
‘Yes, I’m sure, C-O-L-L-I-N-S, Richard. He’s been there for a few days. Could you check again?’

‘Certainly, ma’am.’

I waited.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am. He is definitely not here. Are you certain that he is at this hotel? We have another Rydges on the Gold Coast as well. Would you like the number?’

‘Oh, another hotel. Yes please.’

I listened carefully, wrote the number down and dialled.

The response was just as immediate. ‘Good evening, QT Gold Coast.’

‘Good evening. I am trying to get hold of a Richard Collins. I believe he might be staying in your hotel. I was wondering if you would mind checking, please.’

‘Can you hold for a moment while I check the register?’

‘Sure.’

I waited hopefully.

‘I’m very sorry, ma’am, but we have no Richard Collins staying at the hotel. Have you tried our hotel on the riverfront in Brisbane?’

‘Yes, I have already tried there. Are you sure that you don’t have him?’

‘I have the screen in front of me. Yes, I am definitely sure. Sorry that I can’t help you.’

Maybe he had had an accident. I felt the panic rising and tried his mobile one last time. It rang and rang as I listened, waiting for the voicemail to kick in.

‘Richard Collins.’

For a few seconds I couldn’t speak. ‘Richard,’ I finally managed. ‘Where are you?’

‘Jane. I told you not to call.’
‘I needed to call you. Where are you?’

‘I am at the hotel. I came back here for dinner.’

The panic was replaced by numbness. ‘I phoned you because your mother is ill. Which hotel?’

‘The Rydges.’

‘Which Rydges?’

‘The hotel that I always stay at. By the river.’

‘Are you sure?’ I braced myself for the calm but irritated reply.

‘What do you mean am I sure? Of course I’m sure. I’m not stupid, Jane. I know which hotel I book myself into.’

A number of options raced through my head.

But, as quickly as I considered these options, I rejected them and fell into the age-old pattern of wanting to fix the misunderstanding and emotionally connect with him. ‘I have rung both the hotels, Richard, and they told me that you have not checked in.’

There was silence.

‘You rang the hotels?’ He sounded cool but disbelieving, as if it was the most stupid action that I had ever committed.

‘Yes, I did. I haven’t been able to get you on your mobile and I didn’t want to leave another message. I wanted to talk to you.’

‘So this thing with my mother, is it anything serious?’

‘Not life-threatening but she’s in hospital and your sister wanted you to know.’

‘Well, I’m at the Rydges on the South Bank. They must have made a mistake.’

‘There was no mistake. They checked twice.’

More silence.
‘Where are you, Richard?’ My voice was louder now.

‘I have already told you. I am at the Rydges on the river.’

‘Then how come they don’t have you registered there?’

Another silence.

‘Because I let myself into a room with my own key.’

‘Your own key? What are you talking about?’

‘Yes, my own key. I kept one. I didn’t hand it back in. I used it this time.’

‘But how did you know that the room was free? That is ridiculous.’ I imagined Richard walking into an occupied room.

‘I know the room. It’s a suite and I knew that nobody was in there.’

‘How did you know?’

‘Because I stay here all the time. I know the layout.’

‘But why, for heaven’s sake? I can’t believe this. Who do you think you are, Richard? You’re not the prime minister. You can’t make your own rules. Rooms are not just there for your convenience.’

‘There is no need to be so emotional. It’s just a room.’

‘I don’t believe you.’ I was alternating between astonishment and disbelief. ‘Letting yourself into the hotel! If you are going to lie to me about where you have been then I just wish you would do it intelligently.’

‘I am not lying to you.’ His voice was louder now. ‘I am here now and I have used the room before.’

‘When? How many times?’

‘Lots of times. Whenever it gets stressful at home.’

‘What do you mean by stressful?’
‘When Zach’s anger is out of control, when Rebecca gets anxious, or when one of you are going through a homesick phase. It gets too emotional and I need a break away from the stress.’

‘Or since you’ve had sexual problems,’ I said angrily. ‘You’ve been making up reasons to stay away from me ever since. Don’t try to scapegoat me, Richard. It won’t work. Are you telling me that you run away to a hotel to avoid family stress and yet you won’t hear a word about the reasons for our financial stress or the stress you face at work? Are you telling me that all of your energy goes into a company that has left you with major health problems and we get the blame?’

‘I’ve needed to be alone.’

‘If you don’t mind lying to us, then you should at least be obeying the law. What you are doing is illegal!’

Again no reply, just another long silence.

‘How come this room isn’t occupied?’

‘It’s an extra suite,’ he replied. ‘It can be opened up to make a larger space if it’s required but hardly anyone ever uses it.’

Flabbergasted and still not convinced, I continued the line of questioning. ‘So do you make the bed afterwards, straighten the towels and reposition the chocolate on the pillow?’ I enquired sarcastically, hurt at being shut out of his life. ‘What the hell do you do in there?’

‘I told you. I need to be alone so that I can think. I’m not the same person anymore, Jane. Maybe I should just get out of everything – the money problems, the family, my job and my life.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You heard me,’ he said. ‘Get out of the lot. Drive across a median strip. Go away somewhere. Disappear to the Antarctic.’

The reasoning was irrational and the conclusions that he had arrived at were frightening. Suicide or the Antarctic. Somehow the desert island had made some sort
of sense and was still within the bounds of human fantasy. But these two options terrified me. The first was absolute annihilation and the second, like the new Richard, was cold, inhospitable and just as inaccessible.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

‘What do you do with old vinyl records?’ I asked myself. Some of them could be valuable one day but there were so many and the box was heavy. I discarded the 45s but each long player brought back memories and I struggled to let any of them go.

As I foraged through the box I found songs that Richard and I used to slow-dance to, and other songs that I used to sing. Then there were the pieces that I used to replay on the guitar, working them out by ear and fancying that I had some talent. As they got older, both Zach and Bec became impressed, especially when earlier songs reappeared in new formats and I could play and sing them with a head start. Zach didn’t have the temperament to burst into song, even if he could, and Rebecca couldn’t hold a tune, but my voice, along with my love for great lyrics, had remained a distinctive part of my personality. How ironic that with Richard I could no longer find any common sound. How sad to feel spat out by him. How pitiful that when near him, my language would stifle, stick in my throat and collapse.

But Richard had proved that he could still talk, even threaten, and although I took his threats seriously, when he arrived home he created his own Antarctic inside the house and I needed an ice-strengthened vessel to reach him. Our GP said that he could do nothing without Richard coming in, so I decided to speak to someone else. The burnout specialist was happy to talk to me, but at the same hourly rate that he would have charged to talk to Richard. His clients were mostly corporate men who drove sports cars and four-wheel drives. I sometimes said good morning as I parked my little hatchback next to them in the area designated for the GP’s clientele.
From the first appointment, I tried to hurry things along. What I wanted to know, before my money ran out or Richard disappeared, was how to treat the condition. But I had to wait until the fourth visit before he was ready to divulge any strategies. By this time, I had found out that the symptoms were caused by unrelieved stress, and many men are not prepared to do anything about that. Apparently there were a great number, like Richard, whose wives would ring for an appointment for them but they would never show up.

‘So, if they do turn up, what is the most typical reaction?’

‘Firstly, I need to point out that it is not just men who end up in this condition. Women can get burnt out as well.’

I wondered where the women were – I hadn’t seen any in the car park.

‘With regards to your question, there are many ways that people approach it. The most common is what we call ‘the ostrich response’. I presume that you are familiar with ostriches?’

I nodded politely. Richard had actually ridden an ostrich once, on a trip to South Africa. In the audience at an ostrich farm, we had marvelled at the size of the eggs. A large bird with a hood on was tied up to a post and Richard, with some horseriding background, had been chosen to ride it, much to my despair for the wellbeing of both him and the bird.

He had been told to sit well down its back with both hands around its long, flexible neck to steer it. When they removed the hood and untied the rope the bird took off, darting this way and that. Its neck twisted left and right like a deranged belly dancer while Richard hung on for grim death. It was amusing afterwards, but not a pretty sight.

I made more of an effort to concentrate. The specialist was the kind of person who might ask questions to see if I had been listening.

‘The ostrich belongs to one of the largest and most powerful species of birds, and yet as we all know it sticks its head in the sand whenever something happens that challenges it or is dangerous.’
‘Yes, I’m familiar with the habit.’

‘And so, like the ostrich, the person in burnout can simply ignore the symptoms and make excuses for them, so that if they do turn up in my office, they come under sufferance, believing that the symptoms are normal.’

Oh dear, I thought, Richard’s association with ostriches had deteriorated even further.

‘Even physicians can take this approach,’ he warned me. ‘They have received little training in the effects of stress in people’s lives and can often underestimate the results.’

I wasn’t sure that this was an ostrich approach. It seemed that it was more a lack of knowledge in the first place, but I had little time to argue this point or to congratulate myself on being in the right place because the burnout specialist was waving his pen at me.

‘What other approaches do they take?’ I asked, keen to remove myself from the ostriches.

‘Well, I would say that the next most common is scapegoating.’

I couldn’t believe it. An animal again. We had also had a goat once – another shared memory. We bought it for a pet, to eat the grass, but it jumped on the roof of the car… I thought fondly of the animal that had caused so much damage that it had to go. I already knew about scapegoating – attacking and blaming people when the problem is really one that the individual needs to own themselves. Richard had been doing a lot of that lately.

‘Working harder is another trap.’ I knew about this one too and I wondered how many we were going to go through before we came to the strategies. It was my fault for asking the wrong questions. I tried not to look at my watch. ‘They are workaholics and they value themselves according to how much they accomplish. If they fail to meet a self-imposed goal they redouble their efforts to achieve success.’

I must tell Richard’s mother about this, I noted. He is actually calling it ‘workaholism’ and is authoritative about it being an addiction.
I tuned out for a while until he provided some new information.

‘The behaviour comes from the philosophy of John Calvin,’ he said, ‘the
nineteenth-century theologian. There was a German sociologist called Max Weber,
you might have heard of him?’

I didn’t want to disappoint him but I hadn’t.

‘He named it the Protestant ethic, now more commonly known as the
Protestant work ethic or just the work ethic, but John Calvin believed that eternal
salvation came as a gift to those whom God selected. By hard work you could
influence God to make you one of the chosen.’

I conjured up another mental picture of Richard, handing God a ‘get into
heaven free’ voucher, with a goat and an ostrich trailing along behind him.

‘As the belief infiltrated Western culture, hard work became synonymous
with personal worth,’ he continued. ‘Work became holy and noble with the end
result that now people often have a neurotic relationship with their jobs.’

Well, well, I thought. How about that! If anything could knock some sense
into Richard, this would. Having had some unfortunate encounters with organised
religion in his early days, he had little tolerance for it now. It was ironic that he was
living such a theologically based lifestyle.

‘And of course there is always the guilt and the self-blame.’

I hadn’t had that one on my list so I listened intently, wondering if maybe this
would lead to a behavioural change strategy. I was wrong.

‘By adopting this type of behaviour people begin to lose those qualities which
are important to maintain a balanced perspective and they become paralysed.
Instead of doing anything constructive towards promoting the recovery from
burnout itself, they remain locked in self-anger.’

It made sense. Obviously time spent on self-deprecation was time away from
positive action.
‘So, once you tell them that these various responses are futile, what happens then?’ I asked.

‘Unfortunately, most people remain myopic and respond in similar ways, especially in the corporate world. They curse the situation and take drastic but futile action. They sometimes quit their jobs but more frequently they keep the job and quit their marriages. Some leave town, some leave the country, some switch careers and some switch partners, but they do so without ever having learnt to take control of the problem. Only a minority stand back, study the nature of their lifestyle and then plot a strategy for corrective action. Sometimes they do it before they cause damage to others, sometimes afterwards, but these are the people that I can help.’

The prospects sounded dismal but at least we were getting nearer to the corrective action that I had been waiting for him to share.

‘And the corrective action is?’ I was trying to extract the crucial information in the one-hour session.

‘The corrective actions – plural,’ he corrected me with a frown, ‘are many and varied.’

I prayed silently, in keeping with Richard’s new religious work ethic, that he was actually going to tell me. It was becoming like one of those game shows where the advertisements appear just as the person is deciding whether to take the cheap holiday or try for the car, but to my dismay, and with a good five minutes to spare, he began packing up his papers and making signs that the session was over.

When I did finally get the information, at a series of later visits and by paying up-front, it was relayed sparingly, with the stern reminder that this wasn’t something that could be done by proxy and that we were at the point where the person had to actually turn up. As Richard had isolated himself from the family in his cold dry desert, there was not much hope of an Antarctic treaty so I continued to go it alone.

What I did manage to glean, however, was basic. We had to find a way to counteract the biochemical and psychological changes that had occurred as
Richard’s body became continually mobilised to deal with the stress. There were the obvious things like cutting back on excessive hours and releasing pressures on the job, which were never going to work in Richard’s current frame of mind. Then there were other things like pampering him and relaxation techniques, which I couldn’t envisage Richard doing either. Exercise sounded like a possibility since Richard had athletic tendencies and because it reversed many of the biochemical changes, such as the rise in noradrenaline that occurred during high stress.

The specialist’s advice, however, was that it should be moderate, as apparently many corporate high-flyers had taken it on with a vengeance and thrust themselves into endurance sports with the same ‘need to prove something’ that they had once applied to their jobs.

Another option was to find something else that would capture his interest. It could even be something that was also stressful, something that I felt would work in Richard’s favour, but the crucial fact was that it had to be entirely different. The old adage ‘a change is as good as a rest’ seemed to apply here. Overall, the idea was that the burnout client was to re-evaluate their personal attitudes and take responsibility for their actions, something that sounded simple in theory but was obviously harder to apply in practice. But at least it was a start and I finished the session satisfied, accepted the business card and arrived home ready to try yet again.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

When I entered the house Richard was in the kitchen, getting himself a hot drink. I peered at him over the top of washing that I had saved from a heavy shower of rain. The signs were good, I told myself. We were in the same place at the same time and the drink was nurturing and suggestive of a thaw. No need to wait, I would just launch into the fact that I had just gone to see the burnout specialist by myself.

But within a few minutes, the chilliness descended. Disappointingly and predictably, he had no interest in working towards any of the solutions. Fortunately he did not make any repeated threats of just how he intended to deal with it, but he was certainly not finished with the blame. Not only was he not going to listen but I was now at fault as well. In his mind, I had added to his stress by having been homesick. I had also added to his stress because I had not dealt adequately with Rebecca, who had been both homesick and anxious, and more importantly, I was not coping well enough with Zach either, who was exonerated because he hadn’t been homesick but had become a problem because of his increasing anger.

I was feeling angry at the injustice and despair because things were getting worse and I had run out of ideas. I tried to console myself that the information I had learned had been useful – if it wouldn’t help Richard at this point, then it might give Zachary and Rebecca some of the answers they needed.

I brought the matter up one evening when Richard was at work. Rebecca had been watching television and switched it off as I put forward the last of Richard’s case.

‘Just like I support you with your anxiety,’ I told her, ‘maybe you need to be less dismissive of your father.’
'He gets plenty of peace and quiet,' she said. ‘I hardly talk to him. He’s cold and distant and never spends any time with any of us.’ She stopped as she saw the look on my face. ‘Okay, Mum. I can’t promise anything but I will do my best.’

‘And Zachary.’ He was about to walk out the door. ‘How about you? Can you stay for a minute please? I need your cooperation as well.’

‘Cooperation! If you want my opinion, this whole burnout thing is a complete crock of shit. You’ve been making excuses for the whole thing for far too long and I’m not buying into it anymore. I think you’re an absolute fool, Mum, wasting money on this stuff. If you ask me, he’s got another woman.’

I flinched. Zach’s outrage put me in a wretched situation. It also made me afraid. As he was getting older, his way of confronting things head on, even when not directed at me, felt aggressive and threatening. It was the last thing I needed when I was feeling at my most vulnerable. Right now, it wasn’t appropriate to share details of our sex life with him and yet I needed to convince him that I didn’t believe this to be the case.

‘Your father is also having some personal health problems that have developed because of the burnout,’ was all that I would disclose. ‘You are completely wrong, Zach, and you need to keep a tighter rein on the anger.’

Zach wasn’t listening, however, and he couldn’t be convinced. A few days later I saw him snooping on Richard, trying to overhear his phone calls. Then, to my mounting horror, he announced that he was going to start to follow Richard around Sydney, coming back with reports of where he had been.

‘He went to the meeting,’ he announced one evening as he walked in the door. ‘But I have to go back later and make sure that he didn’t leave it.’

I was furious. ‘This is ridiculous, Zachary! I do not want you following your father. It is not ethical and it’s got to stop.’

But he took no notice and two weeks later, after Richard had returned from a trip to Melbourne, I caught him with Richard’s briefcase, trying to work out the combination.
'What do you think you are doing now?' I yelled, grabbing at the briefcase.

'Go and get Rebecca and tell her to watch the door.' He was ignoring me completely.

'Give the case to me immediately.'

'No way! I want to see what is in here – where he’s been and what he’s been up to.'

'Zachary, I’m not joking. Give me the briefcase now.'

Zach kept moving it and turning his back to me and, as we were grappling with it and arguing, the briefcase sprang open.

'I did it!' Zach exclaimed. 'I could tell where it opened by how worn it was around the numbers.'

I watched helplessly as he thumbed through the papers while I kept hoping that Richard wouldn’t walk back in.

'Look at this!' Zachary exclaimed.

'I’m not having anything to do with it.'

'No, Mum, look at these receipts. He was supposed to be in Melbourne and these are for a restaurant on the Central Coast. What do you say to that?’

'I don’t know,' I said angrily.

'And look, there’s more. There’s a taxi receipt from the airport to up there. Jesus, look how much it is! Do you think he went to Melbourne at all or do you think he actually went down there and came back early without telling us?’

I had no idea and I didn’t want to talk about it with Zach. I was feeling sick in the stomach.

'I will ask your father,' I said, 'later on in private. In the meantime, you are to put the papers back and leave the briefcase as you found it. I will deal with this, Zach. None of this is any of your business.'
‘Oh yes it is,’ he said, looking even more determined and angry. ‘This is definitely my business and your business and Rebecca’s business too. We are the ones who have been taken for a fucking ride. You can ask him if you like and are stupid enough. No doubt he’ll make up some shit that will satisfy you, but it won’t make any difference to me. I’m still going to follow him and I’ll keep following him until I prove to you that I am right. And when I catch him, I’ll knock his fucking head off. And, if you want me to stop it, then you do something for a change. Instead of wasting your time and money with burnout specialists, get yourself a private detective and sort it out once and for all.’

‘And if I do and prove to you that your father is totally innocent, then you, young man, will give me your word that you will never follow him again.’ I wanted to put an end to it once and for all.

‘Definitely. I give you my word.’

‘Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll find someone – I’ll prove it to you and then you are to let the whole thing drop.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Keep me informed.’ He shrugged his shoulders and left the room.
I began looking at websites the very next day, surprised at how many companies there were that actually did this stuff and how much it cost. It was difficult to choose one but eventually I found something that had a professional-looking advertisement, appeared to be respectable and was reasonably cheap.

What had seemed like a large organisation turned out to be a two-man operation, but having started the process I stuck with it as I didn’t want to go through it all again. First I had to supply them with some basic information: our address, the name of his company, the type of car he drove, the dates that I wanted the surveillance done and a current photo. I also had to pay a fee in advance. Having just spent my money on the burnout specialist, I tried not to react, except for asking what I would receive in exchange.

‘For your first instalment,’ I was told, ‘you will receive a detailed log of our movements and a detailed log of your husband’s movements. If you are lucky, we might come up with something incriminating. If not, you will need to pay again. We will send the first report, by express post, to a box number that you will need to open.’

We wound up the conversation discussing the kind of lifestyle that Richard had, the people he might be with and places that he was likely to be going.

It all sounded straightforward, except for how long I wanted to pursue the case. With no experience in such matters, I decided to give it one week, at a time when Richard was supposed to be at another cost-cutting conference, and hope that Zachary would be satisfied.

I informed Zach and waited. The dates rolled by and I felt sick with anticipation. I had cut the photo of Richard that I needed from his company’s annual
report, the only current photo that I had, and the jagged edges of the pages stared at me accusingly.

Eventually the due dates came around. On the morning of the conference, I farewelled Richard and kissed him on the cheek. All of that week, I couldn’t settle. Whenever we spoke I tried to pick up something different in the phone calls, stupidly asking more than usual about the conference and yet trying to sound calm and casual. Overall, however, things sounded much the same. Richard was stressed, one of the workshop trainers had had to go home sick and the food was, as usual, not up to standard. At the end of the week, Richard returned home looking tired and exhausted and retreated to the spare room.

The following week, I began to check the newly acquired post-office box. There was nothing on the Monday but I hadn’t really expected it. Tuesday was also a wasted visit. Wednesday I missed because I had another appointment and so it was Thursday before I tried again.

In the box there was a pink card, indicating that I had to take it to the post office to pick up my registered mail. I joined the queue at the counter, with a dry mouth and sweat on the palms of my hands. After waiting my turn, I handed over the card and waited again while the assistant went away to get the envelope. She came back, handed it over and I thanked her, tucked it under my arm and walked back to the car. As I sat in the car, I considered opening it, but knowing that nobody was home and feeling fearful, I decided to wait.

When I reached the house I delayed even further, placing it on the edge of the bed while I changed into some more comfortable clothes.

I couldn’t eat, but I took it with me to the kitchen while I got myself a drink, before finally sitting down to open it.

My hands trembled as I tried to get rid of the sticky tape that had been placed excessively over the normal seal. Eventually I lifted out the typed report. There was a lot, too much to digest as my eyes ran swimmingly over the page. On the front
page there were dates and places but no specific information. It seemed that Richard had gone to the conference as planned. I was right. There was nothing.

But then I saw the address of an apartment that Richard had visited on the evening before he went to the conference and in which he had stayed the night. It was in Bondi – not far away. I knew roughly where it was.

I committed the address to memory. There was nothing incriminating yet but I felt uneasy.

I needed more information. They needed more money.

But I had no chance to update Zachary nor send the money, for the very same night, I had a call. ‘I am going to be working late,’ Richard said. ‘It is going to be a really long one, but I will be working from the office and I will be coming home, no matter how late it is.’

‘But you’ve only just arrived back.’ All I had was an address of an apartment that he had visited. I chose not to react. ‘Well, if you’ve finished your work and you are home before midnight I will still be up,’ I told him. ‘Even with this part-time tutoring, I have still got some marking to do.’

‘We’ll see.’

We were used to eating at different times and being on different schedules. This time Rebecca and I ate together and I put something aside for Zach. I enjoyed having a meal when he was out. Zach could turn mealtime into a stressful rant session and this time I wanted to have a quiet meal just with Rebecca. I wanted a chance to tell her about the apartment – underplay it and try to keep her calm, but tell her nevertheless. The times when we ate, with just the two of us together, were the only times that she did any more than pick at her food. I watched her and felt pleased that she had an appetite tonight, as well as some colour in her face.

We finished our meal in companionable silence.

I suddenly got up to give her a hug, overwhelmed with feelings of protection for her. ‘I love you, girl-child of mine.’
She stood up and hugged me back. ‘I love you too, Mum. This much.’ She grinned and stretched her arms out as far as she could, in an old childhood gesture guaranteed to make me smile.

‘I need to tell you that I have got something back from that detective agency, you know, that place called Manning Investigators that I told you about. There was nothing important in it. Your dad went to a conference as we thought he would, but he also visited an apartment while he was away and, for Zach’s sake, I need to get them to do a bit more work and check it out, so that we have some proof for Zach and he will lay off the Sherlock Holmes stuff. Okay?’ I tried to make light of it.

She nodded, with trust in her eyes. ‘Okay. If you think that’s what we need to do. Anything to make Zach settle down is good by me.’

I understood how she felt. Zach’s anger was taking its toll on both of us. ‘So, is there something you would like to watch tonight? There’s a doco on SBS that we’ve been waiting for.’

‘I’ll stack the dishes first, Mum.’

‘No, leave them, Bec. It’s Zach’s turn. He was supposed to do it last night and found an excuse to get out of it. He needs to have his dinner first, anyway. Do you know when he is due back from the gym?’

‘He’s already back from the gym. I think he is in his room, or at least that’s where I think he was heading.’

I left the kitchen to look for him, feeling guilty that he hadn’t been called for the meal, but when I looked into his room, he wasn’t there. All I could see was his sports bag, dumped in the middle of his bed.

‘He took my car to the gym, Bec,’ I called out. ‘Can you see if it’s back?’

‘I’ll check.’ She went out to the driveway. ‘It isn’t here,’ she yelled. ‘Maybe he came in and went out again.’

When she returned, I persisted. ‘Did you actually see him come in?’ Anything involving Zach was never what it seemed.
'Yes, I saw him. He was in the kitchen when you were talking on the phone.'

'Talking to your father?' I felt sick to the pit of my stomach, unable to remember exactly what I had said, but realising what he would think and knowing that the details of the apartment were in a pile of mail on the end of my bed.

'Yes, talking to Dad,' she confirmed.

I rushed to my room, hoping that Zach had not been in there, but as soon as I got to the entrance I could see papers strewn everywhere and I knew that I was too late.

'Rebecca!' I yelled. 'He’s gone and I’m going to have to go out and find him. You need to stay here. I’m going to call a cab.' I cursed, knowing that more drama was the last thing she needed. 'I’ll take my phone and I’ll call you.'

I called the cab, grabbed my phone, shoved it into my bag, threw on some shoes and went outside to wait at the gate, swaying from heel to toe in impatience. The cab came quickly for once and I jumped in and gave the driver directions to the apartment. The traffic was never light around that time in Sydney, but fortunately we had a good run with the lights. If Zach was out there, I figured, he must only be thirty minutes ahead of me.

As we got nearer to the address I began to scan the traffic, hoping for a glimpse of my car. I had no idea what I was going to do at the end of the journey. It seemed absurd, like something from an action movie minus the guns and blindfolds. We were nearly there when I saw a car that looked like mine parked down a nearby side street with a view of the apartment building.

'Can you pull over somewhere near that blue car.' The driver nodded and began to ease towards the curb.

'Oh my God.' I suddenly put my hand over my mouth. I could see Richard’s car coming down the street with a woman sitting beside him. 'It’s him.'

'Who?' The driver looked surprised and confused, obviously not expecting his fare to be involved in some kind of subterfuge. 'Do you want to get out?'
‘No. Yes. I’m not sure. Oh shit.’ I watched in horror as Richard parked outside the apartment, got out and then went around the other side of the car to open the passenger door.

The woman stepped onto the pavement. ‘Oh Christ,’ I exclaimed. ‘It’s Monica.’

As I clambered out of the back seat and thrust some money into the taxi driver’s hands, I saw Zachary get out of my car and start sprinting towards Richard who now had his arm firmly around Monica’s waist and was making his way towards the entrance.

I pulled off my shoes and began running in the same direction.

‘Dad!’ Zach shouted. Then he realised his mistake.

‘Richard,’ he called out. At the sound of the name, both of them turned around.

‘Zachary. No!’ I was desperate to stop him. ‘For Christ’s sake, Zach. No!’ He stopped for a minute, looking startled to see me, and then continued his pursuit. Richard also stopped, staring in my direction as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

‘You loser,’ I heard Zach shout as he jumped on Richard and pulled him down to the pavement.

‘You fucking loser!’

I sprinted the last few metres as Zach pummelled Richard over and over again, each time his fist raised higher. Puffed and panting, I tried to pull him off, but it was useless. Monica just stood there watching,

‘Zach,’ I screamed. ‘Stop, for God’s sake stop! You’ll kill him.’ But Zach was someplace else, months of frustration being worked off with every punch. Suddenly there was a groan.

‘My heart, my heart…’ Richard clutched his chest and began rolling from side to side. Zach pulled away and began stepping slowly backwards.
'Get out of here immediately, Zach. Get yourself in the car before someone calls the police.’ I looked around at the curious bystanders who had gathered. Zach was crying now; tears streamed down his face.

‘Fuck,’ he cried, throwing his fist into the air as he turned around and made his way back to my car. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!’

I turned my attention to Richard. Monica was stroking his head and holding his hand.

‘I’ll call an ambulance.’ I grabbed my mobile out of my bag, but before I could phone Richard began to slowly sit up, looking dazed. Blood trickled down his chin.

‘I’ll be alright,’ he said slowly. ‘I faked it. I had to do something or I would have been dead.’

I looked at him scathingly as he scrambled to his feet, then looked across to the car where I knew that Zach would be watching.

Monica continued to play her role. ‘Oh Richard! Are you okay? That monster. How dreadful. How could he do something like that to his own father?’

Richard looked irritated and tried to brush her aside. ‘Leave it alone, Monica. I told you, I’m alright.’

With my eyes fixed on his face, my expression didn’t change.

‘Jane, don’t look at me like that. This isn’t what it appears. I can explain. Monica has been pressuring me. She’s needy. She’s got problems and she’s not strong like you. She doesn’t like to be alone.’

I watched with disdain as Monica burst into tears. ‘Monica has problems! Oh my God, how rich! There is nothing to explain, Richard. I’ve seen enough. The two of you deserve each other.’

I turned away in disgust and went to join my son.
I hammered down the top of the last tea chest the best I could and zipped up my suitcase. With the help of Zach and Rebecca I had managed to catch the frightened cats and put them into the carry boxes provided by the vet to transport them in the car.

So that was it. Family life in Sydney. Finally, it was over and done with. Everything was packed and ready for the truck.

I walked from room to room, looking at the holes that I had tried to patch where Zachary’s fist had hit the walls, and wondered if anyone would notice. The place was bare except for some of Richard’s items left in our wardrobe. He was planning to come and get them before we went our separate ways.

‘Check your rooms one more time,’ I said as they followed me around, ‘just to make sure that you haven’t left anything behind.’

‘Why are his things still here?’ Rebecca had seen of the suits still hanging neatly.

‘He couldn’t fit them into his car,’ I told her. ‘He’s coming this morning to get them. Actually, he should be here soon. I’m waiting for a call. It’s alright, Rebecca. He did say that he would call first. He won’t just walk in.’

‘Well, I’m leaving just in case.’ She looked pale and drawn now that the time had actually come to vacate.

‘And you should too,’ I said to Zachary. ‘I don’t want you anywhere near him. You can take my car and I’ll find my own way. We’ll meet at the new apartment.’

They didn’t argue and I watched them walk out the door, Zachary whistling the strangest tune and Rebecca blinking a little too hard.
True to his word for the first time in ages, Richard phoned to say he was outside so I opened the front door to let him in. He looked tired and bruised, emotionally as well as physically, and remained distant, as I knew he would.

It was only when he had the suits over his arm and had turned to face me that I could see the pain in his eyes. ‘I will always help you with Zach,’ he pledged. ‘I will do whatever I can.’

‘If you had been available to help me with Zach then none of this may have happened.’

‘Yes,’ he conceded. ‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Then why, Richard?’ I asked before he left my life for good. ‘Why did you do it?’

‘Because I wanted to know if I still could.’

‘But why Monica? She is less than ordinary.’

‘Because she was available. Because she was there.’

‘Are you in love with her?’ I asked despite myself.

‘Love?’ He made an attempt at a hollow laugh. ‘What’s love at this age?’

‘So it’s not better than we had?’ I persisted, fighting back the tears.

He placed a hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye.

‘How could it be? How could anything be? We were lucky, Jane, with what we had, you and me. I’ll never forget it. I’ll take it to the grave.’

And with that he turned on his heels and strode out the door.
A few years later I was doing it again, farewelling another man in a suit as he went off to work for the day.

Zach was immaculately dressed in pinstripes, a crisp white shirt, cufflinks and Italian leather shoes. His glossy business card had the title ‘Investment Banker’ and he was going into one of the most prominent banks in Sydney.

He turned to face me before he went out the door. ‘It won’t get to me, Mum. It’s just that I don’t have any choice. I need some money and I have to start somewhere. The bonuses are coming back again. I will just do it for a few years and then I’ll get out.’

I nodded and watched him as, with Richard’s long stride, he walked out the door.
Exegesis

A Feminist Creative Response to a Literary Void

Janice McClennan
My research project comprises a creative work (a novel) entitled ‘The Company He Keeps’ and an exegetical component. It is a strand of sociologically inspired fiction undertaken to present the impact that political positions and economic policies have on human experience, through the filter of a New Zealand/Australian perspective. The project, *From economic rationalism to the global financial crisis: Creative and literary responses to Australian middle-class experiences of financial upheaval*, focuses on a period of economic history from the 1980s (economic rationalism) to the global financial crisis (2008 and beyond), with a particular emphasis on how this period has affected the middle class.

The novel, which takes the form of a partially experiential but fictionalised account of the break-up of a tight-knit family that is affected by the socio-economic conditions of the time, is told from the narrative viewpoint of the wife. The breakdown is primarily played out within the cityscapes of Auckland and Sydney. As the writing unfolds, the focus is on the rewards and downsides that occur as the family moves through various facets of restructuring, headhunting, promotion and relocation. When the antagonist eventually achieves the title of CEO and is in a financial position to begin to invest and overextend in property, the family, already under emotional pressure, is financially destroyed by the effects of the global financial crisis (GFC). The work highlights the personality traits, anxieties and insecurities that can attract someone to, and retain someone in, an overworked corporate world. The issues of work-induced burnout, and how to earn a living in a way that is ethical but also nurtures families and sustains relationships, are at the fore.

The novel is being written in response to a gap in literary fiction in Australia, in which the middle class and its relationship to economic issues is neglected. It is a novel of what I am terming financial realism that tries to combine the public and the
private and deliver this to a world in which there is a complex silence around financial matters in terms of both victims and perpetrators. As such, it is testing both the novel’s capacity to tell this kind of story and the receptiveness of the audience to it. Specifically, and most significantly, as a female-authored text, it also takes on the challenge of writing about a financial topic that has traditionally been the preserve of males.

Against this complex silence I have created the character of Jane, who is intelligent and questioning and caught between the traditional gender roles of her generation and the emerging voice of feminism. She questions people’s reactions to her CEO husband Richard, his responsibilities and his own response to the role. She questions their life choices, including their financial pathways, and she illuminates the difficulties of parenting teenage children who are affected by their father’s lifestyle and the difficulties of living with the physical and emotional changes that occur in her husband. After once having a social conscience, Richard has become a right-wing voice of the corporate world, reliant on it as someone with no formal qualifications who is coming up to the age of fifty. Their daughter, Rebecca, studying commerce at university, is ethical and principled, commenting scathingly on headhunters, corporate bonding sessions and the fundamentals of corporate life in Sydney. Their son, Zachary, initially supports his father’s job, presenting a viewpoint of self-interest and materialism. New Zealand family and friends add a variety of viewpoints. Phil is doing a masters in sociology and is highly critical of the capitalist system. He is married to Annie, an artist who can’t make a living by selling her paintings. Brian has inherited a family farm and has his own staunch nationalist view. Tim is unemployed and an ex-unionist and his wife Marie is a self-employed midwife.

All sub-characters are diverse, both in their choices and their political orientation, and their choices are set in contrast to those of the protagonist. Where there might have been a likeness to my former husband, my children and myself, such a likeness has been pushed through the mill of the fiction as each character took on their own mannerisms, identities and trajectories. As established by Laurel Richardson (2005), when we write stories it sensitises us to the potential
consequences of our writing by bringing home—inside our homes and workplaces—the ethics of representation as fiction and life overlap.

Because the creative work is set in both New Zealand and Australia, the research is framed within both countries’ economic policy over the past thirty years, during which time there have been radical changes in both the workplace and in investing practices. The first of these was economic rationalism, also known as neoliberalism, in which the number of people in part-time/casual employment increased and, paradoxically, the number of people who were overworked also rose. These changes, when combined with the push towards new industrial relations laws, created an undercurrent of insecurity that took its toll on the psyche of all employees. Globally, this policy was the economic doctrine adopted by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. (1979–90) and by Ronald Reagan’s republican party in the U.S. (1981–89). In Australia, it was the economic policy put in practice by the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (1983–96) and the John Howard Liberal Government (1996–2007). In New Zealand, it refers firstly to the David Lange–Roger Douglas Labour Government (1984–89) and afterwards to the National Government (1990–93). It is generally regarded as involving an ever-diminishing role for government in the economy and an ever-greater role for the market, a reduced government role in the provision of healthcare, education and social welfare, and an ever-greater reliance on the private sector for these services. It also involves the privatisation of public utilities, free trade (the removal of protective tariffs and quotas) and the phenomena of restructuring and downsizing (Maynard & Connolly, 2005). Begun in the 1980s, economic rationalism has recently reappeared as underpinning the Abbott budget of 2014 (Kenny, 2014), albeit in a new language, but reinforcing the need for the writing of my novel as a language experiment.

Economic rationalism was followed by a catastrophe that is commonly known as “the global financial crisis”, which refers to the banking crisis that emerged in the mortgage market in the U.S. after an increase in the number of mortgage foreclosures. These were mainly subprime and they resulted in the collapse of a number of mortgage lenders and hedge funds. As a result risk premiums increased,
capital liquidity was reduced and the meltdown quickly spread into the global credit market.

In the February 2009 issue of The Monthly, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, found this to be a crisis that was seismic in its significance and something that was a turning point when one orthodoxy was overthrown and another fitted into its place. He blamed it, as have other world leaders, on loose lending practices, low interest rates, a housing bubble and excessive risk-taking by lenders and investors. In short, he blamed it on the economic rationalism of the previous decades, in which, he believed, extreme capitalism and excessive greed became the economic orthodoxy of our time. In the same article, he observed that the significance of such events is often only apparent in retrospect and that by then it is often too late to change the events and the effects that they have had on the lives of families (Rudd, 2009).

My project is one of complementary strategies. As previously stated it is loosely based on some of my family’s lived experiences, with social research as an underlying rationale. Other layers involve qualitative research, with a substantial amount of knowledge acquired through the scholarly realm. Although most facets of this research have been straightforward, it has been more problematic reviewing the available literature with regards to other current works. Very early on, it became apparent that there has been little fiction written on the topic that I have chosen and that very few social experiences are documented in regards to such crises, especially when it comes to the middle class. In this regard, my research is very much “a history of an absence” supported by the significance of silence as revealed by Susan Sontag (1982) and Pierre Macherey (2006). Hence, my aims have been to discover why this absence might be so, to incorporate the economic theory at the novel’s foundation, and to bring my novel into representation as a female-authored text, using feminist practice-based research, while researching a male-dominated genre in a near-empty horizon.

A number of theories have been put forward as to why such fiction has not been written. I have had to explore these theories, discarding some, filtering some,
and developing those that I found most useful. These theories include the view that the Australian reading public prefers escapist fiction and also the fact that, with the exception of David Williamson’s plays (which were not included because I have confined myself to the novel because I am writing one), financial upheaval is generally written about in the form of nonfiction. They also include the view that there has always been an historical preoccupation with the working class and that the bush, rather than the city, is identified with an Australian national spirit, giving it cultural dominance. All of these suppositions needed to be investigated.

Early in the research, it also became apparent that there is very little put forward about the Australian middle class itself, called “the forgotten people” who are “the backbone of Australia” by Sir Robert Menzies in a speech he gave on 22 May 1942 (Liberals.Net, 2011). In particular, general research says little about where they are specifically placed in regards to the small amount of fiction produced about them.

Initially, my supposition was that my questions would be resolved within the issue of class. Partway through the research, however, this shifted to an increasing confidence that the answers to my questions lay not in class but in gender, since women and men occupy different public and private domains in which women are the least economically literate (Still, 1997). While still retaining the concept of absence, I eventually realised that the “absence” could also be extended to the mechanics of how economic forces have triumphed, not only over issues of gender but over politics and language itself.

While dealing with such unpredictability, at the heart of my project has been the fictionalised, first-person account of a corporate, middle-class, feminist wife, and in creating this “self” I have been both assisted and influenced by the work of feminist theorists Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, and Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, and have also been influenced by the intellectual vision of Hélène Cixous. As a result, I have identified a notion of “self” that has allowed me to bridge the gap between the private domestic female domains and the public masculine work domains and to try to fill that gap, in a non-corporate language that expresses
my own reality. Overall, the uncovering has proven to be a compelling and revealing search, and the process of writing, a demanding but rewarding challenge.
Methodology, Feminist Theory and Language

As stated, the novel ‘The Company He Keeps’ is one that has an autobiographical element in its dealings with both the public element of the impact of economic policy and crises on the middle class, and the private world in which I was both a participant and witness.

Writing this novel, and moving between the realms of public and private, I am also striving to present a work that is not confined to expressing the role of corporate wife as elegant hostess and social facilitator, but rather a work of sociopolitical realism, albeit this is a subject previously encased in literary silence. It is a task in which the first-person-narrative “self” at the centre is, most significantly, a feminist “self”, writing about a woman who was caught between her traditional role and second-wave feminism: a period of feminist activity that began in the United States in the 1960s and spread throughout the Western world.

All of these matters pose questions as to the particular impacts on my writing. The subject of finance is central to men but, as it apparently lacks emotion, often appears to be peripheral to women, adding to the difficulty of stepping outside the mould.

My methodology is feminist-oriented, practice as research, a type of inquiry that embraces artistic practice as knowledge in action and which acknowledges this type of inquiry as being something that may generate information not revealed through other research approaches. In this respect, it is in line with the theory of Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt in their book Practice as research: Approaches To creative arts enquiry and also Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber’s work Feminist Research practice. This methodology is part of a larger grouping of post-1970s critical theory, which includes neo-Marxism, feminism and race research, all of which cross-fertilise and all of which have shown that material conditions, social, political, gender and cultural factors have a major influence on people’s lives (Shape...
& Spencer, 2003). My methodology also includes the work of Cudd and Andreasen, whose anthology allows me to place the influential feminism in my novel within the context of feminist history.

At the heart of my creative project is the fictionalised, first-person female “self”, and after an extensive search—through the theories presented by James Cote and Charles Levine and those in Anthony Elliot’s Concepts of self—I finally found a comfortable place within the writings of Hélène Cixous in Toril Moi’s work Sexual textual politics and Abigail Bray’s work Hélène Cixous, which reject the hierarchical binary oppositions propagated by patriarchal ideology.

My creative project began from my personal reactions to my own lived experience. Initially, as experienced by Gaylene Perry in her account of writing her doctoral thesis, I was also dealing with grief and trauma and a “remodelling of my own familial relationships” (Barrett, 2010, p. 9). By combining autobiography and fiction, I found that writing became an agent of emotional reconciliation and change. This healing ran parallel with honest and enthusiastic inquiry, driven by the real-world problem in which I had been a participant, and for which I was engaged in finding a solution. I drew on “subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies” and was motivated by “emotional, personal and subjective concerns” operating not only on the basis of not only explicit and exact knowledge, but also tacit knowledge (Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 4).

The process was thereby a holistic endeavour (sometimes given the name of triangulation by feminist researchers). I wrote, researched and reflected, but not always in that order. The knowledge that I acquired was always a “combination of that which was robust enough to be objective and generalised but at the same time accounted for my individual, subjective thought and action” (Grenfell & James, as cited in Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 5). In keeping with such a methodology, my methods did not produce a predetermined outcome and resulted in a lot of unpredictability.

Feminist views and perspectives are grounded in the experiences of women, whether they are struggling with a lack of affordable day care, balancing work and family, inflexible corporate environments or, as is the case for my protagonist Jane,
trying to handle the parenting of teenagers, moving countries and living with an impotent, burnt-out, financially overextended CEO husband while spending lengthy periods alone. In Feminist research practice (2007), Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber discuss the impact of a feminist approach in their chapter “An Invitation to Feminist Research”. For them, feminist research is a holistic endeavour that incorporates all stages of the research process, from the theoretical to the practical, and which by documenting such experiences and concerns can challenge the basic structures and ideologies that exist in society. Indeed, Brooks and Hesse-Biber specifically and importantly state that “a researcher’s personal experience, emotions and worldview may serve as the impetus for the creation of a research project or guide the choice of a research topic” (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 14), as it has done in the creation of my novel. This is also considered to be an experiential approach (Kolb, 1984).

With respect to construction, I am very much aware that, in Laurel Richardson’s terms, mine is not the only story that could have been told, but simply the one that I am choosing to represent (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). In terms of epistemology, I am writing under the auspices of an “empathic neutrality”, which implies a non-judgemental approach to my qualitative findings. My narrative is not, however, value free, due to the fact that I have left-wing political views and am biased against the corporate world (Richardson, 2000). Other biases that impact are my gender, my location on the Gold Coast while writing about Auckland and Sydney, and my writing time in history from 2009 to 2014, looking back over the past two to three decades. I am therefore engaged in a creative, analytical practice, aware that there is no such thing as getting it right, but in the hope that I can make a substantive contribution that will contribute to knowledge.

Although the writing process began with a feeling of intense academic curiosity and passion for the cause, it also included personal upheaval, empowerment and healing. I was in charge of the one I decided to name Richard, and initially I was strengthened by the newfound voice that self-blame and exaggerated memory had thus far denied me. I began to write about myself in a favourable light. A first line appeared: “In a way that has ceased to be fashionable
for women over forty-something, I like myself”. I call her Jane. I like her – there is something I find pleasant about her, even though she is a by-product of my own neurosis, obsessed with what has happened to herself.

I become a figure who, while steeping myself in qualitative research, both private and book-learnt, sets up a fictional, public, corporate world with its own rules. I expose Richard as someone whose judgement was affected by a swivelling leather chair and a harbour view and integrate him into my narrative in a constructed truth.

It is rewarding to note that undertaking feminist methodology is a way of seeking the betterment of humanity in general and women in particular. This type of research has particular application to finding realities that are yet to be named and uncovering areas of invisibility and silence. As Barrett says in her introduction to *Practice as research*, practice-led research is a new species of research containing “emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research” (Barrett & Bolt, p. 1). She also states that “An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised in established social practices and discourses” (Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p.4).

Abigail Brooks expands on these ideas. She endorses feminist-standpoint epistemology as having a three point objective: “to see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and to apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change”, and also to do these things through “the fusion of knowledge and practice”. Although she uses the example of Harriet Jacobs, who gave a nonfictional account of being a poor slave mother, she shows how the principle of sharing experiences—or even pointing to the unknown and the silenced through fictional means—can offer a new insight. It is an alternative way of thinking that places women at the centre of the research process in which “women’s concrete experiences provide the starting point from which to build knowledge” (Brooks, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 56). Feminist-standpoint scholars place emphasis on beginning with women’s lives “as they
themselves experience them, in order to achieve an accurate and authentic understanding of what life is like for women today” (Brooks, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 56). Brooks explains that a much broader picture can be built by privileging just one aspect of women’s lives that has not been taken into account before, and that by making women’s concrete experiences the point of entry for research and scholarship, and exposing the previously unacknowledged material contained within women’s experiences, feminist-standpoint scholars can begin to shed light on the subject of women in many areas of study.

Such observations bring me to the narrative voice of my novel. I chose a female first-person narration and used a flashback technique. Jane and her two young adult children, Zachary and Rebecca, are about to leave the family home and are in the process of packing up their possessions. This flashback technique allows the sorting process (a metaphor for sorting out one’s life) to take them and the story back to the past. This is done, not only to structure the novel to a point where the past and the present entwine, but also to vary the narrative voice. The voice in the present is the aware voice—a voice of pain and depression, struggling with the circumstances that Jane finds herself in, contrasting with the voice narrating the past, in which there has been buoyancy, happiness, humour and naivety, the latter being something that Jane’s cynical son labels the “purple haze”.

In the shadow of patriarchal thought and language, I had certain sensitivities about my reflexive self and authorial female voice and found myself checking that there was nothing that could be decoded as a sign of murderous rage or suicidal pain, or as a shrill phrase or bitter accusation. I addressed the purple haze. It had a certain appeal, back then, but did not hit the mark. There was nothing noble in naivety. So as I wrote, I was aware of my own contradictions. While I constantly strove to identify the gaps, silences and exclusions in others, and tried to be honest myself, I was unable to write without silences of my own. That is, I papered over my all-too-decodable purple haze.

I also often felt that I needed a new status of discourse. Without the masculine jargon of financial language, at times I struggled and could find no voice. At other
times, when I tried to isolate Jane’s current state of mind, my language felt like a feminine “scream language” of pathos. At yet other times, more frequently perhaps, my language in my novel drafts became nothing more than a mundane, monotonous telling. I was lost on a windswept, tussock plain, such as one encounters in New Zealand—a wild wasteland, with no signposts. My female language had nothing to tell, nothing that could express what was really the case. At such times I turned back to the research, and these are the moments when I gained sustenance from the words of the feminist theorists, which became supportive words in paper cups from which I drank deeply before being able to move forward.

Hélène Cixous, in her work on “feminine writing”, believes that it is the kind of writing that matters and not the author. For Cixous, feminine texts are texts that “split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality” (Conley, as cited in Moi, 1985, p. 108). “She thus warns against the dangers in confusing the sex of the author with the ‘sex’ of the writing he or she produces” (1985, p. 108). She writes that women are much more likely to be bisexual in this sense than men, a statement that corresponds to other research that acknowledges women’s increased ability to operate within more complex domains. She further states that “bisexual writing is overwhelmingly likely to be women’s writing” (1985, p. 110), though she concedes that some exceptional men may in certain cases manage to break with their monosexuality and achieve bisexuality as well.

Like all theorists, Cixous does present some contradictions, as she sets her own distinctions between the “realm of the proper” and the “realm of the gift”, with masculine value systems structured according to an economy of the “proper”, which contains “self-aggrandisement and arrogative dominance”, with its “classification, systemisation and hierarchisation”, while the realm of the gift consists in giving with generosity and no thought of return (Moi, 1985, p. 110). In her compilation of this doctrine, she has been criticised for descending a slippery slope that moves from the gift to feminine and then to female. Still, the theory does not need to be clear of contradictions in order for it to be useful, if only heuristically, for the writer involved in practice as research from a feminist point of view. Indeed, the writing produced in
novels like mine might well speak to, even solve, these contradictions. Writing provides a more fluid space than theory in this way. Abigail Bray argues in her book *Hélène Cixous writing and sexual difference* that the essentialist charges made against Cixous often neglect the metaphoric content of her writing in which “feminine” is simply a metaphor, citing the feminine as an identity lacking the fear of lack (Bray, 2004). In such a way, feminine writing is able to perform an acrobatic flight into thinking, to cross over to differences and the other. Cixous urges women to enter into the flight of thinking by rewriting this female lack (Bray, 2004). Her work became invaluable to me as a female writer struggling with the issues of “self” and “gender”.

As the writing of the novel progressed, a suggestion to write the story from multiple points of view was rejected as it would defeat the purpose of the novel, as well as disallowing what would be eventually understood as a “double consciousness” that began to emerge as a unique part of a female-directed narrative. When I did manage to impregnate that female authorial voice with a stronger differentiation between the present and the flashback past, with a stronger contrast between the person she was and the person she became, a firmness and sureness of purpose in my work began to parallel my emotional state at the time of writing. This is the empowerment gained from something that Gaylene Perry identifies as “residing in the imaginative work” (Perry, as cited in Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 35). In my case, it was an empowerment that came from examining the experience, having the ability to remove or embellish it, and at the same time, through the book-learnt quantitative research, to situate it within a broader political and economic framework. As such, it included the confidence of having a two-fold understanding of both the dominant masculine experience and the importance of my own less-recognised experience; an empowerment not open to the female characters in *Three dollars* and *We all fall down* (the two other most substantial Australian novels written on the subject) who have their stories narrated from the male point of view. These texts will be discussed later in the literature review.

As I wrote, I learnt that feminist-standpoint scholarship and research embraces this “double consciousness”, which is a “sensitivity to both the dominant
world view of the society and their own minority” (Neilsen, 1990, p. 10). We can therefore say that women converse in a world of “domestic events, interests and activities” in which the male “occupational and political world is barely present” (Smith, 1987, p. 7). Further research shows that as well as managing the household, women are often expected to be familiar with their husbands’ work activities. Knowing about and understanding the day to day activities in their husbands’ workplaces enables women to provide emotional support to their husbands, and this support is instrumental in insuring future business success (Ostrander, 1984). With this understanding, I was encouraged to perform the acrobatic flight of thinking advocated by Cixous; to see my writing not hindered by a lack (Bray, 2004), but advantaged by a lack of lack, with my double consciousness as something rich and valuable.

Deleuze and Guattari’s work Kafka: Toward a minor literature discusses this in academic terminology. It refers to the three characteristics of such literature, which can be applied to my novel. Firstly, Minor Literature is defined as being constructed within a major language but being affected by a great deal of “deterritorialisation”: namely, a freeing of labour power from the specific means of production (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 16). Secondly, it is explained that while in major literatures the individual concern joins with other no less individual concerns, minor literature is different in that “its cramped space” forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. “The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 17). I found this a key, inspiring sentence. As a third characteristic, they identify the positives of the collective value of such languages because talent is not abundant in them. In this way, they conclude that such scarcity of talent does not keep the languages beholden to traditional masters and allows the conception of forging another means of consciousness and another possible community (1986, p. 17).

As part of their daily survival, many women subconsciously operate on two different levels, making sure that in addition to their own social cues, they can understand and are familiar with all of the attitudes and interests of men (Ostrander,
In contrast, however, the male members of the dominant group are not usually tuned in to women’s activities and behaviours, but have a reality that is firmly grounded in their own experiences, something that is very evident in both *Three dollars* and *We all fall down*.

To improve society, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of how society functions overall, of the dominant groups and of the exchanges that occur. This ability has been described in many different ways. Bell Hooks sums it up as serving both as a powerful “space of resistance” and a “site of radical possibility” (1990, p. 149). Alison Jaggar calls it a “view of the world that is more reliable and less distorted” than that of the “ruling class” (2004, p. 56-57). Or as Sandra Harding puts it, “Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order” (1991, p. 185). To this extent, at least, my novel is written for men as much as for women.

This reliable and less distorted view can be applied to the sub-theme of impotence in my novel, since the sexual component, in terms of its effect on partners, is often neglected. In an article in *Mail Online*, British novelist Martin Amis made reference to gender differences when defending himself against a nomination for a “bad sex” award with regard to a scene from his latest novel. It is his belief that women are better writers, more free of personal hang-ups, when it comes to sex scenes, and that male authors are plagued by a fear of impotency (*Mail Online*, 2012).

With no novelistic template of financial and social realism other than the novels *Three dollars* (1998) and the recently published *We all fall down* (2012), which are both written by male authors, the way of approaching the writing of ‘The Company He Keeps’ is encased in a literary world of silence. In *The aesthetics of silence*, Susan Sontag primarily focuses on silence as a supreme state where all is transcended and there is no art at all, stating “Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn” (Sontag, 1982, p.192). In her appreciation of silence, however, Sontag acknowledges that the
audience/community does not go away, and that to analyse the idea of silence is to analyse the artist’s various alternatives within this situation. There are, however, many extensions to this interpretation. On this, Sontag quotes John Cage, who reflects on silence in a way that sheds light on my predicament. He suggests that in order to perceive fullness, one must retain an acute sense of the emptiness that marks it off and conversely, in order to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other zones of the world as full. In other words, silence always implies its opposite and depends upon its presence. These concepts of silence motivated me, not only to continue searching for fragments of a connection between the middle class and economics, but also to maintain that connection in my own writing.

Pierre Macherey in *A theory of literary production* also discusses principles that, while usually applied to the gaps and silences in a particular novel, can appropriately be extended to the gaps and silences in a genre: what it tacitly implies and what it does not say—remembering that in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said. As someone who is writing minor literature, my task is to make the silence “speak” and to identify what the unspoken word is “saying”. The visible is merely the hidden in a different guise, but my problem, as Macherey describes it, is “to pass across from one to the other”—from the hidden or silent to the visible or audible (2006, p. 96).

Still, there were times when the writing flowed and I felt that not only did I understand these gaps and silences but also that I was combining writing styles in order to bridge the domains of public and private. Yes, I needed a pragmatic language to express my understanding of finance, but on occasions I also needed a language of metaphor that expressed emotion and gave richness and texture to the story. An example is my depiction of the meeting of Jane and Richard—that electrical charge, when the attraction is high and the words are intense but few in number, like a Tarzan film with monosyllabic interchanges yet primal undertones. I wrote of their passion when they are caught in a tide of surge and suction, when the rolling waves churn in a rhythmic journey and they swirl and splash in a dance. I wrote of their mistakes in which they put out one fire as others ignite, in which they run about, spouting water at anything that looks like it will engulf them, but
watching the fire too closely and forgetting to watch their backs. I wrote that they should have done better, but they didn’t, and I feel sympathy for their struggle, even as I write.

Alison Jaggar (1997) endorses the idea that women’s emotional acumen can help to open up new areas of meaning in the disciplines of sociology and philosophy and create a new set of “psychotherapeutic tools” in the field of psychiatry (Jaggar, 1997, p. 192). It is believed that the emotional acumen that enables women to recognise aspects of “cruelty, injustice and danger” can also be useful for political and social injustices by “providing the first indication that something is wrong” (Jaggar, 1997, p. 191). It is important to note that, of all the new insights, the one that is considered to have the most profound potential is that which opens onto political analysis and accountability. Thus, women’s experiences, and the resultant knowledge, can be used as a way of foregrounding the inequalities and injustices in society as a whole. The first step is to understand society through the perspective of women’s experiences; the next is to draw upon what we learn from these experiences for improving the condition of women and creating social change. Women’s experiences not only point out to us flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions. Jaggar (1997) explains that because women’s experiences offer us a deep understanding of the “mechanisms of domination”, they also offer ways to “envision freer ways to live” (Jaggar, 1997, p. 193).

In order to create an alternative to what I perceived as a flawed capitalist model, I researched behavioural economics, in particular Animal spirits (2010) by George Akerlof and Robert Shiller, which presents an opposing viewpoint in which people have non-economic motives and are not always rational in pursuit of their economic interests. These so-called “animal spirits” are the main reason why the economy fluctuates the way that it does. This theory of flawed capitalism posits that, left to their own devices, capitalist economies will pursue excess—as current times bear witness—leading to booms and busts.
The fact that this economic research was so crucial to the writing of the novel began to indicate that other things—such as accessibility to economic language—needed to be considered and there could be something more at play here. I had an absence of language and knowledge that could describe the experience that I wanted to put forward. Although I eventually categorised myself (as a result of this project) as a working-class person who became educated and moved into the category of “culturist” in the middle class, I still lacked the financial language to describe and understand my experience. If this was my reality, then surely it would be more problematic for the cashed-up so-called bogans and the big mineral-boom earners who had also found their way into this enlarged group of the middle class.

Initially I simply explored the language of economics, since all discourse communities converse with their members (in this case economists and businesspeople) using language structures that other members identify with and recognise. Doing so creates an inbuilt dynamic between these members and eventually this shared and specialised terminology results in abbreviations and acronyms, which further isolate nonmembers. The language includes rhetoric and persuasion, a specialised lexis, and the neologisms that describe new trends. The dominating result of the continual development of specialised language is that economists use it in headlines, along with acronyms, to describe their new policies. Jane has trouble with these acronyms, feeling excluded by them and isolated from the world that they represent. This fuels an anger inside her, prompting an outburst in which she couches her own domestic reality to Richard in plain, everyday English. Ironically, as a writer, I had to research how to play the language game, in order to have my female protagonist refuse to do so.

There is a need for a non-financial language. In *Critical practice*, Catherine Belsey believes that women can make their language and ideas accessible by transcribing them back into the language of the everyday. She also sees that the categories and laws of the symbolic order (in this case an economic one) are full of contradictions, and that the role of ideology is to suppress the contradictions in the interests of preserving existing social formation. The presence of such contradictions ensures that it is always possible—with whatever difficulty—to identify them,
recognise the ideology for what it is, and take an active part in transforming it by producing new meaning. She tells us that “we are not enslaved by the conventions which prevail in our own time. Authors do not inevitably simply reiterate the timeworn patterns of signification” (Belsey, 2002, p. 38).

In ‘The Company He Keeps’ Jane’s emotional experiences foreground the capitalist system as it goes from the political to the personal. We are not only exposed to its shortcomings but to the need for change and new solutions. Jane’s narrative voice raises awareness of the particular difficulties and disempowerment women may face—when moving countries with a partner and losing one’s identity, when caught between tradition and second-wave feminism, when taking on the role of the wife of a CEO, when coping with the subsequent overload of parenting teenagers, and when living with male impotence and corporate overwork. It is only through the articulation of these problems that women can be assured that these serious social concerns are not their responsibility alone.

As the notion of the importance of language took hold, I began to look at not only the economic language that is used, but the way that the economic system itself is described. In December 2013 Chris Hedges, a veteran foreign correspondent and author, discussed this as another type of obstruction. It is his belief that, to the majority of professionals and paid intellectuals, the idea of the free market is sacred and the language that describes it is beyond criticism (Peries & Jemison, 2013). Although there used to be debate on economic policy, liberal thinkers have been silenced and pushed into the margins because they have been robbed of the language by which they can express their reality. In an interview with Paul Jay, Hedges reinforces the point of view that even though the Federal Government in America (where economic rationalism began) failed in its ability to address the wrongdoings of the G.F.C., in Harvard Business School they are still exalting the idea that the free market rules, supported by every economic justification. This same financial ideology is taught not only at Harvard but at universities in Australia (Peries & Jemison, 2013).
To understand how our intellectuals could have been hijacked like this, I then returned to the academics themselves, in particular Brett Neilson’s discussion of Giorgio Agamben (Neilson, 2006). In this discussion, Agamben reflects on the work of German political theorist Carl Schmitt, who draws attention to a “state of exception” or emergency in which normal arrangements are suspended and subjects are then stripped of their rights. Eventually, such a state of exception moves more to the foreground and ultimately becomes the rule. Sovereign power, as pointed out by Neilson, is not the only form of power, and it is generally recognised that the current era of globalisation is one in which economics has triumphed over politics. From this, it seems that the restructuring of the 1980s, and its associated language, has become the norm. It appears that the interests of private entities and the tools of right-wing think tanks have converged to change the nature of both universities and politics (Neilson, 2006). Both Hedges (Peries & Jemison, 2013) and Neilson’s discussion of Agamben, although approaching the subject from vastly different standpoints, help to explain the silencing and impotence of the middle class, in which, I was to discover, women are the most disenfranchised.
Identity Constructions of Self

As the storyline developed in my novel, I was doing two things: writing about a theme and producing a sense of my “self” as a female writer. These two things are connected by broad notions of identity and language, and they are also connected more specifically in that the problems of being a corporate wife are paralleled in becoming an author in a domain (publishing). As an author, I do not want to be categorised into one of the binary oppositions of identity theory, so I began to further explore the notion that masculine autonomy and female connection can be combined in order to expand upon, place academically and substantiate the work of Cixous.

I was initially heartened by the work of Archer, who found that although females form an identity of self in relation to others, “females have been as likely as males to be self-defined in the intrapersonal domains as well” (Archer, 1993, p. 85).

Moreover, it has been suggested that in order to do this, the balancing act that women undertake seems to involve dealing with the private sphere first and then moving on to the public sphere (Thorbecke & Grotevant, as cited in Cote & Levine, 2002). The majority of men, in contrast, “seem to have been less willing to interconnect the public and private domains, preferring the public; when they do sense links, they apparently deal with them as independent issues” (Marcia & Waterman, as cited in Cote & Levine, 2002, p.86). For these reasons, it is accepted that identity formation currently appears to be more complex for women, who generally attempt to form an identity based on participation within both spheres.
This research regarding domains is very satisfying for me because it reflects my position as a female writer in which I am moving between the private sphere and a more public realm. It is also significant in its assertion that the domestic sphere is the one that is most frequently dealt with first. This can be applied to Jane’s journey, chronologically in the novel, which is a reflection of some of my own personal life experience. With the exception of Elliot Perlman (who, as a male writer, has negotiated both the public and the private domains, albeit negotiating the public first), and Peter Barry (who has recently done the same, except with even less emphasis on the private) most of the male writers researched, have remained in the public arena.

Jane constantly struggled to hold onto her identity while I struggled to create my own identity as a female writer. Consequently, issues of self, writing and language were always interwoven throughout the core of my creative project. The concept of identity construction is entrenched in academic theory and is constantly being re-evaluated due to changes in social conditions. I began with the three main periods in which the idea of identity has been altered. In Cote and Levine (2002), these periods include the romantic period, in which there was an understanding that the “self” had a fixed core and deeply committed convictions; the modernist period, during which time the notion of the “self” changed to being viewed as machinelike and ruled by rational thought; and our present state of thought, defined by a movement into the postmodern period, in which the previous views on the construction of identity are rejected in favour of the idea of a “self” formed because of socialising technologies. None of these views felt right for my purpose.

Judith Jordan believes that the traditional Western “self” describes a “male” model of development that emphasises “Increasing self-control, a sense of origin of action and intention, an increasing capacity to use abstract logic, and a movement toward self-sufficiency” (Jordan, 1997 p. 9). She contends that a notion of a “relational self” better characterises the psychology of women. For her, the relational model emphasises that the connections women have with others are uniquely and entirely different from those of men. Against this, the Western “self” is marked by power-based dominance patterns. “In such systems, the self-boundary serves as
protection from the impinging surround and the need for connection with, relatedness to, and contact with others is subjugated to the need to protect the separate self” (Jordan, 1997, p. 17). In contrast, she claims that women are more “contextual and relational, with the capacity to form gratifying connections” in a process that is “participatory and synergistic” (Jordan, 1997, p. 17). In summary, relational theorists believe that a woman’s being is continuously formed in connection with others in an empathic responsiveness whereas a man’s identity is marked by separateness and autonomy (Jordan, 1997, p. 15).

Not wanting to confine my identity as a writer to either the Western “male” model or the model of care-taking and empowerment of others, I continued to research. Ruthellen Josselson has also applied relational theory to research on identity formation and her findings reported how the women in her sample struggled to maintain a sense of competence in conjunction with their sense of connection. It is her belief that identity resides at the intersection of competence and connection but that “Identity in women is an ongoing process of balancing and rebalancing needs of the self and investment in the needs of others” (Josselson, 1996, p. 210). She states that “a woman’s sense of competence resides in her sense of effectiveness in the world” (Josselson, 1996, p. 180) but that “The overall, abiding deepest sense of competence for women is the feeling of competence in connection with others” (Josselson, 1996, p. 199). This struggle reflected my own dilemma as a female writer in which I needed to write about (and out of) the connections of the private domain, but also wanted to illustrate competence in my representation of capitalism and the public domain. Kate Jennings, author of Moral hazard, has already been judged harshly for not maintaining her balance between the two (The Complete Review, 2010). Life and art slide into each other here.

In the writings of Nancy Chodorow, when discussing the processes of identification and role learning for girls, her view is that “it is embedded in an interpersonal relationship with their mothers. For boys, identification processes and masculine role learning are not likely to be embedded in relationships with their fathers or men but rather to involve the denial of affective relationship to their mothers” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 177). When boys separate from their mother, she
believes boys begin to prepare for the sort of emotional withdrawal and cold reasoning that the economic world of Capitalism will require from them in adult life. (Chodorow, 1978). I wondered if I could succeed at bridging such a gender gap, as so many other female and male writers before me appear to have been influenced by this emotional preparedness, or lack of it, to the point where it has become the seemingly crucial, gender-based criteria on which they have based their subject matter and writing style.

Looking more closely, the “relational self” did not seem to be what I needed either, since when scrutinised from a social-scientific point of view, the gender division is seen by some as stereotyping men and women (Hulbert, Tavris & Tronto, as cited in Cote & Levine, 2002). There is a concern that the words “in general” soon get interpreted as “all” as the stereotype emerges. This then leaves little conceptual room for understanding women who have supposedly masculine tendencies, men who have supposedly feminine tendencies, and the fact that there are merits in both “connection” and “autonomy”.

At this point in the research, a number of ideas had presented themselves with regards to “self”, but all were unsatisfactory in that they appeared to offer no escape from binary opposition. Abstract logic was pitted against that which was more contextual, boundaries that protected and defined were in opposition to those that were flexible and more interpersonal, power-based dominance was set against the caretaking and empowerment of others, and emotional detachment was in direct contrast to emotional connection. Only the feminist “relational model” reinforced Cixous’ theories, but in its putative shortcomings: that is, in the acknowledgment that both masculine and feminine tendencies overlapped in each gender and that both connection and autonomy had their merits. Such observations confirmed the idea of my writing a feminist text, which might split open the idea of binary opposition and instead produce an open-ended textuality. They established that it was in the work of Hélène Cixous that I would continue to find support for this endeavour.
A Feminist Approach to Writing and Character

Writing from a feminist perspective obviously raises questions as to the nature of that feminist and how that feminism is reflected in the novel. Feminist theory: a philosophical anthology discusses the history of feminism along with concepts of sex and gender and how to centre women’s experience. Because my novel concerns the policies of economic rationalism that began in the 1980s, the feminism is Second Wave, which began with Simone de Beauvoir and her influence in The second sex and continued until the advent of the Third Wave in the early 1990s. This movement went beyond the gains of the equal political rights achieved by First Wave, to include every aspect of human social life including marriage, motherhood and heterosexual relationships, in which the causes of women’s subordination were seen as much deeper than the political or economic (Cudd & Andreasen, 2007).

Second-wave feminism in the United States addressed the differences among women through identity politics, which focused on how these differences were interlocked but had disparate voices. In the more philosophically based European context, it took a different direction. There, as articulated by Hélène Cixous (Krolokke & Scott Sorensen, 2006), it explored the Western dualisms like body and mind, which are deeply correlated with gender asymmetry, and have a hierarchical ordering in which one element is less valued than the other.

Jane is a perfect candidate for second-wave feminism in both traditions. She has played a conservative role in a marriage that has been highly successful, smoothing and placating, offering encouragement, writing reports for her husband and comparing herself to Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s To the lighthouse. It was she who kept in touch with the in-laws when overseas and she who, as an executive’s wife, is lined up with other couples and expected to circulate on a company cruise. The first change occurs when, as a vegetarian, she refuses to eat a prawn that is part of the company dinner. However, we see her repeating the
politically acceptable mantra that real estate is a safe topic, and complying with her role to say the right thing. The seeds of something more can again be seen when she wants to discuss the behaviour of one of the wives, Penny, who rebels against it all. Jane wants some changes made such as more assistance for families and debriefings once back from overseas, but she is still typing for Richard when his secretary can’t be tracked down. Jane is in an environment that is changing—albeit one in which sexual harassment can still take place in the workforce, and receptionists smile as if their lives depend on it—and it is against the backdrop of this world that she decides to go to university.

Jane is introduced to feminist concepts at university at a time when Kate Millett’s *Sexual politics* is all-pervasive and interest in the power structure of relationships, whereby one group of people is controlled by another, is at the fore. In universities at this time there was an awakening to the concepts introduced by Millett, concepts of interior colonisation in which every woman is in male hands and male dominates female and elder male dominates younger males (Cudd & Andreasen, 2007). Jane, like many women of this era, is caught between the traditional roles that have been assigned to her and such concepts.

Jane eventually connects with the university environment, calling it “her home ground”, the meeting house where she speaks with a tribe that is her own kind, choosing her own path between financial analysis and art installation. When the headhunting of Richard occurs she is studying feminist literature with a minister’s wife who had abandoned the Sunday sermon, with another woman who filed a domestic violence order against an abusive barrister husband, and with an elderly woman who will no longer leave to go home and make her husband’s lunch. Jane is aware of the value of the community support around her and the powerlessness of not earning. When her feminists friends tell her that she is “screwed”, Jane does not feel exploited, just scared and disappointed that her goals and Richard’s goals are not coinciding anymore. She does not want to go to Sydney and, after visiting there, she just wants to go home. At the party for the family’s farewell, she has not mentioned the traditional role playing of her children to her feminist friends, with Zach, in a mock office, playing business with a reluctant
Rebecca, who wanted to attend dressed as a nurse. Jane has not needed feminist support before. Her initial views on power in marriage were that each person is the leader of the moment. Then she was pushed into a more traditional sphere.

Phil’s research tells Jane that young women are not following their partners anymore and she often feels torn between the emerging ideas around her and the practicalities of everyday life and trying to stay grouped as a family. Once the family is in Sydney, Jane becomes angry about these new roles when Rebecca breaks her arm and Richard, putting work before family, won’t come to the hospital. She wants solidarity with her friend Annie, knowing that women should give each other support, but when Richard says “maybe that feminist stuff has got in the way of some clear thinking here”, she is incensed. She worries about being ungrateful, knowing that Richard is still providing for them all, but she can’t avoid the confrontation in which she tells him that the corporate world is one that does not nurture families or sustainable relationships. Additionally, she must struggle with the female competitiveness that claims the men through whom the women vicariously live in the workplace.

It is also Jane who raises the issue of parenting teenagers, struggling with her son’s aggression and daughter’s anxiety, a subject woefully neglected, as pointed out in the Minds Goma talks (Saturday Extra, 2012). In a conversation by the panel, the article by Anne-Marie Slaughter entitled “Why women still can’t have it all” is discussed. Slaughter analyses the giving up of her sixteen-hour-a day job as the first woman director of policy planning at the State Department, something she calls a “foreign-policy dream job” (2012). She did so because her teenage son was skipping homework, disrupting classes, failing maths, and tuning out any adult who tried to reach him. As the Director at Workplace Gender Equality Agency in Sydney it is Helen Conway’s view (2012) that all previous conversations have been applied to babies and not teenagers and so there needs to be a redesign to reflect the needs and aspirations of today. Workplaces are toxic to women and men and the teenage years make great demands on both the mother and father.
With the double consciousness of Jane’s perspective, ‘The Company He Keeps’ carries a strong message that men too need to agitate for change, something that will take a great deal of courage. Jane wants to have compassion for Richard, because compassion means two children having parents with decades of mutual history that will remain entwined. She is aware of how important their successful and longstanding union was and she wants it back. As she admits to Phil, she has a head full of feminist theory, but still follows Richard.
The fact that Australians were not reading literary fiction about financial upheaval begged the question of what exactly they were reading.

My starting place was to consider what was being avoided, which in turn could throw light on why this was so. I began with examining what was capturing the market and the public’s attention. When it comes to the reading habits of the middle class, what was visible was escapist literature, including that of a light nonfictional nature: that is, literature was often about somewhere else. As well as examining what was visible, it was also my intention to try to seek out any nonfiction written by writers of economics, or any financial “tell alls”, purportedly written by some of the key players.

Carmen Lawrence, who has lectured in both Psychiatry and Behavioural Science, in her essay “The Reading Sickness”, believes that many contemporary Australians do not wish to be challenged as readers and prefer to remain at a high personal comfort level. She states that most of our reading material consists of “formulaic fiction or how-to guides for managing our real estate, our children, our physical appearance and our relationship—in no particular order and with little discernible difference in style” (Lawrence, 2007, p. 9). In the same vein, she quotes Patrick White as stating that writers must be prepared to take risks, “in an attempt to illuminate and perhaps alleviate the human dilemma” (White, as cited in Lawrence, 2007, p. 9). When David Marr, journalist and broadcaster, gave the Colin Simpson Lecture in 2003, he uttered similar sentiments. He asked Australia’s writers to address the big issues of the day, making a plea to unflinchingly look the country in the face.

In 2002 Drusilla Modjeska, a respected nonfiction and fiction author, brought her own opinion to the fore in a book of essays called Timepieces. She believes that a
great deal of Australian fiction feels as if it is being written for somewhere else. She blames this on the internationalisation of publishing, along with postmodern experiments that deserted a sense of larger narratives (Modjeska, as cited in Ball, 2002). James Hall, former literary editor for the *Australian*, is yet another person who asks where our novels concerning the “lived” aspects of politics and business are, supporting this view of modern Australian fiction as bereft, and appealing for literature dealing with a more contemporary reality (Hall, as cited in Mordue, 2003).

Ironically, the fact that economic rationalism/the GFC is not the subject of literary fiction, could have been influenced by the fact that it was economic rationalism that reduced the amount of support governments were prepared to give to the cultural industries by way of subsidy. In the 1980s, Australia Council grants became more difficult to obtain, and subsidies to local literary magazines and publishers were reduced. Furthermore, from the later 1980s, the Australian publishing scene was significantly altered by a number of takeovers. The result was that, although a large amount of creative writing occurred during the 1990s, “publication was increasingly done electronically, through small independent presses or at the expense of the author” (Webby, 2000, p. 16).

Obviously, the GFC itself has had a part to play in what is being read. It is interesting to note that after the GFC had struck and the stimulus package was released into the Australian population preceding Christmas 2008, Shona Martyn, the publishing director at Harper Collins, stated that the sales indeed went up at Christmas, but for Stieg Larsson’s crime thrillers, endorsing Carmen Lawrence’s view that Australians prefer escapist fiction both in good times and in bad (Martyn, as cited in Mordue, 2003).

As a direct result of the free market being perceived as dead, albeit permanently or temporarily, after the GFC there was also a trend for writers of economic nonfiction to appear and tell us what they believed had been the real story behind the crisis. In these texts, this began with the GFC being an isolated American phenomenon and as time went on, expanded to critiques of Australia’s regulatory system and exceptionalism, the resources boom and the security of China. These
nonfictional accounts have definitely not been escapist, but have appeared to fill a niche at a particular time rather than becoming a permanent trend.

In conjunction with these journalistic accounts the memoir or financial “tell all” has emerged, in which various players in the American and British financial industry have cashed in by disclosing their strategies, bonuses and behind-the-scenes behaviour. Lacking a financial centre of such heady heights, Australian readers have not been able to read their own homegrown version of such escapades, but have been able to choose from an exhaustive list of overseas writing. Geraint Anderson’s book Cityboy: Beer and loathing in the square mile (2008) and The wolf of Wall Street (2008) by Jordan Belfort are just two of many, with their popularity demonstrating that readers seem to prefer nonfictional to fictional accounts of financial disaster. Such publications are not about the middle class but are exciting and racy nonfictional works about the risk taking of male high-flyers, which provide another form of escapism.

Journalist Mark Mordue has taken a personal interest in this trend towards nonfiction. In his article written in 2003, in which he questions whether the novel is dead, he reveals that when walking into a bookshop to see what was selling, he was confronted with book after book indicating a renaissance in Australian nonfiction, incorporating everything from “narrative journalism to memoir, rock’n’roll, history, philosophy, the essay and the political biography. Works that often blurred the territory between these forms and fiction, part and parcel of a radical hybridisation of style and content affecting literature internationally and sending our old generic orders into meltdown” (Mordue, 2003, p. 4). For every big novel from the likes of Peter Carey, Tim Winton and Frank Moorhouse, he maintains that “there were a plethora of second-raters and wannabes, postmodern failures and hype riders beached in ‘grunge-lit’, ‘chick lit’ and assorted niche-marketed clichés” (Mordue, 2003, p. 5). In such a comprehensive sample, one would have expected something on the middle class.

In taking account of reading habits, in an effort to establish the “history of an absence”, my research also took me to what is perceived to be an historical
preoccupation with the working class. A.D. Hope is quoted in Ian Reid’s book *Fiction and the Great Depression* as maintaining that “Australian fiction practically ignores all except the lower income groups, just as on the whole, it ignores the cities and concentrates on the country” (Hope, as cited in Reid, 1979, p.18).

This emphasis on the lower classes has been verified in marketability of grunge fiction, the province of young writers who write with a focus on sex, drugs and life on the margins of society. Christos Tsiolkas’ *Loaded* (1995) and Andrew McGahan’s *Praise* (1992) and Andrew McCann’s *Subtopia* (2005) all explore the political and personal implications of grunge living. Although Tsiolkas’ *The slap* (2008) contains middle-class characters, the novel makes only an initial, scant reference to the underlying economics. In an overtly dystopian extension of the genre, Amanda Lohrey’s *The reading group* (1988), set in the near future, alludes to elements of the Australian political landscape of the 1980s under the Australian Labor Party. It is deeply pessimistic over the failures of reformism but, once again, deals with an underclass.

In 1971, in his book *Social patterns in Australian literature*, T. Inglis Moore sees this clear preference for working-class literature as historical, stating that these people enjoyed a greater dominance in shaping social patterns in Australia than in England or Europe and that, consequently, they have been far more important in literature here than overseas. This is something he traces back to the convict system, the levelling nature of early pioneer conditions, the demand for labour, and the refusal of the working class to submit to an English class system that was based on wealth, birth and rank. According to Moore, not only were the working class the majority of the population, but they powerfully identified themselves with the new country and, in doing so, contributed to a nationalist sentiment with their ascending cultural values. Whereas migrants of the British upper and middle classes in the colonies had the choice of either visiting or returning to their homeland, the working class did not. Thus, “This identification of the working class with its adopted country was indeed, one of the chief factors why it was so influential in forming the Australian outlook” (Moore, 1971, p. 55). Over time, the values of this working class, and the accompanying mateship, seem to have prevailed to such an extent that the
bushman has become the ideal national type, revered by writers who have rarely been members of the working class themselves, but have adopted a working-class point of view, “celebrating the values of the worker, using proletarian themes, and adopting a proletarian outlook” (Moore, 1971, p. 57).

Although the working class is well documented in Australia, the middle class is not, with middle-class lives not seeming to be very attractive to writers. Historically, according to Moore, they began as a very small group of squatters who had belonged to the upper or middle classes of England and Scotland but who, because of the levellers of drought and its associated financial hardship, were unable to establish an aristocracy along hierarchical lines in their new country, either clinging to the British way of life, or returning home. Moore documents that, during the early pastoralist age, before the struggle for the land sharpened antagonism, “squatter and worker were allied in a double camaraderie of hard work and individual independence” (Moore, 1971, p. 42). Indeed, the accounts of pioneering days relate many instances of the “mutual respect squatter and bush worker developed for each other in their common fight against the dangers and hardships of life in the outback” (Moore, 1971, p. 42). Yet despite these intertwined beginnings, in literary fiction the working class has proliferated and the middle class has been marginalised.

Moore identifies various periods in Australian society that have been reflected in the literature and social realism makes an early appearance. He discusses realism within this broader framework as “a doctrine of truth to life” free of romantic emotion or false illusion, as held by Miles Franklin and Joseph Furphy, who rejected Victorian romance (Moore, 1971, p. 137). He believes its forces were inherent in the dark nature of the convict system, reinforced by that of the working class and the “determinant of Place, with the hardships and vicissitudes of pioneering forcing all men to be hard-headed, strong-handed realists in order to survive” (Moore, 1971, p. 124). Yet although realism was woven into the fabric of early writing, it wasn’t until the post-depression years (an economic crisis and a time that exerted a sobering and maturing influence), that realistic criticism became a fixture in the novel. Having done so, however, it did not last for long. Moore
illustrates how, in the 1950s, prompted by a postwar need for an independent Australian identity, a new nationalist trend developed in which people looked to the past to revive historical myths and legends that would serve as viable national traditions. Much of this arose out of the bush, as “a people more advanced in national maturity began to look back for its roots in its history, searching for its half-lost folklore” (Moore, 1971, p. 269). Social realism was overtaken by bush mythology.

The dominance of the bush in our literature presents a striking paradox. The national psychology still seems to prize the bush as the home of an Australian way of life that typifies the real Australia, despite the fact that the majority of Australians live in urban areas (Barnard, as cited in Moore, 1971, p. 74). In a special issue of Australian literary studies Writing the everyday: Australian literature and the limits of suburbia, edited and introduced by Andrew McCann (1998), Garry Kinnane separates the bush and the city as two poles of experience that matter in Australian literature, in which heroic suffering, innocence and wisdom are equated with the bush and corruption, violence and waste are fascinations of the city (Kinnane, 1998). At the literary high end, he identifies the earlier settler imaginings of David Malouf and the nineteenth-century retro-novels of Peter Carey while, at the lower end, Kinnane singles out grunge literature. His lament is that “imagination has been given preference over observation” and that writers don’t look at the world of suburbia that most Australians inhabit (Kinnane, 1998, p. 42). Because most of the middle class lives in suburbia, this also helps to explain their neglect.

This situation is now being given increasing academic attention. Nathanael O’Reilly in Between the city and the bush: suburbia in the contemporary Australian novel, includes both the development of “Australian suburbia and the anti-suburban tradition in Australian culture” (O’Reilly, 2008), quoting various Australian intellectuals who, over the years, have continually viewed suburbia in a highly pejorative sense. Although he states that there is no typical Australian suburb he does, however, identify the older, established parts of the inner-city areas as being middle class. With regards to the anti-suburban tradition, he traces this back to a Louis Esson essay, published in 1912, which declares that “the suburban home must
be destroyed. It stands for all that is dull and depressing in modern life. It
endeavours to eliminate the element of danger in human affairs. But without
dangers there can be no joy, no ecstasy, no spiritual adventures” (Esson, as cited in
O’Reilly, 2008, p. 19). So, while the notion of living in suburbia has been historically
embraced by Australians, an anti-suburban sentiment runs deep in the artistic and
intellectual mainstream.

In her book *Journeyings: The biography of a middle-class generation 1920–1990*,
Janet McCalman (1993) also notes that scholars have been shy of writing about the
Australian suburban middle class. Overall, she sees the great ideological divide
between the middle class and the Working Class in Australia (and the Right and the
Left), defined over the issues of independence and interdependence. The middle
class retains its focus on the virtue of self-reliant individualism, without an
understanding of the notion of interdependence and charity, while the working class
draws its strength from recognising people’s interdependence with each other. It is
her view that the middle-class frame of mind depends on a sense of personal
righteousness, “of believing that one must provide for oneself and one’s family and
not be a burden on the community” (McCalman, 1993, p. 300). Although
McCalman’s research is somewhat dated, it is in accord with more recent findings;
significantly, such a proposition is still relevant to the plight of the family in my
creative project—a nuclear family, with children in private schools, not in their home
country, and carving out their own fortunes in isolation from community or
extended family.

In their book *The times will suit them: Postmodern conservatism in Australia*,
Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe (2008) add to McCalman’s theory when they
explore the nature of what is called “the new individualism”. They consider the
psychological consequences of economic rationalism, in which contemporary
Australians are expected to determine their own life plan in the absence of inherited
guidelines. They agree with Janet McCalman and expound on the downsides of our
current risk-obsessed society—in which people are increasingly preoccupied with
the future, driven by market mechanisms and the mass media, and without larger
social ideals—as one creating a medicated and anxious society in which people are
treated as objects. In such a society, sociologists Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert argue that the only realistic way to cope is to “live aggressively” by not worrying about the consequences of one’s actions but by thinking of “raw self-interest in an uncertain world” (Elliott & Lemert, as cited in Boucher & Sharpe, 2008, p. 198).

In yet another contemporary analysis of the middle class, Andrew West (2006) has written a thoughtful book called *Now: Inside the lifestyles of the rich and tasteful*, in an effort to reveal who these contemporary Australian people really are. Not able to be defined as a single group, West divides the middle class into those who crave financial capital and those who are building cultural capital—“the rich versus the tasteful” as he calls it (West, 2006, p. 1)—and makes a strong argument for this division. West sees materialists as highly individualistic in their support for a free market, and an unregulated economy, and as liberal in their social values. According to West, they are characterised by the size of their mortgage, beach houses, children’s private-school fees, their memberships to various exclusive clubs, and their dependent (usually female) spouses. Culturists, on the other hand, are seen as tending to adopt a more communitarian view of the economy, described as “doing well by doing good” (West, 2006, p. 46). In addition to looking for work that encourages personal growth, they also look for a job with a conscience. Wives work and children often attend selective schools. Entry into this class, according to West, requires only a “curiosity about the world, a commitment to self-improvement, and an ability to conduct a reasonably fluent conversation” (West, 2006, p. 100). Most significantly, they also have a commitment to reading, and in this class of people a library card will buy you more cultural street cred than a Visa card (West, 2006, p.100).

West’s book is more about the “culturists” because he holds that their lives are more complex and nuanced. He proposes that, at this point in history, the promise of the “materialist” is more alluring to the public and the “culturists” thus have to content themselves with being “economically dominated but symbolically dominant”, the latter being an important concept that gained traction over my time of writing (Bourdieu, as cited in West, 2006, p. 100). What I recognised immediately, however, was that these divisions also have some ramifications for the family in my
creative project, with conflict occurring between the couple Jane and Richard, as Jane leans more to West’s culturist values while Richard ventures on a corporate and more materialistic pathway.

When considering why both of these groups are not the subjects of fiction, West postulates that the contemporary urban world of affluence and technology does not provide an environment with the hardships and dangers that foster mateship. Lawnmowing and bus-catching are not riveting topics, and besides that the “materialists”, although having home-entertainment rooms with ceiling-mounted projectors, tend to focus on wine and not books. The “culturists”, however, hold out a prospect of hope since, according to West, they definitely read literary fiction, albeit not about themselves. He cites culturist playwright David Williamson as saying that his wife’s book club features books on the perceived high literary end of the spectrum. He quotes former publisher Hilary McPhee listing some of the relevant authors here: Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Zadie Smith, Tim Winton, Helen Garner, Philip Roth, anything by Ian McEwan or Martin Amis, and Annie Proulx (West, 2006, p. 72). He even goes as far as identifying the reading neighbourhoods as Glebe, Balmain and Leichhardt in Sydney, Fitzroy, Carlton and Hawthorn in Melbourne, and Manuka in Canberra, areas in which there are bookshops that always stay open until late at night, have author readings and discussion panels (West, 2006, p. 72). This group therefore appeared the most problematic when accounting for their “absence” in literature and acted as a catalyst that directed me to search further in order to account for them.

Most recently, in the Summer Issue of The Monthly bridging 2013–14, Tim Winton has also expressed his thoughts about class in Australia. The title of his article, “The C Word”, indicates the taboo and silence that surrounds the word “class”. Winton chooses the specific time period of my study as he quotes John Martin, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s former Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, as estimating that twenty-two per cent of growth in Australia’s household income between 1980 and 2008 went to the richest one per cent of the population.
Winton identifies the time prior to the 1980s as a time when origin was
destiny and isolates the time after this, as the period when things began to change.
From this time on, the old working class, defined by its state housing and a decent
day’s work for a decent day’s union-won pay, began to be harder to identify as
tradespeople started to earn incomes that were once the preserve of the middle class
and the minerals boom began to take effect. He reiterates that the union movement
was being demolished, Thatcherism was at play, and Australian governments
appropriated her policies, albeit with less aggression. Overall, he is in agreement
with other researchers in that this resulted in a transition from collective citizenship
to consumer individualism that remade our understanding of taxation, health and
education. In his view, current indicators of the middle class are not the previously
identifiable accent, postcode, job description, what people wear or drive or indeed
the homes that they live in; rather, “the soundest measure of a person’s social status
is mobility. And the chief source of mobility is money” (Winton, 2013, p. 30).
According to Winton, the battlers, who were previously working-class toilers, have
changed to “Howard’s battlers” of middle Australia, concerned more with material
ambition than enduring hardship, simply because of the nation’s remarkable
prosperity. Where once Australia looked like a pyramid in terms of its social strata,
with the working class as its broad base and the rich at the top, the pyramid is now
wide in the middle.

If Winton is correct, then the composition of the middle class is distinctly
different from what it was before, now containing fewer people like himself, and not
the sort of environment that would produce much reflection upon itself, let alone
written reflection in the form of a literary novel about financial upheaval. His work
has been instructive for his viewpoint that the composition of the middle class has
changed predominantly into West’s self-interested Materialists. At the same time,
however, he, as others before him, still left me with further questions around West’s
Culturists, of which women appear to be a dominant reading group with the
potential to write. These remaining questions have been crucial, and eventually
became linked to my own continued investigations about the way that such
Culturists have been challenged and silenced by the doctrine of economic rationalism, which is discussed in my findings.

Although I gradually built up a substantive profile of the forgotten middle class, their experiences also needed to be backed up by hard data. This I found in the work of George Megalogenis, who documents the types of financial impacts that have been made on the middle class in *The Australian moment* (2012). He tells a story that begins with the Oil Shock of 1973 and ends with the global financial crisis. Although his politics are in line with those of neoliberalism, his work is instructive for the detail that he provides with regard to the number of financial upheavals that occurred and their composition. Megalogenis states that the middle class felt insulated against financial upheaval until the 1980s, when a considerable amount began to happen for fiction writers to write about. This includes unemployment peaking at 10.4% in the early years and an inflation rate that peaked at 12.5%. It includes a savings rate that halved between 1984 and 1987, a stock-market crash and a subsequent switch to more investment in home ownership. Other factors that follow in the 1990s are the “recession that Australia had to have” (Keating, as cited in Megalogenis, 2012, p. 239), when these house prices went flat, and a transition from “blue collar to pink collar” (Megalogenis, 2012, p. 263), when there was financial pressure for mothers to return to work.

As to why none of this has been written about, according to Megalogenis, “the rough rule of thumb for the Australian character is that we are greedy in good times and inspired in bad times” (Megalogenis, 2012, pp. 4-5), suggesting that the upheaval had had less of a psychological impact because of this. His research does not explore the undertones that exist beneath his facts and figures. His research is quantitative and his financial upheavals are expressed in the very language of finance itself. As such his focus is purely macroeconomic. It is useful for its documentation and verification of facts, but a long way away from the subjective and interdisciplinary methodology of my creative project, thereby endorsing my need to continue to fill the gap.
When looking for the human side to this hard data, I found it in the work of Michael Pusey in his book *The experience of middle Australia: The dark side of economic reform* (2003). His research proved to be a backbone to my project. Pusey not only throws light on who these people are, but provides a carefully researched account of how their quality of life has been impacted by economic restructuring. He explains that while, in the past, it was the poor who were most vulnerable to the fluctuations and political manoeuvrings of the economy, since the advent of economic rationalism the market has definitely affected the middle class as economic policies penetrate more deeply. In summary, “with economic reform has come a thinning of democracy and an induced retreat of the people into a purely private sphere of caring only for one’s own, of mood states, of consumption, of recuperation, therapy, and incommunicable anger at what is being done to them” (Pusey, 2003, p. 183).

Such summations again hinted that something substantial was going on with regards to the language, or lack thereof, that these people had within their means to express themselves. More obvious, however, for me, was the fact that my fictional account was something much more than just a resentment residing in my bones—it was morphing into many things, one of which was my communicable anger.

Pusey’s middle-class Australians comprised a stratified random sample of four hundred respondents who completed questionnaires and interviews between 1996 and 1999 in five Australian capital cities. They were randomly selected from Australian Bureau of Statistics data and incorporated average household incomes below the ninetieth percentile and above the twentieth percentile. The group was further stratified into “North Shore people”, who changed jobs often but who had prospered in global corporations while still feeling insecure, and “survivors”, who were skilled tradespeople in old manufacturing jobs of manual and lower service and who had made peace with the market. Further to these were “battlers” and “Hansonites” (the latter being followers of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party), namely subcontractors and small-business operators, unreconciled to economic reform, while living in permanent insecurity. Finally, there were “improvers”, the likes of teachers and nurses, who had university degrees but whose
anger focus was towards the quality of their life and social relations in society as a whole.

This research, like that of Andrew West, has the same ramifications for the fictional characters of Richard and Jane in my novel, with Richard moving into the category of North Shore People (reconciled and doing relatively well out of economic reform) and Jane remaining in the category of “improvers”. It also confirms previously held ideas that these people have had to reinvent themselves as risk managers of their own lives because financial variations—such as inflation rates, the stock exchange, and the fluctuations of exchange rates and other investments—have combined to resemble something more akin to gambling. As a sole-breadwinner, middle-aged person who was being demoted and devalued in a restructured workplace, Richard felt compelled to find a way to provide income for the family. Economic rationalism dictates that, regardless of where your social support is, jobs need to be sought, whether you are a young person on government welfare or at the older end of the job market.

From a sociological perspective, most significant for my project is the research that confirms that such economic policy results in a number of negative social consequences, including a corrosion of character, a severing of community ties, pressure and stress. These conditions exist because people are constantly trying to adapt to their changing economic conditions in a chain of events in which economic restructuring has been passed on to corporations and most emotional costs have been loaded onto families. Once these reforms have been categorised as necessary to economic efficiency, they are seemingly of no further concern to the politicians who orchestrated them. Where there is a sole breadwinner with unsociable hours (such as Richard in my novel), the family comes under ever-increasing pressure as family and work dependencies conflict and decisions must be made about how best to share the care of the children (Pusey, 2003). Tertiary-educated “improvers” such as Jane typically weigh the costs and benefits of a doctrine that offers financial advantages to the family while destroying it, and are aware of just how much the market has invaded the familial domain. Someone like Jane understands and objects
to the fact that economic reform is not a consensual process, but cannot do anything about it.

In light of such impotence, my creative project has the opportunity of presenting what Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt describe as “a learner-centred activity driven by real-world problems or challenges in which the learner is actively engaged in finding a solution” (Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 5). Within the novel is knowledge and information that is objective and generalised but, unlike Pusey’s research, is motivated by experience, producing new knowledge, not anticipated by the curriculum (Grenfell and James, as cited in Pusey, 2003). There is a unity between the artistic domain and the domain of economics that reflects a unity of the problem, the context and the solution.

The subjective experience of returning to a home country when under stress is only one example of what my novel can explore, but a study such as Pusey’s would find hard to capture. Modern labour markets have dissolved the bonds of an older, intimate, and sometimes nostalgically remembered world of the extended family and local community neighbourhood, in which each reinforced the other. This was realised with a sense of deep regret by the participants in the survey; in my novel, however, it is dramatically articulated, as Jane lacks any support for her parenting when Richard is consumed with his job and the children’s problems become intense. Creative practice can go where research like Pusey’s cannot or does not. It finds the chinks in what, sociologically, appears to be a dead end. In Jane’s case, she goes back to her country of origin for the support that she requires. Both unsocial working hours and the breakdown of community and social life equate to a decline in the overall quality of life. Unfortunately, however, these complaints are not being voiced in general society, other than through statistics, charts and tables.

Stress and pressure, another sub-theme in ‘The Company He Keeps’, is a common complaint of Pusey’s respondents. Once again, however, the remodelling of my own familial relationships (as pointed out by Estelle Barrett in reference to Gaylene Perry’s studio writing research project), which combines autobiography and fiction, has the emotional capacity to take the long-term effects of this through to
its bitter conclusion in the complete destruction of Jane, Richard and their family. It is my novel, and the imaginative act, which transforms these modern individuals into personalities that we come to know and then, sadly, watch implode, that gives empowerment. It is an empowerment that can reach well beyond Pusey’s careful accounts, with real material benefits.
My ongoing research had substantiated the idea that vast numbers of the middle class were financially and emotionally affected. However, I was still left with the fact that, apart from Elliot Perlman’s social criticism through the character of Eddie, in *Three dollars*, published in 1998, it was not until June 2012, when Peter Barry’s *We all fall down* was published, that any other such book appeared. These novels are seemingly isolated, not only in their inclusion of economic content, but also in their allegiance to the middle class and in their inclusion of domestic life in the suburbs. Furthermore, both are written by men. Because they partially meet the criteria that also define my novel, they are critiqued in detail at the end of this section.

When trying to place my work within the literary landscape both overseas and in Australia, my research findings, in terms of what novels had been written, consistently kept redirecting me away from class and towards gender. This was because books about finance began falling into two categories: firstly, action-driven financial fiction written predominantly by male authors; secondly, domestic stories of family life with only brief financial comments used as background material, written largely by females.

*Nowhere man* (2010) by John Green—who currently lives in Australia and has spent time working as an investment banker—is an example of the action-driven mode, even though his novel is directly related to the global financial crisis. It tells the story of a wealthy stock trader, Michael Hunt, whose wife, Sonya, is a university professor. Just before the GFC Michael goes missing, leaving Sonya in debt with a bank foreclosing on their Sydney beach house. When the GFC erupts, Sonya’s financial position becomes dire. After stumbling on some files, she begins a journey that includes the stock markets and eventually takes her to Princeton University. While this novel does contain elements of financial upheaval, this is not the focus.
The financial elements are merely used as a fabric for what is essentially a futuristic thriller.

In an overseas search there seemed to be more of this type of novels written by men about banking and economics. In both the U.K. and the U.S., the changes towards greed and avarice that occurred under economic rationalism were embraced by a group of new novelists who had worked as bankers. Their work became popular on both sides of the Atlantic. *Month of the Leopard*, written by James Harland (2001), a financial journalist, involves a search when the protagonist's wife disappears and, while trying to find her, he uncovers a plot to destroy the world's currencies. Other novels such as *Stock market rollercoaster* by Alexander Davidson, also published in 2001, while not thrillers, deal with a variety of themes in which the main characters learn to conquer the cutthroat dealing floors of share-dealing companies. Some of the financial novels, like *This bleeding city* by Alex Preston, include a love story in the midst of the bravado and excess; while others, such as Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic*, Ethan Cooper's *In control* and Sebastian Faulks' *A week in December* have ambitious protagonists who outsmart other major players to stay ahead of the pack. Most of these novels are written by male financial journalists or city traders and are instructive for the questions that they raise about gender and writing.

Unfortunately, very few women writers in this genre can be found either locally or overseas, and those who are writing financial fiction are following the more prescribed and masculine format rather than trying to combine the public and domestic spheres as I have done. Linda Davies is one of a few such overseas authors to have a substantial reputation. She has worked as a banker on Wall Street and then in the City of London. Accordingly, she became aware of the scope for enormous swindles that provided the inspiration for her novel *Nest of vipers*. In a posting on her website by jettica, “Banker-novelists and modern financial thrillers”, many of the characters of Davies’ novels are described as “adventurous women in a man’s world” (jettica, 2013). Her novels feature women as investment bankers, an M16 agent, a woman suspected of fraud involving derivatives who flees to Peru to fight security forces and drug runners, Bowie bonds (an asset-backed security that uses
the current and future revenue from albums recorded by musician David Bowie as collateral) and include a psychological thriller.

Back in Australia, the equivalent of this type of financial fiction does not seem to exist; only two novels by Australian female authors could be found, with financial issues as a sub-theme only. *Moral hazard* (2003) by Kate Jennings is the first that fits some aspects of the criteria, but very loosely. Born in the outback of Australia, and having attended Sydney University, Kate Jennings moved to New York in 1979. Her novel is set there in a fictional world of greed, prior to the global financial crisis. It consists of a dual narrative: Cath (a New Yorker in her mid-forties), describing her working life in the world of international high finance on Wall Street, where she works as an executive speech writer, and Cath (the same woman) describing her relationship with her husband Bailey and the steady decline of his health due to Alzheimer’s disease. It is noteworthy that Jennings’s attempt to include her business experience has been criticised as lightweight in U.K. reviews by Helen Brown in the *Daily Telegraph* and Glyn Brown in *The Times* (Complete Review, 2010). In the latter, we are told “her choice of (and command over) subject matter isn’t ideal” and that “She gets too many of the Wall St details wrong and she oversimplifies too much of high finance”. Overall, she is characterised as “A talented writer, perhaps simply trying to do too much” (Complete Review, 2010).

Also with peripheral financial issues is *Indelible ink* by Fiona McGregor, published in 2010. This novel focuses on the transformation of a fifty-nine-year-old recently divorced female called Marie King who, with her three children having moved out, decides to get a tattoo and thereby changes her perception of herself and others’ perceptions of her. Her transformation is, however, set on the affluent North Shore of Sydney, and the process of Marie having to sell the family home exposes her own indulgences, those of her adult children, and those of her middle-class friends. Marie struggles to adjust to her new financial circumstances, and further financial commentary comes from the three adult children. All are the products of this privileged upbringing, having received money to buy properties at the age of twenty-five, and being consumed by real-estate price rises and renovations. Both
Jennings’s and McGregor’s novels revolve around protagonists who would generally be considered middle class.

In 2010, when reporting on International Women’s Day and the discussions that it produced on the gender divide, Jo Case revealed comments that the former Miles Franklin judge, Kerryn Goldsworthy, had made on her blog “Australian Literature Diary” when commenting on all-male Miles Franklin shortlists. Goldsworthy’s view is that the works of credible female authors are often considered too domestic and modest in scope because of their focus on relationships and domestic politics. She believes there is a perception that women should write only about domesticity and middle-class concerns. British writer Rachel Cusk agrees with her, and wrote an article for the Guardian voicing the concern that women might cease to produce women’s writing “not because they are freer but because they are more ashamed, less certain of a general receptiveness, and even, perhaps, because they suspect they might be vilified” (Cusk, 2010).

Excluded from the powerful financiers of downtown Sydney in Australia, women have exactly the sort of “lower end” experience, at the intersection of high finance and the domestic, that would be of use to writing across these domains, yet they are not doing so. One reason appears to be that at the same time as economic rationalism has become dominant, women have been increasingly shut out of the world of finance. Marriage and children present obvious career barriers, but so too does paternalistic management, whether structural, attitudinal or behavioural. In 1994, on the tenth anniversary of the Sex Discrimination Act, various organisations agreed to support research projects designed to improve the position of women in Australia. The report, in 1997, Glass ceilings and sticky floors: Barriers to the careers of women in the Australian finance industry was prepared for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Westpac Banking Corporation. It shows that career and promotional opportunities have not changed anything and that the industry’s culture continues to reflect traditional male models. The term “glass ceiling” refers to vertical sex segregation, an accompanying idea of “glass walls” refers to occupational segregation, and “sticky floors” refers to the lack of career
movement beyond the initial entry. As such, this has affected male perceptions in areas of recruitment, selection, promotion, transfer and conditions of service.

Part-time work is yet another barrier to women in finance, as illustrated by the Australian Human Rights Commission, which shows that the Australian banking and finance industry has slightly more females than male workers but with many employed in part-time or junior positions, with the senior management and executive group being drawn exclusively from the full-time pool (Goward, 2005). H.R.Leader, a human-resources magazine, examined the patterns of the Australian workforce over a decade between 1997 and 2007. Some of the key findings are that men in the finance sector are much more likely to hold managerial positions than women, that women employed part-time in the finance sector are also twice as likely to be in clerical positions as men (sixty-five per cent for women, thirty-two per cent for men), and that the average personal income for men employed full-time is considerably higher than for women employed full time, with the difference more acute in the forty-five to fifty-nine age bracket. The result of this is that women have little serious exposure, not only to the world of high finance, but to all finance, and therefore must confine themselves to writing with a domestic focus.

In the overseas arena, however, alongside the financial fiction, a parallel genre of formulaic writing does exist, with such titles as Confessions of a corporate slut by Jacqueline Gum (2008), and Hedge Fund Wives by Tatiana Boncompagni (2009). This writing adds further weight to the gender theory that women write about what is familiar to them in the private domain, that being married is the only way to have access to the public domain of corporate privilege, and that without a high-flyer as a partner, even this is remote. In a nonfiction book Playing for high stakes: The men, money and power of corporate wives (2000), Elaine Denholtz uses a series of interviews to document the journey that these corporate wives are no doubt using as writing fodder. In Stage One, the women are devoted helpmates; in Stage Two, they begin to develop a growing dissatisfaction with their role but are not able to define their needs; then in Stage Three, they find their own voice, something that can ultimately lead to the dissolution of the relationship.
That women writers are deciding that the only choices they have are to either write their financial stories as domestic accessories, with their corporate husbands at the fore, or to remain silent, appears to also parallel the gender bias that is associated with suburbia. Hugh Stretton, a writer of social history, is credited with being among the first to recognise the fact that the gendering of suburbia pulls women back into it. In his book *Ideas for Australian cities*, he discusses the clichés of the suburbs as being merely domestic, a woman’s realm of trivial activities such as bringing up children, and set apart from important matters of the world of art, industry, commerce, excitement and achievement (Stretton, as cited in McCann, 1998). He is scathing of those who believe child-centred environments are childish, stating “If you undervalue that half because of its lower economic productivity you have a funny notion of productivity” (Stretton, as cited in McCann, 1998, p. 44). He goes on to remark that those mature individuals who believe that childhood is preparatory and adulthood the real thing are usually adult males. Stretton also attacks the trend of favouring the casual relationships of the nightclubs and casinos, maintaining that “there is as much suffering and happiness, as much crime and passion, as much art and industry going on in the suburbs as anywhere else, except that it is often beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facades of tranquil streets and respectable houses” (Stretton, as cited in McMann, 1998, p. 45).

Stretton’s views are supported by other historians who also refuse to generalise about the suburbs. Garry Kinnane reminds us that, in comparison with America, Australia has a dismal record when it comes to the social novel of the suburbs, listing the likes of John Updike, John Cheever and Don DeLillo as American authors who have built their reputations on this area of society and this group of people alone (Kinnane, as cited in McMann, 1998, p. 49). Kinnane’s view is that globalisation has ensured that we all live dangerously now and that suburbia offers a wealth of opportunities if writers can only see them and if the public will only embrace them.

In an article by Susanna Rustin in the *Guardian*, “Class is Permanent”, she quotes middle-class British author William Nicolson as feeling unable to write fiction about the middle class. Understanding that the middle classes dominate
British culture, he wants to write about his own world, but cannot, because he feels that “it was illegitimate subject-matter for serious fiction”. He once again points to American literature, in this case Jonathan Franzen’s novels about American family life, and believes that there is no such equivalent as there is no such compassion for middle-class characters of British and Australian life in their natural, everyday environments. In contrast, there is a “strong domestic market for homegrown romantic and women’s fiction that is very much concerned with love and marriage” (Nicholson, as cited in Rustin, 2011).

Ben Elton is, however, someone who can and does write about British middle-class characters, since he has authored *Meltdown*, a third-person narrative about how Jimmy, a stockbroker, and his wife Monica, along with a group of university friends who graduate in the 1990s, find success in their various careers but are then hit by the global financial crisis. Much of the story is dedicated to the fall of Jimmy, who has borrowed well beyond his means, lives in a five-storey Notting Hill mansion, and owns an entire London street, but becomes desperately poor with no cash flow when his negatively mortgaged property becomes devalued. At the same time, however, Elton critiques the raising of these characters’ children, the role of nannies, the nature of private schooling and their day-to-day routines. All this qualifies *Meltdown* for the category that I was interested in. In this respect it stands alone, as a British version that is similar to what Perlman and Barry have produced. It does, however, have similar shortcomings to those existing in the writings of Perlman and Barry, now to be discussed.

In Australia, the rare exceptions to the rule of the absence of serious fiction about the middle class are Elliot Perlman’s *Three dollars* and Peter Barry’s *We all fall down*. However, both are written by male authors, create traditional gender roles and, once again and by extension, provide a commentary on middle-class life executed from a masculine perspective.

With the title of the novel indicating the impact that economic rationalism can have on an individual, *Three dollars* is a domestic tale about a likeable, well-educated and morally decent middle-class family. Eddie is a thirty-eight-year-old chemical
engineer and his wife, Tanya, is completing a master’s thesis at university and through the construction of her thesis, Perlman uses Tanya to present a left-wing voice of social conscience while Eddie, who works for the Federal Department of Environment, supports her in her beliefs. Although Eddie manages to buy a nice house in the suburbs, he ends up on the brink of bankruptcy with just three dollars to his name, due to the politics that generate the socio-economic conditions of the time. Minor characters contribute to the critique with Eddie’s uncle committing suicide when the bank sells his houses in a mortgagee sale and he loses his business; Eddie’s father is affected by how the fictionalised government looks for ways to limit early retirees’ access to lump-sum superannuation funds. Also highlighted is the background of Eddie’s young crush, Amanda, and the socio-economic differences between them.

Despite Tanya being the mouthpiece for the socio-economic and political diatribes, she is, however, generally framed within the domestic environment, taking care of their daughter Abby and/or being in a state of depression. On the return of her husband from his fifth visit to Spensers Gulf, Tanya, having fallen asleep, had set the dining table for two and left his dinner in the microwave (Perlman, 1998, p. 174). Unlike his wife, who is primarily confined within the walls of their home, Eddie is in the public arena, and has been chosen to work on a special project to submit an environmental impact report directly to the Minister.

Because of the first-person narration, Eddie often has to second-guess Tanya. When having breakfast, after his daughter Abby has returned from hospital, following a seizure, Eddie uses conjecture and surmise to guess the state of Tanya: “Was Tanya thinking of the waiting she had in front of her in all its different hues?” or “Was she thinking of her thesis?” or “Was she waiting for the remaining weeks of her current employment to peter out?” or “Was she thinking that it was never meant to be and had not ever been?” (Perlman, 1998, pp. 253-4). In contrast to such a filter, Eddie is very direct about himself, telling us “I was essentially just an egocentric pseudo-intellectual slob motivated only by facile romantic notions” (Perlman, 1998, p. 76).
In addition to the issue of the male narrator are the fragments of gender stereotyping in the text. There is a discussion in 1985 about the “all ordinaries index” which Tanya doesn’t understand. When Eddie explains to Tanya how it all works, she asks “How come you know all about this and I don’t? It’s not a science”, to which Eddie replies “Cause I’m a man and even if we’re not interested we’re expected to know these things” (Perlman, 1998, p. 88). When their bathroom tiles are lifting in the shower recess and Eddie is ignoring this because he doesn’t know the first thing about fixing them, he states “As both a man and an engineer I should have known more about this than I did, should in the sense of everybody’s expectations, perhaps Tanya’s expectations. But I didn’t” (Perlman, 1998, p. 172). When reviewing this literature, these inclusions—in addition to the predominance of the male point of view—became influential in my thinking and acted as a major catalyst (displacing the initial concept of class), as I continued to search for answers to the “history of the absence” at the heart of my project.

While *Three dollars* puts a fictional and human face on the early ramifications of economic rationalism, it is not until the recent 2012 publication of *We all fall down*, by Peter Barry, that another such work appears. As well as including many aspects of economic rationalism, Barry’s novel also uses the 2008 global financial crisis, and the immediate conditions that preceded it, as a background for his writing. The title refers to the children’s rhyme that relates to either the Black Death of 1347–50 or to the Great Plague of London in 1665 whereby the falling down was an indicator of impending death. It is an apt title for an Australian narrative in which the relationship of the primary couple, Kate and Hugh Drysdale, eventually disintegrates along with Hugh’s work opportunities. Hugh earns a good salary working for an advertising company within a booming economy in Sydney, but at a time when the market is just beginning to falter. His wife Kate, from a wealthy family, is a stay-at-home mother with their young son, Tim. Coming from a disadvantaged background in Manchester, England, and fixated on the idea of achieving a financially secure dream, Hugh overextends by buying into a larger home in the hope of securing more property growth. When his company experiences a period of tightening, losing business, putting off staff and employing a new
creative director from the U.K., Hugh loses his job, his house and, because of the strain of it all, his marriage.

Like Perlman’s characters, Barry’s characters also reflect social politics. At a time when the value of their Sydney house has gone up seventy-five per cent, Hugh is well entrenched in neoliberal thinking. He quotes one of the directors at work, who has assured him that the boom will never end and that the demand for property will remain high for decades. He tells Kate that “the people who become rich are the people who stretch themselves” (Barry, 2012, p. 41). When the global financial crisis takes place in 2008, Hugh is reduced to selling things on eBay and holding a garage sale, being left with more than three dollars but not much more than a few thousand.

Unlike the close and unified relationship that Perlman creates between Eddie and Tanya, Hugh and Kate are diametrically opposed to each other’s plans and future pathways and lack any empathy for each other. In addition, in contrast to the first-person narrative in Three dollars, Barry writes in the third person. While this could make the bias more obvious in Perlman’s novel, it does nothing to mitigate it in Barry’s work. Once again, Kate is firmly ensconced in the domestic space, whereas Hugh is foregrounded in the public space of advertising, one of the most visible areas of corporate life.

We are told that Hugh works for The Alpha Agency, reporting to the Managing Director. His primary advertising account is Bauer (luxury cars). Hugh works in a skyscraper near the northern end of George Street, Sydney and the ad business is something he considers “exciting, fast and very much at the centre of things” (Barry, 2012, p. 65). He believes in creative advertising; advertising is always at the fore, with every available opportunity taken to debate the finer points of award-winning advertising versus selling. In contrast, Kate is in the domestic space: a mother, a wife and an artist who is cast as a “dabbler”, wanting a second child and often sitting with an empty wineglass waiting for a husband who is continually late and who arrives home smelling of perfume.
If there was some guesswork and surmise in *Three dollars*, it is nothing compared to that in *We all fall down*. Because the couple are not close and do not communicate well, or sometimes at all, there is continual second-guessing about the emotional responses of Kate: “It could have been she wanted to continue their argument, it could have been she wanted to make up with her husband” (Barry, 2012, p. 29). Hugh’s analysis of Kate is that she is a person of amateurish compromise—a woman with no real talent. When she wants another child to fill the bedrooms her tears could have been those of anger, sadness or frustration (Barry, 2012, p. 51). He just doesn’t know. Hugh also corrects Kate at various times, such as when she says she hates the house: “You don’t hate it Kate. Even if you did, you will come to love it one day” (Barry, 2012, p. 145). Although the third-person narrative has the potential for more intimacy with all the characters, it fails to do so because Hugh’s male voice is dominant.

Again, what is significant is the identification of the gender issues and how, at a social level, they are ideologically driven. Hugh states that it is “what husbands were supposed to do, take care of her and [son] Tim” (Barry, 2012, p. 115). Kate, according to her husband, understands none of this. We are told that the business world doesn’t interest her and that her reality is circumscribed by home, playschool and friends (Barry, 2012, p. 117). The opposite also applies. When Hugh tries to join in with the Easter celebration, hiding the Easter eggs, by his own admission it is false enthusiasm (Barry, 2012, p. 129). At such times, the gender differentiation endorsed my thinking that, even post-GFC, separate domains occur in middle-class families, and that this situation is not only reflected in who writes about which subject (as in male and female authors), but in the actual writing itself (as in gender stereotyping and differently gendered vocabularies).

 Various other gender contradictions show up at many points during this novel, in particular the double standard that Hugh applies in his asserted desire for ethical standards in the workplace as contrasted with his own personal, less ethical behaviour. He bemoans the fact that at work tactics are secretive, underhand and belittling of the worth of employees. He tells Kate that it is unethical when she suggests giving out the secret information about the report that Dieter paid for
(Barry, 2012, p. 196) and yet at the same time she is having to deal with his affair (Barry, 2012, p. 200). While the unfairness and disparity is obvious, this may well be what capitalism relies on in that Kate is the safety valve for contradictions that proponents of capitalism would otherwise have to face up to. More simply put, there is a lack of fit between the public and the private and this disjunction is often essential to capitalism. In the book *The secrets of CEOs: 150 global executives lift the lid on business*, by Steve Tappin and Andrew Cave, Jon Moulton affirms a preference for investing in companies where the CEO has been divorced, arguing that such a status creates more motivation due to the need to rebuild wealth (Tappin & Cave, 2008, p.19). With such a casual approach to family life, frequently, as in the case of my fictional family, gender becomes a key factor in which the woman struggles to maintain the cohesion of the family unit under displaced stress from the economic world, as the public slides into the private.

For all of their gender-dominated drawbacks, however, both *Three dollars* and *We all fall down* can unequivocally be said to be literary responses of the Australian middle class to financial impacts. They present the human faces of ordinary middle-class people, living ordinary lives, but who are dependent on a strong but fair economy. Both Perlman and Barry use their characters to make a plea for a gentler and kinder society in which the individual is not turned into a commodity and the family is offered some protection. Barry might well be sharing his own political philosophy through Joe (Hugh’s work-for-the-dole compatriot), when Joe leans on his spade and reflects on the eighties:

Those were the days when kindness died, killed off by the likes of Reagan and Thatcher. The only kindness shown in society in the eighties and nineties was institutional kindness, paid kindness from those leftie, sandal-wearing do-gooders and professional carers. But it wasn’t until a few years later, when George W. Bush, that traitor Blair and our own nonentity of a Prime Minister, the despicable Howard, arrived on the scene, that it really became every man for himself. That’s when society was split into winners and losers. Competition was everything, for people and for companies. And it’s still like that today, Hugh, twenty years later. (Barry, 2012, p. 303)
Overall, it can be said that the task of presenting my theme of a corporate, middle-class feminist wife finding independence—while living within the private domain of the suburbs but trying to intelligently access and assess the public domain of the globalised financial world—is a challenging one without a template. In the USA, a number of male writers write about the middle class, but with no particular attention to financial matters. In both the UK and the USA there are a plethora of financial thrillers, full of espionage and intrigue, but when it comes to literary responses to middle-class experiences of financial upheaval, there is only the UK writer Ben Elton. With regards to female writers, those few overseas women who have been exposed to Wall Street, or its equivalent, appear to have followed the example of their male counterparts (masquerading as male) or to have written domestic-based narratives about their lavish lifestyles as partners to some of these high-flyers. In Australia, only the male authors Elliot Perlman and Peter Barry have explored the subject, in attempting to bridge both public and private domains, but while foregrounding the workplace and writing from a male point of view. Both female Australian authors, Jennings and McGregor, have merely used the subject as sub-themes.
Emergent Knowledge

The aim of my journey was to engage the reader in a crisis expressed through financial social realism, thus bridging the gap between the public and the private domains. When this journey began, I had no way of telling that what began with a hypothesis about the Australian middle classes—and their historical and literary responses—would end up in a critique about gender and the embracing of feminist methodology. I had no way of telling that what began as an inquiry into middle-class financial upheaval would become one of authorial upheaval—a struggle of the female narrative voice as it attempted to stretch itself over the two domains in a feat which, at times, felt akin to the fanciful image of Colossus straddling land and sea. Nor could I foresee that my protagonist would become a voice for countless people who had been surveyed and quantified but who remained so economically dominated that they lacked the language to articulate the intuitions, anger and resentments that resided in their bones. I could never have imagined that, as a by-product of my project, I would create characters whose fictional dilemmas would showcase a number of significant sub-themes such as burnout, male impotence, lack of workplace support when raising teenagers, and the challenges when changing countries. Even more unlikely was the idea that the process of laying out a personal experience, and both embellishing it and subverting it, could result in such a profound healing. This healing is personal and has the potential to be public.

As I approached the end of the project and began to consider the findings, for the first time I began to draw out men in the world of finance who I thought may have been interested in what I had uncovered. The three men I spoke to had either senior managerial roles or were involved in some aspect of investment banking;
their responses demonstrated that my findings were not yet fully refined. As I began
to give a holistic picture of my journey and my findings to date, one jokingly asked
me for an abridged version. Another, at a different encounter, politely asked if I
could stay with the key issues and remove the background noise, while the third
said, with a wry smile, that although he was interested in the finance, he didn’t need
to hear my life story.

It was obvious that, in attempting to share my accomplishments to date,
despite my economic knowledge and attempt to break into a masculine domain—
both in the written and oral forms—I had the sort of language that patriarchy, in the
form of capitalism, was continually trying to smother. It was evident that, instead of
listening to an integrated and holistic story about my findings, these businessmen
sought after things like Richard’s quickly acquired habit of writing dot points. In a
way they wanted a novel of dot points, something that was unacceptable to me, both
personally and artistically. Just how such a situation may have come about, along
with its implications, will be dealt with during the account of my findings. Based on
these more recent conversations, however, it was with a great deal of irony that I
began to list some of these major findings and to deal with them in a semblance of
order.

The first element of the research that was of major importance was to confirm
the crucial aspects of my premise: that when considering the period from rational
economics to the global financial crisis, the middle class was indeed severely
affected. This was confirmed in both the work of Megalogenis (in his factual account
of the crises that occurred) and Pusey (in the more socially conscious and detailed
reporting of the impact these crises had on people’s lives). In both accounts, the
crises that were written about were severe, and could definitely be categorised under
the title of financial/social upheaval.

Megalogenis identified that the upheaval began in the early 1980s, and listed
unemployment and dramatic inflation as some of the things experienced by middle
Australia in the early 1980s. He also documented falls in household savings, the
stock-market crash and a recession under the stewardship of Australian Prime

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Minister Paul Keating, along with the disturbing fact that, unless men were at the upper end of the income bracket, this period saw the end of the sole male breadwinner with a job secure enough to maintain a partner at home. This principle of a “state of exception” turning into the norm was something I later identified as a pattern running throughout the project and is a phenomenon discussed later in the findings.

Through the socially conscious work of Pusey, I discovered that, despite Megalogenis’ s denial that middle-class Australians were emotionally affected by financial upheaval, they were angry and resentful and could identify all that they had lost. It was also through Pusey’s work that I discovered that, although willing to come forth with their discomfort when surveyed, their pain remained unarticulated and without a public face or a voice. His personal accounts were of people retreating into incommunicable anger, people who intuitively wished to revolt but who, for a reason that I did not then understand, could not decide when enough was enough. Their very statistics not only justified my project but also served as a platform from which my creative work cried out to be launched.

Also of major importance was the issue of whether there was, indeed, an absence of literary responses to these middle-class experiences. This was something that was suspected but needed to be verified, to the extent that this was possible. A wide-ranging search of both fiction and non-fiction, that was extended to the UK and the USA, unpredictably uncovered some serious issues about gender — including the fact that the international genre of financial fiction is dominated by a male voice. A verification occurred, with the finding that, in Australia, only Elliot Perlman and Peter Barry have dealt with my subject, albeit by foregrounding the public world of work and from a masculine perspective. When it comes to female writers in Australia, both Fiona McGregor and Kate Jennings have tarried with aspects of economic rationalisation and financial upheaval, but as a sub-theme rather than anything more substantial, leaving me with a gap to fill.

At the same time as uncovering issues of writing and gender, I found that the composition of those who make up the middle class had substantially changed. I
became aware that the middle class had become a different group of people than it was prior to 1980 because Australia’s social centre had broadened. Due to the nation’s prosperity, they were no longer classifiable by the old, reliable markers of job and postcode but by the independence of having money, with more self-interest than interest, along with many “interlopers” brought in by the mineral boom. Although a number of researchers assisted me to accumulate this knowledge, it was Andrew West’s innovative but most plausible division of these people into materialists and culturists that pushed me into gaining further insight about how they operated. The fact that the majority are neither reflective nor interested in portraying their financial experiences in literary fiction can be accounted for by the fact that many of them are West’s materialists, who focus on wine in preference to books; still this did not account for the culturists, those people who have a commitment to self-improvement, a curiosity about the world, fluent conversation, jobs with a conscience and who do well by doing good. They are the people who West, when citing Bourdieu, categorised as symbolically dominant but economically dominated, motivating me to find out why. I found the answer in gender and language.

In December 2013, in an interview with Paul Jay, Chris Hedges (a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist) asserts that those whose voices are heard, serve the system, and those who don’t, do not have a job. He includes in the first category the majority of professionals, paid intellectuals, professors and writers, who now accept the idea that the free market is the fundamental assumption and starting point (Peries & Jemison, 2013). It is his opinion that to suggest anything else is sacrilegious, since the ideology of a free market, laissez-faire capitalism and globalisation (a thin rationale for unmitigated greed) is still being advocated within modern economic policy. Thus, the ideology of the intellectual class serves the system. According to Hedges, the inability to grasp the pathology of oligarchic rules is a grave fault. At the same time, he alludes to the overall disconnect we have from the language we use to describe the economic system and the reality of our economic system, in which corporations have become predators on the governments and on taxpayers’ money (Peries & Jemison, 2013). We have been robbed of the language by
which we could express the reality of what we are undergoing because our radical populist dissident movements, those who once offered a critique of the power elite, have been banished or silenced. The self-identified liberal middle class therefore no longer do anything to defend the interests of those they claim to represent, making it easy to see how West’s Culturists have been silenced and pushed into the margins. As such, there is both a longstanding lack of literature and art about the middle class and a more recent ideological silencing of dissent. Both concern language, but from different historical origins or conditions, and with different if complementary effects. My novel represents a rebuff to both strands.

Hedges elaborated further in an earlier interview with Jay in July 2013, saying that we are in this strange period when the language we use to describe our economic and political system no longer matches the reality (Peries & Jemison, 2013). In Harvard Business School, they are still teaching the doctrine of the same old financial system, even after the federal government in America, where the global financial crisis began, bailed out the banks to the tune of trillions of dollars. In this respect, he tells us, we have not moved into a period where the vocabulary we use to describe our reality matches that reality. There is a disconnect between the way we speak about ourselves and the way we actually function. Consequently, we are always searching for words to describe what is happening to us (Peries & Jemison, 2013). This is a good place for a novelist to occupy as one who tries to introduce, infiltrate or smuggle new languages or vocabularies into the culture.

While Hedges’ claims make both intuitive and intellectual sense, we must question how these new economic paradigms became such a mainstream view. An answer can been found in the discussion driven by Brett Neilson, when he critiques Giorgio Agamben and his review of the notion of the political in *New cultural studies: Adventures in theory*. Agamben expresses a deep scepticism about the possibility of ever fully escaping from the existing articulations of capitalist and state power (Neilson, 2006). As Agamben develops his argument, and draws on the work of Carl Schmit and the notion of a “state of exception” or emergency in which normal legal and constitutional arrangements are suspended, it is easy to see how this strips away our language and extends into areas of our private lives until it becomes the norm.
Sovereign power, as pointed out by Neilson, is not the only form of power and it is generally recognised that the current era of globalisation is one in which economics has triumphed over politics (Neilson, 2006). Wendy Brown argues that sovereign power has been eroded by economic forces and that it has lost control of its destiny (Brown, 2010). Agamben believes that both sovereignty and governmentality (in other words, here, politics) have always been intertwined—they just have two faces. Today this is evident in the phenomena of globalisation and its economic aspects, and internally in domestic politics. Thus, sovereignty is the way in for economics to enter politics and the spread of economic rationalism has reconfigured all our lives, including the university environment in which cultural studies exist. Thus, the 1980s policies of restructuring and privatisation became a state of exception that morphed into the norm, only to be re-enforced by another state of exception with the coming of the global financial crisis. The interests of private entities, think tanks and big data then converged to complete this act of colonisation. When the political becomes economic, the middle class (like all classes) gets pushed to one side, since it is not identified by or within financial politics. Alongside this, patriarchy smothers the domestic in the public when it comes to financial and economic matters.

It is painfully obvious that women are the most financially disenfranchised within this middle-class group (Still, 1997). The intersection between private and public is smothered by the public language of the financial. Those who have access to it are men and the public story they tell differs from the one that concerns women. With rare exceptions, women are less engaged in the finance industry and excluded from the jargon of finance and economics more generally, and it is my conclusion, that this language disconnect continues into the literary world, manifesting in a silence. While men may be happy to either participate in or to find power in telling their own thrilling financial boardroom stories, this should not set the pattern for women. Women too have shared in this financial pain and need a debate and not a stranglehold. It is women, with their consciousness of the dominant paradigm and their ability to reconcile this with their own reality, who have been rendered silent, but it is also women who have the ability to name and shame the current situation,
where economics has become the cornerstone of our lives. Instead of being intimidated by the language of finance, women need to bypass it and use their own everyday, non-corporate language to express their reality.

As Catherine Belsey explains, if women make their ideas accessible then the contradictions of such things as the current economic order, including the “state of exception”, can be identified, exposed and actively transformed. In addition, it is only by distancing ourselves from such modes of representation that we can also expect to identify which areas of ideology are silenced by Patriarchy. This is a liberating concept that frees us from such conventions and, as female authors, motivates us to move beyond “timeworn patterns of signification” (Belsey, 2002, p.38).

Obfuscation reduces the opportunity for healing, reduces meaningful communication, protects the power of those who hold it and increases the importance of what they hold on to. It will continue to do so if left unchecked. For this reason women need to establish a language of honesty, within other masculine-dominated occupations, where specialist language creates a gap. Not to do so is to endorse a society in which there is less talking to less people in a vocabulary that becomes more specific and at the same time more exclusive. As seen in the language of finance, very often it is women who are no longer meaningfully participating in the conversation. On a broader scale, because a lack of language transparency has so many parallels in other occupations that are similarly positioned and silenced by Patriarchy, any commitment by women to resist such entrenched practices will have a far-reaching effect on society.

A new project from a female author that describes the plight of an executive wife, not as hostess, but as how she fits into a wider emotional and financial picture, may well indicate that many things are wrong, and foreground many injustices in our society as a whole. This recognition of contradictions can bring about social change. It is also reasonable to consider that my own literary response to the Australian middle-class experiences of financial upheaval may be significant as much for its sub-themes as for its initial focus. It is possible that an account of the
expatriate experience of moving to a new country and living with burnout, impotence and troubled teenagers may be as instructive as the account of the financial overextending of the family, or indeed of the financial system itself. Just as the processes of creative research are unpredictable, so too are the results for both the audience and the creator of the work.

In the end my confrontation with the “self” was resolved—not as a fixed inner core, not as a machine ruled by rational thought, not as the male model of autonomy, self-control and self-sufficiency, nor even as a relational connecting self, but as one who was exploring as many domains as possible, albeit the private sphere first and then the public—in an open-ended textuality. As Hélène Cixous explains, it is the kind of writing that matters and not the author, and writing itself is the factor that augments this discovery. In a way, to paraphrase and twist Jacques Lacan, I had to lose myself in language in order to re-identify myself in language (Lacan, as cited in Thomas, 2009).

Along with a writing “self”, I have also found redemptive meaning in my writing. There has been an honest encounter with healing through helping myself, and perhaps other women, to find wholeness. With an affirmative will to power, the will to form and create, I have tried to become an assessor and creator—my critique active and affirmative—hopefully contributing to society, presenting good sense, not for its own sake but for the sake of research, for the sake of establishing a place within the masculine-dominated literature of financial social realism and for the relief of my feminine mind and the minds of others like me.

It can therefore be said that having tried to satisfy all of the above objectives, as well as creating an awareness of the broader extent to which women are affected and can re-direct change, as Jane discloses in the first line of The Company He Keeps, “In a way that has ceased to be fashionable for women who are more than forty-something, I like myself”. 
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