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**IN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HISTORICAL FICTION.**

submitted for the degree of **PhD (CREATIVE WRITING)**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There have been a lot of people who have helped and supported me to make this thesis, and specifically the novel *Voice of the Shadows*, the best it can be. I would like to thank the first readers of my novel, who gave me invaluable feedback on early drafts: my parents, Elizabeth and Peter Ryan, and my colleague and friend Helen Withycombe, all of whom read the novel multiple times. I also want to thank later readers who added their thoughtful feedback – Claire Flynn, Bec Harris, Mark Kavenagh, and my sister Claire Nightingale. The novel is much better for their generous time, honesty and wisdom.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Antonia Pont who has known exactly where, and how far, to push me. I appreciate her insightful feedback on the novel and the exegesis both, and the conversations over coffee that have really crystallised my thoughts. Her clear pinpointing of where and how things weren’t working has been so helpful, and my thesis is a much better work because of it.

I would like to thank my grandmother, Sheilah Hamilton, from whom I first heard the story of the Brownout Strangler who killed women to get their voices.

I would like, also, to thank the Wheeler Centre where I work, for so many things. For the inspiring conversations I have listened to from the back of the Performance Space and other venues, over the past five years – so many of these have infused my work. For the wonderful colleagues and friends who have been interested in, and supportive of, my work and study, and who are always asking about it, and who I know will be ready to have a celebratory drink with me now that it is done. For creating and fostering a community of writers in Melbourne that is so welcoming and supportive – for this I’d also like to thank Writers Victoria.

And finally I would like to thank my family: my parents Elizabeth and Peter, my sisters Claire and Bec, and my partner Scooter. Thank you for being there, always.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis will attempt to address the question of whether the Gothic is still useful as a transgressive mode of representation in Australian women’s historical fiction. It will do so via the practice-led work of a novel accompanied by exegesis. The novel, Voice of the Shadows, is a full-length work of historical fiction set in Melbourne in 1942, during World War 2. It uses as background the story of the Brownout Murders, where an American GI named Edward Leonski killed three women in the space of fifteen days. He was arrested and confessed that he killed these women ‘to get their voices’. The protagonist is Alice Jenkins, a working-class girl inspired by real-life journalist Pat Jarrett, who covered the Leonski court martial because, as her editor said, there were no men around to do the job. In the novel, she has a fledgling relationship with one of the three women, just before the latter is murdered by Leonski.

The exegesis examines fraught areas of representation at issue in the novel and the process of writing it. It charts a history of affinity between women’s writing, historical fiction, and the Gothic, as explored in the writing of contemporary scholars such as Diana Wallace and Anne Stevens. These scholars have focused on this primarily in the British context. My thesis brings it into an Australian post(?)colonial context, exploring the construction and representation of racial, sexual and gender identities in relation to the Gothic and Australian colonial history. It explores the tension of the Gothic: that although it has a transgressive power and has been used by marginalised people to ‘write back’ against their marginalisation, it also reinforces these marginalising structures through an inherent conservatism. In my thesis, I explore whether it is still a useful mode, given this conservatism, or whether we are entering a post-Gothic world. Over four chapters, I discuss the representation of women, Aboriginal characters, and queer women, using examples from Australian fiction. In choosing these examples, I have focused on historical novels by Australian women, set in Australia, with women protagonists.

Overall, the thesis examines how creative writers may engage with the Gothic and dismantle it, in order to subvert traditional re-impositions of patriarchal heteronormative endings. The exegesis seeks to advance practice-led knowledge in relation to the challenges posed by the theoretical questions above, specifically in relation to practices of representation in the field of post-Gothic, women’s queer writing and the settler context.
INTRODUCTION

The Gothic has been used as a transgressive mode of writing since its beginning in the late eighteenth century, particularly by women writers. Women have found that this characteristically otherworldly, ghostly, shadowy mode of storytelling and representation has particularly suited their stories, which were traditionally excluded from the more corporeal, embodied, ‘realism’ that was the usual domain of men. They have used it to ‘write back’ against this exclusion, to write from the margins, to write their own histories and experiences. The act of ‘writing back’ is discussed often in this thesis and refers to writers using historical fiction to look back and redress the ways the past has been misrepresented, addressing omissions as well as errors. Fiction can do this by uncovering ‘lost subjectivities’ but it can also go beyond that and create ‘multi-layered texts that can incorporate, and hold in tension, multiple perspectives’ (Mitchell & Parsons 2013 p.6). The Gothic is one mode that historical novelists have used to do this. And yet the Gothic, even with this transgressive impetus, is also inherently conservative (Jackson 1981, p.96; Althans 2010, p.12): since although it challenges the dominant ideology, it usually ceases to displace it, and the structures it seeks to subvert are still secure at the end. In this thesis, through a novel and exegesis, I will explore the ways in which the Gothic has been successful as a transgressive mode of writing, and the ways in which it often fails. I will explore this in relation to representation of women, Aboriginal and queer characters in historical novels by Australian women. I will consider the possibilities for the Gothic in a postmodern world, and I will ultimately seek to address whether the Gothic is still useful as a transgressive mode of representation in historical novels by Australian women.

The Gothic, like other genres, is a mode that is difficult to define. It tends to be described by its most common characteristics, rather than any totalising definition. This might be a listing of recognisable symbolic images, such as crumbling castles, fog, secret letters, hidden passages, flickering candles, confined women, ghosts, vampires and the supernatural. It is usually
characterised as having something to do with fear. It usually bears some relationship to the past, or the haunting of the present by the past. It is usually transgressive, challenging, unsettling. It is also decidedly anti-realism (Wallace 2013, p.1). In chapter one I will look at what it means to be anti-realism – I will consider what ‘realism’ is, and what values it can espouse and uphold, for what purposes. I will look at where the Gothic intersects with and undermines ‘realism’ and discuss some other ‘anti-realism’ modes and new ways of configuring ‘realism’. For the purposes of this thesis, I am using the word ‘Gothic’ broadly to include anything that is otherworldly: it can include certain types of fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction, and I will use examples from all of these genres, and more.

I have chosen to focus on Australian women’s historical novels. As mentioned above and elaborated on in this exegesis, there is an affinity between women writers, historical fiction and the Gothic that goes back a number of centuries. Contemporary scholars such as Diana Wallace and others have done a significant amount of work on this history and affinity in a British context, much of which is referenced in this thesis. I wanted to bring this to bear in an Australian context and consider the ways in which historical novels by Australian women have contributed to the construction of both national and personal identities, and how they have worked – and continue to work – to challenge these myths and identities. The novels I have referenced in the exegesis – apart from a few comparative exemplars from British writers or the occasional male writer – are all novels written by Australian women, featuring women protagonists, set in Australia. The novels written in contemporary times, for the most part, have an historical setting: at least 60 years in the past. Many of the novels written in the past are about the author’s contemporary time (and therefore not historical) but these novels speak to the construction of particular identities through time and contribute to the identity politics at play in the historical novels written in contemporary times. Given that a significant part of my focus is on Australian national identity politics, I felt that it was important to concentrate on novels set in Australia. I have also limited the scope by
focusing on literary novels, although I was open to the inclusion of literary crime, romance, science fiction, speculative fiction, and fantasy novels. My judgement of this ‘literariness’ echoes Amanda Johnson’s in *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage: Making and Unmaking the Postcolonial Novel:*

Without wanting to drive a wedge between populist fiction and literary fiction, I can hardly regard authors such as Dan Brown and Colleen McCullough as being in the same critical or politically aspirational zone as (Peter) Carey, (Kate) Grenville and (Kim) Scott. Scott’s *Benang* proposes a form-and-content relationship that deploys research for specific postcolonial political intentions rather than for the niceties of building historical atmosphere (2016, p.125).

For my purposes, I have referred to novels that have a particular political aspiration regarding the representation of women, Aboriginal Australians, or queer or women-desiring-women and their histories. What is this political aspiration, how does it manifest in a postmodern world, and what forms of writing best evoke and animate it?

Postmodernism has demanded that we rethink what used to be cornerstone structures, including history and realism. These structures are considered no longer to be able to tell the whole, objective story, but are recognised as subjective contributions that are ideologically loaded. For Jean-Francois Lyotard, it is the withdrawal of the real, and the celebration of that withdrawal, that characterises postmodernism (Berlatsky 2011, p.3), as opposed to modernism, which continues to be nostalgic for a time when ‘realism’ seemed to be available, approachable (Berlatsky 2011, p.4). Lyotard says: ‘Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences’ (1984, p.81). This, of course, has implications for how we perceive and present history. Amy J Elias says:

The act of historical retelling becomes refocussed on the event that is unpresentable rather than on the minute study and empirical reconstruction of past actions; history becomes more about testifying to the unpresentable than about re-presenting the past (2001, p.29).
Elias goes on to paraphrase Lyotard: ‘what we need ... is a performative history that remembers without appropriating, that stands between the space of remembering and the space of forgetting’ (Elias 2001, p.29). This seems to me to be arguing for the application of a light touch to history, a questing, questioning approach, rather than heavy, confident footfalls that make claim to ‘realities’ that they, in fact, both construct and defend.

This whispering, unpresentable quest where the writer stumbles upon fragments of the past and pieces together a story from the mystery that remains, seems to me to fit nicely with the Gothic. But is the Gothic as we know it up to the task of this postmodern (re)presentation? The Gothic is good at rattling cages, but, as mentioned above, it is not necessarily the tool that is going to tear apart the bars. The Gothic will show us the social anxieties of a society, will ask questions about the positions of people within that society, will cast light into its dark corners and shadows, but will not necessarily bring a solution. The Gothic is associated with that pleasurable – but ultimately safe – thrill of being scared without actually being threatened. The Gothic, as such, is perhaps more of a modernist mode than a postmodernist one: a sublime impulse that will approach the awe-inspiring, terrifying thing, but will retreat, at the end, back into the warm safety of the unchanged world. For Steven Bruhm, the Gothic has always pined for an impossible social stability that never existed, ‘mourning a chivalry that belonged more to the fairytale than to reality’ (2002, p.259). And perhaps this nostalgia, coupled with the conservative restoration of social order at the end, means that the Gothic has had its day.

Are we, then, living in a post-Gothic world? Amanda Johnson mentions the term ‘post-Gothic’ a couple of times in her monograph Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage, but she doesn’t define it, and it doesn’t seem to be in regular use in academic writing. Fred Botting uses the term ‘aftergothic’ in the title of his essay Aftergothic: consumption, machines and black holes that appears in the Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction, but again doesn’t define it or indeed use it in the text of the article. He does,
however, believe the Gothic as we know it has lost its power, and I quote here at length:

An inhuman future is shrouded in old Gothic trappings emptied of any strong charge; past images and forms are worn too thin to veil the gaping hole of objectless anxiety. Gothic fiction, which served as earlier modernity’s black hole and has served up a range of objects and figures crystallising anxiety into fear, has become too familiar after two centuries of repetitive mutation and seems incapable of shocking anew. Inured to Gothic shocks and terrors, contemporary culture recycles its images in the hope of finding a charge intense enough to stave off the black hole within and without, the one opened up by postmodernist fragmentation and plurality. Gothic figures, once giving form to the anxieties surrounding the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois culture, now disclose only the formlessness, the consuming void underlying the flickering thrills of contemporary Western civilisation (2002, p.298)

Catherine Spooner, on the other hand, argues for a reconsideration of the Gothic in her 2017 book Post-Millennial Gothic. Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic. She argues that, in the twenty-first century, there has been a proliferation of ‘images, texts, products and artefacts that do not seem remotely anxious or traumatised, that revel in their Gothicness’, and that to see the Gothic only as an expression of underlying social anxieties is to limit its scope (2017, p.17). She calls this ‘happy Gothic’, as per the book’s subtitle. She goes on to say that ‘this counter-narrative is not apolitical, it engages specifically and repeatedly with identity politics but also … with a politics of national representation’ (2017, p.17). Giving examples such as Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight series of novels and films, as well as many others from literature, television, film and other media, Spooner argues that:

Radical new spaces are imagined in which the absence of the ‘normal’ makes for the possibility of uniquely fluid identities based not in otherness but in celebration of the multiple differences. The assimilative monster stands for social inclusion and as such we cannot be too nostalgic for the days before subcultures were assimilated by the mainstream ... the sympathetic vampire (or werewolf or zombie) is a direct result of the gains in feminism, civil rights and gay liberation
since the 1960s, and tolerance of alternative lifestyle choice is an extension of that process' (2017, p.185).

Spooner’s study does not argue for a new Gothic, but rather an expanded one: she states explicitly that this ‘happy Gothic’ is not intended to replace the Gothic of ‘trauma, social conscience, sublimity and terror’ (2017, p.187). It is intended, rather, to ‘put the term Gothic to work in new and sometimes unexpected ways’ (2017, p.187). For Botting, one of the problems of the postmodern Gothic was that it seems ‘less able to restore boundaries by allowing the projection of a missing unifying (and paternal) figure. No single framework stabilises social meanings and identities’ (2002, p.281). For Spooner, perhaps, this is the exact thing that recommends it.

In my exegesis, I will explore issues of representation, appropriation, and identity politics, both personal and national, in Australian women’s historical fiction. I will show how the Gothic has worked in these spaces as a subversive tool and attempt to identify where it needs re-thinking in order to continue to be transgressive and generative. In my novel, I have played with Gothic tropes: setting them up, then unpicking them. Across both the novel and the exegesis, I have attempted to find a way to move through the Gothic and to continue to be haunted by it: to sit with its hallmarks of discomfort and challenge, to allow my work to be unsettling and remain unsettled, rather than to seek any neat and (in fact) fantastical resolution at the end.

My intent in this thesis will be to show that if it is true that the Gothic might no longer be reliably effective in representing the past in a subversive political way, that it is not because we no longer need these transgressive stories. Conversely, it is because we need them more than ever, but we need to rethink them. We need them to do more.

*Reading Note to Examiner:
I have included in this document the entire novel but have marked certain passages which may be skipped over, without risking the integrity of this
thesis as a whole. As such, if time is at issue, a reader may skip the paragraphs presented here with a line down the side of the page. These passages, although wholly a part of the novel as creative work are scene- and atmosphere-setting passages that have been selected (out) in order to conform to the advised word count. I hope that this allows for a flexible experience for examiners under various degrees of time pressure.
VOICE OF THE SHADOWS
May 1942
Alice arrived home the day the murders began.

The Spirit of Progress carried her backwards towards a past she thought she'd left behind. She stared out the window. All she could see was thick mid-morning fog obscuring the city, revealing only fleeting glimpses of Spencer Street Station looming before her. She remembered how excited she'd been when she'd left to go to Sydney, two years before. Now she sat, her shoulders slumped and her forehead resting on the window. The glass fogged up where she breathed on it. With her finger she drew a heart in the fog, then scrubbed it out. There would be no more of that. The train’s loud whistle sounded then, a timely reprimand that brought her back to the present.

The train drew into the platform and came to a halt. Passengers around her scrambled for luggage, smoothed their good travelling clothes, and smiled, eager to get off the train and greet whomever was waiting for them in the crowd on the platform. Alice waited until they’d gone before she fetched her suitcase and stepped off the train. She braced herself against the cold autumn breeze and looked around. Fallen leaves pooled in gutters and along the train tracks, the newer ones red and gold and copper, the older leaves brown, brittle. She heard one crunch beneath her foot as she walked away from the train.

The platform was almost empty now. She’d written home to say when she’d be arriving, but she didn’t know if anyone would come. It was possible after all that Kate had written to tell her mother what had happened in Sydney. Her face felt hot in the icy air. She stood up straight, tucked a recalcitrant blonde curl under her hat and tightened her grip on her suitcase. What would she do if no-one came? She pegged her shoulders back, firmly.
If no-one came, she would find a boarding house, she would –
But then, a cloud of steam from the train dissipated and revealed her mother, not only there but smiling and waving. Alice almost dropped her suitcase as the tension left her shoulders in a rush. She took a deep breath and walked towards her mother.

At that moment, not too far away in a big old rambling house in East Melbourne, Ivy McLeod was already hard at work, not yet having any idea that this was to be the last day of her life. She was up to her elbows in a bucket of soapy water, just like any other day.

For Alice, it was the first day of her life back home – a life that she was stepping into with a heavy step. She wasn’t sure which was the scarier prospect – not recognising the life she’d left back home, or recognising it exactly, because it hadn’t changed at all. For now, she was hugging her mother at the station and walking with her down Spencer Street to the tram stop. Inside the tram, she sat on the wooden seat and rested her feet on her suitcase. She listened as her mother told her about what everyone in Richmond had been up to over the last two years. She tried to remember who they all were. She’d need to know. She’d need to care.

The tram rattled up Flinders Street. The shops along the street were still open, but some of them had boards or sandbags inside their windows, guarding against an attack. There was a large American flag fluttering in the breeze above the clocks of Flinders Street Station, at the bottom of the dusty green dome.

The tram crossed over Punt Road and shuddered into Richmond. There were a few empty shops along Bridge Road, and more boards and sandbags. Alice closed her eyes and tried to believe she was travelling back to a time before the war. Her mother prodded her arm when they reached their stop. She got up and followed, content just to go through the motions of this strange, stilted homecoming.

Outside, the air accosted her with its stink, a cocktail of industries at work. She’d been away long enough for the stench and the noise of the
factories – once so familiar – to be strange to her again. It settled on her like a layer of pungent grime, soaking into her clothes, her skin: a disquieting welcome.

They walked down Coppin Street and turned into Abinger Street, and home. The house was squashed between the houses on either side, as if trying not to take up too much space, its red bricks tumbling over each other. The paint around the windowsills was peeling, and the verandah was crooked underneath the crimson wrought-iron lace across its roof. It didn’t feel the way she remembered home feeling. Had the house always leaned, like that, into the Wests’ next door? It was funny how you didn’t notice those details about a place you’d lived in all your life, until you went away. Until you saw things differently.

Alice opened the squeaky gate at the same moment Sylvie came out through the front door. She didn’t seem quite the same, either, but of course she wouldn’t. Alice knew she was pregnant, of course. She’d had a letter. But there was something else. Alice frowned. Her sister looked, at that moment, quite uncannily, like their mother. Alice had never noticed the similarity before. It had snuck up on her, while she wasn’t looking, as if someone had come along and taken Sylvie away and left this other, older, woman in her place. She followed her inside.

‘Is that Alice, home from her adventures in Sydney-land?’

‘Harry!’

Her uncle emerged from behind the flimsy partition that formed, in the corner of the lounge room, a temporary bedroom that had been there for ten years. He enveloped her in a hug. She breathed in the smell of tobacco, woodsmoke, and sweat. Here, she thought, here is something that hasn’t changed. She sighed, relieved.

‘Who wants a cuppa?’

‘Keep mine warm,’ Harry said, shrugging into his overcoat. ‘Goin out for a bit. Gotta see a man about a dog.’ He winked at Alice. ‘Good to have you home, love.’ And he left.
‘Do you have coffee, Mum?’ Alice asked. Her mother looked surprised, and then concerned.

‘I’m not sure. I think we have some somewhere; in the pantry?’ she looked at Sylvie, who shrugged.

‘That’s all right,’ Alice said. ‘I drank a lot of coffee in Sydney, but I had one in Albury this morning, so tea will be fine.’

In any case, it had been her habit to drink coffee with Pat.

She followed Sylvie into the kitchen and watched her mother tip the water out of the teapot, retaining the soggy tea leaves from breakfast. She stirred them around and filled the pot up with boiling water from the kettle and left it to steep. She must have thought, after the Depression, that she wouldn’t have to do that anymore, that she might have fresh leaves for every pot. But then the war had come and the countries that produced Australia’s tea were occupied by the Japanese.

‘I’ll go down and register for my tea allowance on Monday, Mum,’ Alice said. ‘I assume you’re all registered at the Marinos’?

‘Oh wonderful,’ said her mother, calculating. ‘That puts us up to four ounces a week now that there are four of us here again. And Mr and Mrs Marino sometimes slip us a bit extra. On account of Sylvie’s condition, mind.’

Her mother poured the tea and went to stir the soup on the stove.

Alice thought about Kate up in Sydney and wondered if she was still collecting Alice’s tea allocation from the corner store. Alice had left in such a hurry she hadn’t thought to cancel her registration at the shop. Kate would miss the extra ounce. But, she reflected, Robbie would be nine soon, and he’d be able to register for his own allocation. That would help.

‘Lovely cuppa, Mum,’ she said.

She leaned back and took a deep breath that was full of the scent of her mother’s beef and barley soup. Being back in Melbourne held its comforts after all, she had to admit, even if there had been a time when she had been ready to leave it all behind forever.

‘What’s the latest news from John, Sylvie?’ Alice asked her sister after lunch.
‘Nothing much,’ Sylvie said, picking up a pile of plates from the table and carrying them to the sink. ‘He is still hoping to be back for the birth.’

‘Hoping?’ Alice asked. Her mother and Sylvie were silent, but looked at each other, and she guessed that this was a conversation they had had before.

‘Who knows what will happen? My baby may yet be delivered by a Japanese doctor.’

‘Sylvie! Don’t make jokes like that! Of course Dr Flannery will deliver your baby.’

‘John’s asked for leave around the baby’s due date,’ Sylvie said, ‘but there are so many unknowns. What if the baby isn’t on time?’ She left the other unknowns unsaid.

‘I’m sure it will be all right,’ Alice said, picking up the soapy saucepan from the dishrack and wiping it with her sodden tea towel. She replaced it in the pots cupboard and hung the tea towel on the oven rail.

‘I was able not to think too much about it while I was working,’ Sylvie said. ‘But now that I’ve finished up at the factory …’

‘You’ll have enough to occupy your time soon enough,’ their mother said.

‘I do miss the factory, though. Mostly the girls. Mr Hogan was good to keep me on there after I was married, even when I fell pregnant, and he does treat his girls well.’

‘Mr Hogan? From up on Lennox St? Fred’s father?’

‘Not Fred’s father, Alice. Fred himself!’

‘Fred? I thought he enlisted?’

‘Textiles and clothes manufacturing is a reserved industry, so when he took on a job at Pelaco he was saved from having to enlist. He’s doing very well for himself, practically running the factory. The girls say he’s a real favourite of the managing directors.’

‘Running it?’

‘Not quite running it,’ said Sylvie. ‘Yet, at least. He has been promoted and promoted. He’s a foreman now.’
‘And he’s still not married,’ said her mother, with a pointed look in Alice’s direction.

‘He did often ask about you, Alice, when I saw him at the factory or at picnics and outings.’

‘He’s very handsome,’ said her mother.

Handsome? Perhaps he was. She thought about the last time she’d seen him – the day before she’d left for Sydney. He’d given her a bag of boiled lollies for the train trip and reminded her to write.

‘Perhaps he’s the reason she decided to come home so suddenly,’ Sylvie said, winking towards their mother.

‘Of course he isn’t why I came home! I came home because I thought you could do with an extra wage around here, now that Sylvie has finished up at the factory and there’s about to be another mouth to feed. And Kate doesn’t need me as much anymore, now that Evie is fourteen and about to leave school. She can help with the smaller children, and around the hou–’

‘Keep your hair on,’ said Sylvie. ‘I was just teasing. How about we go for a walk?’ Sylvie untied her apron and slipped it over her head. ‘Let’s go down the park.’

Alice, her face still burning, turned to grab her hat and coat.

They meandered up Lyndhurst Street, across Bridge Road, and down Gleadell Street, to the Richmond City Reserve. The breeze was stiff, fresh, and carried that factory stench that made Alice wrinkle her nose. There were a couple of boys at the Reserve, kicking the footy. Something about the park made Alice think of their father – not the father who had come back, shell-shocked, from the war, but the other one – the one he’d been before he’d gone. There was an impression, a memory, of that long-ago father, somewhere in her mind. She wasn’t sure if she could trust it, but she wanted to, desperately. It was a picture that had faded before it had become familiar to her, but which she kept, like an old negative, this washed-out version of her father that might once have been real, but just as easily might never have been. She crossed the path and linked her arm with Sylvie’s, feeling a sudden glow of intimacy with her sister. Sylvie glanced over at her, surprised, but
smiling. She patted Alice’s hand with her own. Alice felt, in that moment of
sisterhood, that maybe she could tell Sylvie what had really happened in
Sydney. That maybe Sylvie would understand. After all, she knew what it was
like to fall in love.

A lady with a baby in a pram walked by. Sylvie took a gentle hold of
Alice’s fingers and guided them onto her belly.

‘Can you believe that in a few months I’ll be pushing a pram, just like
that?’

‘I know.’

They stopped walking and stood facing each other on the path. ‘I
thought it would never happen. I thought there was something wrong with
me.’ Sylvie said. ‘You’ll understand one day, Alice. When it happens to you.
It feels like all my life’s been leading to this, like I’m fulfilling my purpose.’

And Alice knew she couldn’t tell her, not now at least. She wondered
if the time would ever be right, or if it even mattered, now that there wasn’t
anything left to tell.

That night after dinner, after Harry had put on his air raid warden
helmet and left to patrol the streets, Alice sat in the living room and told her
mother and sister stories of Sydney, stories whose necessary omissions made
them false to Alice’s ears, but sounded to her mother and Sylvie like catching
up on lost time. Lies, thought Alice, that she must pretend to believe.

‘Did Katherine ever have news of Charles?’ her mother asked, lowering
her tone.

Alice shook her head. ‘She’d go every day to the post office. She hasn’t
heard a single word since she got the telegram telling her he was captured.’

‘How awful!’ Sylvie said. ‘No news for two years! I don’t know what I’d
do, if that were John. It was so good of you to go to her, Alice. She’ll miss you.’

Alice grimaced. ‘The kids will, I’m sure,’ she said. ‘And I’ll miss them.
I grew quite close to them, especially Evie. And little Jack. Every night I
prayed that he would one day get to know his father.’
Sylvie looked down at her stomach, and then, very quietly, she rose. She moved slowly, switched off the ceiling light. She turned then and almost ceremoniously began drawing black hessian curtains across the windows. Alice hadn’t noticed these curtains before, and she wondered where the original white drapes had gone. The flames from the open fireplace in the corner flickered and danced, projecting restless light and shadow onto the surfaces of the room in ever-changing patterns. Sylvie herself was transformed in the half-light; her pregnant belly gave her an unfamiliar shape. She lit two kerosene lamps, one at either end of the room. The lamplight painted the room with a dull glow, stealing some of the fire’s glory. The fire crackled in protest. And then Sylvie, her nightly brownout ritual complete, put a hand on her lower back as she sank into the cushions on one side of the couch, leaving the other side for Alice. The lamp restored her normal features, and she was once again Sylvie, unpinned blonde hair straight where Alice’s was curly, falling now across her face in soft waves as she bent to pick up her knitting. The lamplight hit her wedding ring, creating eerie flashes of refracted light against the wall and ceiling. The wedding ring, amplified like this, reminded Alice that Sylvie was not a little girl anymore. No longer her little sister, but a wife, soon to be a mother. Alice caught sight of the silver ‘female relatives’ badge pinned to her cardigan, the single star on the bar below the crest representing John’s absence. Kate wore hers everywhere too. Sylvie’s head was bowed as she concentrated, and Alice felt saddened by this picture of her dutiful sister, alone at this exciting time of her life. The sacrifices she was making, had to make, because the world had gone to war. She turned away and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

It was about this time that, not far up the road, Ivy McLeod fastened her new belt around her waist and admired herself in the mirror, before setting out into the murky night.

Warm at home, Alice Jenkins waited for the kettle to boil and made the tea, which she brought into the living room along with a plateful of her mother’s shortbread biscuits. The three women sat, enjoying the warmth of the fire, the buttery biscuits, the milky tea. Alice spoke, trying to recall the
acceptable stories, her mother and Sylvie knitting woollen socks for the troops. The war that – for the time being at least – was still being fought elsewhere – threatened to sneak in at every moment: through the brownout curtains that imperfectly covered the windows, through a gap in Alice’s jaunty tales, through a dropped stitch in the socks. And although they didn’t know it yet, a very different kind of death threatened, too, much, much closer to home.
The first time Alice saw Pat was about a month after she’d moved to Sydney. It was that sleepy time on Sunday afternoon, after Church, after the roast lamb: the time that was to become theirs.

‘Kate! The kids and I are going to go for a walk. Will you come? It’s such a lovely day.’

‘No, thank you, Alice. I will stay and write to Charles.’

She wrote every day, without fail, to Charles. She had not had a reply, despite all her letters, all her prayers. Alice wanted to tell her that it wouldn’t make a difference to miss one letter, but she knew that a break in that ritual would be a break in so much more. It would be a break in the hope that sustained them all. So, instead, she turned and settled Jack into his pram, buckling the straps around his chubby legs.

‘Come on Charlie!’ she called. The boy, ten years old and not sure how to fill the position of man of the house left absent by his father, scowled. He shook his head, and then caught sight of his mother’s expression, and obediently reached for his coat.

‘Evie! Robbie!’

The five of them trooped out of the house, Evie pushing her brother’s pram, Alice holding tightly to Robbie’s hand to stop him from wandering off, and Charlie walking a foot behind them, dragging his heels. They set off up the steep incline – after a month Alice didn’t feel the burn in her thighs on the hilly streets as much as she had when she’d first moved from flat old Melbourne. At first she’d felt like her calf muscles were going to burst right through her skin as she walked. It was not like that now, and she could walk around Balmain without concentrating so hard on each step, each breath, but the pain still hummed there, a dull undercurrent. Her mind wandered now, as they trekked through the streets. She caught occasional
glimpses of the blue water sparkling in the harbour. She loved it here, the water all around, the ramshackle houses, with everything from colonial sandstone cottages to Victorian terraces, many of them run-down or even derelict, but still somehow charming. The whole suburb seemed to be engaged in a conversation between past and present. Alice stood on the top of a hill and stopped for a moment, to feel all of it rumble through her feet. Then she moved on, and looked back, half expecting to see a trace of herself there, where she had stood – a footprint, perhaps. But there was nothing. She whispered *I was there*, and then, feeling foolish, looked around to see if anyone had heard. But no-one was nearby, except Robbie, who was more interested in tracking the path of a butterfly through the air. She watched Evie, running down the hill towards the grassy cove, stopping at its edge to take off her sandals, before running, barefoot, down the slope. She left no footprints either, no impression on the world. Alice sauntered after her, still clutching Robbie’s hand.

All of a sudden, Evie stopped, just underneath a huge, sprawling tree. Something in her stance made Alice run to her: it looked as though Evie was frightened, or shocked; as if she’d seen something that had startled her. Alice reached her now, and lunged towards her, to drag her back, protect her from whatever it was that threatened.

Alice, tentative, looked up then, and saw someone under the tree – almost naked, glistening wet after a swim, and wriggling into a pair of trousers. Alice looked to the water, thinking it wasn’t really a swimming spot – but then, why not? – and then back at the swimmer, who was fastening buttons now, slow and steady as you like. The swimmer, who would turn out to be Pat.

‘Well hello there,’ Pat said, in an Irish accent, with a brazen lopsided grin.

Alice instinctively put her hand over Evie’s eyes and stuttered an awkward apology, retreating and indicating that the kids should follow her. They scampered back up the hill, heading back the way they’d come. Alice stole a moment to look behind her, and she saw Pat standing there, having
emerged from the shade of the tree, fully dressed now. Watching them go. Alice stared back for a moment, her heart pounding, before Robbie grabbed her hand and pulled her away. Magpies carrolled loudly after her, as if trying to call her back.

She thought of it still, every Sunday morning, even now, after everything. Even here, far away from that cove and back in Melbourne, in a different life.

Later, after Church, she stood with Harry on Richmond Hill, outside the magnificent Gothic bluestone building that was St Ignatius. Harry had come over to rescue her from the chatter of the parish women, who’d all crowded in to ask her questions, she being somewhat of a novelty after two years away. Homecomings were a big thing, in wartime. Mrs Cleary had held on a little too long when she hugged her, which was awkward, but Alice knew she was thinking of her three boys off in the Solomons, that she was imagining the day they’d be home, by her side at church. Some of the others told her she looked too skinny. They said that Sydney must not have agreed with her and it was a good thing she’d come home. Alice smiled, a wan, sad smile. The women she’d met in Sydney had told her that it was good she’d come up north for some warm air and fattening up. But that was before things had all gone wrong.

She’d caught Harry’s eye as he’d stood smoking with the blokes, sending him a silent plea for help, and he’d laughed, before breaking away to come over.

‘Got somethin to tell you, Alice,’ he’d said, ‘can I steal you for a sec?’ and she’d allowed him to take her elbow and turn her towards the shadows.

‘Thanks Harry,’ she said, when the ladies had gone.

‘They mean well, love.’

‘Oh I know,’ she said. ‘It’s just a bit much sometimes, you know?’

‘That I do,’ he said. He took out his pouch of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. Wordlessly, he inclined his head, offering her one. She nodded.
He licked the paper along its edge, smoothed it down, then handed it to her, offering his lighter.

‘What’s the good oil today?’ Alice asked, nodding towards the group he’d just left. She took a drag on the cigarette, tasting the acrid, bitter smoke, feeling the heat of it in her lungs.

‘It’s awful,’ said Harry. ‘Bloody terrible.’ He shook his head, and then remembered where he was. He turned towards the church and did a sign of the cross, a penance for swearing.

‘What? What’s awful?’

He hesitated a moment, then took her elbow again and drew her further into the shadows.

‘A lass was killed last night. Down Albert Park way.’

‘Murdered?’ Alice felt her eyes grow wide. Harry nodded.

‘How – who –’

‘Razor told me, and he oughtta know.’

‘But what –’

‘Look love, keep it quiet, all right?’ Harry said. ‘It’ll all come out in the papers over the next few days. Razor told me to keep mum til then, said the cops down the station are flummoxed, which is never good for morale. I shouldna said anythin. But it just gets to you, you know? Thinking it might of been you, or your sister.’ He took a long drag of his cigarette, blew the smoke out in a thin, steady stream.

‘Did he see –’

‘Look! Here comes your fella. I’ll see you back at the house.’

And just like that, Harry disappeared, and Alice looked up to see Fred Hogan approaching her.

She stepped out from the shadows to greet him.

‘Alice! There you are. I heard you were back.’

‘Hello Fred.’

‘It’s just – great – to see you.’ He stood back, his hands in his trouser pockets, making a circle in the dirt with the toe of one shoe.
‘I’m a bit surprised to see you,’ she said. ‘I thought you were going to enlist.’

‘Was I? Maybe I was. But then the factory –’

‘Ah. Yes. I heard you’re doing well there.’

‘You stopped writing,’ he said. ‘I would have told you, but – you stopped answering my letters. The last couple came back to me, unopened, return to sender.’

‘Sorry about that,’ she blushed. ‘I was busier than expected, in Sydney. With the kids.’ She’d stopped writing once she took up with Pat, but she couldn’t tell him that.

‘I had hoped to come up to see you,’ he said. ‘But then they rationed petrol, so I put the car up on blocks in the yard. And anyway I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.’

Alice cringed, not wanting to get into this with him, not able to tell him what he wanted to hear. She allowed herself a moment to picture him visiting her in Sydney, a moment to see how out of place he would have been there. She lifted her head, scanning the gathering of churchgoers partaking in their Sunday ritual. She raised her hand to wave at her friend Josephine, only just resisting the temptation to beckon her over with a crooked finger. But Josephine didn’t need beckoning. She broke away from her mother’s side and came over to Alice and Fred.

‘Alice! Welcome back. How was Sydney?’

‘It’s a lovely city,’ said Alice. ‘The harbour, the beaches, the bridge. We don’t have anything like that here.’

‘You left in such a hurry.’ Fred, again, not quite willing to let it go. She shot him a look.

‘An opportunity came up, you know, and I took it. A chance for something different.’

‘Of course.’ He looked down at his feet, biting his bottom lip.

Alice put her hand on Josephine’s arm. ‘I heard George enlisted.’

Josephine looked up at her, her hazel eyes bright. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He felt he had to do his bit.’
Was it Alice's imagination, or did Josephine shoot a fleeting glance towards Fred then?

‘How are you holding up?’

‘Oh, me!’ Josephine said, and she laughed. ‘You know, Alice, it doesn’t do to say this too loudly, but sometimes I feel like we women have as much to endure as the men do. At least they’re having an adventure! I’m still living with Mum and it’s driving me to despair.’ She laughed again, to take the sting out of her words, show she was joking. ‘But I’ll have to show you our place, Alice! Before he went, George bought us a little shack in South Richmond, and we’re going to live there when he comes back. It’s right in the slum district, but it’s upstanding, and we have grand plans for it. I can’t wait to have you over for tea.’

‘Sounds lovely, Jose,’ said Alice. ‘I’ll look forward to that.’ She wasn’t quite sure what else to say.

‘But we shouldn’t wait til then,’ said Josephine. ‘Come to tea at Mum’s, sometime soon. We can catch up properly.’

Alice nodded, and watched Josephine stride across the asphalt to where her mother was standing.

‘She seems happy,’ said Alice, cautiously.

‘She’s putting on a brave face,’ said Fred. ‘She hasn’t had a letter from George in months. But she’s putting a positive spin on it. You know what she’s like.’

Alice closed her eyes, then, thinking about this. When she opened them, the crowd in front of the church had thinned a bit, and she scanned those who were left, taking in all the familiar faces.

‘There’s Moira,’ she said, nodding towards a woman her own age in a demure pale pink dress, with a toddler in her arms, resting against her pregnant stomach, and an older child running around her ankles. Moira turned, then, so that Alice could see her face: she found herself looking closely at it, out of habit, trying to see where extra thick make-up was covering something up. It was too far away to tell, but she squinted to try, anyway. ‘Is Tom –?’
'He enlisted last month,’ said Fred.

‘Maybe that means Moira will finally get a little peace,’ she said. ‘I must pop in and see her.’

It was wicked, Alice knew, to hope that Tom Wallace was one of the ones who didn’t come back, but part of her – for Moira’s sake – couldn’t help it. Would Moira be relieved? It might be her way out. What would become of her, of those kids, if their father was killed? But what would become of them if he lived, if he came back? She wasn’t sure what would be worse. Poor Moira.

It made her think about the girl who was killed at Albert Park. What had happened to her? Who had killed her? Who was she?

Moira shifted the child in her arms to the other hip, adjusting her stance. The older one ran off, towards the school yard, with another little boy. It was just like in their day, Alice thought, here on Sunday, after church, playing hopscotch and chasey while the grown-ups talked, the smell of roasting lamb hovering in the air. It was all the same.

‘Everything’s changed,’ said Fred. ‘Remember when we used to meet here after school, to walk home, you and me and Moira and Josephine and George, my brothers and Franny and Sylvie?’ She looked over behind the church, where St Ignatius Boys’ School was, and her gaze panned from there towards the Girls’ School next door.

‘It doesn’t seem so long ago,’ she said.

‘Do you remember going to the Marinos’ on the way home, begging for broken lollies?’ They both smiled.

‘Sylvie told me that people have thrown rocks through the windows of their shop,’ she said, her smile disappearing. ‘Who would do that? They’ve been here for years.’

He didn’t answer. They stood there, in silence, for a minute.

‘Hey,’ she pointed to someone on the path outside the church. ‘There’s Jack Dyer. And that must be his wife. I heard he got married.’

‘You should have seen it, Alice. Crowds outside the church that day, lining up almost all the way down the hill, to catch a glimpse of him, of her.
He must have thought he was running out for a game, the number of people there.'

She smiled.

'They should have a good year this year.'

'Is she expecting?'

He looked at her, confused, and then he laughed.

'No! Or, at least, that’s not what I meant. I meant the Tigers.'

She laughed, then, too, some of the tension dissolving.

'A premiership would certainly be good for morale around here,' she said.

'I should take you to a game sometime.'

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. ‘I’d like that.’

‘Or to the pictures? Will you come to the pictures with me?’ He rushed his words, as if her saying yes to the previous question had given him confidence.

‘I’d love to,’ she said, shrugging. It might make her feel more at home. He could be a welcome distraction, if she let him. Perhaps.

‘Beauty.’ His grin was broad.

‘Give me a ring. I’d better go. Mum’s waiting.’
The week before she’d left for Sydney, Fred had taken her for a drive to the beach at St Kilda. It was the tenth or eleventh time he’d taken her out, and she supposed that he was her bloke now. Or she was his girl, or however it went. He opened the door for her and helped her out of the motor car, his pride and joy. He bought them ice creams. Strawberry for her, she remembered. Spearmint choc chip for him. They’d walked along the beach, eating them. The wind off the ocean whipped her hair about. They walked along the pier, and sat on its edge, their legs dangling over the side.

Kate’s letter had arrived the week before. She hadn’t told him about it yet. Kate wrote that since the government had been putting pressure on people to give up their jobs as domestic help and go into essential Manpower jobs, she’d had to let her girl go. Kate knew that, without her, she’d struggle to keep the household going, with the four kids. She could do with some help, some company.

Alice was trying to think of a way to get out of going. Of course Sylvie couldn’t go: she was just newly married and needed to be with her husband. So it was up to Alice. But no-one thought about what she would be giving up: her editor at the Richmond Guardian had recommended her for a position at the Herald and Weekly Times. She’d worked so hard towards it for ten years: starting as a junior office girl, first making tea, then filing, then answering telephones, and finally convincing him to take her on as a cadet. He’d even agreed to pay for her tuition in shorthand and typing at South Melbourne Tech, and she went to night classes there after work, never missing a single one. And now this! This was an opportunity that didn’t come along every day, especially for girls. She’d even gone in to the Herald office and met Mr Sykes, the news editor there, who had promised he’d consider her application in the next round. But family came first, and Kate needed help.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Fred asked, as she stared back across the beach, at the dog-walkers, the fishermen, the joggers.
‘Life,’ she said, licking her ice-cream slowly, allowing the sweet, cold, creamy pinkness to dissolve on her tongue.

‘Me too,’ he said, grinning.

‘What do you see in your future, Fred?’

‘A good job. A nice big family, a nice house.’

‘The Army?’

He squirmed. ‘Probably. I can’t see how I can avoid it, in good conscience, if this war keeps going.’

‘But then – home to your family, and your white picket fence.’

‘Yes,’ he paused for a bite. ‘What about you?’

‘I want to be a great journalist,’ she said. ‘Reporting on real news.’

‘Like what?’


‘Sounds dangerous,’ he said.

‘That’s part of the fun!’

‘I’d rather leave that kind of fun to someone else,’ he said. ‘And I’d pretty well rather you did too, Alice.’

Fred leaned over and wiped a stray drop of melted ice cream from her chin. She looked up at him in surprise, and from his reflection thought that perhaps he was as surprised as she was. But he became more confident when she didn’t rebuke him, and he leaned in, licking the ice-cream from her lips, drawing her into a clumsy, sticky kiss. She didn’t resist.

‘Alice,’ he said. ‘Alice.’ He mumbled into her hair, and, irrationally, she wondered if he was getting melted ice cream in her curls. She’d just washed her hair.

He tossed the rest of his ice cream cone to the seagulls, and took hers out of her hand, tossing it too, without asking her if she was finished. A flock of seagulls swooped on the two discarded cones, squawking loudly and nipping each other violently if they got too close. Alice turned her head to watch them descend on the melting pink and green blobs.
His hand was on her waist now, and he kissed the side of her neck, her face still turned towards the seagulls. She felt his hand creeping upwards, towards her breast. She grabbed it in hers and pulled it down. He leaned in closer. She turned her head towards him, into his kiss, but then she felt his tongue in her mouth, and she pulled away.

‘Fred. Stop.’

‘Alice,’ he said, breathlessly. ‘I’ve wanted to do that for such a long time.’

Up until now they’d only kissed each other on the cheek, chaste hellos and goodbyes.

She wanted desperately to reach up and wipe around her mouth, which felt wet and sloppy with his kisses, but she thought she shouldn’t.

She leaned into him playfully, nudging him to one side. He took her hand, looking at it, tracing its lines with his finger. It tickled, a bit.

‘We’ve been – stepping out – for a while now,’ he said, awkwardly.

‘A couple of months, yes,’ she said.

‘Is that all? It feels like longer.’

‘Just a few months.’

‘It feels like longer,’ he said, again, and she felt the conversation begin to spiral around them, going in circles, making her dizzy. Trapping her.

She looked out to sea, focusing on the straight line of the horizon, clearing her head. What was beyond there, she wondered? Beyond the horizon, in other lands, other places? She wished she could get into one of the boats that was bobbing in the marina and sail away, the wind in her hair. See what happened, what she could find, what she could do, out there.

‘You know what else I see in my future, Alice?’

She turned, distractedly, towards him, her eyes still dreamy.

‘Hmmmm?’

‘You.’

‘What?’ She came back to earth now, with a thud, forcing herself to tune in to what he was saying.

‘You. I see you there, making the picture complete.’
He lifted her hand and held it at chest height. He held it tighter, squeezing gently.

It had always seemed to be assumed, around the neighbourhood, that Alice and Fred would marry, one day, when they were grown up. Alice had never thought to question the assumption, but it had always seemed to be a long way in the future. Now it seemed that it loomed towards her, hurtled, in fact, and it was suddenly there. It wasn’t that she didn’t want it, she told herself. It was just that she didn’t want it yet.

‘Alice.’ He looked into her eyes.
‘I’m going to Sydney,’ she said, quickly. ‘I forgot to tell you.’
‘What?’ he dropped her hand, his brow furrowed.
‘To help my cousin Kate, with the kids.’
‘When?’
‘Next week.’
‘So soon?’
‘Yes. It’s happened quite quickly.’
‘How long will you be gone?’
‘Who knows? Only a couple of years.’
‘Years?’
‘Don’t look so glum, Fred. We can write to each other.’
‘I suppose we can,’ he said, not cheering up one bit.
Fares please.’

Alice had been staring out the tram window, thinking about the murdered girl, when she was interrupted by the voice. She turned to face the woman in the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board uniform. Alice put her fingers in her pocket, digging for her fare. She put a pound note into the woman’s outstretched fingers, noticing the gold wedding band as she did so. The wife of a M&MTB employee on active service, she thought, keeping his job warm for him until he got back. The woman made a sound, frustrated, as she looked at Alice’s note.

‘Haven’t you got anything smaller?’ she asked.

‘Sorry. No,’ said Alice. She watched as the conductor reached into her bag for change. She was younger than Alice, maybe in her early twenties, with dark red hair and bright green eyes. It was curious, this. Everything was almost exactly the same, with just these small changes. Strange, but familiar at the same time. The American accents, the brownout curtains, and female tram conductors. Only tiny changes, changes that did not quite alter the fabric of society, but rather ever so slightly picked at its stitching.

Alice took the change and the ticket stub and narrowly avoided being pushed, by the crowd, out the open doorway onto the road. She stared straight ahead of her, right at a colourful advertisement on the tram wall: it depicted a large woman, loaded with bags and parcels, sitting down on a seat while the poor war-time workers held onto the overhead straps. It said: *Here is another Selfish Sue, who dawdles all the morning through, Then late she rushes for a tram, And some tired worker has to stand.* The rhythm of it impressed itself on her brain.
Alice clung onto the strap for dear life until the tramcar stopped at the top end of the city, near enough to the Herald and Weekly Times for her to walk.

The newspaper building on Flinders Street looked the same from the outside: she knew this from having passed it on the tram on Saturday. But as soon as she walked through the doors, she noticed the sandbags – a whole wall of them, piled up inside the windows. There were one or two air raid helmets and gas masks hanging from the hooks inside the doors. She took off her coat and hung it up.

Mr Sykes was standing on the other side of the room, a cup of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other, talking to two other men. As she drew closer she heard they were talking about the footy, ahead of the start of the new season. Mr Sykes was saying that Melbourne were sure to go back-to-back after such a strong season in ’41. She stood back for a moment and listened to the pre-season analysis from each of the men: which teams had been hardest hit by players away on military service, and who might have a good year.

‘Poppycock, Cassidy! Essendon will have a slump after that disappointing Grand Final,’ Mr Sykes’ voice boomed out across the newsroom as he slapped the tallest man – Cassidy, it must be – on the shoulder.

‘It is hard to see anyone beating Melbourne,’ said the third man, as the man called Cassidy shook his head. ‘But a week is a long time in football, let alone a whole off-season! Anything could happen, particularly during the war.’

‘Melbourne have depth, Jones, they have depth,’ Mr Sykes turned his head a bit as he spoke and caught sight of her as he did so. Without even appearing to draw breath, he lunged towards her.

‘Miss Jenkins! How delightful!’

‘Hello Mr Sykes,’ she said.
‘Well I must say, my dear, it’s good to see you. I was pleased to get your letter to say you were still interested in the cadetship. We are undermanned, you see, and need to take what we can get, these days.’

‘Some of the boys must have enlisted?’

‘Yes. Some of the boys asked my leave to enlist. And how could I say no? One must do what one can for one’s country. I myself would go, but I am too old, and my own sons too small.’

‘Of course,’ said Alice.

‘Now, Miss Jenkins, tell me. What is the first thing you read in the Herald at night?’

Alice bit her lip, surprised by the question. Was this an interview, then, right here in the newsroom, in front of these men? Think, Alice, she told herself. Think!

‘Err.’

Think. Say something! Now!

‘Um. Mickey Mouse and the comics,’ she stammered, and then closed her eyes and took a deep breath, kicking herself at her childish response.

But Mr Sykes laughed, a loud booming laugh that seemed to rattle the windows. But it was a nice laugh, she thought, and made her feel a bit better. She smiled.

‘Me too, my girl. Me too.’

He came over to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

‘I like your honesty,’ he said ‘I think we’re going to get along just fine.’ He directed her away from where the men were standing, watching. She didn’t trust herself to say anything more.

‘Let’s see.’ He looked around. ‘Ahh, yes. I’ve got an exciting assignment for you, Miss Jenkins.’

She took the opportunity to look around her. The room did seem emptier than she remembered, altered. Last time she’d been here she’d been almost overwhelmed by the smell of stale cigarette smoke that seemed to be oozing out of the walls, carpets, curtains, even the desks themselves, but it seemed tempered now: shot through with a floral note, something like
perfume. Perhaps the stitching was coming loose in the normal fabric here too: being slowly unpicked by small pops of colour and scent – fresh flowers in a vase near the window, a lady’s scarf draped over the back of a chair, a brightly-coloured lipstick uncapped on a desk. She hadn’t expected it here, of all places – journalism was a reserved profession, so she thought it might still be full of men, but she supposed it couldn’t compete with the allure of fighting, being part of the action. And, she had to admit, it did make Mr Sykes’ enthusiastic response to her letter make just a little bit more sense.

‘Come this way,’ Mr Sykes said, leading her gently with his hand on his shoulder.

She leaned her body in the direction he was indicating, but before Mr Sykes had a chance to speak again she heard the front door slam and saw a man enter with great urgency. All heads in the room turned to look at him.

‘Hughes!’ Mr Sykes’ voice silenced the men. ‘What’s this all about?’

‘Mr Sykes,’ Hughes said, ‘A man who said he was with the murdered woman on Saturday night has come forward.’

‘Oh yes?’ Mr Sykes looked down from his height at the journalist. ‘To whom?’

‘Albert Park police station. Near where she was found in that doorway.’

Alice stood, as if turned to stone, her eyes moving from Mr Hughes to Mr Sykes and back again, adrenaline rushing up and down her body. Here it was. The story.

Mr Sykes gave a small nod, at which Hughes turned back to his desk, grabbed a pen and notebook, and ran out the door. A thrill went up and down Alice’s spine. One day she hoped she would get that nod from the editor.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Jenkins. As you can see, something has come up. I can discuss your assignment with you tomorrow. For today ...’ he looked around, hoping to find something to keep her busy until he was less so. ‘Read through these letters to the editor, and sort through the ones worth printing.’ He put his hand on top of a great stack of paper and motioned to the chair in front of them.
‘Yes, Mr Sykes.’

‘It will give you a chance to get settled back in, my dear. We will meet again tomorrow.’ He gave her a kindly glance before rushing off back to his office to follow up on breakthroughs in the murder case. Time was of the essence if he was going to get it into that evening’s edition.

Alice did as she was told and sat down.

The newsroom around her thrummed with activity. Alice watched, fascinated. Her eyes landed on Enid Allen, surprised to see someone she recognised: she’d met Enid at a couple of picnics and dances and church fundraisers before the war. She was Mr Sykes’ niece. Alice remembered receiving a letter from her mother saying something about Enid’s father being killed in Singapore the year before, and her family having fallen on hard times, despite the war pension. Mr Sykes must have convinced the chairman to give Enid a job. Alice looked at her: she couldn’t be much more than about sixteen.

‘Enid!’

‘G’day Alice,’ she said, sitting beside her. ‘What have you got here?’

‘Letters to the editor,’ she swiped her hand across the top of the pile, pushing a couple of pages to the ground. ‘But I am much more interested in hearing about this murder.’

Enid looked around her.

‘They think it was an American who did it,’ she said. ‘The bloke who found the body said he saw someone in an American uniform running away.’

‘That’s strange. In Sydney the Americans are bending over backwards to ensure that the locals like them.’

‘Here too!’ Enid said. ‘Well. Until now. They’ve been charming all the women from St Kilda to Seddon. I’ve made a few American friends myself.’ She blushed. ‘They are ever so dishy. A couple of them have even come home for tea. Mum loves them. Keeps going on about how polite they are, calling her ma’am and all that.’

‘Oh yes. They do, don’t they?’
‘Did you have any American boyfriends up in Sydney? It must have been nice, going out along the harbour.’

‘I didn’t really meet any up there,’ she said.

‘Didn’t they have balls? Parades? They’ve had all that down here. It’s been a lot of fun. They sure know how to make a girl feel special, you bet they do. Not like Australian men. But I haven’t seen any nastiness. This murder has come out of the blue.’

‘What else do you know about it?’

‘A woman was found early yesterday morning in a shop doorway in Albert Park. Slumped there, almost naked, like a rag doll.’

‘How did she die?’ Alice’s voice was a whisper.

‘They think she was either strangled or she hit her head on the wall during a struggle,’ Enid said. ‘Apparently her body was awfully mangled.’

‘Do they know where she’d been? Where she was going?’

‘No. I suppose that’s what this man who has come forward this morning might be able to say.’

‘Do you know who she was?’

‘A woman named Ivy McLeod. She was divorced,’ said Enid, lowering her voice. ‘Worked as a cleaner at an old house in East Melbourne.’

Alice crumpled a letter in her hand.

‘I wish I could talk to her gentleman friend, instead of having to sort through these rotten letters.’

‘Come on. These letters can be an interesting insight into the morale of the common people. Like this,’ Enid lifted a page and read: ‘It is essential that captive cockatoos in suburban houses be banned, for two reasons. The most important is that their screeching drowns out the air raid sirens, and secondly, it attracts rats, which can be terrible in devastated buildings. Mrs Susan Williams, Toorak.’

‘I wonder what Mrs Susan Williams expects the government to do about those cockatoos? Exterminate her poor old neighbours’ pets? What’s the world coming to?’
‘There are always quite a few letters about animals,’ Enid said. ‘People worried about danger from panicked or gas-contaminated animals during air raids.’

‘Do you think there will be raids here?’ Alice thought about Harry, his ARP badge, whistle and helmet.

‘People are certainly expecting them. We’ve had practices, trial runs, and everything. It was pretty chaotic. Oh, and last week we ran an article in the fashion section advising women not to wear high heels in an emergency. And you really must get yourself a new siren suit, Alice. I hear the fashionable colour is Alert Brown.’

‘Alert Brown?’ Alice laughed. ‘They have thought of everything!’
The streets were dark in the brownout. The pubs were all closing, men pouring out the doors like beer from a bottle. It felt later than 6pm as Alice left work and walked to the tram stop.

The yellow and green tram had white bars painted on its bumper and apron, which made it more visible in the waning light. It approached through the gloaming like a phantom vehicle, a hood over its headlight, albeit with a clatter and jangle that anchored it very much in the real world. There were so many people hanging out the doorways that it looked as though the tram had burst its seams, like a cushion with its stuffing hanging out. Alice squeezed inside. Even the lights inside the tram were dimmed. The conductor carried a torch to make sure she didn’t get short-changed. There was no room to unfold the paper to read about the murder, nor light to read by. Alice made out the headline, *Man sees Police about Mystery. Says he was friend of dead woman* – and then gave up and tucked it into her satchel.

The men from the pubs were piling on to the tram. They looked old – every last one of them. All these ageing and damaged men were the ones who had been left behind when the young fit men went off to war. Their own shadows grew longer and longer – they thought they’d had their day. They’d fought their war, they still bore its scars, and they thought they’d never see another. But beside them in the pubs, on the trams, were the ghosts of the men who were gone, now, and who might never come back. ‘Howdy ma’am, won’t you take my seat?’ Alice heard the drawl, and her attention shifted towards the group of American marines at the front of the tram. Most of them stood, and the one who had spoken was standing now, having given up his seat for a lady who had been struggling to keep her feet in the crowd. She settled herself on the seat now, taking out her knitting needles. The marine clutched the dangling handle and resumed talking to his friends, their voices a little too loud, their manners a little too polite, everything a little too
foreign. Yet not unwelcome. Alice was relieved to see them. Without them, the tram was too heavily weighed down by the past.

She looked out the window and tried to get her bearings. Apart from the moon’s silvery glow, the only light was the occasional flash that came, perhaps, from a dog-walker with a torch or a slow-moving car on a nearby street. As the tram passed the Fitzroy gardens, she could just make out shapes of moving trees in the darkness; in the wind, they looked as though they were reaching for her with their branches, macabre dancers swaying to and fro. In the dirty, grey light, Alice could see silhouettes flying across the sky, but couldn’t identify them: bats, perhaps. Or birds.

The Americans got off the tram at the corner of Powlett Street in East Melbourne and made their way across the railway line to their camp at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, taking with them their chatter and their laughter. Without them, even in that busy tram, the silence resounded.

She had to squint to see the street signs as they passed so that she didn’t miss her stop. She was grateful that the tram conductor shone her torch quickly at each street corner. She looked for landmarks. Richmond Town Hall, its clock tower reaching up into the night sky, came into view, the stop before hers. Relieved, she pulled the cord.

She had known, of course, that it would be dark, that the city would be browned out at night. She’d become accustomed to walking browned out streets in Sydney. But the quality of darkness in the normally well-lit cities was something she could never quite get used to, and in industrial Richmond, brownout conditions were stricter than elsewhere, because of the factories, and her home suburb was cloaked in a darkness she hadn’t quite been able to imagine. She fumbled in her satchel for her torch, then crossed Bridge Road and began to walk down Coppin Street. Her steps were heavy, more deliberate than usual, as if she wasn’t quite sure how far beneath her the ground was. She heard a rustling in the trees and stood still, her body taut and her heart racing. Possums. Only possums. She thought of Ivy McLeod, and she thought of Ivy’s killer, imagined him lurking in the shadows, huge and hulking, his breathing heavy, his glassy eyes flashing. She quickened her
step and strode towards home, letting the familiar road and the watery light from her torch be her guide. She turned onto Abinger Street and its narrowness made everything feel darker and more disturbing still – it felt as if the very houses, piled so closely together that they might almost be on top of one another, were closing in on her. She shrugged her shoulders up to her ears, trying to make herself smaller. To take up less space.

She breathed out when she walked in the front door, then breathed in. The air was full of the smell of frying lamb chops. She hung her coat on the rack in the hallway and walked down to the kitchen. Harry was seated at the table, and her mother was at the stove, turning chops.

‘You're late,’ her mother said, frowning.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

‘Go and call your sister. She’s having a little lie-down. Tea’s almost on the table.’

Alice crossed the living room and shouted her sister’s name down the hallway.

‘Tell us about your first day back at work, Al,’ Harry said.

‘Everyone was so preoccupied with this murder.’

‘Murder?’ Sylvie’s echoed the word as she entered the room, her voice small.

‘A woman was murdered over the week-end. Down at Albert Park.’

Alice reached into her satchel to bring out the crumpled newspaper, throwing a glance at Harry.

‘Uh-uh,’ her mother said, shaking her head. ‘No reading papers at the tea table. You can read that afterwards.’ Alice obediently put the paper away.

‘They think it was an American,’ she said. ‘The woman was left naked in a doorway. Harry, do you know anything about it?’ She tried not to give away that Harry had told her about it on the week-end, but she knew that if there was anything more to know, he’d know it.

‘Alice!’ her mother’s voice was stern. ‘What did I say? We’re eating.’

‘Sorry,’ she said through a mouthful of peas.

‘Don’t speak with your mouth full.’
‘You’re your father’s daughter, Alice Jenkins,’ said Harry, leaning both his elbows on the table, waving his fork around between mouthfuls. It was family legend, this, that she was like her father. It had never really occurred to Alice to wonder what that meant, what her father really had been like. Whenever she remembered him, she didn’t seem to be able to put her finger on anything specific about him. He seemed insubstantial, somehow. It was as if everything that had made her father who he was had slowly dripped out of him, over time, so that one day when they looked up he wasn’t much more than a shell. Maybe that was why they kept saying Alice was like him: they were clutching at something that would reaffirm him in the world, to stop him from disappearing altogether. Which was fine, she thought, except that it meant she’d always felt a responsibility towards him: that there was a part of her that really belonged to him. To them. But which part?

‘Headstrong and defiant,’ her mother said, almost as if she were reading Alice’s mind. Alice looked down at her food and dragged some of the mash through the dregs of mint sauce on her plate. She was tempted to pick up her chop and gnaw at the meat around the bone, but she’d already raised enough of her mother’s ire that evening. She tried to cut the meat off the bone with her knife, but it never quite did the job, could never quite get into all the crooks and crevices of the bone. Instead, she speared the chop’s severed tail with her fork and put it in her mouth, biting down and savouring the fat that squirted out between her teeth. She looked at her uncle.

‘I heard bits and pieces today,’ he said. ‘Around the traps, from the boys at the Vine. They –’

‘Harold Jenkins! Not you too.’

‘I read some funny letters to the editor today,’ Alice said, changing the subject, to placate her mother. She selected the best of them to tell her family as they ate. At one stage they were laughing so hard that she was able to sneak a little nibble of her bone without anyone noticing. Her mother eyed it suspiciously when she took away the plates, but Alice smiled innocently, and rose to help her mother get the stewed fruit and custard.
On the Sunday after she'd first seen Pat, Alice had gone back to Cameron’s Cove. She'd been trying to come up with a way to shake off the kids, and things seemed to be going her way – Evie and Robbie both had temperatures, and Kate had decided to keep all the kids home lest they over-excite themselves. So Alice had ventured out on her own, rehearsing what she was going to say when she saw Pat again. Friendly nonchalance, she thought, ought to do it. But, to Alice’s dismay, the cove was empty. Alice sat under the magnificent tree, relishing the coolness, to wait. She watched as the shadows lengthened across the harbour and the light grew dull. The darkness crept, slowly, across the water, as if reluctant to get wet. The moon glinted at her through half-closed eyes, and Alice knew it was time to go. No-one was coming today. The reflection of the moon in the water seemed to gloat insolently at her solitude. She shivered, and got up to walk home, her head drooping. She had been sure Pat would be there, although now she couldn’t work out where that certainty had come from, or why it had been important. She felt as though she’d missed out on something, but she wasn’t quite sure what. She would go back next week, she resolved, and see if she could find – whatever it was she sought.

She wouldn’t be able to say exactly how many Sundays she ventured back to the cove before she saw Pat again. She went every week, hoping each time that this would be the week. She wasn’t sure what it was that drew her back there, she just knew that she couldn’t resist. She went there with the kids, and a couple of times even with Kate and the kids – almost thankful, on those times, that Pat didn’t appear. She knew instinctively that Pat wasn’t something she could share with Kate.

And then, one glorious Sunday, Pat appeared. And they sat together, and they talked, and Alice knew she’d been right.

After that, everything seemed to happen so quickly, as if it had been pre-ordained and could be no other way. Once the two of them met, properly,
it seemed to be assumed by them both that they would spend Sunday afternoons together. She invented an excuse to be out of the house without the kids: she told Kate that an elderly lady who lived in a house near the wharf had agreed to give her sewing lessons. It would be such a help to Kate, she said, if she could take some of the mending off her hands.

At first they met only at the cove. When the weather was warm, they swam in the sea. If it rained, or was cold or too windy, they would go out for coffee or sit in a milk bar on Darling Street and drink milkshakes. One time in a thunderstorm they sheltered under the tree and watched the downpour and the lightning, huddling close to keep warm and to shield themselves from the deafening crack of the thunder. The tree’s leaves drooped towards the ground, heavy with water, cloaking them from the world. Raindrops leaked through the canopy, onto them, around them, but Alice didn’t care. That day, the day of the thunderstorm, was the first day Pat kissed her: she remembered it so clearly it still made her shudder – their closeness as they huddled, clutching each other tightly. Pat’s fingers reaching out to stroke and turn her face, their lips meeting, their tongues exploring each other’s mouths. It was nothing like Fred’s kiss, that awkward day at St Kilda. When she was there with Pat, watching the boats bobbing on the harbour, she did not have the same sense of wanting to sail away. There was nowhere else she wanted to be. All the adventure she wanted was right here, with Pat.

After that day, when they swam, they would often be naked, and they would lie naked in the sun to dry, sometimes out in the open, out of the reaches of the tree’s shade. Alice still thought of the first time Pat licked crystallised sea salt from her nipple, sending tingles all over the surface of her skin. They grew more and more reckless, meeting at the cove and venturing out to other places, even in public – they walked arm in arm around the streets of Balmain, or even, brazenly, once or twice they ducked into Pat’s boarding house when everyone else was out. Sometimes they took the ferry to Circular Quay, and Alice loved the feeling of the sea-spray in her face as they leaned over the railing. Pat told her stories about when the Sydney Harbour Bridge was being built, and its grand opening, ten years ago. Alice
couldn’t imagine the harbour without the monstrous bridge, just as she could scarcely imagine her life now, without Pat.

How many times had she walked home alone after spending the afternoon with Pat, walked home with no notice or care for her surroundings, late at night? She had not, even once, considered that she might be in danger. It didn’t seem right that a girl could be killed on her way home for no apparent reason, as if she were being punished for some unseen crime. But if being with Pat taught Alice anything, it was that things were often more than they seemed, that indiscretions could be hidden under layers and layers of propriety. She thought back on it now. What would the papers have made of it, if she had been killed on her way home, with Pat’s kiss on her lips? Would they have known, somehow, would they have been able to figure out, what she had been up to? Was there a time when Pat would have risked exposure to come forward and try and help them catch Alice’s killer? Like this gentleman from Albert Park now, who had come forward, even knowing what it meant, what they would all say about him and Ivy?

Alice watched now as Ivy McLeod’s every movement was scrutinised in the paper and could not rid herself of the feeling that this exposure was more than simply clues to solve a case. It was to satisfy the voyeurs as well. It was so that people could sit at their kitchen tables and tut-tut over Ivy, and where she’d been, and who she’d been with. There, but for the grace of God go I, thought Alice.

At first, Alice would always tear herself away from their Sundays to be home for tea. But seeing Pat only one day a week quickly began to feel inadequate, and Alice wanted to prolong their meetings for as long as she could. When she left after helping with the dishes after lunch, she told Kate she’d be out for tea, she’d heat herself up some tinned tomato soup when she got home.

At first, Kate asked her questions, a sly gleam in her eye as she asked Alice where she’d been, what kept her away so late. Sewing lessons could not possibly take up so much time, particularly as Alice’s sewing didn’t seem to be showing much improvement. Kate seemed animated then, as though she
sensed an opportunity to regain some of her vigour by living vicariously through Alice. Sometimes she knew Kate had been waiting up for her, and she wanted nothing more than to make them both a cup of cocoa and sit in the bed they shared telling her everything, but of course she couldn’t. She always said only that she had been enjoying the beautiful night air or soaking up the silver moonlight, or stayed late working on a tricky stitch. Soon, Kate stopped waiting up, and stopped asking questions, and things went along as normal. For almost two years, Kate kept quiet.

Then one day that changed.

Early in the new year, Alice came home from the market, her basket full of fruit and vegetables. She almost ran into the neighbour Mrs Peterson as she opened the door. Kate grabbed her arm and pulled her through, at the same time opening the door wider to make way for Mrs Peterson’s exit.

‘Alice! I’m so glad you’re home. Let’s get started on these peas.’

‘What did Mrs Peterson want?’

‘Oh just to tell me the news. It’s her daughter. She’s gotten herself engaged.’

‘Engaged! How lovely.’

‘To an American.’

‘How exciting,’ said Alice, her eyes flashing.

‘That’s what I said,’ said Kate. ‘Mrs Peterson doesn’t see it that way, though. Thinks her daughter has been swept off her feet and doesn’t know what she is getting herself into.’

‘What’s she worried about?’

‘Well,’ Kate said. ‘She didn’t say so, but I got the feeling that her daughter might be –’ Kate’s face coloured.

‘Oh!’

‘They are getting married next week. Mighty quick, if you ask me.’

‘Oh. Well I suppose that would have been a surprise for Mrs Peterson,’ said Alice. ‘To learn that her daughter is not the little golden child she’d have us all believe.’
‘Yes,’ said Kate. ‘It seems she’s been walking out with this man for quite a while.’

‘And doing a bit more than walking, too, by the sound of things.’

Kate laughed. Alice felt a twinge of guilt.

‘I don’t blame them,’ Kate said. ‘Girls, I mean. Single girls. Mrs Watson at the post office is always going on about how awful it is, girls throwing themselves at the Americans’ heads. But I must admit I understand it. I mean, there’s a war on. Who knows what is going to happen? Why not have a bit of fun when you can?’

‘I suppose, according to Mrs Peterson, the problem comes when the fun turns into something else.’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Kate. ‘But by all accounts her daughter is smitten with this American. And, really, you can’t help who you fall in love with, can you?’

‘No, indeed you can’t,’ said Alice, enthusiastically.

‘Times are changing,’ said Kate. ‘Perhaps it’s wicked of me, but I say if you’re young and pretty and single, why not?’

‘I wonder if she’ll go back to America with him.’

‘I suppose she will.’

‘What a great adventure!’ said Alice.

‘Speaking of love,’ said Kate, in an awkward segue, ‘When are you going to tell me about your boyfriend, Alice? Don’t you think it’s high time you did?’

‘My boyfriend?’ Alice stood up from her chair and smoothed her apron, hiding her face from Kate.

‘Yes. You must have been going to meet someone on these long Sunday jaunts of yours! Come on! Tell me who he is. Maybe he is an American? A marine? Someone you met down at the docks, maybe?’

‘There is no-one to tell you about. Really.’

‘So Mrs Parker teaches sewing until after midnight, does she?’ Kate’s voice had an edge to it.
‘Oh. No. Of course not. There’s another girl – Gracie – who comes to Mrs Parker’s on Sunday. We often have tea together afterwards. Her husband works at the soap factory and finishes late at night, so I keep her company until he comes to pick her up.’ Alice played with the stitching around the hem of her apron.

‘You don’t have to pretend, Alice. The kids saw you. Last Sunday.’

Alice’s head snapped up. What had she and Pat done last Sunday?

‘Last Sunday? Are they sure it was me?’

‘Yes, they said it was certainly you. They saw you near the wharf. You were with a young man, and you were walking with him, arm in arm, along the foreshore. And then you sat, and you touched heads. He took your hand. He was no Gracie.’

Alice’s heart beat quickly. She wondered how close to them the kids had been.

‘I wouldn’t bring it up, only the kids asked me about it. Evie asked me if you would still live here when you got married.’

‘Married? Oh, Kitty. I have no intention of –’

If only she knew.

‘It’s not – I mean – he’s not married already, is he?’

‘Who?’

‘Oh all right. You’re going to persist with that game. I’ll stop asking questions then, if you’re going to be so secretive. It will all come out sooner or later, though, you know. You can’t keep it secret forever.’

Alice didn’t speak.

And the next Sunday, when Alice stood up to leave after lunch, Kate gave her a knowing glance, as if to let Alice know she was playing her game. And it wasn’t entirely a lie, of course, that she had a secret sweetheart. But it also wasn’t as simple as that. If it had been, things would have worked out differently. Maybe.
At the moment that Alice left work that Friday, at 5.45pm, Pauline Thompson was saying goodbye to her husband at Spencer Street Station.

Les had come down for the day and she’d told him again that she was making arrangements to come back to Bendigo, to be a family again, sometime soon. Permanently, she told him. It made him happy when she said that. He didn’t need to know that the ‘arrangements’ would be delayed and delayed. Unavoidably, of course.

She couldn’t go back there, not for him. Not even for her children.

She looked at her watch. She’d better hurry if she was going to make that meeting with Jim. She slipped her wedding ring into her pocket.

Alice had made it through her first week back. The rhythms of the city undulated around her, lapping at her with their familiarity, as if they had always existed and always would. She didn’t resist: this was her life, now, and the persistence of the rhythm was exactly what she was counting on. This being Friday, she would go home and her mother would have cooked fish for tea, of course, and she would continue to bob here, tethered to this life of shallow waters, not looking any more out to sea. This was what she’d chosen, when she’d come back from Sydney. Quietude.

Back in the city, Pauline, in her pale blue dancing frock, drummed her ringless fingers on the tablecloth at the café where Jim had said he’d meet her. It was maddening, really. This was the third time this week he’d been late. She was getting fed up with it. She had half a mind just to –

‘Can I buy you a drink?’
At the sound of the American accent, she turned, but it wasn’t Jim. She took a moment to run her eyes over the strapping physique of this timely newcomer: a dashing, blonde American GI with broad, strong shoulders and a surprisingly young face. She batted her eyelashes. He smiled – nay, he grinned.

That smile! It was broad, reaching almost the entire width of his baby face. But it wasn’t entirely sweet, for which Pauline was grateful. She had no time for sweet and nice. There was something sharp about him, which was fascinating and so incredibly attractive. Too bad for Jim, she thought. The early bird catches the worm, and all that. What harm could it do?

‘Coffee, please,’ she said, and she began to feel the familiar tinges of excitement run through her. Why would she want to go back to lifeless old Bendigo when she could still reel in these exciting, exotic young things? ‘Won’t you sit down?’ Slowly, seductively, holding his gaze, she kicked out her leg under the table and used her foot to push out the chair opposite her, displaying her shapely ankle. He looked down at it, appreciatively, and then back at her with that breathtakingly sexy hunger in his eyes.

‘You have a pretty voice,’ he said, and she thought that she must show him, later, exactly what it was that her voice could do.

‘I’m a singer,’ she said, and he grinned again. ‘What do you say we get something stronger?’ he said, inclining his head towards the door, and holding out his hand. She put hers in it and let him pull her up, noticing with a thrill how small and dainty her hand looked in his. His hand was huge, big as a dinner plate, just about. She imagined how it would feel – later – to have that hand undressing her, tripping over her naked skin, exploring her. She shivered.

‘I know a place,’ she said, letting go of his hand just long enough to gather her coat, then clutching it again, to lead him. ‘Follow me.’
Saturday May 9

Alice heard about the second murder on the morning news bulletin as she ate her porridge. Pins and needles tickled the back of her neck. She’d only been back in Melbourne a week and two women had been killed. So much for her thinking she was leaving life behind when she left Sydney. Melbourne was doing all it could to stop her from wallowing in self-pity. As she rushed into the newsroom, she thought that, strangely, these women’s unfortunate deaths were helping to reanimate her. The very horror of it was titillating, the fear that made her know that, after all, she did still value life. There may not be love, but there would always be stories, she thought. And maybe that was enough.

The evening’s Herald announced:

_Murdered Woman Found in Doorway._

_Spring Street Crime is Second in Week._

_Examination suggested that she had been throttled and had died 3 or 4 hours before her half-naked body was found._

Alice’s assignment was to write the ‘Women’s World’ column. Mr Sykes had presented it to her with such pride, expecting her swooning gratitude. The bleeding ‘butterfly department’! Little more than social pages. She clicked her tongue in frustration. At least this war had made things a bit more interesting for women, and there might be more to write about than who married whom or what they wore to the social functions. Mr Sykes had said she should include recipes, as it was anticipated that food rationing would be introduced sometime soon, and housewives would need to know how to make eggless cakes and meatless meals, if it came to that, later this year, or next. Recipes! Alice could barely boil an egg.
She sat down at her desk to write a column about women who worked at the munitions factory in Maribyrnong. She kept her ears pricked, though, listening in to the chatter about the murder that was going on all around her.

Joe Hughes sauntered past Alice’s desk, whistling, thinking he was Glenn Miller. He oozed self-importance from every pore of his body, every stitch of his expensive black woollen suit and every glint of his shimmering leather shoes. A few shiny, oily locks of black hair escaped from underneath his hat, a disobedience that was the one hint at how young he really was beneath all the carefully sculpted manly trimmings. She averted her gaze from his piercing blue-black eyes.

‘Mr Hughes,’ she said, her voice sweet and – she hoped – not too sarcastic.

He turned around and smiled his smarmy smile, displaying a row of perfectly straight, perfectly white teeth. She wasn’t sure if his handsomeness made him harder or easier to dislike.

‘Miss … ?’

‘Jenkins.’

‘Miss Jenkins.’ He tipped his hat to her and went to walk on.

‘Mr Hughes.’ He stopped. ‘What was the name of the woman who was murdered on Spring Street?’

‘No-one seems sure,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It seems to depend who you ask. The folk at the boarding house knew her as Coral, but others we talked to called her Pauline, and I’ve heard some mention O’Brien and others say Thompson. Sounds shifty, if you ask me.’

‘Do they think it’s related to the first one? The Albert Park one?’

‘The police don’t think so,’ he said.

‘But weren’t there lots of similarities between them?’

‘The only important similarity is that a woman ended up dead.’

‘Was her body really mangled?’

Joe Hughes looked shocked.
‘I suppose your body would be if you were murdered.’ He shifted from one foot to the other.

‘Was she married?’

‘Yes. Her husband is a policeman in Bendigo.’

‘Separated?’

‘Apparently not. She was an actress or something.’ His voice dripped with contempt. ‘Was apparently in the city to make some money to supplement the family’s income. Working at galas and balls to entertain the troops.’

‘Do they know where she’d been that night?’

Joe hesitated.

‘She was seen with an American soldier.’

‘And they still don’t think it was related to the first one? Don’t you think it sounds similar?’

‘It’s not my job to speculate, Miss Jenkins, and it certainly isn’t yours. I would suggest you get back to your butterfly department and leave this line of questioning to the police.’

‘Sorry, Mr Hughes. I didn’t mean to …’

‘I’m not sure why it’s so important anyway. Our men are getting killed every day on the front-line. Who cares about one or two dead women at home?’

‘But these women aren’t at war!’

Joe Hughes looked at her as if she’d completely missed the point.

‘I have work to do. Good day.’

‘Good day.’ It was galling that he got to cover the story when she was stuck writing about women driving the men’s bread carts around the city so people could have their morning toast.

But the next time she saw Joe Hughes he was packing up his desk. She jabbed Enid at the desk next to her and asked her what was going on. Enid shrugged, but motioned to Alice, and they both cocked their heads to try and hear his conversation with the sports editor William Cassidy.
'Where are you off to, then, Joe?'
'I’m heading overseas!' he picked up his jacket and flung it flamboyantly over his shoulder.
‘Overseas?’
‘Old man Sykes is sending me to the front!’
‘To fight?’ William’s voice was squeaky.
‘No, you ninny. To report. I’m the new war correspondent in the Pacific.’

And it was galling that men like him kept getting promotions. Alice gripped the seat of her chair hard with her hands, feeling her knuckles clench. She willed herself to stay seated, and not to speak.

Hughes turned around then and faced them.
‘So see you later Miss Jennings! I’m off to where the real action is!’
Alice cringed at his mistake.

‘Well Mr Hughes,’ she said with mock affection, ‘I do hope you don’t get yourself killed.’

He spun on his heel, picked up his briefcase, and strode out of the building. She heard him whistling, and then the slam of the door. Good luck keeping so perfectly turned out in a war zone, she thought, thinking of the impossible shine on his impossibly black shoes.

Mrs Pauline Buchan Thompson had been found strangled in the doorway of her very own lodging house in Spring Street at the top end of the city. It was reported that she'd been seen with an American soldier in an establishment that served liquor after hours and had left there with him. What kind of a woman, the hushed tones asked, would leave her husband and two children in the country and come to the city to seek her fortune? And what kind of woman, when she was in the city, drank illegally with foreign men and walked through dark streets with them? Perhaps such a woman deserved what she got. Perhaps our girls should take heed, and stay at home where they belonged, instead of courting these American soldiers for a pair of real silk stockings, a few bars of chocolate, and who knew what
else besides. Alice heard Bill Cassidy saying that he was pleased his wife was scared to be out after dark now. It meant that she refused evening shifts at the factory. It meant that she was home to cook him dinner, and he didn't have to walk into a cold, dark house after a day at work.

The men stopped short of saying that it was a good thing these women had been murdered – although who knew what they were saying at the pub on their way home when there were no women around to hear them?
It was such a mild afternoon that she decided to walk home from the newsroom, to save on the tram fare. She passed the Fitzroy Gardens, looking less ghoulish in the daylight, and detoured through Yarra Park, skirting the edges of the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

It was strange that no football was being played at the MCG in round one of the footy season, but of course that hallowed turf, like so many other footy grounds around town, had been requisitioned for the Americans. It felt lonely. But once she reached Punt Road, she began to see the familiar sight of people in yellow and black milling around on their way home from the game at Punt Road Oval. She asked someone the score: Richmond had started their season well, beating Footscray by twenty-one points. She’d missed the footy, in Sydney. She’d never understood that strange game they played up there, as much as Pat had tried to explain it to her. Even the fact that Balmain’s team was the Tigers as well had not made her feel more at home with it. They weren’t her Tigers.

She thought of Fred, and his offer to take her to a game. He would have been there, today, in the scarf his mother had knitted him when he was a boy. She tried to picture herself sitting beside him, cheering when Skinny Titus kicked another goal.

She recalled the birthday when Fred’s mother had knitted him that scarf, how he’d worn it so proudly on the way to and from school, and probably all day in his lessons, for all she knew. After school, he’d taken it from around his neck and tied it around his waist so he could kick the footy with his brothers in the street. She’d tried to join in, and he’d even kicked the ball to her once, before his older brothers told her that girls couldn’t play footy. She’d taken the mark, though, that day: a tricky one from Fred’s high kick in the swirling, cold July wind. What a thrill that had been, for a second, before it was taken away.
Moira Wallace had been there too, although she’d been Moira Kennedy back then. She and Alice had slunk away together. Alice had complained, but she knew that Moira had been relieved. She had always been scared of being hit in the face with a footy, even though she always watched from yards away and Alice knew the boys couldn’t kick it that far. Not even their torpedo punts.

She wondered if Moira remembered being so scared of being hit with a footy, now that she was so familiar with bruises. Had she known what Thomas Wallace was like, when she married him? Alice thought that the signs had been there, if one had chosen to take notice. She remembered Tom’s over-zealous hip and shoulders during those schoolboy games, the smaller boys’ tears.

And then there had been that day, five years ago, when Alice had come home to find the ambulance in the street: a summer’s night, still light at 8pm. Tom had come home from the Spreadeagle, full as a tick, with a head of steam on him, about something. Poor, timid little Moira never even knew what she’d said wrong, but she told Alice afterwards that she must have been out of line. They’d feared for her life for three weeks. The baby had come to stay with them, and Alice hadn’t wanted to let him go back. But Moira had insisted that things had changed, he had changed, he was sorry, he was really very nice when he was sober. It was what she always said.

Harry had said later that Tom had been in one of his moods that night, spoiling for a fight. The men at the Spreadeagle knew to stay out of his way, when he was like that. It was too bad Moira had no warning, had nowhere to hide. She always thought about Moira, on Saturdays, when she heard the footy scores. That feeling of dread that came over her if she heard Richmond had lost, the almost irresistible desire to go to Moira’s house and pull her out of harm’s way before Tom got home from the pub.

Josephine told her to stop asking Moira about it, stop trying to put ideas in her head to leave him.
‘She made her bed,’ Josephine said, sadly and sympathetically. ‘You’re stirring up trouble, Alice. What, really, can she do? Where’s she supposed to go?’

And the next time Alice had seen Tom in the street she hadn’t said anything about it to him, either. She’d fallen into step with him and they’d walked along, talking about the cricket scores. Like they’d always done, matching stride for stride, walking companionably. Alice had left him at the door of the pub and walked home, wondering what he’d be like later, when he came out of there. Nervous about it, for Moira. But, even as she wondered, she was still smiling to herself at a joke he’d made, thinking about the declaration he’d predicted Australia would make in the Test Match before lunch the next day, wondering if they really would, or if they’d bat on until they were all out.

Josephine’s mother had said ‘What about Tom? What would he do, if she left?’ and Alice and Josephine had not known how to answer. It had been the same since those schoolyard days. Boys will be boys, and all that. But it didn’t make Moira’s bruises heal any quicker or hurt any less. It didn’t make her safer.

She knew Josephine was counting her lucky stars. She was one of the fortunate ones. George Kelly was a fine, upstanding man, a staunch member of the Australian Labor Party, a moderate drinker, and he absolutely doted on Josephine. They’d had a long engagement, because he wanted to make sure she had the best wedding money could buy. She’d looked like a queen, too, on the big day. Their wedding had been lavish, an extravagant breakfast at the Town Hall. It was hard to fathom the difference in her two childhood friends’ lives. They’d all grown out of the same soil, and still lived within blocks of each other, but worlds apart at the same time. One blossoming, one wilting, and she herself somewhere in between, just trying to find a way to stay out of the mud.

She tried to picture both men, fighting, somewhere in the Pacific, George and Tom, such different men. What would they be like, when they came back?
Monday May 11

She was the last one left in the newsroom. The men had gone to the Duke of Wellington down the road to get in a couple of drinks before closing, and all the women had gone home early, anxious to be home before darkness set in. They’d tried to get her to leave with them, but she’d said she’d be right. But now, as she stepped out onto the misty dark street, she felt less certain. She saw a group of girls huddled together on the street, their arms linked in solidarity. She counted them: six. The instruction had come out that women were advised to travel in groups of at least six, as if that was the magic number that would save their lives. The chain of girls in front of her weren’t speaking – it seemed they were concentrating on what was around them, as if they could control their surroundings if they focused hard enough.

Half a block further on, she saw a girl on her own, rushing towards the tram stop. She was fidgeting as she walked, her eyes darting left and right. As Alice watched, an American soldier came around the corner and took a step towards the woman. She screamed, right in his face, and turned on her heel, running away in the opposite direction. He looked bemused, and then sad, and continued along the footpath, shaking his head. It seemed that the honeymoon was over for these dapper visitors.

A light flashed in front of Alice, cutting through the darkness. She jumped, involuntarily, out of the way. It had gotten to her, too. Women were terrified: this unidentified killer had the city by the throat. She pictured him, an evil villain rubbing his hands together in glee at the terror he’d created, plotting his next move. Was this really the same city Alice had returned to only a week before? Then, the trams, offices, factories, cinemas, and ballrooms had all been full of girls and women who were making the city their own. Now they cowered.
The newsroom and all the masculine city puffed up its collective chest in pride. Our girls had seen sense and gone back to their Australian boyfriends, finally suspicious of the ‘overpaid, oversexed and over here’ GIs. And all it had taken was a couple of murders.

‘We’ve got some time before the pictures,’ Fred said. ‘So I thought I’d take you to the factory, show you around.’

‘The factory?’ She was about to laugh, but saw his face. He was serious. ‘All right then.’

They came out into Abinger Street, where Fred pointed out that you could already see the huge, double-sided neon Pelaco sign that imposed itself on the city skyline. It had gone up three years ago, just before war broke out. PELACO, it screamed, in letters fourteen feet high. Although it was unlit, because of the brownout, it was so big and starkly white that it was unnecessary for him to point it out to her, but he flushed with pride as he did so, and she decided not to poke fun at him. They began to walk towards it, past the malting house silos, and the cordial factory, and Alice caught a hint of the familiar bittersweet and smoky aroma of roasting malt mixed with syrupy sweetness. Fred tried to take her arm, but the footpath was so narrow that there wasn’t quite enough room for them to walk next to each other, and he kept sliding off into the gutter. Eventually, he gave up and walked apart from her, on the quiet road. When they reached Church Street Alice noticed that the houses began to be larger and much, much grander than they were in the densely-populated part of the suburb where she lived. There was a sense of space up here on top of the hill: space between the houses, inside the houses, little gardens in front of the houses, separating them from the street. It was like stepping off a crowded tram and finding that you could breathe again: a whole different world just a couple of blocks away. They continued towards Goodwood Street. She sensed his excitement, and indeed, as they approached the factory, he was almost running, stopping outside the entrance and stretching his arms out wide, turning back around to face her.

‘This is it,’ he said.
‘Yes.’

The red brick building was large and imposing before her. Fred was powering towards a double door that stood in the centre of the building, a mouth in a big red face. There were large windows on either side of the door, and more above it, snaking all the way around the building, on every side. On top of all of that was a cream-coloured roof that covered the whole gigantic building, and a sign, here at the front entrance, that read *Pelaco Ltd* with an ostentatious flourish.

‘I heard you are a foreman now,’ she said.

‘Yes.’ His chest puffed out a little as he said this, emphasising the brightness of the crisp new white shirt.

‘Congratulations.’

He led her around the factory. He seemed charged by a childish excitement, animation. He pointed out the cutting room, a large room with long benches from end to end. The benches held long stretches of material, ready to be cut into workable pieces. A couple of women were bent over the benches, measuring.

‘The workers here have wonderful conditions, Alice, the best going around. Proper lighting to work by, and every Saturday off. And the Christmas picnics we throw for them, well … Alice … you’ll see … Ain’t that right, Wanda?’

The girl he spoke to batted her eyelashes at him, and Alice noticed a couple of the other girls were looking, doe-eyed, at him as well. She looked at him again, herself, trying to see what they saw. She should feel proud to be here with him, on his arm, and for a moment she did, holding her head high and squeezing his arm. He took her through to another room where rows and rows of girls sat, folding and packaging army uniforms.

‘We’ve had to forfeit some of our regular line to manufacture Australian army uniforms. The war contract is very lucrative for us,’ he said, sweeping his arm out over the room. ‘These shirts are sent straight to the soldiers.’
‘Look at this,’ he picked up a stray piece of khaki-coloured material and rubbed it between his finger and thumb. ‘Feel the quality of that.’ She took it from him.

He looked around for other things to point out to her. She watched the girls. A girl at the end of the closest row look up at them, furtively. She picked up a piece of paper, wrote something on it, kissed it with her lipsticked lips, then folded it neatly and tucked it in the pocket of the shirt she was folding. Alice wondered what it was. She was about to tap Fred on the shoulder and ask him, but the girl caught her eye, and lifted a finger to her lips. Whatever it was, it was not allowed, and she nodded at the girl to show that she understood the importance of secrecy. Then she remembered that Sylvie had once told her that some of the unmarried girls who worked in the factory would write their addresses on pieces of paper and tuck them in the shirt pockets, hoping that they’d reach a soldier who would write to them from the front line.

Alice picked up a flyer from one of the tables and studied it.

‘I’ve always wondered about the logo, Fred,’ she said. ‘Can you tell me where it came from?’

He came over to her and stood close, taking the flyer from her hand, brushing her fingers with his.

‘Pelaco Bill?’ he said. She nodded, looking down at the paper he was holding, at the picture of the bearded Aboriginal man, striding forward: black and naked except for his Pelaco white shirt, red tie and a big grin.

‘He’s great, isn’t he?’

‘Is he a real person?’

‘There are black fellas turning up here every day, claiming to be him. Mr Pearson and Mr Law give them food, money sometimes. Lots of people say he’s modelled after that black showjumper who does whip-cracking tricks at the footy sometimes, and at the show. But no-one really knows.’

‘And the slogan? Mine Tinkit They Fit,’ she read the words slowly, phonetically, stumbling over them, as if they were foreign.

‘That’s how they talk.’
‘Do they really?’

He looked at her, surprised by the question.

‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ he said, visibly annoyed. ‘It shows that we are an Australian company. Not foreign owned. People like that. It’s good for business.’

‘I suppose so.’

She wanted to argue more. The picture made her feel uneasy, but she wasn’t sure why. She opened her mouth to say something, but Fred had already turned away and was climbing the stairs. There was nothing much for it but to climb up behind him, and they came out onto the roof of the factory. Fred stood back and watched her as she emerged from the stairwell, watching to see her reaction. She caught her breath as she took in the magnificent view. She could see all over Richmond, blurry in the encroaching darkness: Bridge Road and down towards the tanneries along the Yarra, and from a different angle, Swan Street and towards the south. She turned, and could see the city, buildings upon buildings against the deep sapphire blue of the night sky, like phantoms. She imagined how wonderful it would look in the daylight, or at night when the city wasn’t in brownout. She turned around and gave a small squeak, realising how close she was here to the base of the monstrous neon sign. She felt as though she could almost reach up and touch the P – it made her feel part of the city skyline she saw each day. The city was at her feet. She felt like a queen.

‘It’s wonderful.’

‘On a clear day you can see all the way to Port Phillip Bay,’ he said.

She stretched her arms out, as if she could reach all the way across the horizon, hold the whole city in her arms.

All of a sudden, he was standing close behind her. She could feel his hands on her waist. She stiffened slightly, feeling immediately smaller again. How did he manage to move so quickly into these intimate positions, without her even realising what was happening?
‘Alice,’ he turned her around so that she was facing him, his hands still on her waist. ‘I missed you when you were in Sydney, and it is so good to be able to put my arms around you again.’

His words sounded almost foreign to Alice; they didn’t quite fit the relationship she remembered them having.

‘And now I am established here, with great prospects, like I said I would be, I have something to offer you. Something better than a dilapidated slum house at the bottom of the hill. A life together.’

Promises, promises. She knew that words weighed nothing at all. Even now she could feel them dissolving in the night air. But she stopped herself from scoffing. She didn’t want to offend him.

‘Fred.’
‘What do you think of the factory?’
‘It’s very impressive.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Isn’t it? In a few years I’ll be able to buy us a house, up on the hill, and in the meantime we can stay with my parents in Lennox Street.’

She frowned. Buy them a house? Move in with his parents? She felt like she’d missed a step. She felt panic rising, then: had he asked her to marry him one of those times when she’d been staring out at the horizon, tuned out, just nodding and smiling? Would he have taken a vague nod for a yes to a question like that? She didn’t think she’d miss anything that big, that important. But surely, surely, he couldn’t just be assuming? But he, right now, was clutching her as if he owned her. She went over his words in her mind, and realised that none of them were of love, or even esteem. Only of houses, and money, and prospects, as if they were all that mattered. And yet, people had always said he’d make something of himself, and she realised, now, that this was exactly what they’d meant. And maybe for people who had lived through the first war, the Depression, and now this war, those things would always be the criteria for success. But she and Pat hadn’t had any prospects of those cold hard things, and it hadn’t mattered.

But whatever else they had had hadn’t survived either. She frowned.
He stepped closer to her. He leaned in, his eyes closed, and she realised he was going to kiss her. She leaned backwards.

‘Here!’ she said, handing him back the piece of khaki cloth. ‘It really is good quality. And it’s all very impressive. But I’m surprised it’s enough.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well. Don’t you ever feel guilty?’ She swallowed.

‘Guilty?’ He stepped away from her, taking his hands off her arms.

‘For being here. While all your schoolmates are fighting.’

She saw him stiffen.

‘Let the ladies and the old men make the uniforms Fred. You should be wearing one.’

She knew this was a horrible thing to say, and it was made worse by the fact that she didn’t even really mean it. She had just needed to avoid the kiss. She wasn’t ready for that, not yet.

He took the khaki material from her and looked down at it, not saying anything. His thumb moved slowly, reverently, across its surface, as if he was mesmerised by the pattern.

She turned and walked away, down the stairs, through the factory, wondering if he’d follow her. She got to Bridge Road and saw the queues outside the National Theatre. She was still alone. What had she done? Couples were lined up to get into the feature, laughing and joking and cuddling together. She felt so far now from such simple pleasures, and she knew she’d just turned away from what might have been her last chance to find her way back.
Tuesday May 12

The air was murky with fog early in the morning at the Drill Hall. It hung around her, thick and pungent as cigarette smoke. She’d stepped off the tram in Elizabeth Street outside the Queen Victoria Market, where early morning shoppers were bustling around. Their arms were full of parcels wrapped in paper from the fishmonger or the butcher, their baskets full of fruit and vegetables. She’d bought herself a cup of tea from the canteen and walked up Victoria Street. There was a paper sign stuck to the door of the hall: ‘Australian Women’s Army Service Meeting. Tuesday 12 May. Lieutenant Colonel Sybil Irving address 8am. Recruitment opportunities to follow’. She rolled, then lit, a cigarette, jumping from one foot to the other to keep warm. A group of girls gathered on the corner of Therry Street, darting glances towards the door. They were eighteen, maybe nineteen, glowing with youth.

The door opened and a woman beckoned them inside. The Drill Hall was a wide, echoey space with military posters and photos tacked to the walls. Alice sat at the back of the hall, with a view of rows and rows of the backs of girls’ heads, most of them perfectly coiffed in curls and braids, an array of colours and shades.

A woman in the AWAS uniform climbed the steps to the lectern on a makeshift stage and introduced the AWAS founder, Lieutenant Colonel Sybil Irving. There was raucous applause from the girls in the audience. Alice leaned to one side, trying to see past the tall brunette right in front of her.

Lieutenant Colonel Irving was an imposing woman, despite her small stature: around mid-40s, Alice thought, and very fit. Alice guessed she could still give most of these much younger girls a run for their money. She kept her hat on while she addressed the audience, making the life of an AWAS girl sound quite glamorous and, more importantly, meaningful.
‘An AWAS girl is a soldier, doing her best for her country, just as the men are. She frees up a man to go and fight by taking on the job he’d be doing at home. That might be driving ambulances, learning signalling, cooking, typing, working in intelligence, and any number of other things that need doing on the home front. You can contribute to this war just as much as the men can. And yet. You’re not the same as the men. You will be in the Australian Women’s Army Service. You will be as feminine, as ladylike, as ever – we don’t want to take that away from you, for if we did, what are the men over there fighting for? But this is our chance to show them that feminine and ladylike can make a difference too, and that even the women can help us win this war.’

There was a big cheer from the crowd. The Lieutenant Colonel stepped out from behind the lectern.

Alice got up, brandishing her notepad and pen, cursing herself that she hadn’t sat closer to the front. There was a crush of girls standing between her and Lieutenant Colonel Irving, and she’d have to get her elbows out and be insistent if she was going to interview her. She put her head down and tried to burrow through the crowd. The noise echoed in the cavernous space, reverberating peals of enthusiasm and excitement. Lieutenant Colonel Irving must have stepped down from the stage and been swallowed up by the crowd: Alice couldn’t see her in the mass of girls. She kept pushing to the front.

‘Excuse me. Excuse me.’

‘The recruitment desk is over that side,’ a tall girl pointed to the opposite corner.

‘I’m not going to the recruitment desk,’ said Alice. ‘I’m going to speak with the Lieutenant Colonel.’

‘Lieutenant Colonel Irving has gone,’ the tall girl said. ‘She is very busy. You can ask your questions over at the recruitment desk.’

Alice slumped. She looked at what she’d written in her notebook. Only the Lieutenant Colonel’s name. It was a pretty poor story if she didn’t have a couple of quotes from the main attraction. What a waste of a morning.
She looked at her watch, calculating what time the next tram was, eager now to be back at her desk in the newsroom. But she was trapped for a moment, in the crowd. She took a deep breath, trying to stave off her impatience. Girls chattered all around her and didn’t seem in any particular hurry to move.

‘Come on Mabel. Join up with me.’

‘I couldn’t! What would Mum say?’

‘She’d be pleased of your wage, I imagine.’

‘It would help.’

‘And the uniforms are dashing! I could see myself in one of them.’

‘They do look very smart.’

‘And besides, why shouldn’t we do our bit for our country, rather than staying at home crocheting, waiting for it all to end?’

‘You’re right there. I am going a bit crazy waiting here for Joe to come home. You know I haven’t heard from him in a month.’

‘Do it for Joe. Come on! It will be an adventure. When will we ever have such an opportunity again? When he comes home, you’ll get married, and you’ll have babies, and won’t this be a ripping story to tell them when they’re older?’

‘I might even be a hero!’

‘That’s the spirit!’

Alice followed the girls to the growing queue at the recruitment desk.

What would her father have thought of this, of all these young ladies clamouring to enlist in an army? She remembered one ANZAC Day, when she was about eight – her father had come to look for her when it was time to leave the Shrine of Remembrance after the Dawn Service. He’d found her playing war games with the boys on the lawn. He’d stood for a while, watching her, before she’d noticed he was there. When she’d finally seen him he’d had a peculiar expression on his face. She’d walked towards him, timidly, expecting that she was to be scolded. But instead he’d dropped down into a squat and gathered her in his arms.
‘My little tomboy,’ he’d said, into her hair. ‘But thank the Lord you aren’t really a boy. The Lord will spare you, my Alice, if the world is stupid enough ever to have another war. Thank God. Thank God.’ And she’d held still, not knowing what to do as her father held her and sobbed.

A woman sat at the desk, in front of a brightly coloured poster that declared I said I’d never wear uniform ... but I couldn’t stand back now! On the poster was a coloured picture of a gentle-looking united uniformed woman with a smooth complexion and bright red lips, looking wistfully out against the backdrop of a large Australian flag. Alice leaned forward to read the writing underneath the picture:

I’m not the sort of girl who normally joins Armies.

I’m not an Amazon, a flag-flapper or a hip-hurrah girl.

I’m as interested in my hairdo, my make-up and my nails as you are ... but I’d hate to have to admit, later on, that I ‘flapped’ while others fought.

Alice’s gaze moved from the poster to the woman in front of it, who was a perfect embodiment of the poster girl, right down to the red lipstick on her plump lips. She stood up and moved out from behind the desk to greet the girl at the front of the queue, and Alice could see the full AWAS uniform she wore – a modest, well-cut khaki skirt suit, with buttons down the front of the jacket and an A-line skirt to her knees. On her head she wore a matching feminine khaki wide-brim hat. Alice looked around at the other uniformed women, most of them in the same skirt suit, but some wearing trousers. She noticed two trousered women standing near the wall, one leaning on it with one shoulder. The other stood like a man: her feet apart, at ease, and her hands deep in her pockets. Alice had a fleeting vision of Pat, standing on the Sydney ferry, hands on hips and head held high. She shook her head and focussed again on the girls near the wall. The one who had been leaning straightened up, patted the other on the shoulder, and walked away. The other turned and caught Alice watching her. She grinned, a grin that was perhaps a touch too ribald to be polite or feminine. Alice felt her face burn, but she walked towards her.

‘Excuse me,’ Alice said. The woman held her gaze.
‘My name is Alice Jenkins. I’m a journalist at the Herald, and I was wondering if I could have a few words?’

The woman looked Alice up and down, smiling to herself.

‘Of course. What is it you want to know?’

‘Well. What’s your name?’

‘Dorothy Carroll.’ She reached forward and shook Alice’s hand. ‘Dot.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Dot. Why did you join the AWAS?’

‘I come from a military family,’ said Dot. ‘My father fought in the Great War, and my three brothers are in the Pacific now. Like all the girls here, I wanted to do my bit.’

‘And what is your role in the AWAS?’

‘I’m a driver,’ she said. ‘Trucks mostly, at the moment, but I am training to drive ambulances.’

‘Do you enjoy being in the AWAS?’

‘I love it,’ she said, her eyes twinkling. ‘The girls are great – we have a terrific time, Alice, really we do. And,’ she winked. ‘No-one makes me wear a dress.’

‘You do look beaut in those trousers, I must say,’ Alice said, admiring her, and wondering how Mr Sykes would cope if she began wearing trousers to work. ‘I must get myself some.’

Dot laughed, and Alice did too.

Dot was distracted now, though, by a movement at the door. She lifted her hand and waved at someone.

‘Hang on there, Miss Jenkins. I can see my friend – she’s waiting for me. I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta go. I hope I’ve been some help to you.’ She gave Alice a bright smile and a wink that made Alice feel they’d shared a secret.

‘You have,’ said Alice, quickly. ‘Thank you for your time.’

She watched Dot walk over to the door and link arms with another AWAS girl, and lean close into her, saying something. There was something familiar about the gesture, something almost audacious. The other girl tossed back her head and laughed, and they left together, arm in arm, without a
backward glance. Alice watched them leave, and then, alone, she had the feeling of someone watching her. She snapped her head up, and the woman standing behind her flinched. She wasn’t wearing a uniform, and she had a hand full of flyers. She stood with her heels together and her toes turned out, as if it was a natural way to stand. Alice wondered if she was a dancer.

‘I’m sorry,’ the woman said, in a voice that was soft, but not timid, somehow. It was like honey, smooth and sweet, but bold. ‘I didn’t mean to stare.’

‘Do you know those girls?’

‘No. Well … yes. One of them. Dot, who you were talking to. She – used to be a good friend.’

‘Used to be?’

‘Not anymore.’ The woman cast her gaze downwards, and then seemed to pep up when she saw the flyers in her hand. ‘But that doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘Would you care to come to a tea dance this Friday? It’s to raise money for our servicemen and women.’

‘Maybe,’ said Alice, taking a flyer and studying the woman. She was about five-feet-tall, about Alice’s own height, but she was slighter – medium build against Alice’s broad shoulders. She was dressed neatly, modestly, in a brown A-line skirt and maroon blouse, with a blue jacket over the top. She wore a matching blue beret over brown wavy hair, and Alice noticed a small silver cross at her throat. Alice guessed that she was in her late thirties, maybe about ten years older than Alice herself.

‘It’ll be fun,’ said the woman

‘I’m Alice. Alice Jenkins.’ She extended her hand.

‘I’m Gladys Hosking,’ she shook. ‘It’s terrific to meet you, Alice. Are you here to join the AWAS?’

‘I’m a journalist,’ Alice said. ‘I came here today to write a story for the Herald.’

‘A journalist!’ Gladys’s big blue-green eyes shone. ‘I’m sure that the AWAS would love for you to write a story about their work. Perhaps you could put in a little call to arms? They are always looking for recruits.’
‘I’m sure I can do something,’ Alice said. ‘I’m hoping to use my column to showcase the contribution women are making to this war.’

‘Of course, it is an essential one, and these girls are wonderful.’

‘Tell me more about this dance,’ Alice said.

‘I’d love to, Alice. May I call you Alice?’

‘Please do.’

‘Please call me Gladys,’ the woman spoke almost shyly, and Alice felt herself leaning forward to catch her softly spoken words. ‘Do you have time to duck into the canteen around the corner for a cup of tea? I could tell you all about the dance there.’

Alice didn’t even glance at her watch before she nodded.

‘I’d love to.’ And she waited beside the desk while Gladys went to get her coat. Alice gripped her notebook, hoping that Gladys’s fundraising work would be interesting enough to write a column about, but suddenly hoping also for something entirely different.

‘Let’s go,’ Gladys said when she returned, and her familiarity was such that Alice almost expected her to crook her arm and invite Alice to link her own through it. She didn’t, though, not quite, but Alice, enchanted by her, would have accepted if she had.

The two women settled themselves in the canteen and ordered tea and rock cakes. Around them, American soldiers played cards and drank coffee. Alice wished she’d ordered coffee.

‘Are you from Melbourne, Alice?’

Alice nodded.

‘I’m from Western Australia, originally,’ said Gladys. ‘One day I’d love to go back there. My parents are getting older. I almost stayed there when I went home for Christmas. My mother was ill, but she recovered, so I came back here.’

‘What is stopping you from going home?’

‘Well, at first it was people – a certain person – keeping me here.’ She blushed, and looked down, playing with her rock cake, breaking it in pieces.
‘But when that finished I realised I’d fallen in love with my job, and now I’m here mostly for my work.’

Alice wondered about Gladys’s sweetheart.

‘What do you do?’

‘I work at The University as a Secretary and Librarian at the School of Chemistry.’

‘That sounds fascinating.’

‘Yes.’ Gladys looked down at the table. ‘I’ve always been interested in science. I think I have a head for it.’

‘Not me,’ said Alice. ‘I am much more suited to words than science and mathematics.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Gladys. ‘Tell me what it’s like to be a journalist!’

‘It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,’ said Alice, ‘or, at least, not for women. I’m stuck in the butterfly department while the blokes get all the interesting stories.’

‘The butterfly department?’

‘It’s what they call the social pages, the women’s pages. You know – fashion, and scandals, and who’s marrying whom.’ Alice rolled her eyes.

‘What would you rather be writing about?’

‘The war, of course!’ Alice said. ‘We’re in the middle of an international war – the world is changing, and our men are off fighting for our freedom, for progress. I want to write about that.’

‘The world is changing here, too,’ said Gladys. ‘I mean, look at those girls in the AWAS, what they are getting up to. They weren’t able to do those things in the last war. Progress isn’t only made on the battlefield, Alice.’ Her voice was gentle, and she looked closely at Alice’s face as she spoke.

‘I suppose,’ said Alice, chastened, her face hot.

‘I think you have an exciting job, even as it stands,’ said Gladys. ‘As you said, you have an opportunity to show the contribution women are making to the war, from back here. What we are doing, what we are capable of.’

‘You’re right,’ Alice said. ‘It’s just a lot less bloody and spectacular.’
‘But women get killed, too,’ Gladys spoke softly, looking down again.

‘What?’

‘Women, back here, at home. We aren’t safe here, either. Look at this monster who has been strangling women on the streets.’

‘I suppose that is quite spectacular,’ said Alice. ‘One of the most interesting local stories for a while, at least. But they give those ones to the boys.’ She rolled her eyes, again.

‘It’s more than a story,’ said Gladys. ‘It’s terrifying. I must admit that it’s even had me thinking about going home, moving back to Western Australia.’

‘Oh no! Gladys – you wouldn’t?’

‘I’d miss Melbourne, of course. My work. And the friends I’ve made, am making,’ she looked pointedly at Alice, with a shy smile. ‘And I’d miss the larks. I sing, you know, and dance, in amateur productions – for the University and a few small theatre companies. I’ve been producing a few small works, as well, and putting on dances, like this one, to raise funds for Australian servicemen and women. And yet …’ Gladys looked around the café nervously.

‘Yet?’

‘I can’t help feeling less safe here.’ It was almost a confession.

‘Yes.’ Alice said. ‘But surely we can’t run away.’

‘I don’t want to. But I must admit I have been staying home after dark a lot more lately. Usually I am out for supper with friends a few nights a week and working at the theatre on the others. But I even missed a rehearsal last week, on the day I heard about the murder, because I would have had to travel there on my own. It’s the only rehearsal I’ve ever missed. I heard afterwards I wasn’t the only one, but I hated letting the other girls down. And when I am out, I keep seeing shadows, ghosts almost, or feel like I am being followed.’

She waited for Gladys to look up, and when she did she found herself staring straight into Gladys’s eyes. She felt peculiar, as though she had lost the certainty of her own grasp on the world: it had shifted, infinitesimally.
‘Tell me,’ Gladys said softly. ‘Tell me I am being silly. It’s horrible to be scared at home in my own place. Tell me that I must not let this dictate my actions. I know it myself.’ She continued to look into Alice’s eyes. Alice’s fingers reached out across the table, brushing Gladys’s. She pulled them back quickly when she felt them touch, a shiver running down her spine. Gladys hadn’t pulled her fingers away.

‘If we give in, then whatever his motive, whatever his campaign, he’s won.’

Gladys looked into her teacup. ‘You’re right. Of course, you’re right. But aren’t you – frightened?’

Alice thought of the very short two-block walk from the tram stop on Bridge Road to her house, and how every night she almost ran through the darkness with her heart in her mouth. She thought of the dark tram stop near the Herald office, and how she always stood, stiff, alert, never relaxed, as she waited. She felt her heart beating fast, even now.

‘Of course I am.’ She raised a cake from the plate and took a large bite, perhaps to take the taste of what she had just said out of her mouth. A stray currant tumbled to the plate.

‘You are very brave, Alice,’ Gladys said. ‘I am not sure I am quite as brave.’

‘Is it called bravery when you don’t have a choice?’
It was hardly surprising that Evie and the others had mistaken Pat for a man. After all, it was what had drawn Alice to her in the first place as well: the alluring incongruity of her pulling those trousers over her naked body in the cove that first day. Of course, Alice knew that lots of women wore trousers now, but she had not had much experience of knowing, or seeing, women who did. Evie and the kids would have had even less. And it wasn’t only that: Pat didn’t look like the other women who wore trousers. Their trousers were pleated, flared, still feminine. Pat wore men’s trousers. She wore her hair short, cropped close to her head, under a boy’s cap. She wore no makeup, and she generally got around in brogues or boots. That, along with her broad shoulders and her height, meant that she could pass for a man, at first glance at least, or from a distance.

It was lucky, really. Alice did not want to think about what would have happened if the kids had seen two women in skirts on the top of the cliff. What Kate would have said, about that.

‘They nearly discovered us,’ Alice said, the next Sunday in the cove. Pat stretched her legs full length and leaned her long arms down to try and touch her toes. She almost reached.

‘What would happen, Pat, if they did? Discover us.’

‘They’d want me to share you,’ said Pat. ‘I want to keep you all to myself.’

Alice swatted her with her sunhat.

‘No, but really. What’s the worst they could do?’

‘Are you kidding, Allie? They would call us filthy, unnatural. We would be ostracised from society, they’d force us into marriage to straighten us out. Your family would probably disown you, and I’d lose my job.’

‘Not really, Pat? As bad as all that?’

Pat nodded.

‘But you’re always so daring,’ said Alice. ‘I mean, look at us now.’
Pat lay back under the tree, stretching her arms above her head, splaying her naked body out in a star shape, at full stretch. Alice gazed at her, the long, lean limbs, the voluptuous breasts, the little tuft of dark hair between her legs. She glistened in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the leaves, from head to foot, like she had been swimming in the dust from a thousand crushed jewels. Even after almost two years, Alice still got a thrill at the sight of her, at being allowed to see her, like this.

‘Anyone could come into the cove, when we are like this. Like I did, that day.’

She was always nervous on sunny days. The cove, generally deserted, occasionally attracted picnickers or fishermen. On those days they usually didn’t stay at the cove for long. Those were the days they’d go up and catch a tram on Darling Street or get on a ferry to Circular Quay.

‘Maybe I’m just lucky,’ said Pat, sitting up. ‘But I’ve been coming here for years and you’re the first person who ever caught me in a compromising position.’

‘Me and the kids.’

‘I’ll never forget it,’ said Pat. ‘Do you know, for a long time I thought they were your kids. That’s why I didn’t come back here for weeks. I quite thought you might break my heart.’

‘Did you really? My kids?’ She laughed. How absurd. ‘So why did you come back?’

‘I figured that some broad and her brats shouldn’t stop me doing what I’ve always done. That, and I couldn’t stop thinking about the way you looked at me.’

‘How did I look at you?’

‘Like I was some kind of a magical creature.’

‘You are! You’ve bewitched me.’

Pat laughed.

‘But really, Pat,’ said Alice. ‘I’m not the same girl I was, before. It’s as though you’ve awoken something in me. Not only,’ she blushed, and indicated the two of them, ‘not only this. Us. It’s also, you know, that now, I
am itching to get back to work, to do something meaningful, do my bit, you know. It's like I was only half a person, before, only half of what I could be, half alive –'

‘All because of little old me?’

‘You know it’s because of you,’ said Alice, shyly, digging in the dirt with her fingers. And then, more boldly, ‘I am thinking of applying to one of the newspapers, see if they’ve got some work.’

‘Are you?’

Alice nodded. ‘Do you think I should?’

‘What for?’

‘To be engaged in the world, to write about the war, about the possibilities there will be, for everyone – for us – after the war is over. It’s exciting. Don’t you think?’

‘Not really. It’s all sadness and despair. How can any good come out of that?’

‘You’re just jaded from working in the censor’s office,’ said Alice. ‘Reading all those letters and cutting them up. Throwing away all those words people want to say to each other, but aren’t allowed to.’

‘I really don’t think the world will change, Allie. Not like you want it to.’

‘You’re cynical.’

‘Realistic, actually,’ she said, brushing dirt from her arms. ‘They’d never let you write about the war. You’d be stuck writing about dances and ticker tape parades. Why even bother?’

‘Don’t you think we have to try?’

‘What I do think,’ she said, beckoning Alice to her, ‘is that we are breaking our rule, talking about work.’

*Your rule,* thought Alice. Pat was the one who had suggested, early on, that they not talk about things they did during the week, when they were together. That they should keep their Sundays sacred, and self-contained, so they could retain their magic. Alice had agreed, because she had been too entranced to challenge Pat, but really she wanted to know everything about
her, everything she did and everything she thought. She was jealous of every moment Pat spent away from her.

There had been that one, single, magical Tuesday, a cold early evening in winter, around 5.30pm, when she’d run into Pat just outside the Cricketer’s Arms up on Darling Street. Her heart had leapt, and, before she’d even thought about it, she’d called out. Pat had turned, and a dark shadow had crossed her face, as if she was not at all pleased to see her. But then it had passed, and she’d grinned, and hurried over, and touched Alice’s gloved fingers with her own naked ones, and said, whispering, leaning her face next to Alice’s ear ‘Fancy that! Running into my darling on Darling Street!’ and then she’d leaned back and laughed, and Alice had wished she wasn’t wearing her gloves, as Pat’s fingers still touched hers. Pat had looked around and then grabbed her hand harder, pulling her quickly into the ladies’ lounge. She’d marched straight up to the counter and bought them beers. The publican had called Pat ‘mate’, he must’ve thought she was a man. They’d had a good laugh about that, and Pat had said ‘there you go love’ in a deep voice as she put Alice’s beer in front of her. Alice remembered the beer bubbles tickling her nose as she took a sip, making her giggle even more. A fight had broken out next door, in the public bar, amongst the dockers and wharfies who were drinking there. Alice and Pat had finished their beers and left, escaping the violence. Pat’s cap had flown off her head, and she’d stopped to pick it up. Alice had stopped too, and then Pat had grabbed her hand, breaking into a run and pulling her along. A man had stood watching them, and then he’d yelled something out before turning to join the fight. An obscenity, and a word Alice didn’t know: *fuck off lezzos!* Some coarse language he’d picked up working on the docks, no doubt. She didn’t know if it was directed at them, or just part of the fight, and she didn’t wonder about it for long. Pat had dragged her into a darkened laneway behind the pub and kissed her with such vigour that it had taken her breath away, and she couldn’t think about anything else. Didn’t care about anything else. Only this. Only Pat. But maybe, she reflected later, maybe that kind of thing was why Pat wanted to
stick to the cove, stick to quiet, unpeopled Sundays. And maybe she had a point.

Alice went, now, to nestle herself in between Pat’s legs. She leaned back against Pat’s chest, and Pat brought her arms around Alice, kissing the back of her neck. They both stared out over the harbour, towards the city, silent for a moment.

‘Did you bring other girls here, before me?’ Alice asked.
‘As I said, I’ve been coming here for years.’
Alice felt jealousy burning in her gut.
‘Who was the first girl you brought here?’
‘Laura,’ said Pat, quietly. ‘Laura Lombardi.’
‘What was she like?’
‘She was my Italian queen,’ said Pat. ‘She was lovely. She had skin like silk.’

Alice looked down at her breasts, her stomach, her legs, feeling as though she was covered all over in scales.

‘Where is Laura now?’
‘Oh, her parents shoved her off into the convent, when they found us together one day.’

‘That’s horrible! Where were you?’
‘In her bedroom. We thought her parents were away, but they came back early. We didn’t hear them come in.’

‘Did you ever see her again?’
‘I tried,’ said Pat. ‘It broke my heart. Sometimes I sat in church on a Sunday and watched her, all dressed up in that nuns’ garb, singing her little heart out. Occasionally she’d steal a look at me. Her parents didn’t want me lurking around, so they told the priest about me, and he told me not to come back to his congregation. That people like me weren’t welcome.’ Pat stared straight ahead.

‘Is she still there?’
‘I don’t know. I suppose so. It was a long time ago.’

‘And what did your family do? Did they find out?’
‘I don’t have any family.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They were killed in a house fire when I was a baby. Kerosene heater, you know. Catching on the curtains. Somehow I survived, one of the neighbours heard me crying and got me out. I was brought up by the nuns, would you believe it? The irony.’

‘My God. Why haven’t you told me that before?’

Alice thought about how little she knew Pat, beyond Sundays, beyond the cove. She might know every inch of her skin, every shudder of her body, how she tasted and smelt and moved, but she didn’t know her past, didn’t know all the fibres of her being and how they were woven together to create her. Didn’t know which ones were damaged, frayed, even broken, and which were whole. She wanted to know, burned to know, everything. Ah well, she thought. She had plenty of time to find out.

‘It’s all right. No great loss, really. I don’t even remember them.’

‘I don’t really remember my father,’ Alice said, coming back to the conversation. ‘He died when I was sixteen, but he had been – ill – since he got back from the war. Not himself.’

‘But you’ve still got a mother, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What would she say – about all this?’

‘I don’t know,’ Alice spoke slowly. ‘Before I met you I had no idea that any of this was even possible, I hadn’t ever thought about it. It shocked me, a little, when we started.’ Alice blushed, remembering that first kiss, and those tingles when Pat’s tongue probed her own lips open. Her eyes had flickered open, then closed again as desire flooded her, drowned her and everything she’d ever known, ever been. She remembered her shock and delight when she first felt the wetness between her own legs, when Pat touched her there. She remembered wondering why people said this was unnatural when, at that moment, Pat felt like an extension of her, as easily and naturally as two droplets of water joining and becoming one, quivering in the breeze, glinting in the sunlight, soaking into each other.
‘I would hope I could make my mother understand,’ Alice said, doubting her own words, even as she spoke them, ‘I mean, if I could make her see that I love you and that I’d be miserable without you, she might – in time – if we promised to be discreet –’

‘What did you say?’ Pat’s voice was playful again now. She brought herself up to her knees and came around so that she was sitting beside Alice.

‘That she might – eventually –’

‘Not that. The other thing.’

‘What? Oh.’ Alice blushed. ‘That I love you?’

‘Yes! That!’ Pat laughed, her face turned to the sky, illuminated by bright, bright sunshine. Then she grew serious, and looked out into the harbour, her fingers interlaced with Alice’s.

‘I love you too, my little dreamer. Beyond the harbour, beyond the city, to the ends of the ocean, as far as the eye can see.’

And they kissed, Alice running her hands over the fuzzy short hair on Pat’s head, pulling her closer. Pat snaked her long arms around Alice and squeezed.

‘Maybe if I hold onto you tightly like this, and allow not even daylight between us, they won’t be able to tear us apart.’

She kissed Alice again, their bodies pressed together.

Alice tasted salt.
Wednesday May 13

‘But it does fit with my brief, Mr Sykes,’ Alice said. ‘Women are being killed. It is very much about women and how the world is for them during this war. How the world’s changing.’ She tried not to let her emphases sound like pleading.

‘Miss Jenkins ... Alice. It’s simply not appropriate to put a woman on a murder case.’

‘Why not?’

‘Particularly these murders, my dear. They are especially grisly.’

‘But you need someone to cover the story,’ she said. ‘Now that Mr Hughes has gone.’

‘That, indeed, is true.’ Mr Sykes finally put down his pen and gave her his full attention, and she thought she almost had him. He wavered, leaned forward ever so slightly, opened his mouth and then shut it again. He shook his head slightly, and his brow furrowed. ‘But I cannot send you out to these crime scenes, Alice. It wouldn’t be right.’

She took a deep breath – it would not help her cause to get upset now; she had to show him she was just as good – as emotionless – as a man.

‘I am up to it. I promise you.’

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed, sizing her up. She bit her lip and held her breath.

‘It’s no job for a woman.’

‘But who will cover it?’

‘Cassidy will do it.’

‘But Mr Cassidy is not a journalist! He’s an editor. A sports editor! He wouldn’t know the first thing about covering a story like this. This is not a game, Mr Sykes.’

‘Hmmmm.’
‘Women are frightened to go out at night – they are even frightened to go to their jobs, and it is causing absenteeism from their war work. Those ladies I did a story on last week – remember the ones up with the sun each day delivering bread from the bakeries? Three of them didn’t turn up for work until it was light, and they were too late for the first round of deliveries, which caused more women to be late because they had to wait for their deliveries: not just bread, but ice, and milk. But they were too scared to leave the house while it was dark. And there are many young women who are being forced to leave their war jobs because their parents are sending them away to the country, to stay with relatives until it is safer in the city. Don’t think of this as an extra thing for me to do, think of it almost as part of the Women’s World column.’ Alice’s heart was racing. She was sure she’d never said so many words together to Mr Sykes, before this.

He sat still, thinking. The silence thundered around her ears.

‘Give me a chance,’ she said. ‘I promise if I am overwhelmed by it I will come to see you and you can hand it on to someone else.’

‘You drive a hard bargain, Miss Jenkins.’ He tapped his fountain pen on the mahogany desk, three times, before holding it suspended in mid-air above the desk, ready to execute the deciding tap. Alice held her breath.

‘All right,’ he said. Alice couldn’t stop the smile spreading over her face. ‘All right. But you and Cassidy will do it together. Any problems, you go to him. And if there are any more murders, you are not to go to the murder scenes while any victims’ bodies remain. Cassidy will do that. You – you talk to people. Talk to the police, the coroner, the next of kin, the hospitals. Find another angle.’ Alice’s smile had, by now, disappeared.

‘But Mr Sy –’

‘Silence. I am only humouring you in this at all because there are no suitable men to do the job. At least this way you won’t be on your own. My terms are final.’ He brought the pen down again, tap, and then let it fall to the table.

‘Yes Mr Sykes.’

‘Don’t make me regret this, Miss Jenkins.’
‘I won’t.’

And, with that, Mr Sykes nodded his head.

Alice stood up and walked out the door before he could change his mind.

It was something, she thought. A start. And she would show them all just what a good job she – she, not Cassidy – would do.

She walked straight back to her desk, sat in her chair and was tempted to put her feet up on the desk in the way the men often did when they felt cocky or victorious. But of course she could not do that. Even a woman doing a man’s job must remain ladylike. She rolled a cigarette, taking her time over the ritual, and then lit it and inhaled deeply, expelling some of the tension. She leaned back in her chair, listening to the relentless clacking of typewriters, her favourite sound. She felt her thoughts fall into the familiar rhythm: *clack clack clack clack clack, ding, scrape, clack clack*: the sound of a story coming into being. She thought of Gladys. *I’m going to find the killer so we don’t have to be scared anymore.* She didn’t want her new friend moving back to Perth just when she had found her.

Alice crushed the butt of her cigarette in the ashtray on her desk and stood up, reaching for her coat hanging on the wall behind her. She looked over at Cassidy, who was leaning against his desk, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. She thought about going to talk to him, but instead she turned the other way and walked out of the newsroom alone. Mr Sykes hadn’t said anything about going to the murder sites after the fact. Alice had a story to tell.

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Morningside House on Spring Street was just around the corner. She said goodbye to Enid out the front of the Herald building and walked towards the tram stop. She blended in with the crowd of people waiting for the tram until Enid was out of sight in the other direction, then she broke away and walked up the hill.

It was only a few steps up Spring Street, past Shield’s Motor Garage on the corner, to number thirteen. Alice stood outside Morningside House
which, this time last week, had been the home of Mrs Pauline Thompson. But it was Wednesday, thirteenth of May, which meant that Mrs Thompson had been dead now for four days.

She held her hand out in front of her and snapped the leather of her glove, as though she were a detective in a story. This was her chance. Her chance to find something that the incompetent policemen overlooked, show what she could do. Because if Joe Hughes’s attitude was anything to go by, the police could have been sloppy. They might not be taking this seriously enough. It was a mistake she herself would not make.

Morningside House was the first in a row of four three-storey houses along Spring Street. It had eleven narrow, steep stone steps leading up from the street to a verandah. At the bottom of the steps there were two stone pillars, an iron railing on one side and a solid stone wall on the other. She climbed to the third step, guessing that Mrs Thompson’s body had lain just above: it had been reported that she’d been found spreadeagled on her back across the fifth and sixth steps. Alice knew that, like Ivy McLeod before her, her clothing had been torn up towards the waist, and also down towards the waist, with just some clothing left around her middle, exposing her genitals and breasts. Alice shivered, and ran her gloved fingers across the stone, and glanced at them, expecting to see – something. Blood, perhaps? And yet, the leather of her gloves was clean. The steps looked like any old steps at the front of any old boarding house: the same, in fact, as the three other boarding houses along the street. She should have known this: she’d pored over the reports in the papers and knew that Mrs Thompson had been strangled. She’d known there had been no blood. How could it be, though, that such a violent crime could leave absolutely no trace? That a thirty-one-year-old woman could have stood here, on this very spot, full of life, and been rendered so quickly and silently, unobtrusively lifeless? That no-one asleep in the bedrooms – right there! – could have heard anything? Alice looked around for clues: a piece of torn clothing caught on the fence, a boot print, a button? But there was nothing. It was as though whoever it was had vanished, right into the cold air. As if he wasn’t a man at all, but something else, something
out of a storybook. Alice looked around again, probing the corners of the step with her fingers. A gentleman approached, looking annoyed when he saw her crouched in his way. He excused himself and pushed past her, pulling out a key and unlocking the door, then walking through it as if it were just a normal boarding house on just a normal day.

Alice felt disappointment descend upon her. She turned around and faced the Treasury Gardens across the street. The light was beginning, ever so slightly, to fade into late afternoon and the trees were starting to look menacing in the pink twilight. She wasn’t sure what she had expected to find here. Perhaps she’d been reading too many Sherlock Holmes stories. There was no crucial clue the policemen had missed.

She walked away in somewhat of a daze, and a few minutes later realised that she had not gone towards the tram stop at all but had walked a block down Flinders Lane and was standing outside the Theatre Lovers’ Club. This was where the murdered woman had told her husband she was coming that night – to a dance. She hadn’t turned up. Alice walked on, up into Collins Place, where Mrs Thompson had been last seen, about midnight, with an American soldier. Alice stopped outside the Astoria Hotel. Perhaps this was where Mrs Thompson had come with her companion. She looked through the grimy windows, willing herself to see Pauline Thompson, to recreate her as she had been on the week-end. But the room was empty, filled only with ghosts.
There had been nothing out of the ordinary when they’d got home from school on the day their father died. Everything had looked exactly as it should.

It must have been a Monday, twelve years ago. Washing day. The bed sheets on the clothesline in the backyard were spinning around, dancing on the breeze, and she’d glimpsed them through the gap down the side of the house. Strangely, this was one of the signs that something wasn’t right. The sheets should, by now, be dry, folded, and put neatly away in the linen cupboard.

He’d left before they were up in the morning to go to work at the match factory, as normal. They’d had breakfast and gone to school. Alice’s mother had scolded her for leaving newspaper clippings all over the living room floor when she’d been doing her school project the night before, and she’d promised she’d tidy them up when she got home.

They’d come home, she and Sylvie, as normal, past the Lennox St Barracks where they handed out bread and jam to kids whose families were struggling in the Depression. She’d walked up the front path licking strawberry jam off her fingers, calling back to Sylvie to keep up. Her mother had been standing at the front door, still wearing her washing-day clothes: a full-length pinafore, gum boots and a scarf tying back her hair. That part, Alice could remember as clearly as if she could still see it. It was so unusual for her mother to still be dressed like that at this time of day that she felt her mind go clear, as if preparing itself for what was to come.

‘Girls,’ her mother had said, gently. ‘Come here.’

Sylvie had rushed straight into her mother’s outstretched arms. Alice, made even more wary by her mother’s strange tone, hung back.

‘Alice, love. Come here.’

She stepped forward.

‘I have some terrible news.’
Her mother hugged them close for a moment, and then shepherded them inside the house, with a backward glance at the neighbours’ houses. Alice saw Mrs West leaning out over her gate next door, to get a good look.

‘It’s your father.’

Sylvie looked up, wide-eyed.

‘There was an accident today, at the factory.’

‘Is he all right? Mum?’

Their mother shook her head.

Alice still couldn’t remember the exact words her mother spoke next. She wondered if Sylvie remembered, or if her mother did: perhaps those words were burned, indelibly, into both of their memories. Or perhaps none of them knew. They’d never talked about it since, not once. It seemed to be a one-time-only deal, this news that her father had been killed. Because how could you say it more than once? There was that time of not knowing, and then the words, and then she knew, and she knew, irrevocably.

She remembered that Sylvie had wailed and shrank into her mother’s embrace. Alice had known she should cry, but felt strangely numb. She had a vague memory of her father coming into their bedroom that morning and kissing them both on the foreheads before he left for work. But maybe she’d dreamed it.

‘No!’ she screamed. ‘You’re lying!’

‘It’s true, I’m afraid, petal,’ her mother said.

‘I bet he’s just at the pub, like normal!’

Usually, on the way home from school, she glanced in at The Vine Hotel, to see if he was there, at the front bar. She hadn’t looked today.

She burst away from her mother and ran down the hallway, into the living area. She wasn’t sure what she expected to see, but she must have thought there’d be proof there that her father was still alive. That he’d be sitting up in his chair, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. That there’d be a newspaper, the *Sporting Globe*, perhaps, left open on the arm of the chair, as if he’d only got up for a second. But the room was empty, eerily clean. She ran and jumped into his chair, something she had never dared do
before, as if her breaking this rule would bring him back, even if only to punish her. It didn’t even smell like him anymore. It smelt – she sniffed – like lemon juice and carbolic. And he still wasn’t there.

Harry came in from the kitchen.

‘Oh kiddo,’ was all he said, and she ran to him. He bent down and caught her in his arms, picking her up in a big hug.

‘Is it really true?’

‘Fraid so, love.’

She sobbed, then.

The room looked exactly the same, but somehow it was changed. Not changed, so much, by her father’s absence right now, as by the knowledge that her father would never be in here again. It was as if someone had picked up the room by its four corners, and tossed it, like folding a sheet, so that when it landed again everything was in a different place. Familiar, but not the same.

She glanced over to where she’d left her stack of newspapers the night before. They were gone. Her father’s bowls shoes that belonged in the corner near the hallway door, were gone. She’d tripped over them that morning, on her way out. It was spotless, but the washing was still on the line outside, and there was no sign of tea being cooked in the kitchen. Later she saw the scrunched-up newspapers in the fireplace.

Why had her mother cleaned up stupid things like her stupid schoolwork and the bowls shoes, when her husband had just died? It almost felt like a normal day. It didn’t make sense. Alice ran outside, and hid among the washing on the line, breathing in the clean, comforting smell of soap and wet, clean sheets.

After that they’d had to leave school. She was sixteen and Sylvie was fourteen, and in these hard times they weren’t the only ones leaving at that age. She’d had two more years than a lot of kids got – she should be grateful. It was then that Sylvie had got a job folding shirts at the Pelaco factory. The editor at the Richmond Guardian, a man who had served with her father in
the war, agreed to take Alice on as a junior office girl, because he sympathised with the family and wanted to honour his friend’s memory. Her mother picked up a few shifts at the Rosella Factory, making jams and sauces, and Harry had moved in with them, to help with the bills.

‘We’re the lucky ones,’ her mother had said, all through the Depression, even when Harry lost his job at Bryant and May. He stayed with them, even after that, because he had nowhere else to go, and besides, as their mother said, it was good to have a man around the house. They’d become a family, as convincingly as if her father were still alive. Sometimes Alice thought that they were more convincing, now, in fact: Harry seemed to fill the void left by her father much better, much more fully, than her father had done since the war. Even now, Alice had memories of her father that she wasn’t sure weren’t actually memories of Harry – things were blurry.

Her father’s chair was still there. It was a long time before anyone sat there. But one day, without any preamble, their mother had come in from the kitchen and set Harry’s tea and his paper there, along with a fresh ashtray and his slippers. And so it became Harry’s chair. One couldn’t be tossing out perfectly good furniture, after all. But somehow, even as Harry made it his own, Alice would still sometimes, even now, walk into the room and see her father there as he had been every day since he had come back from the Great War: slightly hunched, with a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. Sometimes asleep, often drunk. Sometimes with a blanket over his knees, as if he was infirm. And although she often saw him, he never spoke to her. She couldn’t even remember his voice. And, always, he faded away as soon as she saw him, leaving the chair somehow emptier than before.

Harry had always told them, even after he lost his job, that he sang for his supper. He had connections, he told them, mates with their fingers in important pies. He would always come home with something useful, some firewood, a bit of spoiled meat that made the stew go further. Her mother would look at it with a mild disapproval, but there was pride in there somewhere, too, and she accepted whatever he was offering without
complaint. Beggars couldn’t be choosers in those lean times. And so they’d survived.

The lucky ones, Alice thought. I suppose we are.
Melbourne University next stop. Melbourne University.’

Alice clutched the flyer in her hand. It was crumpled. She smoothed her dress, running her fingers down the pleats. It didn’t quite do, but she had nothing else.

She’d tried to buy a new dress for the dance during the week. She’d even gone to Myer’s. But she’d stopped as soon as she’d seen the crowd of rampaging women, anxious to get their hands on everything they could on the eve of the threatened clothes rationing. She had watched for a minute from a safe distance. She saw the salesgirl put up the ‘Quota Sold Out’ sign, at only eleven-thirty am. She’d thought the women, far from being genteel today, might actually riot. Alice had turned around and come home, empty-handed.

And now, here she was, in her same old good red dress. It was too long to be fashionable, and the sleeves were all wrong. It was the wrong colour, too: a deep, vibrant red in a world of pastels and soft shades. But Alice, a poster girl for austerity fashion even before the war, had never much cared about that. But now, unaccountably, she did.

The hall was decorated in red, white and blue crepe paper, and had American and Australian flags hung, side by side, at one end. Alice stood in the doorway, chewing on her fingernails, looking out for Gladys. She wasn’t sure why she had come. Perhaps she should just go.

‘Alice! I didn’t know you would be here.’ It was Enid from the newsroom, holding two cups of lemonade.

‘Oh Enid. It’s good to see you.’

‘I’m here with him.’ Enid giggled and pointed to a swarthy American GI who was lounging in the corner. ‘Better get back.’

She walked away.
‘I’m so glad you made it.’

It was that voice again, behind her. Gladys. Alice turned. When she saw Gladys she felt momentarily out of breath: it was the cold afternoon, the quick turn on her heels, she supposed. Gladys was dressed in a lavender knee-length gown with white polka dots. It had short sleeves and a white Peter Pan collar, and brought out the colour of her eyes. She was still wearing her silver cross around her neck: Alice found herself wondering where she’d got it, if someone special had given it to her. Her hair was set in pin curls and secured with a matching lavender bow.

‘You look lovely, Gladys,’ she said.

‘So do you.’

‘Oh, now, Gladys, you don’t need to be polite. I know that this is not quite the thing for a tea dance.’

Gladys looked her up and down.

‘Perhaps it’s not quite a tea dance dress, Alice, but you look very fetching in it. Red is definitely your colour.’

‘You are very kind.’

‘Not kind so much as … pleased to see you.’ Gladys blushed a little then, and quickly turned her face away. ‘There’s so much to do!’ she said, changing the subject.

‘Can I help you?’ Alice asked.

‘Oh no. You go and have a good time. Have a dance.’ She moved her arm in a sweeping motion across the room, coming finally to indicate a group of American GIs standing near the punch. Alice looked at them, and then back at Gladys.

‘I’d much rather help you.’

‘All right then,’ said Gladys. ‘Help me set out these lamingtons.’

She started walking towards the refreshment table, moving, it seemed to Alice, in time to the jaunty music coming from the gramophone.

‘Why don’t you dance, Glady?’ she said. ‘I can do this.’

‘Maybe later,’ she said, brushing coconut from her fingertips.
There wasn’t really very much to do at all, Alice saw. At one end of the hall there was a stage, its curtain drawn across the front. Down one side of the room there were trestle tables draped with white cloths and piled with so much food – lamingtons, tea cakes, scones, jellies, sandwiches. And punchbowls full of ginger beer and lemonade. The rest of the hall was empty, set out as a dance floor, with only two couples on it. They swayed in time to the music. There were others, congregating around the edges of the room, standing in groups of civilian girls, AWAS girls, and American soldiers, the latter two groups in uniform. Alice watched with interest as the civilian girls and the soldiers sized each other up, the girls giggling and looking coy, the soldiers drinking beer and trying to look dapper. One of the soldiers approached the group of girls and held his hand out to a pretty girl in a lemon-yellow swing dress – she took it and allowed herself to be led to the dance floor. Her friends looked envious and exaggerated their preening.

After they’d transferred the lamingtons from a plate onto a cake stand, Gladys handed Alice a glass of ginger beer, and they both sat down in chairs beside the table.

The dance floor was thriving now, a sea of pastels and energy as the couples twisted and swung to the music. In the middle of the dance floor, Enid was being swung around by her handsome GI. Alice didn’t know anyone else.

‘Ma’am. Ma’am.’ An American soldier approached the table, greeting them each in turn. He cast his eyes over the cakes and the delicacies on the table, and then looked at each of them, almost as if he was taking stock of what was on offer, deciding what he wanted, appraising cakes and dance partners all at once. He took a shortbread biscuit, bit into it and then looked at Gladys as a small shower of crumbs fell onto his uniform. He brushed them off and swallowed the biscuit.

‘Care to dance, ma’am?’

Gladys got up, and Alice felt a little bit sad that her time with Gladys was over – Gladys would dance, now, and she wouldn’t see her again until
they had a rushed goodbye in an hour or so, when Alice decided it was a polite time to leave.

‘I’m sorry,’ she heard Gladys say, to her surprise. ‘I have to help my friend with these.’ She rattled a tin. Alice heard a few coins inside and noticed that a hand-made label bearing the AWAS crest had been wrapped around the outside of the tin. She indicated that Alice should take a second tin from the table and join her, and the two of them moved off around the room, collecting donations.

‘Why didn’t you dance with him? He looked nice enough, didn’t he?’ Alice asked.

‘I’m not quite in the mood yet,’ Gladys said.

They made their way back to the table, and each fixed themselves a little plate of food before sitting back down.

‘This is – fun,’ said Alice.

‘You sound surprised!’

‘I am, rather,’ Alice said.

Two women in AWAS uniforms, both in trousers, walked towards them. The one on the right was Dot to whom she’d spoken on Tuesday. She smiled at her and Dot said hello, introducing her friend as Sadie. Alice thought she was the same girl Dot had left with the other day. Dot didn’t look at Gladys, but Alice noticed that Gladys couldn’t take her eyes off Dot. Dot reached over and took a lamington from the pile. Sadie smiled at her and parted her lips, slightly, invitingly. Dot broke off a piece of the cake and put it in Sadie’s mouth, then she let her finger slide softly along Sadie’s bottom lip, perhaps wiping away stray flakes of coconut. She broke off another piece of cake and put into her own mouth. Alice’s own mouth began to water, a little, and she looked away, suddenly aware that she was staring. The two girls turned and walked back to the AWAS group, sharing the rest of the lamington as they went. Alice glanced at Gladys, who was still watching the retreating girls. Her expression was hard to read, and not quite pleasant.
Alice was about to speak, but at that moment *In the Mood* came on and Gladys seemed to snap out of whatever fog she’d been in, sitting up straight, almost defiantly, and looking at Alice.

‘How about it?’

‘About what?’

‘Dancing with me, you duffer,’ said Gladys. She stood up and held her hand out to Alice. Alice hesitated, for a moment, before she put her hand in Gladys’s, and they shuffled over to join the dancers.

Alice tried to keep up. Gladys’s movements were swift, sure. Alice twisted, stiffly.

‘Relax,’ Gladys said, into her ear. She felt a tingle go all the way up and down her spine, and somehow found a rhythm, falling into step with Gladys. Gladys swung Alice back and forth, reaching out her hand each time to pull her back in. Alice tried to copy what Gladys was doing with her hips, swivelling, kicking out her feet. Gladys’s arms seemed made of rubber, flying all over the place. Alice’s long dress got tangled around her shins, and the sleeves were too long and too tight to allow her to swing her arms like Gladys was, and she was out of time with the music. But it didn’t matter. They jived and jitterbugged, laughing, laughing. The song ended, and they waited breathlessly for a split second before another one started, waited to see what it was. Alice felt giddy. Gladys groaned when she heard the opening strains to Vera Lynn’s *We’ll Meet Again* and turned away from the dance floor as the couples around them clutched each other and leaned in to the slow love song. Alice followed her, and together they sat back down, still laughing, their faces flushed from dancing. Alice’s heart was beating so fast she felt as though it might jump out of her chest.

‘You’re a beaut dancer, Gladys,’ said Alice.

‘You’re not so bad yourself.’
When the dance was over, Enid and her handsome American shimmied over to them.

‘Alice,’ Enid said, somewhat breathlessly. ‘Clive here knows of another dance tonight. At the Troc. Won’t you and your friend come?’

Alice looked towards Gladys.

‘I can’t,’ Gladys said. ‘I’ve got to clean up here.’

‘I’ll help,’ Alice said quickly. ‘Sorry Enid.’

‘Come afterwards,’ Enid said.

‘Maybe. We might see you there,’ Alice said.

Enid shrugged, and she and her friends turned away, dancing down the street towards the tram stop. Alice watched them walk off into the afternoon light, Enid clinging to the waist of the American soldier, his arm proprietorially around her shoulders.

‘Well I think that went well,’ said Gladys.

‘Indeed it did!’ said Alice. ‘It was a wonderful dance.’

She took the apron Gladys offered her and tied it around her waist.

‘I’m not sure this dress is worth protecting. I think I tore the sleeve when I was dancing.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Gladys. ‘It’s perfectly fine.’

‘Yes,’ said Alice. ‘That’s exactly what it is. Fine. Practical. Nothing special.’ Like me, she thought.

‘There’s honestly nothing wrong with it, Alice. But if you want it to be something special, you know, I could fix it up for you.’

‘Oh no! I couldn’t ask you to do that!’

‘You’re not asking me. I’m offering. I’d like to do it.’

Alice didn’t reply.

‘Come on. Let me! Come over tomorrow morning, say ten o’clock. Bring the dress and leave it with me.’
Alice nodded, turning her attention to the sink full of dishes in front of her.

‘Good,’ said Gladys. ‘Here.’ She wrote something down on a stray piece of paper. ‘My address.’ She came towards Alice and tucked it into her breast pocket, standing, Alice thought, a little bit closer than she needed to, for the task, before breaking away and going back to the sink.

‘Dot and Sadie seem nice,’ Alice said, cautiously, after a moment.

‘Who? Oh.’ That strange expression flitted across Gladys’s face. ‘I suppose.’

‘They look so dashing in their uniforms. Those trousers!’

‘False bravado, perhaps,’ said Gladys, then she turned and hung up her apron. Alice felt her mouth drop open.

‘Are you saying that women who wear trousers are –’

‘Oh don’t mind me. I’m bushed after the dance. Thank you for helping me here.’

‘It was my pleasure.’

Gladys opened the door from the little kitchen onto the vast hall, its table and chairs empty now, the room cold. It was getting dark. It looked a bit spooky, but they were used to darkness now, to moving about in it, to finding their way. Alice stepped into the room and walked tentatively towards the door, acutely aware of Gladys behind her. She reached for her coat, hearing the indecipherable whispering of a million unsaid words. She switched on the light, then reached out to open the door. The knob turned, but the door stayed shut.

‘It’s locked,’ she said. ‘Pass me the key, Gladys.’

She turned around and noticed that Gladys had become pale.

‘Locked? It can’t be!’

‘Try it.’

Gladys stepped forward and tried the knob for herself.

‘Oh! It was open when we came to set up. I didn’t think we’d need the key.’

‘Try the window,’ said Alice.
Gladys did, and shook her head.

‘What are we going to do, Alice?’

‘There’s nothing we can do,’ she said. ‘We’ll have to stay here until someone comes.’

Gladys’s face crumpled, as if she were about to cry.

‘Don’t be silly, Gladys. It’s not so bad. Look,’ Alice folded her coat and put it in the corner of the hall, on the floor. ‘We can make a bed here til morning. Someone will be by then, I’m sure.’

‘But it’s Friday night. No-one will come here til Monday.’

‘I’m sure there’ll be a cleaner or someone coming by tomorrow. Or someone walking past the window we can flag down to get help.’

‘How are you so calm?’

‘Getting upset won’t help us much,’ said Alice. ‘It could be worse. We’re not in any danger here. We’ve got lots of food left, and drinks.’

Gladys didn’t speak. Her face was pale.

‘Oh Alice, now you’ll miss that dance at the Trocadero.’

‘I don’t care about the dance,’ said Alice.

‘Still. I’m sorry.’

‘No need to be,’ said Alice. ‘Look. We can make our own dance here. This seems to me a perfect opportunity for you to teach me the jitterbug.’ She held out her hand. Gladys looked at it, standing still for a moment, but then moving towards Alice.

‘All right,’ she said.

‘So where do I start?’

‘The jitterbug basic is counted in six counts, but there are only four steps. On counts one and three, you take small steps to the side, and on counts five and six, you rock to the back.’ Gladys went through the movements, quickly.

‘Show me.’

Gladys walked a few steps closer to Alice, and then began to move.

‘Slow, two, slow, four, back, back.’
‘OK,’ said Alice. ‘I think I can do that.’ She tried, but her feet didn’t seem to want to go in the right order or position, and her hands were doing something else entirely. Gladys watched, her head cocked to one side.

‘It’s hopeless! It looks so much easier when you do it.’ Alice said.

‘It’s not hopeless,’ Gladys said. ‘Try it with the music.’ She went over to the gramophone and selected a song. She put her hand out to Alice as the music started. ‘Follow me.’

Alice took her hands and kept her eyes on Gladys’s feet.

‘Slow, two, slow, four, back, back.’

‘That’s a funny kind of slow!’ Alice said, getting her feet tangled again.

‘I can’t keep up.’

‘All right. Try this. Let’s start with the rock step. Rock away from me with your right foot, as I rock away from you with my left, then step back in, and then two small side steps. You’re a mirror to me, so watch me and copy.’

‘Righto.’

‘Just go with the music.’

Alice joined hands with Gladys again, and concentrated on following Gladys, her steps stilted, but becoming a bit more confident.

‘When I let go of your hand, here, come around beside me, so we’re both facing the same direction. That’s it! Well done. Now back in, start again.’

‘I don’t think I’ll ever really get it,’ said Alice.

‘You will. It just takes practice. You wait, I’ll be swinging you around in no time!’

‘It’s fun,’ said Alice, thinking of the feeling of her hands in Gladys’s, her body rocking in time with Gladys’s. ‘Let’s try again.’

They danced together, so involved in the rhythm that they didn’t notice the darkness begin to trespass across the hall. The moonlight crept in, bright and dull at the same time. Alice twisted in towards Gladys, stepping on her foot as she did so.

‘Sorry!’ she said, for the hundredth time.

Gladys looked up then, and made a little noise, as if she’d just remembered where they were.
‘It’s getting dark out there,’ she said.

‘I’d better close the blackouts,’ Alice said, moving towards the window, looking for the curtains to draw them across. ‘There aren’t any!’

‘What? No blackouts? How can that be?’

‘I suppose they don’t use the hall at night, so they don’t need them.’

‘But the light –’ Gladys looked nervously around, ‘We’ll have to turn it off.’ Her voice trembled.

‘I saw a kerosene lamp in the kitchen. That’ll do for some light, and should be all right for the brownout, if we keep it low.’

‘It’s cold, too,’ said Gladys.

‘It is cold,’ said Alice, as if she’d only just noticed. ‘Perhaps they have a small heater as well. Help me look.’ She grabbed her torch.

They went back into the kitchen and searched, coming up with the lamp Alice had seen, but no heater. Alice set the lamp near her folded coat, and sat, patting the ground beside her. Gladys inched forwards.

‘You can’t stand there all night,’ said Alice, and Gladys came then, and sat down. She shivered.

‘Isn’t the moonlight lovely?’ Alice said, watching Gladys. Gladys relaxed a bit, and began to sing, her sweet voice filling the darkening hall.

‘Follow the simple directions and they will bring,
Life of another complexion where you’ll be king,
You will awake in the morning and start to sing,
Moonlight Cocktails are the thing.’

‘But we’ll be the queens, Alice, you and me.’

Alice closed her eyes, allowing the day to wash over her: it seemed, somehow, perfect, even with the inconvenience of being locked in the hall. In truth, she was happy not to leave. She wanted to keep that moment forever. She wanted to wrap Gladys’s melodious voice up and take it with her, so that she could play it whenever she wanted to come back to this moment. Whenever she wanted to feel this peculiar mix of stimulation and contentment. She imagined Gladys as a little dancer in a music box like the one she’d had as a child, the one that she opened to make the music play and
the ballerina twirl. She imagined the feel of that soft green felt between her own toes as she stepped into the magical garden of the music box to join her, hidden safely there, away from the real world.

‘Here. Come and get warm,’ said Alice, raising her arm to offer a hug. Gladys shuffled closer, nestling in to Alice’s side. Alice embraced her, pulling her close. She began to stroke Gladys’s hair, playing with the stray curls that had escaped around her face.

‘That feels nice,’ said Gladys.

Without thinking about it, Alice bent down and kissed Gladys on the forehead. Gladys looked up, like a sleepy child at bedtime. Alice gazed into her eyes: they seemed to beseech her. Alice bent down again. Her lips were like a feather, barely even brushing Gladys’s. More of a tickle than a kiss. Later, Alice would think that she might have imagined this ghost of a kiss, and she’d wonder if it had ever really happened. But she was sure that Gladys had then shifted her position slightly, tilting herself into the embrace, inviting Alice, wordlessly, to come closer, to press harder, to make it real. And then –

There was a rustling of leaves outside, and the door flung open. They jerked apart.

‘It’s cold in here!’ Gladys said, too loudly, too quickly, jumping up to standing.

Alice stood up, slowly, straightening her pleats.

‘Thank God,’ she said. ‘We thought we’d be here all night.’ Her voice struck somewhat of a false note. Gladys looked at her strangely.

‘You girls are lucky. I was about to go ’ome and I saw the key still on the ’ook in the caretaker’s office. I thought I’d best come an’ ’ave a look.’

‘Thank you,’ said Gladys, striding past him out the door. ‘I’ll be more careful and remember to take it, next time. Good night, Mr Graham. Good night, Alice.’

Alice bent down and picked up her coat, shook it out, and put it on. When she got outside, Gladys was nowhere to be seen.
The day in the cove when she and Pat had declared their love had been such a wondrous one, to Alice, at the time. All she had heard in those words was promise. She hadn’t heard the sinister undertone that hinted at the thing that Pat was, perhaps, trying to protect them both from. It was only afterwards that Alice was able to see that that day might actually have been the beginning of the end.

She had been naïve. Pat had said that, later, and she’d been upset. But she knew now that it was true. She had been so smitten that she hadn’t been able to see the world as it was.

It was maybe four or five Sundays hence when they were cutting through the shipyards, Pat running ahead of her, holding onto her hand. Every now and again they would steal a sneaky kiss behind one of the shipping containers. It was thrilling to be so daring. Alice had never felt so alive.

‘Let’s get a milkshake,’ Pat said, and they went to a milk-bar on Darling Street. Alice would always look around for Kate, for one of the kids, scared to be caught. But, she reminded herself, there was nothing wrong with two girls having a milkshake together. It was just that everything they did seemed to be infused with secrecy and deception, so that even the most innocent of outings felt suspicious. Still, she felt pretty safe on Sundays. Sunday was still the day for letter writing and rosaries. Kate even tended to keep the kids home all day to say the rosary with her, as if their little voices raised in that way up to Heaven could help secure the safe return of their earthly father.

‘You’ll never guess what happened at work this week,’ said Pat.

Alice looked up, surprised that Pat was offering a story from work, from a day that wasn’t Sunday. Maybe this was it, this was the moment when their relationship spilled out from its Sunday confines and impressed itself on the rest of their lives. Please let it be so, thought Alice.
‘Tell me,’ said Alice, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice. She slurped her malted milk.

‘One of the old dames from the mail sorting room pulled me aside.’

‘What for?’

‘Her husband saw us.’

Alice dropped her straw. Milk splashed from it onto the laminex of the table.

‘Us? When?’

‘It was that day at the pub. He was one of those blokes in the fight, or watching it, or something.’

‘What did she say?’

‘She said that she always thought my trousers and short hair were just eccentric, but that now she wondered. She wondered if I were really some kind of a pervert. And she asked me if I was –’ Pat lowered her voice, ‘a lesbian.’ Pat looked around, grinning garishly, enjoying the story. Alice felt hot and cold. ‘Do you know what I said?’

‘What?’

‘I said oh no I’m a Presbyterian.’

‘But aren’t you Catholic – the nuns –’

‘Oh. Um. Yes. Yes, of course I am. I made it up, pretended, said I was a Presbyterian –’

‘Why did you say that?’

‘To throw her off the scent, silly. Pretend I didn’t know what a lesbian was.’

‘Oh.’ It kind of made sense. ‘Do you think it worked?’ Alice didn’t let on that she hadn’t known what a lesbian was, hadn’t ever heard the word, and she wondered if she was one now. She supposed she must be. It felt strange to have a name for it. She suddenly realised, with a strange clarity, what the man outside the pub had yelled, that day. What he’d meant.

‘It worked well enough. She told me to keep my nose clean. Said she wouldn’t hesitate to tell the boss if she thought I was corrupting the moral
fibre of the post office, or of any of the girls who work there. Or the customers. Can you believe it?’

‘Gosh!’

‘Isn’t that funny?’

‘Weren’t you – scared?’

‘What of? She’s just an interfering old biddy. She’s no threat. I’ll deny everything she says anyway. They can’t prove it.’

Alice couldn’t quite see how Pat had reached that conclusion, but was encouraged by her confidence.

‘You’re so brave, Pat.’

‘I don’t have a choice, really, do I?’

She wasn’t only brave, though. She was positively brazen. Alice was overcome with admiration.

‘So, little lady. How do you fancy fish and chips on the foreshore for tea?’

And she said it with such a salacious wink, and that cheeky lopsided grin, that it was – or seemed to be – a euphemism. Alice felt the familiar goosebumps begin to creep over her skin. Even fish and chips couldn’t be what they used to, anymore, in this brave and exciting new world.
Gladys had disappeared so quickly the night before that Alice wasn’t sure if the invitation for the following day still stood. She deliberated and deliberated, and eventually decided to go. She gathered up all her wits and marched up to the door of the boarding house in Parkville, her crumpled red dress over her arm.

‘Alice. You came.’
‘I wasn’t sure if I should.’
‘I’m glad you did. Come in. Would you like a cup of tea? I’ve just made a pot.’
‘Yes please.’

She followed Gladys down the corridor to the kitchen. She looked around while Gladys busied herself with the tea. There was a cabinet against the wall, haphazardly packed with all manner of crockery and glassware, and it faced a big kitchen table. On the wall side of the table was a bench seat, and there were five more chairs around the other sides: comfortably room for seven or eight diners. The room would be quite jolly, Alice thought, when it was full of people sitting down to a meal. Indeed, all the empty seats made her feel like this was a room that was used to having people in it. It felt so large and cavernous, with just her and Gladys, and that big expanse of linoleum floor between them. It seemed impossible that they had danced together the night before, that they had touched, and that they had almost – Alice dared not think it in case it wasn’t true. In the light of day, it seemed like it couldn’t possibly be true. Today, so far from intimacy, it felt like there were ghosts at the table, at the windows, watching them with unseen eyes.

Uncomfortable standing, Alice sat on the bench, with her back against the brick wall, and Gladys put the teapot, in its cosy, on the lace tablecloth,
beside the newspaper. Alice picked up the paper, pleased to be able to fill the awkward silence.

*Murdered wife “True as Steel”,* she read aloud.

There was a large photograph of Pauline Thompson, and smaller one of her husband Les, inset into the text.

‘My landlady loves *Truth,*’ Gladys said, as if disowning the sensationalist newspaper.

‘And why not?’ Alice said, sarcastically. ‘Listen to this excellent example of journalism. *I always knew she was true as steel, and anyone who says differently says a black and dastardly lie.*’

‘Poor man.’

“In these ringing words, during an exclusive interview with *Truth,* gaunt and hollow-eyed Constable Les Thompson, whose wife’s strangled body was found outside a Spring Street apartment house last Saturday morning, refuted any misconception caused by ill-founded and irresponsible reports which had given rise to reflections on his wife’s conduct in Melbourne.’

Why hadn’t she thought to interview the woman’s husband?

‘He says, *I didn’t mind at all, because, as I’ve said, I had every confidence in her. I knew her better than anyone: that’s why this ghastly business has been made so much more heart-breaking by veiled and evil suggestions. I feel convinced that, whoever was the man she met that night, it was someone she had known beforehand; I know definitely he was no stranger; she was not like that.*’

‘Oh! I hope, for his sake, that he’s right!’

Gladys got up and took a couple of scones out from underneath a tea towel on the bench, putting them onto a plate. Alice watched her as she dolloped apricot jam and cream into cut crystal dishes. She was colourful today, wearing a v-necked blue and yellow floral knee-length dress, with a white pointed collar, sleeves down to her elbows, and a white cloth belt fastened around her waist. Her brown hair hung loose, as if she hadn’t quite finished doing it. Alice wondered if she’d interrupted her.
‘Look at her,’ said Gladys, putting the plate of scones on the table beside the newspaper. ‘So pretty.’

‘Did you see the picture of her in the Herald this week? It was ground breaking. They used a wax model, and superimposed photos of Mrs Thompson on its face, to try and replicate what she was wearing on the night she was killed. It was just like the real thing!’

‘But she wasn’t made of wax. She was just like us. It could have been one of us.’

‘I know that, but –’

‘I just feel so sad for her, is all,’ said Gladys. ‘It’s awful.’

Instead of asking Gladys to pass her the scones, Alice stood up and reached over the table, lowering herself just enough that her scarf trailed in the dish of cream.

‘Gosh! How clumsy of me,’ she dabbed at her scarf with her handkerchief. ‘I think that’s making it worse. Mum will kill me. This was my grandmother’s.’

Gladys reached over and took one end of the silk scarf between her fingers. Gently, she pulled so that the knot unravelled. Alice’s throat tickled deliciously as the scarf floated across it, a tie between them, joining them together. A small, involuntary sigh escaped her lips.

‘I’ll wash it for you. The stain will come out nicely,’ said Gladys.

‘You’re more of a lady than I am,’ said Alice, straightening her collar, stopping briefly to put her fingers to the spot the scarf had touched, feeling her pulse beat quickly beneath them. ‘Perhaps that’s why I never got married.’

She looked slyly at Gladys, who was folding the scarf.

‘You’re still young enough,’ Gladys said. ‘Not quite an old spinster, like me.’

‘Did you want to marry? Do you?’

‘All little girls do, don’t they?’

‘I don’t know that I did, although don’t tell my mother! No. I won’t ever marry.’

‘Even if you fall desperately in love?’
‘Even then.’

‘Have you ever been in love?’

‘Now that,’ said Alice, ‘is a story for another day.’

She stood up, gathering the plates and taking them to the sink.

‘Come on,’ Gladys said. ‘Come to my room and we’ll make a start on your dress.’

Alice followed her, picking at a stray thread on her dress, suddenly nervous.

She paused at the entrance to Gladys’s bedroom, but Gladys grabbed her hand and pulled her in, even closing the door behind her. They were there now – in the bedroom, and all that space between them had disappeared. Alice glanced over towards the bed, perfectly made, neat as a pin. She turned her gaze away.

‘Come here, Alice,’ said Gladys, walking over to her sewing table in the corner of the room.

Alice stepped, tentatively, across the room.

‘Now, put this on,’ she held out Alice’s red dress. Alice hesitated for a moment. Gladys looked at her, as if trying to read her, and then, very slowly, she turned around. She walked to the open window, drew the blind closed, and stood facing it, her back to Alice, while Alice got changed.

‘Can you help me with the zipper?’ Alice said. Gladys turned around and walked towards her. Alice couldn’t see her but could feel her coming closer. She closed her eyes when Gladys’s fingers squeezed the zip and drew it upwards, along her back. She could feel the bite of every single tooth.

‘Stand up here,’ Gladys said, bossier now, pulling a little wooden step from underneath her bed. Alice obeyed.

Gladys took a step back and looked at Alice. Alice squirmed a little, under Gladys’s piercing gaze, but she stood tall, her head up, her shoulders back, wanting to appear to her best advantage. Gladys came closer, and walked around Alice, picking up her hem, folding up her sleeves. Thinking. Alice was tuned right in to the feeling of Gladys’s fingers touching the fabric,
a stitch away from her bare skin. She closed her eyes and tried to stand still as Gladys pinned the dress.

‘All right,’ said Gladys. ‘That bit’s done.’

‘What’s next?’

‘Hop down from there,’ she said, looking up at Alice. ‘And I need you to take the dress off,’ she said, softly. She put her hand on Alice’s shoulder and turned her around, then undid the zip. Alice felt the cold breeze licking her exposed skin. She turned around to face Gladys, who, this time, didn’t turn away. Alice shrugged her shoulders and the dress fell to the floor around her ankles. She held Gladys’s gaze as she stepped out of the dress. For a moment they stood and looked at each other. Then Gladys bent down, picked up the dress, and slid it over the headless body of a mannequin.

‘Your slip as well,’ said Gladys. ‘So I can take proper measurements.’

Alice swallowed, and obeyed. She stood there in her girdle, stockings, bra and panties. The cold air swirled around her, bringing her to life. Gladys came towards her with a measuring tape.

She bent down, and drew the tape around Alice’s thigh, where her girdle attached to her stocking. Alice could feel her warm breath on that fleshy part of her thigh. Her heart started to beat faster, and she bit her lip and closed her eyes, trying to keep this exquisite torture at bay. Gladys rose, and measured her hips, her bust. Alice’s flesh hummed beneath her touch. By the time Gladys measured Alice’s arms, Alice’s body was screaming for her, but she opened her eyes and stared straight ahead, trying not to let her desire show.

‘That should do it,’ said Gladys.

Alice turned her head towards Gladys. Gladys’s hand was on Alice’s shoulder, still holding the tape. Their heights matched, so that when Alice turned, their faces almost touched. Alice could smell apricots and sugar on Gladys’s breath, close enough almost to taste. All it would take would be for one of them to lean forward –

But Alice broke away.

She wanted to say, why did you run away so quickly last night?
She wanted to say, I wasn’t expecting this. I’m not sure I can do this again.
She wanted to say, touch me. Let me touch you.
What she said was, ‘Can I get dressed now?’
‘Yes,’ said Gladys, casting her gaze downwards, whether from disappointment or politeness Alice didn’t know, ‘we’re finished.’
Alice already regretted letting the moment pass. She wanted it back.
‘Do you want to come out with me this afternoon, Gladys?’ Her voice wavered. She squirmed into her dress, covering up again.
Gladys stood, in the middle of the broken moment, just out of Alice’s reach, and nodded.
She stepped across the gap and fastened Alice’s zip.
The icy wind ripping across Hobson’s Bay went straight to their bones as they walked from the tram stop to the Bleak House Hotel in Albert Park. Alice strode ahead, trying to forget the feeling of Gladys’s fingers on her skin, Gladys’s sweet breath on her face. Gladys scurried behind, trying to keep up.

‘Slow down! Where are we going?’

Alice kept marching on. Ahead of her was a large hotel, an imposing building straddling the corner of Beaconsfield Parade and Victoria Avenue. Its bullnose veranda reached out to cover the street the whole length of the building, curving around the corner, green Victoria Bitter logos on each façade. On the other side of the road was the beach, the South Melbourne Baths, Kerferd Road Wharf. Alice pulled her coat close around her body, trying to retain what warmth she could.

‘It’s too cold for a trip to the beach.’ Gladys’s voice drifted towards her from behind. Alice stopped and let Gladys catch up. Gladys’s hair, whipped around her face in the breeze. ‘What are we doing here?’

‘There,’ said Alice, pointing as Gladys finally approached the protection of the hotel’s veranda.

‘What?’

‘Ivy McLeod.’

‘Who?’

‘The first murder,’ Alice said. ‘That’s where it happened.’

She pointed to a tiled recess in between two shops: a beauty parlour and a dry-cleaner’s. She was surprised to see women in the beauty parlour, getting their hair done as if nothing had happened. As if a girl hadn’t been murdered here only days before. She stared at them.

‘Oh Alice. Is that why we’ve come here?’
‘I wanted to have a look,’ Alice bristled, ready to defend herself. ‘I have to cover it for the paper, remember?’ The iron grille was open. She stepped inside.

‘What is coming here going to tell you? There’s nothing here now.’

‘You never know. Listen,’ Alice curled her hand behind her ear.

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘Imagine, then. What it would have been like. They say there were no signs of a struggle, here at least, or those windows would have been broken. But some think she was murdered somewhere else and brought here ... because she was killed violently, her clothes torn and her ... she was ... left exposed.’ Alice looked at the street around her, as if searching for drag marks, footprints, something that would give her a clue, but there was nothing. ‘It’s almost as though no-one was here at all ... but this is where she was found .... imagine,’ she said again, looking around.

‘I can’t. I won’t.’

‘She was walking down here – if, that is, she wasn’t killed somewhere else. It would have been pitch black. I wonder if she even saw him coming? She was just going to get a tram.’ Alice glanced over at the tram stop, only a few hundred yards away.

‘Say, Gladys, who do you think did it? It is so strange that there are no clues. Like it was a ghost, or a demon, or something. A ghost with super strength, who can kill a girl in the night and disappear without a trace ...’

Gladys shivered. Alice hesitated, then put an arm around her shoulders.

‘It is cold, isn’t it? Let’s go and have a hot drink.’ She led Gladys into a milk bar overlooking the grey beach.

Gladys sat, fidgeting with the tassels on her scarf, keeping her eyes on Alice.

‘I think I’ll have a coffee,’ Alice said. ‘To warm up. Will you have one?’

‘I don’t like coffee,’ she said. ‘It’s too bitter. A tea for me, please.’

The waitress brought the drinks, and Gladys sipped her tea. Alice’s eyes moved up and down the street, trying to recreate the scene in her mind.
‘Come on. Drink up,’ said Gladys.

Alice lifted the cup to her lips, taking a long sip.

‘Can we go now?’

‘I want to have a look around a bit more.’

‘Why did you bring me here?’ Gladys’s voice was still musical, even in its smallness, but now it struck a sad note. ‘I thought we were going to go to the pictures, or something.’

‘We can go to the pictures after this if you want.’

‘I think you’re morbid, Alice. You seem to be enjoying these murders as if they are not real people. Real women. Like us.’

‘Women like us?’ But are you like me?

‘Yes.’

‘It’s just a normal place,’ Alice said, ‘nothing to fear.’ She wondered even as she said it if she were testing Gladys. She imagined that if Pat were here they would be searching for clues together, combing the murder sites. But what were the criteria of the test? Did she want Gladys to be like Pat, or other than Pat? Had she passed or failed?

‘Don’t you think that makes it worse? If women were getting murdered in war zones or haunted houses it wouldn’t be so scary, because I’m not in a war zone, or a haunted house. It’s precisely because women are getting murdered in normal places that it is so terrifying. Don’t you see?’

‘Gladys, I’m –’

Gladys shook her head. She rose, and, with a sad look at Alice, turned and walked out of the milk bar, her skirt swishing around her stockings. There had been no need for her to go through the ritual of putting her gloves, coat and scarf back on. She hadn’t taken them off.

‘– sorry.’

On the way home Alice felt cold. She put her hands to her throat, feeling for her scarf. She was certain she’d put it on that morning, but her neck was unprotected now. She pulled up the collar of her coat. And then she remembered. The cream. Gladys reaching across to take it off her, her eyes teasing, playful, even perhaps flirtatious, across the table.
And then – such a contrast! – her eyes as she walked away – frightened, hurt, even perhaps betrayed.

Alice wondered if she’d ever see the scarf again.
Shirley and Errol Jones of Leichhardt are pleased to announce the engagement of their daughter, Patricia Jane Jones, to Mr Keith O’Brien, son of Judy and Kevin O’Brien, of Glebe.

It hadn’t meant anything to Alice, at first. She’d always known her only as Pat. Patricia seemed not to suit. But something had made her read it again. *PJ Jones*. It was what was inscribed on Pat’s pocketbook.

But it couldn’t be her. She didn’t have family, parents. It must be a coincidence, someone of a similar name. How Pat would laugh, when she showed her, at the cove on Sunday –

*If* Pat was at the cove on Sunday. She hadn’t been there last week. Alice hadn’t dared to go around to her boarding house, and she’d assumed that Pat was being cautious in declining to send a note. She thought she must have been unwell. There was a bug going around –

But she knew that no illness would keep her, Alice, from the cove on a Sunday. She’d have to be on her deathbed before she sacrificed one of her days with Pat.

Her stomach had been in knots all week, wondering what had happened, where she’d been, what it meant. She lowered the newspaper.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been sitting there when Kate came home from the post office.

‘Still nothing, Kitty?’

Kate shook her head.

‘You should stop torturing yourself like this. Charles’ letter will reach you here, as well as there, when it comes.’

‘The funny thing is that it’s not torture. It’s quite soothing to be there, to wait. Even if I come home with nothing. There’s a real community down there, and I know that when the letter does come, they’ll be as happy as I am, if it’s good news. And if it’s not – God forbid –’
Kate's fingers flitted swiftly from her forehead, to her chest, and to each shoulder in turn: a cross.

‘They’ll support you.’

Kate nodded.

‘Are you all right, Alice? You look a bit glum yourself.’

‘Oh,’ she looked down at the newspaper, ‘I’m all right.’

‘I didn’t tell you what happened down at the post office last week, did I? Quite a scandal!’

‘What?’

‘It was so strange. There’s a funny woman who works there, always dresses in trousers. You could easily take her for a man, if you didn’t know better.’

Alice sat up straight.

‘I was in there the other day, sending off the letters to Charles, and one of the older women came out of the mail room and started to screech at her. She said I knew it! I knew it!’

‘Knew what?’

‘Well apparently the woman in trousers has been going around with – ’ Kate looked around, perhaps to make sure the kids weren’t there to overhear. ‘Another woman. Can you imagine?’

Alice didn’t speak.

‘Maybe it shouldn’t be surprising, a strange woman like that. But apparently the other woman is quite respectable, from all accounts, and you’d never guess. In some ways I think that’s worse.’

‘They know who the other woman is?’

‘Well according to the post office ladies, they’ve been flaunting it all over Sydney. Quite a few of them have seen them together, on Sundays of all days. The Lord’s day!’

‘What happened to the woman?’

‘She almost lost her job, by all accounts. Everyone was up in arms. She should have lost it, if you ask me. They’re asking for trouble, keeping someone like her on. But they decided to give her another chance.’
‘Another chance?’

‘Apparently she said that she and the other girl were only friends. Well. That’s not what Mrs Watson said. She said they looked anything but, when she saw them on the foreshore. They were kissing, and not only a little peck on the cheek, mind you. Properly kissing, like a man and a woman do.’ Kate shuddered. ‘But she insisted, and to top it all off she said she’s engaged to be married! Can you believe it? Well they couldn’t prove anything, of course, and the wedding seemed to placate them, so they said she can keep her job, at least until the war is over.’

‘And what about the other girl?’

‘No-one is entirely certain who she is. There seems to be consensus that she’s local, lives somewhere nearby. Mrs Watson thinks she’s employed as a governess or something – they’ve often seen her around with kids in tow. Those poor children! I don’t know how their mother doesn’t notice, though, if her girl slips out of the house for hours on end every Sunday, with no breath of a word about where she’s going –’

Alice squirmed.

Kate stopped talking. She looked at Alice, then down at the newspaper on the table, at what Alice had been reading, then back at Alice again.

‘Alice.’ There was a warning in her voice, the seed of a realisation.

Alice kept her head bowed.

‘That’s her. Jones,’ Kate pointed to the newspaper, spitting the name out as if it was poison. ‘Why are you reading that?’ Her voice shook. ‘Oh my God. It’s not, is it? You? The young man the kids saw you with – the Sundays – the secrecy. Oh. Oh!’ Kate crossed herself, and stood up from the table, stepping away from Alice as if she might catch something. As if she was scared of her.

‘I’m sorry.’

Alice hung her head.

‘Oh my God. All this time! My babies! How could you?’

‘I didn't mean to –’
'Didn't mean to? How could you do this to me? I trusted you. In my house, with my kids ...'

'Let me explain –'

'Explain? I suppose you're going to try and tell me you're only friends.'

'No. I won't say that. It wouldn't be true.'

'You're disgusting.'

'Kitty –'

'Don't you dare call me that. I don't even know who you are. I can't even look at you!'

'Please –'

'To think I slept in the same bed as you,' she went to the sink and began to scrub her hands. 'I feel so dirty.'

'I just fell in love. You said yourself, you can't help who you –'

Kate swung around, splashing water on the floor, her eyes full of fury.

'Love? Whatever perverted feelings you have for that creature is not love. How can you say it is? Love is between a man and a woman, in the eyes of God. This other thing is something else – it's – it's – sinful, disgusting, unnatural –'

'I'm sorry.'

'Get out of my house.'

'Kate – please –'

'Out.'

Alice stood up. She picked up the newspaper that had broken her heart, and she left.
Fred Hogan! How delightful to see you!’ she heard her mother’s voice. ‘Alice? Yes, of course she’s home.’

Then she remembered. She’d agreed, a whole week ago, to go with Fred to the Saturday evening dance at the Richmond Town Hall. She had never dreamed he might still turn up, not after what she’d said.

Sylvie came into the kitchen, looking for her.
‘Can’t you tell him I have a headache? Please!’
‘Of course not. You should go. You’ll have fun. You could do with a good night out. It’ll cheer you up.’

‘Oh!’ Alice stamped her foot on the ground like a naughty child as her mother came into the kitchen.

‘You didn’t tell us Fred was taking you to the dance tonight.’
‘I forgot,’ she said, simply.

‘Forgot? That a handsome, eligible young man is taking you to a dance?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, you’re going to have to get changed,’ her mother said, beginning to bustle her out of the kitchen. ‘Sylvie, put the kettle on for Fred. Oh, Alice! How can I get you to your bedroom without him seeing you? In your slippers? Fancy forgetting like this!’

‘I’ll just put my shoes on, and go like this,’ Alice said. ‘Or you could tell him I’m sick.’

‘I’ll do no such thing! And of course you can’t go like that. You have a gravy stain on your sleeve. Sylvie, I’ll get the tea. You fetch your sister’s good dress from your bedroom. She’ll have to get changed in here.’

Alice’s mother began to re-pin her hair.

‘Ow!’ Alice said, and her mother shushed her. Alice pulled away and began to tidy her hair herself.
Her mother started singing to herself. Alice could see that she was already planning the wedding. She rolled her eyes.

Sylvie came back, carrying her own good dress.

‘I couldn’t find your dress anywhere. But you should fit into mine.’

The red dress. Of course. It was at Gladys’s house in Parkville.

‘Couldn’t find it? Where in heaven’s name could it be, if it’s not in your room?’ Alice held her breath. ‘Never mind. This will do. I’ll have to take the shoulder pads out, though. Sylvie, fetch the sewing scissors.’

It was nothing like when she stood at Gladys’s house, when every touch had thrilled her. This poking, this prodding –

‘There!’ said her mother, satisfied.

Alice sighed again. There was nothing for it but to go to the dance.

The three of them entered the lounge room, where Harry was sitting with Fred, making conversation. Alice looked over at Harry, silently imploring him to rescue her. But he continued his conversation – football, factories, fighting.

Fred stood up. She took the arm he offered, and he led her out the door. She walked beside him, her body tense, wondering if he was going to say anything about their conversation on Monday night. He didn’t speak, and she wondered if he’d decided to forget about it.

They walked the short distance to the Town Hall and joined the excited crowd. Alice felt out of place among these made-up girls and crisp gentlemen. What was she doing there?

Fred led her over to the table and asked if she’d like a cake. She shook her head and said she wasn’t hungry, she’d just had tea. He pointed out his bosses, Mr Pearson and Mr Law.

‘It’s how Pelaco got its name,’ he said. ‘P E for Pearson, L A for Law and C O for Company.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ she said.

‘A bit of trivia for you,’ he said. ‘Let me introduce you.’

She let him lead her across the room, towards one of the gentlemen he’d pointed out. He was very tall and slender, distinguished looking, with
his hair slicked sideways across the top of his head. His face was long and narrow, its crowning glory an impressive moustache above his upper lip. He didn’t have a beard. His clothes – of course – were immaculate, crisp, clean, and bright. Alice felt as though she should curtsey before him.

‘Mr Pearson, may I introduce my friend Alice Jenkins? She’s a journalist at the Herald.’

‘The Herald! How wonderful,’ he said, taking Alice’s hand and kissing it, in an old-fashioned gesture. ‘You must know my friend, Larry Sykes.’

‘Mr Sykes? Yes. He’s my editor,’ she said.

‘Capital!’ he said, before turning to a young lady who was standing behind him. ‘Mr Hogan, Miss Jenkins, may I present my daughter Nancy?’

‘How do you do?’ she said, dipping her knee ever so slightly. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

‘The pleasure’s all mine,’ said Fred, bowing to her. Alice looked at him. Was he flirting with this child? She looked only about fifteen, from her girlish dress, but Alice thought she might be a little bit older. She had a maturity around the corners of her eyes that belied her childish outfit.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ Alice said. Nancy nodded to her.

Mr Pearson turned to greet another patron, facing away from them. Nancy sat down on the bench seat behind her, crossing her ankles and placing her hands daintily in her lap.

‘Now, how about a dance?’ Fred turned to Alice now that formalities were out of the way. His eyes sparkled.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘I have two left feet.’

‘So do I,’ he said, and led her to the dance floor. ‘Let’s not let that stop us!’

‘Fred,’ she said, when the song had finished. He’d stood on her foot about four times, and she was sure she’d stood on his at least as often. ‘I’m going to get a breath of air. I feel dizzy.’

She broke away from him and went outside.

She stood on Bridge Road and looked up at the large, bright moon. The night was unusually light, even without any street lights or shop lights.
He was being so enthusiastic, she thought. Why wasn’t she enjoying herself? A car drove slowly past, its headlights mostly covered, only a slit of light showing from the middle of each one, and white stripes painted along its side. She took out her tobacco and began to roll a cigarette, hoping that it would quell the unrest in her stomach.

‘I brought you some ginger ale,’ she heard his voice.

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking the cup and sitting down on the Town Hall steps. She took a sip, then set the cup down beside her on the step. He sat on her other side.

‘Alice,’ he said. ‘About Monday night …what you said …’

‘Oh yes. I’m sorry about that.’

‘Sorry? Don’t be. You made a lot of sense.’

‘Did I?’

‘I’ve enlisted.’

‘What? Because of me?’

‘You were right.’

‘I was foolish to say what I said. I was out of line.’

‘Mr Pearson and Mr Law have agreed to keep my job for me. So it will all still be there when I get back. If –’

‘When.’ She put her hand on his arm. ‘When you get back.’

‘Alice.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve got something to ask you before I go, and this time you must let me finish.’

He put his hand on hers. The moonlight shone upon him, making him look slightly ghoulish. She took a long drag on her cigarette.

‘Alice, I want to marry you. Will you be my wife? So I can go into battle knowing you’re back here, waiting for me. It will give me strength.’

She withdrew her hand from his arm and put her head in her hands. What was wrong with her? This was a good man before her, a kind man, a man she liked. A man who was ambitious, from a good local, Catholic family. A man with good prospects. She should be leaping at the chance.
But her heart didn’t flutter when he held her hand. When he looked at her.

She thought about Sylvie, about how she looked when she got a letter from John, about how she had sparkled with happiness on her wedding day, having eyes only for him. She thought about her mother, and how sometimes, even now, she saw her looking at her father’s photograph on the mantelpiece and wiping away a tear. That was what she thought about when she thought about love. That, and –

She thought about Pat. And then she thought about Gladys and remembered how she had – quite possibly – ruined everything with her before it had even started.

But, even if she had, she couldn’t go back.

‘I’m sorry, Fred,’ she said. ‘I can’t.’
After her father died, she hadn’t wanted to be at home. She’d stayed late at work or spent hours swimming laps at the Richmond City Baths. Fred had seemed to sense it, too, and often he’d come past the house and invite her to go for a walk with him. She ignored the approving nods of the women in the street as they saw her walking out with Fred. She was only sixteen, he eighteen, and neither of them were thinking of such things. Or, at least, she wasn’t. She supposed she couldn’t speak for Fred.

They’d walk down by the Yarra, among the bustle of the tanneries, or south down Church Street and along the river there. They’d often find a bench seat and stop. He’d light a cigarette for her and they would sit together, watching the water lapping at the bank, plash plash plash, watching the boats on the water. She felt calm, at those moments, silent with him.

‘I understand, you know,’ he said to her one day.

‘Understand what?’

‘How you’re feeling.’

‘How can you?’ she said, ‘when even I don’t?’

‘That’s normal,’ he said, ‘your whole life has been turned upside down.’

‘But it’s awful,’ she said, ‘I’m awful, because –’

‘Because?’

She shook her head.

‘Because you’re not sad all the time?’ he asked. She nodded. He continued, ‘When Mum died, I felt terrible guilt, because I wasn’t sad all the time. I mean, I was only a boy, and in some ways it wasn’t even the most important thing in my life for very long. I mean there was the baby – Franny, so fragile – and we had to make sure she was all right. There was so much to do, so much to think about, that it seemed we didn’t have much time leftover to be thinking about Mum.’

‘You were – what? Fifteen?’

‘Thirteen,’ he said. ‘It’ll be five years next October.’
'Only a little bit younger than Sylvie.'

'What I mean is that grief has a way, you know, of coming back. It doesn’t run to a timetable, and it doesn’t stay still. It’ll find you, someday. It’s lying somewhere, waiting to pounce.'

She shook her head, ‘I don’t even think that’s it,’ she said, ‘It’s not even that I’m not sad, it’s that I am almost happier now,’ she looked down at her feet, as if she expected the ground to open up and swallow her for her confession. ‘I mean, working at the paper is terrific, and I’m learning more now than I would be at school. It might even be something that I can keep doing – some way I can make something of myself. I – I – love it.’

‘That’s nothing to feel guilty about, Alice. Your father would have been happy for you.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I don’t remember him being happy about too much, especially lately,’ she paused. ‘It’s almost as though I don’t even miss him. It’s kinda already hard to remember much about him.’

‘Doesn’t your mother tell you stories about him?’

‘No, not really,’ she said. ‘She doesn’t talk about him much. Harry talks about him sometimes, but it’s always stories from before the war, and it sounds as though he’s talking about someone else. I didn’t know my father then, or at least not that I remember. Even in the photograph he has a different sort of smile.’

‘The war took away so much,’ he said, and she knew he was thinking of his father, who had died at Flanders. His mother had married again in 1921 and then died, a year later, in childbirth, leaving him and his brothers and his aunt with newborn Frances.

‘Oh, Fred, here I am prattling away, and you’ve lost so much more!’

‘Grief is not a competition, Alice,’ he said, putting his hand over hers. ‘There are no winners.’

They’d had a wake for her father at the Richmond Union Bowling Club on Gleadell Street. He would have liked to have been buried there, if he could, but instead he was buried in the St Kilda Cemetery and his mates spent an
afternoon drinking beer in his memory. Alice’s mother sent her there later that night to bring Harry home, and she remembered walking the few blocks home with Harry’s arm heavy around her shoulders, leaning his whole weight into her and almost dragging her to the ground. She managed to get him inside the house, and he leaned over to her and said, in his malty, beery breath, ‘you know, Alissh Jenkinsh. You’re jusht like him, exshept you’re shtronger, not a weak bashtard like him. You’ll sshee –’

She’d never got around to asking him what he meant. She was never even sure if he remembered what he’d said.
Fred walked her home, a true gentleman even in rejection. She wanted, desperately, to explain to him why she couldn’t marry him, but she wasn’t even sure she knew herself. She groped, in the darkness, for words.

‘When do you leave?’
‘What do you care?’
‘Oh Fred. Please try to understand.’

Everything felt trite.

‘I expect I’ll run into you around the place, sometime,’ she said. Her words hovered for a second, between them, and then, untethered, they broke and clattered forlornly to the ground as he walked away.

When she entered the living room, they were all there. Her mother, Sylvie, Harry.

‘You’re home early,’ her mother said.
‘The dance was dull,’ she said.
‘Dull? What do you mean?’
‘Oh – nothing. It was mostly Pelaco staff, no-one I knew.’
‘You knew Fred.’

Alice looked around the living room, taking in the picture of her mother mending stockings, Sylvie knitting booties, and Harry reading the paper. She perched on the edge of the couch.

‘Fred was his good self,’ she said.
‘When is that young man going to make his intentions clear?’
‘Oh, he did,’ Alice tried to sound nonchalant.
‘What?’ her mother put down her knitting, staring straight at Alice.

‘When? How? What?’

‘He asked me to marry him,’ Alice said, shrugging her shoulders and standing up again.

‘Oh, Alice, love, congratulations!’
Her mother was up now, coming towards her, powered by a strange momentum. Alice put her hand out in front of herself, feeling herself instinctively retreating.

‘I said no.’

Her mother stopped in her tracks. Alice looked around. Sylvie’s eyes were wide, and Harry looked over the top of his newspaper with interest.

‘You said no? Whatever for?’ her mother said.

‘Mum. I don’t love Fred. I don’t want to get married.’

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry nod, and it fortified her, a little.

Her mother stared at her. Alice sighed.

‘Come on. It’s not the end of the world.’

‘He could have taken care of you, a house on the hill, a family.’

‘I don’t need him to take care of me. I can look after myself.’

‘More to life than findin’ a husband,’ Harry said, under his breath.

‘Oh my child,’ her mother said, glaring at Harry before looking back to Alice. ‘Do you know what you’ve done?’

Alice took another step backwards.

‘Yes. I have refused a perfectly good offer of marriage because it’s not what I want.’

She had felt so righteous, before, but the feeling was fading.

‘Not what you want? What are you going to do now?’ Her mother stood, wringing her hands.

Alice’s mother’s knitting lay, abandoned on the couch, Sylvie’s needles were still in her hands, the moment paused. If her mother could take up her needles and stick them into her, mould her like a ball of wool, knit her into a pattern, then, Alice thought, she would. She felt misshapen, standing there. In danger of unravelling, she set her head defiantly and looked directly at her mother.

‘What I have always done. Work.’
‘Work!’ her mother looked now at her own work-hardenèd hands, and she didn’t speak for a moment. When she looked up, Alice could see tears glistening in her eyes.

‘Work,’ her mother repeated, her tone incredulous. ‘You have no idea how lucky you are, do you?’

‘I do know,’ she said.

‘Ever since your father died I’ve worked for this family, doing hours on the fruit whenever I could, even though it meant leaving you alone. Perhaps it’s that that’s made you so stubborn, but I never thought it’d leave you so naïve.’

Naïve. Pat’s word again.

‘Naïve?’

‘Yes. You need to get your head out of the sand. This job of yours, especially this murder trial, you’re only doing it because there’re no men about, love. When they come back, they’ll take all the jobs. The government’ll decide it’s important for them to be occupied, to take care of their families. And there won’t be any room for you, not then.’

Alice stepped back again, almost back now in the hallway.

‘I am good at my job.’

‘What’s that matter?’

Alice stared, the wind knocked out of her as if she’d been hit.

‘It’s not only work that makes me not want to marry him.’

‘What else is it? What else could it possibly be?’

Her mother’s tone was scornful. She looked up, shocked. Her mother, who had always given everything to protect her girls, was sneering at her.

‘It’s – it’s –’

How could she tell the truth? Alice furrowed her brow. She almost wondered if Fred had snuck some whisky into that ginger ale. She felt what she imagined drunk would feel like. Her thoughts darted around, elusive, where just moments ago they had made perfect sense. She couldn’t put her finger on them.
‘You are clever,’ her mother said. ‘And I’ve encouraged that. Allows you to stay at school until you were sixteen. I’ve indulged you, because I wanted you to have the things I didn’t. I might’ve wronged you there, girl.’

‘No. You haven’t wronged me!’

‘I might’ve given you ideas above your station.’

‘No!’

‘When those boys come back from war, they’ll take your job, sure enough. And where’ll you be then? No husband to provide for you, no …’

‘I will make my own way,’ Alice said, feeling less and less sure of herself at every moment.

She thought then her teenage years, of meals of bread and dripping, of her mother buying threepennyworth of scraps from the butcher, to make a stew that would last them a couple of nights, padded out with vegetables. By the third night there was no meat left, only a shimmer of fat, giving the impression of meat to the slimy vegetables. A stew with the memory of meat. She hadn’t cared, getting used to going to work with the dull ache of hunger in her belly, but able to ignore it because she loved going to the paper, following her editor out to talk to people, to write about them. It was enough: she forgot about food. But she had never stopped to think about how hard her mother worked for them, how the girls’ wages only went so far towards feeding four adults, how work at Rosella was seasonal and inconsistent. How her mother still gave Harry his tobacco and beer money, even when it meant she’d have to scrimp and save, even harder. She saw this, for the first time, from her mother’s perspective, and saw how selfish she herself must look, at this moment. She looked again now at her mother’s hands, and she stepped forward to take them in her own. She felt her mother’s fingers, rough against her smooth ones, like sandpaper. Grating against hers.

‘You think this is a new world,’ her mother said. ‘Well I’ve seen the new world. More’n once. All the things it promises. Choices, and all that. You’ll see. You’ll soon realise there’s only ever one choice for people like us, and you must accept your lot in life. There’s no other way.’
Alice looked at the floor, feeling an overwhelming mix of love and resentment.

The fire gave a loud pop then, and the burning logs sighed.

‘I wanted to be a nurse,’ Alice heard, and for a moment she wasn’t sure who it was who had spoken. She looked up, and her mother continued. ‘I almost did it, too. The Sisters of Charity would’ve taken me, taught me at St Vincent’s up on Victoria Parade. I was clever enough. But then my mother died and I had to stay home, look after my grandfather, and then my father. It’s funny, isn’t it? I ended up being a nurse anyway, really, looking after all them parents and grandparents. My family needed me, so I just got on with it.’ She looked down at her hands. No-one spoke. ‘And then I met your father. Where would I be now, if I hadn’t? Lonely and alone, probably dying in the hospice. So you see …’

Sylvie had looked up from her knitting, as shocked as Alice to hear this story, this story that had lain dormant, untold, all their lives. Neither of them had ever thought much about their mother’s life before they were born.

‘Have you ever regretted it?’ said Alice, softly.

‘What was the point of regret? I had no choice.’

‘But –’

‘It was my lot in life. And I was happy to do it.’

‘You might have been able to do both –’

‘No, Alice. There was no other way. There never is.’
After Kate had told her to get out, Alice had gone straight to the cove. She’d sat and looked at the boats bobbing in the harbour. The adventure she hadn’t wanted to escape from felt, now, like it was dwindling, like it was over. But she still didn’t wish she could jump on one of those boats and sail away. She couldn’t let go of Pat – she wouldn’t –

But maybe, Alice thought, it was all part of Pat’s elaborate plan. A sham engagement, to, what did she say? Throw them off the scent?

She felt a flicker of hope.

‘I thought I might find you here.’

She knew the voice so well, but when she turned it was as though she was looking at a stranger. Pat was wearing a skirt and blouse. She had a colourful turban on her head, so you couldn’t see that her hair was short. It might have been anybody else’s hair, tucked up like that. It wasn’t Pat. This strange creature was Patricia. It hurt Alice, to look at her. She looked smaller, less substantial.

She began to walk towards Alice. Alice couldn’t see where her feet landed: the long skirt obscured her feet, and her steps, in those dainty shoes, were light enough not to flatten the grass in their wake. Alice put up her hand, and Pat stopped.

‘I’m sorry.’

A pause.

‘I thought you said she wasn’t a threat. The lady at work.’

‘It wasn’t only her. Other people saw us too.’

‘I know.’

‘I had no choice, Allie. They were like a pack of wolves. You should have seen them.’

‘There’s always a choice.’

‘I was going to tell you about him.’

‘So you’re really getting married? He’s real?’
‘Yes.’
‘Do your parents approve? Since they appear to be alive and well.’
‘Oh Allie, that was just a story.’
‘A story,’ she said, flabbergasted. Why would anyone make up such a thing as that? It seemed to be too big a question to ask, and not the most pressing one, right now, so she let it be.
‘Who is he?’ said Alice, instead.
‘I met him at a church fete.’
‘How long has this been going on?’
‘Four months.’
A stab in the heart. A realisation.
‘You wanted this to happen. When we walked along the foreshore, and you kissed me, right there in the open, not even bothering to hide. To think I admired your courage, when all the time you must have known they were watching. You wanted them to see us.’
‘No! No, Allie …’
‘You did. You did everything you said. You denied it. They couldn’t prove it. And it didn’t matter, because you were going to leave me anyway. I was stupid not to see it.’
‘I never meant to hurt you.’
‘Do you love him?’
‘He’s a good man.’
‘Do you love him?’
‘Yes,’ said Pat. ‘Enough.’
‘You didn’t love me enough.’
‘I did love you! I do love you. But I couldn’t give you what you wanted. You with your naïve ideals, your naïve dreams. You have no idea what they would have done to us.’ Alice could hear the tears in Pat’s voice, but she steeled herself, staring across the harbour, concentrating instead on the shapes of the buildings on the horizon.
‘So not enough then.’
Pat walked up behind her and put her hand on her head. Alice felt it there, its weight, its warmth. She felt everything it was taking away.

‘I couldn’t hold on tightly enough, Allie. I’m sorry.’

Alice didn’t watch her go. She picked up a stray leaf, and twirled it, until the breeze picked up and tore it from her fingers, leaving her empty-handed.

When she got home, the house was empty. In the kitchen, her suitcase was packed, her coat draped over it. And there was a train ticket to Melbourne sitting, beside it, on the table.
'Package for you, Miss Jenkins.'

Surprised, she took the package from the post-boy.

‘Thanks, Mickey,’ she said.

She turned the package over and over in her hands. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a green ribbon, her name on the front in an unfamiliar hand. Alice Jenkins, The Herald. There was no address. No stamps. No return address. Curious. She opened it and held her grandmother’s silk scarf in her fingers. She caught the faint scent of lavender, and a piece of pale pink paper fluttered to her desk. Alice picked it up, looking around to make sure she was alone.

Dearest Alice, I am so sorry to have run off on you on Saturday. I was perhaps hasty, but I felt uncomfortable. I hope you can forgive me. I enclose your scarf. As you can see, I managed to get the stain out quite nicely! I hope to see you soon. Yours, Gladys.

Alice picked up the scarf and tied it around her throat, shaking a little as she completed the knot.

‘Good day, Miss Alice!’ the voice broke into her reverie as Mickey strode past, his post bags now empty.

‘Mickey! Oh, Mickey, can you wait a moment and deliver a letter for me? There’s a shilling in it for you.’

‘I’ve done my rounds, so I s’pose I could give you a hand,’ he said.

‘Just a moment.’ She rummaged around her desk and came up with a piece of paper bearing the Herald’s crest. It would have to do.

Dear Gladys, thank you so much for my scarf – it’s better than new! However, it is me who should be asking forgiveness from you. I never should have taken you there. Please can we meet tonight? I will wait near the
University on the corner of Grattan Street and Royal Parade at 6:30pm. I hope to see you there. I yearn to see you. Until then, Alice xo

She folded it clumsily and tied it with a piece of string, then wrote ‘Gladys Hosking, School of Chemistry, The University of Melbourne, Parkville’ on the front.

‘You do know where the Chemistry School is, Mickey?’ She handed him the letter and the coin. ‘Hurry, won’t you?’

~

A resounding, strident clap of thunder made Alice jump as she waited on the appointed corner, edging past the appointed time. She checked her watch, but didn’t register the time it told, and had to check it again. 6.43pm. The sky was grey and darkening further. A single drop of rain fell and hit Alice’s eyelash, then continued on its way down her cheek like a freshwater tear. The storm broke the calm of the afternoon. She’d forgotten her umbrella.

How was she going to see Gladys in this drab light, in this crowd of anonymous people rushing past, umbrellas obscuring their faces. Perhaps Gladys wouldn’t come. How long should she wait? A silent strike of lightning tore the sky apart, making things bright for a second, before plunging them back into grey. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and she thought of the murderer. She felt as though she were being watched. What if he was here, somewhere nearby? Alice glanced around. But it was only normal men and women, walking past, on their way home.

There was a tap on her shoulder that made her jump.

‘Sorry I’m late. I’m so glad you waited! I popped home to get my umbrella and to tell my landlady I wasn’t going to be in for tea. But she wasn’t home, and anyway, I wasn’t sure what our plans were.’ Gladys sounded shy, uncertain, in her soft voice.

‘I’m glad you have your umbrella,’ said Alice, her heart rate returning to normal. ‘I forgot mine.’

A thunderclap pierced through the moment.
‘Let’s get out of this weather,’ said Alice, grabbing Gladys’s hand and pulling her towards the tram stop on Royal Parade.

They were the only women on the tram. A small group of older men cradling books stood up to give them their seats. A leery, drunken group of Americans huddled in the middle of the tram, in the smoking area, with their American cigarettes. A couple of them had taken off their peaked caps and held them in their hands, and Alice noticed that one or two of them had mud around the buttons on their trouser cuffs.

Gladys gripped her arm. She inched closer to Gladys on the seat. Her hand rested lightly on Gladys’s knee.

She felt Gladys’s sigh of relief when the tram reached the corner of Elizabeth Street and Alice motioned for them to get off.

They didn’t relax until they reached the café. Gladys was dressed professionally today in a grey costume, slate blue blouse, blue and maroon knitted jumper vest and grey cardigan. As she unpinned her black felt hat, Alice saw a flash of colour, a blue ribbon-band nestled in amongst her curls. She allowed her gaze to rest on Gladys for a moment too long, stealing time by feigning being tangled in her own scarf as she tried to unwrap it from around her throat.

They ordered corned beef in white sauce, cabbage, carrots and potatoes.

‘It’s not as good as my mother’s white sauce,’ Gladys said. She chewed for a minute, swallowed. ‘One day I’ll take you there.’

‘Where? Perth?’

‘It’s a bit out of Perth, actually. About one hundred and twenty miles east. My parents are proprietors of a hotel, a country pub, the Railway Hotel in a small, sleepy, wheat-farming town called Meckering. I do miss it.’

‘I’ve never been to Western Australia.’

‘It’s wonderful. The light is so bright. The sky is so very blue,’ she said. ‘Not like this,’ she waved a hand towards the window – the blackouts and the drab world beyond. The candle on their table flickered.
She felt Gladys’s foot stroke her ankle under the table. An accident, she thought. But there it was again, and this time the foot stroked up her leg, much more than an accidental kick. She felt a tingle, as if some sort of current had run up the seam of her stockings, all the way up the back of her leg. She looked up from her corned beef, trying to read Gladys’s expression.

The waitress came over and brought more tea, clearing her throat loudly as if she was aware of interrupting something. Gladys’s foot snapped back under her with enough force to cause her chair to shift slightly, scraping the floor noisily. The waitress glared.

‘I am sorry I took you to Albert Park on the week-end,’ Alice said, once the waitress was gone. ‘I wasn’t thinking.’ Gladys didn’t respond. She took a gulp of her tea.

‘I suppose I feel that if we can work it out, work out what happened, then it won’t feel so terrifying.’

‘Was there another one? This week-end?’

‘Another one?’

‘Another murder? I haven’t read the newspapers today or heard the news on the wireless. I’ve been afraid to.’ Gladys’s voice, pianissimo. Alice leaned forward to hear her and felt the heat of the candle flame on her cheek.

‘There was no news of one today.’

‘Maybe it’s all over –?’

‘Or perhaps the murders weren’t linked after all. Maybe the police were right.’ Alice’s voice was less hopeful, not convinced.

‘The first two were on Friday or Saturday nights, though, weren’t they? It must be a good sign that a week-end has passed without him striking again?’

‘Yes. It must,’ said Alice. ‘I suppose.’

‘I get nervous whenever I see an American soldier now. Like those ones on the tram tonight. It’s irrational.’

‘I wonder if the changes to the brownout will make the city less frightening,’ said Alice.

‘Changes?’
‘More lights on trains and trams,’ said Alice, ‘And some street lights.
It should make it safer.’
‘Is that because of the murders?’
‘I don’t know,’ said Alice, ‘and in any case it doesn’t start yet. There
has to be an official order. I think they’re still deciding.’
‘Gee I hope no-one else is murdered while they wait.’
‘Let’s talk about something else,’ Alice said, her tone more jaunty now,
or at least trying to be.
‘Yes. Tell me some stories from work.’
Gladys told Alice all about the bumbling but very clever Professor
Heinz, her kindly boss Professor Hartung, and the arrogant doctoral student
Graham Peters. Alice, in turn, told Gladys about the peacock Joe Hughes and
her booming but generous boss Mr Sykes. Gladys left out the part about
Professor Heinz confiding in her about his fear of internment, and Alice
didn’t sour her own story by communicating her worry that Hughes would
be killed. The conversation was as light as the excellent currant buns the girls
ordered for dessert, as rich as the butter they spread on them, and convivial
enough to belie the gloomy atmosphere of war and murder. The cosy little
café on Collins Street, run by a housewifely matron with flour on her apron
and cake crumbs in her hair, became spiced with their voices and their
laughter chiming in tune. The darkness, at least in that little candlelit space,
seemed to have lifted.
The rain had set in by the time they left the café.

‘How silly of me,’ Gladys said. ‘I’ve put my gloves on before doing up the top button on my coat.’ She started to tug at the fingers of her gloves, but Alice stopped her by putting her own ungloved hand on Gladys’s gloved one.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to take off your gloves. Let me do your button.’

‘All right,’ said Gladys, a tiny smile twitching somewhere around her lips. Gladys put her head back, craning her neck a little, exposing her throat to Alice. Alice leaned forwards but couldn’t quite get a hold of the button. She stepped in, closer. She reached up and ran her fingers along Gladys’s starched collar, straightening it, fixing it into place. Her fingers paused at the top of Gladys’s blouse, at the base of her throat. Alice fastened the button, and then, without thinking about it, straightened Gladys’s silver cross as well, brushing Gladys’s neck fleetingly as she did so, an intimate, finishing touch. Gladys let out a little sigh, merely a puff of breath that Alice could see in the icy air, almost more than she could hear it.

‘There you go,’ Alice said, removing her fingers and putting her hands in her pockets.

‘Thank you,’ said Gladys, stepping back and putting up her umbrella. She reached out her hand and pulled Alice towards her so that the umbrella covered them both. Rain beat down all around them, and they huddled together, their arms and hips touching. Alice felt a thrill run through her body: in the darkness, sensation was heightened, and she could feel every inch of her body, was aware of exactly how much space she was taking up in the world, that night.

Gladys glanced at her watch, looking, Alice thought, somewhat impatient, all of a sudden. Like she had somewhere else to be or had just remembered an appointment.
‘Goodness! It’s only quarter to eight. It’s so dark, I thought it must be later.’ She retrieved her torch and switched it on.

Alice wondered if she dared ask Gladys to come for a cuppa with her, to prolong the evening. She knew of a late-night café around the corner. They had reached the tram stop.

‘I’ve had a lovely evening,’ said Gladys, a prelude to goodbye.

‘I’ll wait with you for your tram,’ Alice cut her off.

‘You don’t have to,’ said Gladys, but she stepped closer, so that she needed only whisper the words that, perhaps, she didn’t really want to say.

‘I don’t mind,’ Alice said. ‘There’s something charming about the rainy city at night.’

‘Perhaps there is, if one was sitting watching it from inside, by a fire, rather than out here in the middle of it, getting wet,’ Gladys said. Alice felt her shiver.

‘Are you cold?’

‘No. Not cold.’

They stood in the small pool of light offered by Gladys’s torch, as though under a spotlight on a stage. Beyond that, the darkness was almost complete, struck through by raindrops sharp as needles. Alice reached out her hand, trying to capture the raindrops, and almost expected to feel darkness gather in her palm like something tangible. But her hand sliced through the night: it was insubstantial, after all. She could hear ack-ack guns, somewhere in the distance, but she barely registered them, anymore. It was an undertone of danger that hummed through the nights, a warning: reminding them of the possibility of destruction. Alice trembled, and she knew it was nothing to do with the cold. She turned to face Gladys.

She had promised herself she wouldn’t do this again.

But, heartbroken, it had been an easy promise to make. She hadn’t expected to feel like this again. She hadn’t expected Gladys.

‘The rain’s getting heavier,’ said Gladys. ‘Come under the brolly.’ She stepped in, closer, bringing the umbrella in, looking into Alice’s eyes as the distance between them diminished. Alice held her gaze, trying to read it.
Alice thought she saw herself and her desires reflected there, but how could she be sure? Gladys had already walked away from her twice.

Gladys put her hand on Alice’s waist and pulled her, gently, closer. It could be an advance, Alice thought, or it could be nothing more than a friendly gesture to bring her out of the rain.

‘I don’t feel scared when we’re together, Alice. Even the darkness doesn’t scare me.’

She switched off her torch then, and they were plunged into complete darkness. Alice felt Gladys lean forward, searching for her, and suddenly she felt Gladys’s lips on hers, Gladys’s tongue entwining with her own, and she felt herself respond, hungrily, full of desire. It wasn’t like feathers this time, or ghosts: it wasn’t delicate or shadowy. In this moment, there was no hesitation, no doubt, no thought. This was sensual. Alice felt as though she was being coloured in, embodied again. Their kiss, finally, was made possible by a billowing curtain of darkness.

The tram’s bell echoed through the night, signalling its approach, and they broke apart, slightly breathless. Alice’s whole body surged with the promise of that kiss. Gladys switched her torch back on and took a large, deliberate step back, exposing Alice to the rain as she drew the umbrella away, stepping out through night’s curtain and back into the prying gaze of the world, their audience.

Alice wanted to ask her to stay. They could find some shelter, a little corner of the city, and kiss some more, follow that promise, in the shadows of the brownout.

The tram drew up in front of them, its breaks screeching.

‘Gladys.’

Gladys collapsed the umbrella, shaking it out as she hoisted herself up the steps onto the tram. Water splashed up her arm, and she drew her handkerchief out of her black envelope handbag to wipe her sleeve. How could she be so calm, as if nothing had happened? Wasn’t she feeling the tumult that Alice, at that moment, had roiling inside her? Alice grabbed her
sleeve, causing her to look up. If she was going to say anything, now was the moment.

‘Wait.’

‘What is it?’ Gladys said. She looked changed now, under the harsher light of the tram conductor’s torch, which he was shining right on her. The spell, the promise, was broken, as if they could only have a moment at a time. The conductor glared at them. Alice wondered what he had seen in the tram’s dim headlights.

‘I almost didn’t see you there,’ he said, gruffly. ‘What on earth are you doing, standing here in the dark? We would’ve gone right past you if you hadn’t switched on your torch at the last minute, there.’

Gladys hung her head, guiltily, standing still.

‘Well, are you coming or not?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Gladys, not hesitating. Alice let go of her sleeve.

A sudden burst of lightning struck at that moment, lighting Gladys up from behind as she stood in the doorway of the tram, and then fading, just as suddenly, back into black. The tramcar was almost empty, even though it wasn’t yet late – people really were scared to come out after dark, particularly in this weather. The tram’s bell rang out, and Gladys climbed the final step and was inside. Another fleeting, violent lightning bolt showed Gladys, ethereal now, as she settled back on the seat of the tram and looked out the window to blow Alice a clandestine kiss.

Alice realised she had Gladys’s hanky in her hand, and she waved it at the retreating tram, like a woman watching her lover go off to war. She watched the tram until it was out of sight, by which time she was wet through, and shivering.

If she kept letting Gladys go like this, one day she wouldn’t come back.
There was a letter waiting for her on the hall table.

She laid the envelope on her pillow while she got out of her wet clothes and into her warm nightie. She thought about going into the sitting room to join her family, who she could hear were laughing along to the wireless. But, right at the moment, she couldn’t face it. Not when her head was full of thoughts of Gladys, and her skin and lips still stung delightfully from Gladys’s touch, her kiss. She replayed the evening in her mind as she got into bed, picturing Gladys’s goodbye kiss out the tram window as she leaned her head back against her pillow.

She’d forgotten the letter until she felt it crinkle beneath her.

Who on earth was Mrs Tricia O’Brien? She didn’t recognise the writing, but then, she’d never had any letters from Pat. It wasn’t until she read Dear Allie that she understood. There was only one person who had ever called her that.

Dear Allie,

I’ve begun this letter time and time again, and have never quite known what to say, or how to say it. I know I hurt you terribly, and I can’t express how sorry I am for that. But I am sorrier, perhaps, for leading you astray in the first place. For, while I can’t bring myself to regret what we shared, my love (for the last time), I know that it was only a phase we were both going through, and that it could not possibly have had the future you dreamt of. You almost had me dreaming of it, too, on some of our Sundays. But it was the folly of two young girls, as I’m sure you’ve realised by now. Keith says that you corrupted me, but I know in my heart that that is his way of dismissing it and condemning it, while still loving me, so I let him believe it. I know it was not so sordid as all that, for all that people said afterwards. They seem mostly to have forgotten it now that I am married and you’ve gone away.
I missed you at our wedding, although of course it would not have been appropriate to have invited you. We had a lovely ceremony at St Mary’s in Balmain, and then an intimate little picnic on the foreshore (not far from our cove!) It was attended by our families, a few ladies from the post office and Keith’s CO from the navy. I enclose a photograph, in case you are interested.

My hair is long enough to curl, and I wear dresses every day now! To let you in on a little secret, I wouldn’t be able to button my trousers over my belly anymore, anyway. I have a baby on the way, and Keith and I are so excited. Who would have thought my life would turn out like this? And yet it is right, and I am happy.

I see your cousin at the post office most days. She doesn’t speak to me, or even look at me. I am sure she thinks the opposite, that I corrupted you, but it doesn’t matter now does it? She still hasn’t had word from her husband, but perhaps you know that. Her daughter sometimes comes now to post the letters, and she is a real lady these days. She’s the one who gave me your address. She snuck it out of her mother’s address book. She said she’s forbidden to write to you, but she asked me to say hello.

Please don’t reply to this, Allie. I only wanted to say a proper goodbye, now that the pain has faded. I will always remember our Sundays.

Keep me close in your memories, think of me sometimes as:

Your Pat

To her own immense surprise, Alice realised that this was the first time she’d thought of Pat in almost a week. Even the day before, Sunday, she hadn’t woken up with the image of the cove in her mind. It was Gladys, now, who occupied her thoughts. Gladys who had taken no time at all to sidle into the centre of her life.

Nothing in the letter was the Pat that Alice remembered: the brave, daring, darling girl who stood like Peter Pan with her hands on her hips, ready to fly into her next adventure, whatever the danger. That girl had been so certain, so confident, so brave. This girl was divided: regretting something
even as she made the choice to leave it. It was as though she was impersonating a respectable, ordinary housewife: the prim, formal language of the letter, the pretty picture of family life she painted. A bit too neat. Pat was doing all she could to turn herself into Mrs Tricia O’Brien, who was about to become the broad with the brats that Pat had once mocked.

She’d been married at St Mary’s? St Mary’s was the quaint little Anglican sandstone church on top of the hill on Darling Street. She’d got married there, rather than at St Augustine’s, the Catholic church on Jane Street. So Pat wasn’t Catholic at all, then? Was the tale about Laura and the nuns just another story, another lie?

But, Alice realised, it didn’t matter. None of it mattered, anymore. And she realised that it hadn’t been their love, their desire, that had torn them apart. It wasn’t because Alice had been naïve, or because their love was unnatural. It had been cowardice. Pat hadn’t been brave enough to fight. She’d given in, before Alice had even known they had a fight on their hands.

But Alice had a second chance now, with another girl in another city. Alice could barely believe that tomorrow would be only a week since she’d met Gladys – it really didn’t take very long for the world to shift into a whole new shape, she thought. Just six days and her ruptured heart was almost knitted completely back together, ready to give again. Just six days, enough time to begin again, to beget new possibilities.

She laid her head back on her pillow and closed her eyes, letting herself imagine being with Gladys. She wondered where they might go, to be alone, and let herself picture Gladys’s bedroom in the boarding house, the white bedspread with its pink roses. She visualised Gladys, naked, all white and pink herself, beneath it, reaching out to her. They would lie there, and undress each other; they would kiss, and touch, and taste. They would shudder, and arch, and reach up to muffle each other’s cries of pleasure. Alice’s tongue, her whole body, tingled deliciously with the anticipation of it.

But then she pictured coming back here, to her mother’s house, afterwards. Living with a beautiful, shameful secret again, like she had, for all that time, at Kate’s. Carrying guilt around with her like a second skin,
concealing herself within it, unable to take it off, even at home. It would be oppressive, once more, and she wasn’t sure she could do it again. But she wanted Gladys, with everything she had. Right at that moment, remembering their kiss in the darkness, her desire felt like it might consume her.

Maybe there was another way. Maybe she could move into a boarding house, too, and have her own space somewhere? What would she tell her mother? Perhaps she could say that she wanted to give Sylvie and her baby some space to themselves, promise her mother she’d still bring most of her wages home and come for mass and Sunday lunch every week. She felt a flutter of excitement in the pit of her stomach. This might just be possible. It might just work. She hardly dared to think it, but it made her breathless, nonetheless.

But first of all, she would tell Gladys how she felt. Next time she saw her, she vowed, she would not let her walk away.
The newsroom was like Flinders Street Station in peak hour when she stepped through the doors on Tuesday morning. Mr Sykes stood in the doorway of his office, barking orders. Cassidy was there, which was strange for a Tuesday when there was no sport to report on. Enid stood beside her desk and was the only person in the room not moving. She looked as though she’d seen a ghost.

It jolted Alice out of her reverie, where she was still dreaming of Gladys. She shook her head and rushed over to Enid.

‘Enid! What is it?’ Enid didn’t respond.

‘Enid!’ Alice could feel panic rising in her throat.

‘Another.’ Enid managed to croak out the single word.

‘Another what?’

Enid shook her head, her brow furrowed into deep wrinkles, as if she were in shock. Alice looked around the newsroom, took in the panic, the excitement, the flurry of activity. The urgency.

‘Murder? Another murder?’ Alice asked, grabbing Enid’s shoulders and shaking her lightly. Enid nodded.

‘Another woman?’

Enid nodded.

‘Strangled?’

Enid nodded.

‘Where?’

‘Parkville.’

The word, when it came, was scratchy, as if only half spoken, half heard. Alice felt the colour drain from her face.

‘Park – ’ Her eyes began to sting. Her vision blurred. Her heart was beating so very fast. ‘Where in Parkville?’
‘Gatehouse Street. Off Royal Parade.’

Enid seemed to come back to herself now, just enough.

Gatehouse street. Gladys’s tram stop was on the corner of Royal Parade and Gatehouse Street.

‘Do they know –’ Alice began, then stopped. Could she ask it? She took a deep breath. ‘Do they know who she is?’

Somewhere inside her, Alice felt that she already knew.

‘They haven’t identified her yet. Mr Murdoch is anxious to identify her in time for this evening’s edition. He’s got most of the men out there, door knocking, talking to people.’

‘What else do you know?’ She realised she was still gripping Enid by the shoulders.

‘They found her this morning. She had been dead some hours. She was lying – facedown – in the mud.’

So much rain.

Alice let go of Enid’s shoulders, and Enid sank down, limp, into the chair behind her, seeming to have exhausted her energy with the few words she had spoken. Alice stood, stock still, as if waiting for something. She had to ring Gladys. She picked up the telephone and began to give the operator the number of the boarding house, hoping that someone there could tell her that Gladys had gone off, fit and well, to work that morning.

The girl at the exchange put her on hold.

‘Mr Sykes,’ she said, practically grabbing onto his suit jacket as he walked past. ‘Please give me something to do.’

‘I think we’ve got it covered, Miss Jenkins. Sit tight.’

‘I’ll go mad,’ she said, but he’d already walked past.

She watched from her desk as Mr Sykes spoke with Cassidy. They broke apart, and Mr Sykes strode quickly back to his office.

‘Mr Cassidy,’ she said. He turned.

‘Have you discovered anything?’

‘We know the woman’s name,’ he said. ‘But that’s all, at this stage.’

Alice closed her eyes.
‘Please Mr Cassidy,’ she said, opening them again. ‘Who was she?’

‘Miss Gladys Hosking,’ he told her, looking down at his piece of paper.

‘Aged 40, of Parkville. She worked at the university – ’

The telephone receiver felt heavy in her hand, hot against her ear. And from it, where Gladys’s voice should have been, there came only an empty, hollow silence.
She stumbled out onto Flinders Street and gasped at the fresh autumn air, gulping it. Unshed tears blurred her vision. The city did not look like the same city she’d stepped in from under an hour before. The buildings around her seemed to move, to enclose her. Their windows stared at her like eyes, accusing, judging. Because she was cursed. She must be.

She turned to run, as if sure that the building next to her office was about to set off in pursuit of her. The city around her was a cacophony of sounds: tram bells dinging, motor cars honking their horns, pedestrians screeching at her for pushing past them, or cutting across their paths as she ran. When she got to the busy corner at Spring and Flinders Street she kept going, and almost ran straight into the path of a car coming out of the garage. A lady reached out to pull her back.

She ran across the road and in to the Treasury Gardens before she, breathless, stopped to look back.

Morningside House, the place where Pauline Thompson was killed, stood before her, across the road.

Wax figures with Gladys’s face on them began to swim before her eyes. She tried to picture Gladys as she had been the night before, on Elizabeth Street, waiting for the tram, but she couldn’t. She could only see the grotesque waxworks. They laughed at her. Then they disappeared. Gladys had not been made of wax.

One Gladys-shaped waxwork figure came, then, to stand in front of her. It was wearing the clothes Gladys had been wearing last night, and there was a photograph of Gladys’s face, stuck crudely on the front of the figure’s head. Gladys’s grainy black and white face stared out at Alice from the photograph. Just like Pauline Thompson’s photo in the Herald the week before, and Gladys’s voice saying she wasn’t made of wax.

Not just a story. A person. A woman. A death. It was what she had been trying to say.
Alice could see that now.

*Come closer, come closer, come closer.* The trees whispered, conspired.

Alice stepped in towards the wax figure. She noticed that Gladys’s top button was undone. She reached out and fastened it, as she had done the night before. She let her fingers stroke her neck. This time, though, she clung, as though she didn’t want to let go.

‘Don’t go, Gladys,’ she said aloud. ‘I shouldn’t have let you go.’

There was an indent of her fingers, pressed firmly into the neck, under the collar: into the wax, into the flesh. A mark, a bruise, like the killer’s fingers would have left, when he’d strangled her.

Alice stifled a scream.

She wanted to collapse into the relief of tears, but none came. She wrung her hands and walked to and fro in the park, panicked, panicked, breathless, agitated.

People walked past her, giving her a wide berth. In these times of war, the city was no stranger to grief, but still it turned its gaze away from this effusive, public, crippling expression of it. It was only acceptable to cry quietly into handkerchiefs, at least in public. It was as though everyone needed to keep the worst of it to themselves, lest it become a chain of choking, oppressive grief that would multiply if joined, as if it were contagious, grief begetting grief, begetting despair, blanketing the city.

It was all her fault. She had sinned, she was an unrepentant sinner ... she had wanted Gladys, so very much. Too much. She’d dared to dream.

But Kate had been right.

‘It should have been me,’ she said, in a whisper, dropping to her knees and clasping her hands together in front of her face, as if in prayer. ‘It’s my fault. Not hers. You should have punished me.’

And sitting there, in the park, her destructive dreams in shards all around her, she knew that she was finally starting to see the world as it really was.
A

other Woman Murdered
3rd City Crime in 15 Days.
Grim Park Find.

Her half-clothed body was found at dawn today inside the Royal Park boundary, in Gatehouse Street.
The victim has been identified as Miss Gladys Lillian Hosking.

Tuesday evening’s paper was on the kitchen table when she finally emerged from bed, mid-morning, in her dressing gown and slippers. Cassidy must have written the article, after she’d run out of the newsroom. She winced as she picked it up.

A picture accompanied the article, but it was not of Gladys. It was Detective Inspector McGrath and an unnamed black tracker. The Detective had a pipe in his mouth, and he and the remarkably well dressed black tracker stood opposite each other, leaning over, their faces angled towards the ground. Looking for footprints, she supposed. Footprints perhaps made by the same foot that had stroked her ankle under the table only hours before it lay, lifeless, in the mud.

*Prints Trampled*, said one of the subheadings.

There was a map, too. A cross marking where Gladys had been found, and a little black square indicating where her boarding house was. But – Alice squinted – that couldn’t be right. The spot where her body was found was past the boarding house. It didn’t make sense.

*Detective Inspector McGrath wishes to hear from Miss Hosking’s friends, believing that they may be able to assist the police in their investigation. They are anxious to learn from anyone who can tell them where Miss Hosking was last night.*
She was with me, Alice whispered. That’s why she was killed.

She’d telephone Russell Street after breakfast, tell them what she knew.

*Miss Hosking had a wide circle of friends and the police were told that she was fond of men’s company.*

Alice nearly dropped her tea cup, slopping tea into the saucer. How dare you, Cassidy, she thought. He was setting Gladys up here, as another woman out after dark seeking the company of men when she should have been home in bed. He was setting her up as a fast woman who was where she shouldn’t have been, and therefore got what was coming to her. How dare he?

Alice got up out of her seat and practically leapt to the telephone. She had to set the record straight! Gladys hadn’t been out seeking the company of men, Gladys had been out – with her –

She replaced the receiver.

There were worse things than seeking the company of men, after all. She imagined the line.

*Miss Hosking was last seen in the company of a woman and was observed engaging in immoral activity with that woman.*

The police would interview the woman from the café, who would say that she’d seen them caressing each other’s feet underneath the table. They’d find the tram driver, who would say he was sure he’d seen them kissing at the tram stop as the tram approached. The whole wonderful night seemed sordid now, through this lens. She couldn’t bear it. Not for Gladys’s sake, for what they’d say about her in the papers. For what her family would hear. And not for her own sake, either.

The police would simply have to figure it out on their own.
ladys’ boarding house, as was, was at the beginning of Park Drive, Parkville, only eight doors back from the corner of Royal Parade. It was a red brick house, with eight street-facing windows, all covered by striped canvas awnings. All the awnings were open to let in some autumn sun – all except the one at what had been Gladys’s bedroom window. That awning was closed. There was no fence outside the house, just a couple of bushes and a tangled garden with some poor-looking plants. The last time she had been here, on the morning after the tea dance, she had felt so nervous, full of anticipation. Now she felt numb.

She rang the doorbell.

There was a pause so long that Alice almost turned to go away before she heard the rustle of a chain being drawn away from the inside of the door. It sounded as though the person opening the door was having trouble with the chain – she could hear mutterings – but eventually the door was opened, and she saw a man, dressed casually.

‘Can I help you?’

Alice hesitated, not sure whether to introduce herself as a journalist or as Gladys’s friend.

‘Alice Jenkins,’ she said, holding out her hand.

‘Alice, did you say?’

She nodded.

‘Come in Alice,’ he opened the door widely, and even extended his hand to help her over the step. She shrugged out of her coat and he held his hand out to take it, hanging it on the hook inside the door. Alice was a little alarmed to see it hanging there, right beside a coat she’d seen Gladys wearing, just days before, to the tea dance.

Alice looked at him. He was wearing brown trousers and brown lace-up shoes, a white shirt whose top two buttons were undone. He was probably mid-40s, she guessed. His hair was neat, not oiled, but groomed, brushed. He
wore a pair of reading glasses that made him look clever. His eyes were glassy, and his face drawn, as if he hadn’t slept well. It made him look slightly unkempt, but Alice had the impression that this was not his usual presentation.

‘How can I help, Alice?’ he said.

‘I am a friend of Gladys’s,’ she said. ‘I am also a journalist.’

His eyes darted, and he looked suddenly angry, and he lurched forward. Alice pinned herself to the wall, afraid for a split second that he might strike her.

‘You spider!’ He hissed, grabbing her arm. ‘Using false pretences to get into the house!’

‘No! There are no false pretences. You misunderstand me.’ She rubbed her arm. He was strong. There would be a bruise there tomorrow.

‘Do I?’ He towered over her, his thick eyebrows seeming to pulse with fury. He put his hand on the wall, over her shoulder, towering over her.

‘I am here as a friend,’ she said, desperately, trying to shrink away from him. ‘Please believe me. I’ve been here before. That’s her bedroom door, there –’ She pointed, trying not to let herself think about what lay behind it, what might have been. He considered her for a moment, and then took his hand away from the wall above her shoulder.

‘I’m sorry Miss Jenkins,’ he said, his tone lighter, ‘It’s just that we had a shifty-looking character here yesterday, asking questions. We talked to him for a while, but then he started asking about who she liked to entertain, and I sent him packing. He made it up anyway, the scum!’

‘That would have been my colleague Mr Cassidy, I’m afraid,’ Alice said. ‘And I do apologise for him. I am covering the case now, and I assure you that I am a friend of Gladys’s. Didn’t she mention me?’

‘I can’t recall her mentioning you, Alice. I’m sorry.’ She could tell he still didn’t trust her. She tried to think of something she could use as further proof.
‘Wait. Look!’ She drew Gladys’s handkerchief out of her handbag. ‘Her handkerchief. We went to a sad film last week and I had left mine at home.’ She handed him this story, believable for all its untruth.

He reached out to take the handkerchief from her, but she held it only close enough for him to see the GH embroidered on it, before she folded it back up and tucked it away again in her bag.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again. ‘We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot. I am Simon Grant. I live here.’

‘Mr Grant. I am pleased to meet you.’ Alice proffered her hand, hoping it wouldn’t shake. ‘Did you know her well?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘Very. Gladys and I played cards together in the evenings. She had said she would be home to reprise our game of Gin Rummy on Monday night, but of course she didn’t arrive.’ He looked out the window.

‘What do you think happened on Monday?’ she asked

He looked around him, almost nervously, and deftly avoided the question.

‘I’m being terribly rude,’ he said. ‘Forgive me. Would you like some tea?’

‘Yes please Mr Grant. That would be lovely.’

He led her inside and turned right down the long hallway, which was scarcely warmer than it was outside. She looked around as she went: in addition to Gladys’s room, there were two more doors – presumably the landlady’s and Mr Grant’s. She followed him past a hall table, with a telephone and a vase of flowers competing for the limited space upon it.

Mr Grant led her into the familiar kitchen. The cosy smell of baking enveloped her, disarmed her, took her straight back to the day she was here with Gladys. She had to fight back the tears.

‘Mrs Arrowsmith always has something on the go,’ said Mr Grant, peering into the oven. ‘Scones today I think. She’s somewhere around here – doing something or other outside, I imagine. Perhaps gardening.’ He bent down and looked through the oven door. ‘These are nearly done.’ He picked up the kettle and filled it with water, and put it on the wood stove to boil,
before turning to a cabinet to retrieve two cups, two saucers and a couple of small plates. 'Are you hungry?'

Alice shook her head, not trusting herself to speak, still struggling to get control of herself.

'Please,' he said. 'Take a seat.'

It was all very polite. Alice sat on bench seat, as she had last time. She wondered who Mr Simon Grant really was. He seemed quite affected by Gladys’s death.

She coughed then, testing out her voice, making sure that it wouldn’t break if she spoke. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. She felt a bit better.

'Were you and Gladys particular friends? I mean, in addition to your card games?'

He didn’t speak, but busied himself around the kitchen, fetching milk and cream from the ice chest and pouring the milk into a little jug.

'Yes,' he said, after a time, and so softly that Alice almost missed it. 'We were.' His voice wavered slightly on the past tense.

'We would often go walking in the park after work,' He nodded his head in the direction of Royal Park beyond Gatehouse Street. 'We went to dances together,' he smiled, 'and I loved to watch her dance. She used to sing along to the lyrics.' He gave a small, choked laugh, which he covered up by bending down and peeking again into the oven. He reached in then, and took the scones out, transferring them to a wire rack to cool. 'She was always home at a reasonable hour, always home for tea, except when she had a meeting or a concert, and she’d always let me and Mrs Arrowsmith know. But she didn’t say anything on Monday, and we had arranged to go for an evening walk in the park. I simply can’t work it out.'

He put the scones on a plate and brought them and the accompaniments over to the table where Alice sat, even though she’d said she wasn’t hungry. It was such a poor imitation of the scones and tea that Gladys had prepared for her in this very kitchen only a few days ago that Alice
felt, once again, choked up. She couldn’t bring herself to look at the little dish of apricot jam.

‘You don’t happen to know, do you, Miss Jenkins?’

Alice opened her mouth to speak but was saved at that moment by a lady bustling into the kitchen. She came from a door Alice hadn’t noticed, one that must have led to a backyard where the laundry and washing line were. It creaked as she opened it. She wore a loose-fitting beige house-dress and navy-blue cardigan, with a patchwork apron around her stout waist. Her hair was tied up in a makeshift turban, with stray wisps appearing around her face. She appeared ever so slightly out of breath.

‘Simon! My lad. And who have we here?’

‘This is a Miss Jenkins, Mrs Arrowsmith. Miss Jenkins, Mrs Arrowsmith.’

‘Alice,’ said Alice, standing up and nodding to the landlady.

‘Miss Jenkins is – was – a friend of Gladys’s,’ said Mr Grant, ‘.... And a journalist.’ His eyes narrowed.

‘Oh you poor dear. How did you know our lovely Gladys?’ Mrs Arrowsmith perched on the edge of one of the chairs.

‘I met her at an AWAS meeting,’ said Alice. ‘She was promoting her fundraising and I was writing a story for the paper.’

She glanced at Mr Grant, to gauge his reaction.

‘Oh you must be the lass she was making that dress for on the weekend. She took so much trouble with it, my dear. You must have meant something special to her. She redid the stitching around the hem that many times! Asked me to help her out, in the end. Said it was important she get it right.’

‘I never did see the finished product,’ said Alice.

‘Really? Oh, but of course. You couldn’t have.’ Mrs Arrowsmith paused, looking down at her hands and twisting a wedding band around her finger. Alice wondered if she was thinking about a husband far away – or worse. She twisted it twice more, and then seemed to remember herself, turning back to Alice. ‘I must fetch it for you: I know she’d almost finished.
That was why I was surprised she wasn’t home on Monday night, truth be told. Not because it was unusual for her to be out, but because she had been keen to put the finishing touches on it, you see. She’d spent the whole weekend working on it, even when I told her to set it down and have a rest. The devil makes work for idle hands, she told me, and kept going. Give me a moment, my dear,’ Mrs Arrowsmith got up, no sooner than she’d sat down, and walked off down the hallway.

‘Oh, so you are that Alice,’ said Mr Grant, his friendly demeanour seeming to have disappeared.

‘Um. I suppose so?’ said Alice, wondering why Mr Grant had said Gladys had not mentioned her. He looked at her as if he could see right through her.

‘Uh-huh.’ Mr Grant chewed his scone, staring ahead of himself now at nothing in particular, as if Alice wasn’t even there. She shifted in her seat.

‘Here it is! And I am so sorry, my dear, I must have looked an awful fright just now.’ Mrs Arrowsmith came back into the room. She’d removed her apron and her turban, pinned up her hair, and put a bit of lippy on. She looked younger than Alice had first assumed she was, not much older than Gladys herself had been, in fact. Alice wondered again where her husband was. It was not polite to ask these days. Alice wondered if she had children. Perhaps she’d sent them away to the country, Daylesford or somewhere, perhaps, as so many people had at the first threat of air raids.

Mrs Arrowsmith was holding her dress, and she handed it, now, to Alice. It was her same red dress, but it was utterly transformed. It was shorter, a fashionable knee-length now instead of dangling down around her shins. There was a neat row of white flower-shaped buttons dotted down to the waist, which had been taken in and fitted with a red cloth belt and a rectangular buckle. The sleeves had been shortened from full-length to sit at her upper arm and had been fitted with white cuffs. It had a nautical feel to it, similar to a Kitty Foyle dress, but prettier with the flowers. Even the red seemed brighter, sharper.
Gladys had put a collar on it, a red triangle collar with dainty white flowers sewn onto it. The hem had cloth flowers sewn onto it as well, not quite all the way around. There was a gap the width of about five flowers, and a needle and thread was still stuck into the last one. Mrs Arrowsmith noticed that at the same time as Alice did, and with a little cry she leaned over, lowered her face to the dress, and expertly snipped the thread off with her teeth.

‘I’m sorry love. I didn’t see that that was still there.’

Alice didn’t speak.

‘She has some more of these flowers,’ said Mrs Arrowsmith. ‘I can get them, if you want to finish –’

‘No, thank you, it’s all right,’ Alice said. ‘I think I’ll leave it as it is.’

‘It’s lovely, isn’t it?’ said Mrs Arrowsmith, quietly.

‘It’s exquisite,’ Alice said, and looked up to see Mrs Arrowsmith watching her, her eyes full of tears. Alice realised with a little surprise how much Mrs Arrowsmith was grieving as well.

‘Careful, love. You’ll crush it,’ but Mrs Arrowsmith’s words bore no trace of admonishment. She watched as Alice smoothed out the fabric and placed it on the chair beside her, before resuming her own seat.

‘Would you like some more tea?’ asked Mrs Arrowsmith, sitting opposite Alice. Alice nodded, and it was only now that she noticed Mr Grant had left.

‘Where did Mr Grant go?’

‘I suspect he’s retired to his room, my dear. He’s taken it awfully hard.’

‘I wanted to thank him for his hospitality.’

‘I'll be sure to pass it on to him. Between you and me, I think he was quite smitten with Miss Hosking. I think he was fixing to propose to her.’

Propose? Had Gladys had any inkling of this? Had she known about Mr Grant’s infatuation – had she – God forbid! – returned it? Horror crept over Alice at the thought.

‘You’ll stay for lunch, won’t you, dear?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t, Mrs Arrowsmith. Not today.’
‘What a pity. But you must come and see me again,’ she said. Alice nodded.

‘Thank you for your kindness, and for the dress,’ Alice gathered up the garment.

‘It’s my pleasure, dear,’ said Mrs Arrowsmith. ‘I have a feeling we would have seen you here often, had things turned out differently. Gladys was so very fond of you.’

Alice managed to croak out a thank you as she willed herself not to cry. Mrs Arrowsmith must have seen it, because she spoke then in a falsely chirpy voice;

‘You sit there a moment, love, and I'll get your coat.’

Alice was herself again when Mrs Arrowsmith returned to the kitchen. She took her coat, kissed the landlady on the cheek and promised to return. Then she followed Mrs Arrowsmith out the side door through the backyard, past the clothesline, a large apricot tree, a flourishing Victory vegetable patch, and the garage, into a cobbled laneway.
She turned and walked down Gatehouse Street, half expecting to stumble upon a crude black cross and a sign saying *Body Found Here*, just like the map that had appeared in the paper.

An iron-pipe rail fence separated the road from the park. She walked along it until she got to Bayles Street. There was a street light, but it was hooded. It would be dark and spooky down here at night. Why had Gladys walked past home to get here?

She was shaken by what Mrs Arrowsmith had said, and by Mr Simon Grant’s demeanour towards her. What had he said? That he’d planned to meet Gladys for an evening walk on Monday night? What if he’d been waiting for her, at the front door, and been unhappy that she was late home? They may have set out for their walk – even though it was raining – and perhaps she’d let something slip about where she’d been, what had happened?

Or – perhaps he’d proposed and she’d refused him?

Perhaps he’d seen a trace of Alice’s lipstick on Gladys’s cheek, her collar? Could he, possibly, have tasted Alice on Gladys’s lips? Could he have guessed? How?

Alice’s brow furrowed, her eyes narrowed, and she felt the beginnings of a headache, trying to see what had happened that night. Concentrating, as if effort were all that was required to reveal the hidden moments. Her heart beat quickly. There were no visions. Only silence.

But she couldn’t shake the idea that Simon Grant might have had something to do with it. She remembered his strength, prodded at her arm where he’d grabbed it, where it hurt.

He’d have been jealous – angry – if he had guessed she’d been with someone else. What might he have done to her? She recalled his anger inside the house just now, his quick temper and quick shifts in mood. Was he hiding something? It was certainly strange.
Bayles Street was too far, she’d gone too far. Alice backtracked, and stopped when she saw the slit trench. It was only about 200 yards from the boarding house. Imagine being killed so close to home. But, she thought, Pauline Thompson had been even closer, only metres from her front door.

If Simon Grant had killed Gladys, who had killed Pauline and Ivy? Could it be that the crimes weren’t connected after all? Could he have walked here with her, under the pretense of a romantic stroll, and strangled her, then calmly returned home?

And the question that kept nagging her, why had Gladys walked, with Simon, or someone else, 200 yards past her house? Presumably it was someone she knew, trusted. If it was Simon, did she want him to propose – was she in love with him? Gladys had looked at her watch, at the tram stop, as if she was late for something. Would it have been Pat, all over again? Would Gladys have left her, have chosen someone else, a different kind of life, except that, this time, the killer got in first?

It was so quiet. She couldn’t hear the trams on Royal Parade, or the animals from the zoo nearby. It was quite eerie.

‘Ma’am,’ Alice’s thoughts were interrupted by two American soldiers greeting her as they walked past, towards their camp across the park.

‘Good afternoon,’ she said, barely glancing at them.

But Gladys had kissed her. Surely she wouldn’t have done that if she’d been expecting to meet Simon Grant for a romantic walk in the rain? Wouldn’t have come to meet her for tea if she was expecting to get engaged that night?

She hitched up her skirt and ducked under the fence railing, then climbed up the small embankment. It was slippery, covered in mushy red and gold autumn leaves, and mud, and she had to watch her footing. She walked about 20 yards in, to the place where Gladys had been found, between two tall gum trees. She knew from the map in the paper that Gladys’s open umbrella, hat and gloves had been found on the grass walk, right next to the road. She must have been killed on the walk – or grabbed there and dragged through the fence. Alice crouched down and touched the yellow clay, feeling
it squelch between her gloveless fingers. She draped her dress over a sturdy branch, stroking it gently as she did so. Had it only been Saturday when she’d brought it here, and stood naked in Gladys’s room, with Gladys crouching before her, her cool fingers sliding across the measuring tape and Alice’s skin? She closed her eyes, her thumb and forefinger stroking the fabric now, remembering, remembering: it was so real, so real that she almost expected, when she opened her eyes, to see Gladys, squatting in front of her, so close she could reach out and touch her … It was real, it had all been real. Unless it wasn’t.

The slit trench was half full of rainwater, which the mud had turned a dirty yellow colour. There were puddles around, all full of water, but some of them glinting as the watery autumn sun struck them at certain angles. Some of them, perhaps, were caused by footprints. None of them were giving up any clues now, though, in this wet, malleable, yellow mud. She turned and saw something shiny in the mud. She bent to pick it up, and halfway down she recognised that it was Gladys’s silver cross. It was broken, just one arm and the neck of the cross, attached to a broken chain. It felt almost like a judgment: a broken covenant.

The row of houses opposite was separated from her only by a narrow road and an asphalt footpath on the other side. There had been military trucks parked all along Gatehouse Street on Monday night, apparently watched all night in case someone tried to steal them or steal the petrol from their tanks. If Gladys had struggled, how could no-one have heard anything? How could it be that no-one on patrol or in those houses across the road saw the killer lurking? It was unfathomable – unless – Alice thought of Mr Grant again. Passers-by wouldn’t have been suspicious of a couple in love, strolling through here, even in the rain. They would have turned away, let them have their privacy, allowing Mr Grant the chance to do anything he wanted to Gladys. But even so – there must have been some kind of a scuffle, immediately before –. How had all three of these women – these strong, capable women – been killed without a single person hearing a sound? It seemed almost to be a wilful ignoring, a question too hard to answer.
A twig snapped, loudly, behind a tree across the other side of the trench. Alice gasped, and whipped her head around to look.

‘Who’s there?’ she said, staring into the trees surrounding Royal Park. But there was no answer.

Face-down in the mud.

So much rain.

Alice pictured Gladys as she had last seen her: shadowy, sitting on the tram seat as the tram pulled away. What would she have done if she’d known it was the last time she’d see her? She would have screamed, jumped on to the tram, chased it down the road, leapt onto the tracks in front of it. She wouldn’t even have let Gladys onto the tram: she would have held her, tighter.

*I couldn’t hold on tightly enough.* It was what Pat had said, that last day in the cove. Alice wondered what it would take to love someone enough to keep them.
She flicked through Cassidy’s notebook one more time as she stood outside the unfinished new police headquarters on Russell Street. It was going to be grand, once construction was complete: a fitting hub for the business of fighting crime. Now, it was in progress, part old, part new, a building in the process of becoming.

She went inside, and up to the front desk.

‘My name is Alice Jenkins. I have an appointment with Detective Inspector McGrath.’

The woman behind the counter looked her up and down.

‘I don’t see your name in the appointment book.’

‘The appointment was made with my colleague at the Herald, Mr William Cassidy. Mr Cassidy has been held up back at the newsroom, and actually Mr Sykes has assigned the Brownout Strangler case to me, so here I am.’

The woman shook her head, disbelieving.

‘I am a reporter at the Herald,’ Alice said, firmly, mustering all her resolve. ‘And I wish to speak with the Detective Inspector, please.’

‘Wait here.’

The woman stood up and walked out of the room. Alice stood her ground at the desk, looking around her. It was sparse, almost clinical. There were austerity posters and advertisements for war bonds on the walls, and some other official government war propaganda littered around the place. She leaned over to read the print on one of the posters.

‘Miss Jennings?’

‘Jenkins,’ she corrected, straightening up and turning back to face the woman.

‘Jenkins. Detective Fredericks will be down to see you shortly.’

‘Detective Fredericks?’
‘Yes. Detective Constable Fredericks.’

‘Not Detective McGrath?’

‘Detective Inspector McGrath is busy. He is sending Detective Fredericks.’

Alice bristled, insulted. Then she realised that this was the station’s response to the insult they felt – that she was the insult, an inferior offering from the newspaper. She squared her shoulders again, telling herself not to slump.

She still had the red dress in her arms, wishing for the first time that she did not have to carry it around. It was beginning to feel heavy.

‘Excuse me. Do you have anywhere I can leave my parcel?’

The woman looked at her, condescending.

‘We are not a theatre. We do not have a cloak room.’

‘No. Of course not. Do you mind, then, if I leave this here until I am finished with the Detective?’

The woman shrugged, as if she didn’t care what Alice did. Alice draped the dress carefully over the back of a seat in the waiting room, and continued to stand beside it, wondering which of the doors Detective Fredericks would emerge from.

‘I see Sykes is sending girls to do his dirty work now!’ the voice came from behind her, surprising her and catching her slightly off-guard. She jumped and turned around. ‘Miss Jennings, is it?’

‘It’s Miss Jenkins, Detective Fredericks,’ she said, extending her hand.

‘How do you do?’

‘I do very well Miss Jenkins,’ he said, ignoring her hand and tilting his head towards the room he’d just exited, indicating that she join him inside. He stood, though, in the doorway, half filling it with his bulk, so that she had to manoeuvre herself, awkwardly, around him, squeezing herself through the gap he left, into his office. It smelt of cigarettes and body odour – Alice wrinkled up her nose in distaste. He nodded to a chair in front of the desk, before moving his own bulky, muscly frame around behind the desk and
sinking into his chair. He took a pre-rolled cigarette from behind his ear and lit it.

‘What can I do for you today, Miss Jennings?’

She cringed.

‘My colleague Mr Cassidy made an appointment with Detective Inspector McGrath to discuss the brownout murders,’ she said. ‘He said you mentioned that an Australian soldier had come forward with a clue.’

‘I am not sure I should be discussing the case with you,’ he said, exhaling smoke directly towards her. She forced herself not to cough or blanch.

‘But I am covering the case for the Herald, Detective. Mr Cassidy was only covering for me yesterday because I was ill.’

‘He didn’t mention that.’

‘Perhaps he wasn’t sure I would be well enough today to take over from him. But I am fighting fit, as you can see.’ He looked at her, long and hard.

‘Yes. I see.’

‘So what was this clue that the Australian soldier brought forward?’

‘I cannot disclose it, I’m afraid.’

‘But I told you …’

‘I would not have been able to tell Mr Cassidy either,’ he said. ‘It is still unconfirmed and I cannot have it reported in the papers until we know more information.’

He’d been looking out the window as he spoke, sounding as though he was bored and he wished she would go away. He crushed the butt of his cigarette in an already-overflowing ashtray.

‘Very well,’ she said, through gritted teeth. She clutched her pen above the blank page of her notebook. ‘Can you tell me from whom you ascertained this secret clue?’ She deliberately used formal, stuffy language, to counteract his contempt, and perhaps in an attempt to get him to take her seriously.

‘It was a soldier, as we informed Mr Cassidy. He was on patrol on Monday night and may have seen something.’
‘When do you expect to confirm the news?’
‘We are working closely with Army authorities.’
‘American authorities?’
‘Yes. And our own.’
‘Have there been any other breakthroughs you are able to tell me about?’
He turned to face her again.
‘None whatsoever, I’m afraid.’
Alice was not sure whether he was telling the truth or not.
‘Do you have any suspects?’
‘There are a few people of interest and lines of enquiry that we are pursuing.’
‘Soldiers? Americans?’
‘I am not at liberty to say.’
Alice felt the frustration rise, like bile, in her throat.
‘And have you ascertained where the victim was on Monday night?’
‘Not yet,’ said Detective Fredericks. ‘We are still seeking that information and are very keen to hear from anyone who might know.’ He looked straight at her then. She smiled at him, sweetly. ‘It is a priority for us to piece together the dead woman’s movements. She left the University at about 6.30pm and didn’t go home and was not seen or heard of by anyone until she was found dead at dawn!’ He put his face in his hands. Alice was surprised – it was the longest sentence he’d spoken to her, and the first emotion he’d shown. This might be her way in.
‘Where do you think she might have been?’
‘She ate an evening meal,’ he said. ‘The post-mortem showed us that. Something with currants.’
‘Currants?’
‘You’re a woman,’ he said, looking at her, and she felt, almost right through her. ‘Where do women go when they don’t go home?’ His eyes, accusing.
‘They might go to any number of places,’ she said, forcing herself to sit up straight and not shrink under his gaze. He slammed his hand down on his desk, causing her to jump. ‘She might have had tea with friends at a café.’
‘Then why have none of them come forward? What are they hiding?’
She shrugged her shoulders, and looked down at her notepad, to avoid his eyes.
‘Perhaps she is like the other one. Thompson,’ he said, and Alice saw a small glob of spit on his lips as he said the name. ‘She might have had tea with a married man, and he is too scared to come forward, because it would mean admitting to their affair.’
He was so wrong, Alice thought, and yet so close. She didn’t correct him: she let the suspected secret paramour throw him off the scent.
‘Or it would put him in the frame as a suspect,’ the detective continued.
She hadn’t even thought of that! Would she be a suspect, too, if she told him the truth? She supposed she would, being the last person, besides the killer, to see Gladys alive.
‘And the first one too, McLeod. She was off visiting a male friend, unchaperoned, until all hours.’
‘Do you know how Miss Hosking came to be in that part of Gatehouse Street?’ she asked, changing the subject.
‘We don’t,’ he said, and his authoritative facade slipped a little. ‘It doesn’t make sense.’
‘Have you spoken to her boarding house-mate, Mr Simon Grant? I believe he had an appointment with her on Monday night?’
The policeman’s eyes lit up.
‘Simon Grant, you say?’ He wrote the name down. ‘We will look into that.’
She noticed that he looked tired. At that moment there was a knock on the door, and the same woman from the desk came in, walked over to the desk without looking at Alice and handed Detective Fredericks cup of something steaming.
‘Thanks Val,’ he said. ‘Coffee,’ he said to Alice, stirring a heaped spoonful of sugar from a sugar bowl on his desk into it. ‘We have none of us slept much in the past few days. This is lunch.’ He took a long sip and sat back against his chair. ‘You don’t want a cup, do you?’

The coffee smelt wonderful.

‘No thank you,’ she said. She would have loved a coffee. And a cigarette. She stared out the window at the grey street, the grey day.

‘I do have a description of the dead woman,’ he said unexpectedly, sounding almost helpful, as if the coffee had made him more human. ‘Could you publish that? It might trigger something for someone.’

‘Certainly,’ Alice said, but she immediately tuned out. She didn’t need Detective Fredericks’s passionless, monotone description to know what Gladys looked like. She made notes of her own, describing for herself what Gladys had looked like and what she had been wearing on the night she was killed. She could recall every detail.

‘I’m afraid that is all I can tell you today, Miss Jennings,’ he said. ‘I must get back to work.’

Alice did not even bother to correct him this time. She put the cap back on her pen and placed it and her notepad back in her satchel. He stood up and opened the door. She stopped when she reached him and held out her hand again. This time he took it, giving it a perfunctory shake.

‘Be sure to get in touch if you discover anything else,’ she said. He looked her up and down, his eyes coming to rest on her boots. Her gaze dropped too, and for the first time she noticed that her boots were caked in yellow mud from the slit trench, still somewhat wet in patches.

‘Your boots need cleaning,’ he said, looking at her more directly now. He cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes, suspicious of her now, trying to figure her out.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I see they do.’

She shoved her hand in her pocket and hastened out the door, expecting it to close behind her. But he followed her out.

‘Quite a distinctive colour, that mud,’ he said.
‘Yes,’ she said, hastily gathering her dress from the seat where she’d left it. His gaze flicked to it.

‘Washing day, is it?’ he sneered.

She ignored him.

‘I believe I’ve taken up quite enough of your time today. I’d best leave you to it. I’m sure you’re very busy,’ and she finally wrenched herself free of his contemptuous gaze and made it outside. She walked quickly down the steps and onto the street so she was sure she was out of his eyeline, and then she stopped, taking a moment to let her heart rate slow back to normal.

A police car drew up outside the station and stopped. Its door opened, and a man stepped out, unceremoniously dismissed by the unseen driver. He looked familiar to Alice, and she watched him, trying to place him. He was black, and she couldn’t remember ever meeting any black men in the city, or anywhere in fact, so the familiarity was strange to her. But then it clicked. This was the man from the photograph in the paper, the black tracker. And that meant he’d been at Gladys’s murder site. He began to walk, now, away from the city. She fell into step behind him, her long legs quickly making up the ground between them.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. He didn’t turn, and she thought that, if anything, he began to walk faster, as though he were trying to get away.

‘Excuse me,’ she said, again. This time he stopped, and, very slowly, he turned. He averted his gaze, but before he did so she caught the look on his face: fear, almost panic. She wondered what he was afraid of; oddly, it was almost as though he were afraid of her.

‘Me, miss?’

He was over-dressed for the middle of the day, as he had been in the photograph. He wore a long overcoat, down to his knees, and on his head sat a broad-brimmed hat with a wide band around it. An image of Pelaco Bill, almost indecent in only a shirt, flitted across her mind. It seemed completely anachronous to what she saw, now, before her. She shook her head.

‘You’re the tracker?’ she said. ‘Your photograph was in the paper?’

He nodded.
'You were at the place – where Gladys was – you were there – in Parkville …'

He nodded. 'Sorry business, miss.' He bowed his head.

'Did you see her? In the mud?'

'I saw her spirit, Miss. The p'lice had already taken her body.'

'What were you looking for?'

'Footprints, signs of movement.'

'Did you find anything? Any clues?'

He shook his head. 'Many soldiers had been there,' he said. 'Too many prints.'

'What would you have been able to tell, if you had been able to identify any footprints?'

'A person’s weight,’ he spoke hesitantly, stopping now. She nodded to encourage him to keep going. He sighed, 'their height.'

'What else?'

'How they walk and how fast.'

'Really?'

'Footprints can be clear as a photograph, if you know how to look.'

'Really? How?'

He nodded. 'Depth, size, shape, distance apart.'

She looked down at her feet and wondered. They left no prints here, of course, on the impenetrable concrete footpath, but she wondered what trace she had left at the clearing at Royal Park, by the side of the road near that slit trench, among the distorted and waterlogged footprints. She wondered what the tracker could tell about her. It was strange to think like this about the ground under her feet, what story it had to tell, what history it held.

‘That sounds like magic!’ she said.

He shook his head and looked at the ground.

‘Not magic, miss.’

‘No?’ she said.

‘It’s just looking,’ he said, ‘seeing. Noticing.’
‘But not everyone can see what you see?’

‘They don’t know how to look,’ he said.
‘Could I? See those things?’

He looked at her, closely, for a few seconds, before averting his gaze again.

‘Maybe.’
‘The coppers must love you!’

He looked down again and didn’t speak for a minute. She took out her tobacco and rolled a cigarette, not speaking either. All she could hear was the faint crackle of the cigarette paper between her fingers as she rolled. She licked it closed, put it between her lips and lit it. She took it out and offered it to him. He hesitated, then took it, with a deferential nod. She began to roll one for herself, as she waited for him to speak.

‘They like to think it’s magic,’ he said, at last.
‘Why?’
‘So they can treat us as if we aren’t real people.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘If they think we are magic, they don’t have to pay us as much, or recognise us.’
‘Oh.’

She didn’t know what to say.

He looked around then, as though he’d said too much, and then he spoke again, his tone different, almost apologetic.

‘But the whitefella p’lice – they’re working hard. I think they’ll find this killer.’

‘I hope so,’ she whispered.
‘That yellow mud is hard to get off.’

He looked down at her boots and she felt self-conscious. She picked up one foot and tried to use it to scrape some mud off the other, but it only smeared it more.
‘I don’t mean you, miss,’ he said, gently. ‘That mud on your boots is fresh. Still wet – you were there this morning.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘But there will be traces somewhere, you betcha there will.’

He stood still, as if waiting for something. She stared at the mud on her boots, willing it to give something away.

‘May I go now, miss?’

She looked up, confused.

‘Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you. Yes, yes, of course.’

He turned to walk away.

‘Thank you, Mr –’ she realised she hadn’t asked him his name, and he was already out of earshot.

He walked off in the direction of Fitzroy. She watched exactly where he put his feet and she found herself wondering about him, this man who could read a story in the sole of her shoes.
Thursday May 21

She was early to the chapel on the day of the funeral.

It was wintry but sunny as she walked through the University grounds. Trinity College Chapel loomed before her, its red bricks glowing against the clear, cold blue sky that gave a false promise of warmth.

She stood underneath a tree, hugging her coat around her.

Two young girls walked past, their arms full of books, chattering and laughing. Alice envied them.

She lit a cigarette.

‘You’re that journalist, aren’t you?’

Alice hadn’t seen the woman approach the tree: she’d been in her own little world. It was Dot. She was dressed in her AWAS uniform but wore a skirt today. ‘I thought I should, today,’ she straightened her skirt. ‘For the Church, you know.’

Dot pulled a crumpled-up sheet of newspaper from her pocket.

‘You wrote this, didn’t you?’

It was from the previous evening’s edition.

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a stroke of luck meeting you here, then. I wanted to thank you.’

‘For what?’

Dot unfolded the page and read: ‘Melbourne friends of Miss Hosking said today that she was a talented woman and popular with all who knew her. She was of a retiring nature and had few men friends, they said,’ Dot folded the paper up again and put it back in her pocket. ‘I was so mad when I read what they’d written the day before, making her out to be just another Yank-chaser. You’ve managed to do right by her, set the record straight.’

‘She wasn’t out with a man, the night she was – that night,’ said Alice.

Dot stared.
‘Of course she bloody well wasn’t,’ Dot said. Alice cringed a little, at the curse word, but felt strangely soothed by it as well. ‘She was with you, wasn’t she?’

‘How did you –’

‘I saw the way you looked at each other at that tea dance,’ said Dot. ‘I knew what it meant.’

‘I can’t tell them,’ said Alice. ‘The police.’

‘They’d trample all over her, if you did. And you,’ said Dot. ‘And what good would it do, anyway? It has no relationship to what happened – later – does it?’

‘None. She was going straight home.’

‘You see that man over there,’ Dot said, pointing to an elderly man in a grey suit and hat. ‘That’s her father. It would kill him, if he knew. That’s why we had to move to Melbourne. To save him the knowledge, the shame, of – of us –’ She plucked a leaf from the tree and began to tear it up. ‘When she was in Melbourne, far away, it was easier for him to convince himself that she never married because she was broken-hearted over the death of her brother’s best friend at Gallipoli, all those years ago. Apparently he was the man she was supposed to marry. It was easier for him to think that, even though he must have known she was here with me.’

Alice looked at Dot. She had suspected but ….

‘He’s already heartbroken. Do you know how he found out, that she’d been – killed –? He read it in the paper, on his way home from work.’

‘Oh my God. Poor man.’ Alice watched Gladys’s father. He was talking to the funeral director, standing beside the enormous black Le Pine and Sons hearse.

‘What happened, between you two?’ Alice asked. ‘If you don’t mind –’

‘The most normal, mundane thing,’ said Dot. ‘We grew apart. How dull is that? We’d been together, one way or another, since we were teenagers in Meckering. We were each other’s first kisses, you know. Walking home from school one day, ducking behind a tree. But that magic wore off. There
came a time when there was nothing more to discover about one another, and I got itchy feet.'

‘You talk as if it were the most natural thing in the world,’ said Alice, ‘the two of you.’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’

And Alice found she couldn’t answer that. Any words she could think of to say in response were not her own.

‘I hurt her,’ said Dot. ‘I was too callous. I thought she should understand, I thought she felt the same way. I didn’t realise that she never saw it coming when I threw her over, for Sadie. I regret that,’ she paused. ‘I was so happy to see her with you.’

At that moment Simon Grant walked past them, on his way into the church. He turned and glared at Alice.

‘Who’s that?’

‘Simon Grant,’ said Alice. ‘He lived in the boarding house, with Gladys. Their landlady thought there might have been something between them.’

Dot laughed. ‘That’s preposterous!’

‘Is it?’

‘You don’t mean to tell me you believe it?’

‘I don’t know what to believe,’ she said.

‘Well believe me. Gladys would not have been sweet on him, never at all.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I don’t think he was her type!’

‘People change their minds, about that kind of stuff,’ said Alice, darkly, thinking of Pat.

‘Not Gladys. Trust me.’

‘This is all my fault. I could have saved her,’ said Alice. ‘I was too scared. I should have asked her to stay with me, not to get on the tram, not to go home. I should have made her stay!’

Dot laughed, flatly.
‘Gladys might have been one of the quiet ones, but she wasn’t in the habit of being made to do things she didn’t want to do, Alice. She would have gone anyway, probably quicker if you’d tried to make her stay.’

Alice thought of Gladys walking away from her, that day at Albert Park. The steely determination on her face.

‘But …’

‘Neither of you was ready to jump straight into anything. You were right to give it time.’

‘It turns out that time was one thing we didn’t have,’ Alice sighed. ‘I could have saved her. I could, at least, have tried,’ she said.

‘How could you know what was going to happen? You had to let her go. How were you supposed to know you wouldn’t see her again?’

‘Maybe this is a punishment. For what she was – what we were –’

If Simon Grant found out, and he –

‘She was in the wrong place at the wrong time,’ said Dot, firmly, ‘nothing more, nothing less.’

Alice took a deep breath, wanting to believe Dot’s words.

‘Come on,’ said Dot. ‘This thing is about to start.’

Alice hesitated. Dot put out her hand.

‘I promise you won’t burst into flames when you go in there,’ she cocked her head towards the chapel. ‘Let’s go and say goodbye.’
Three women, dead.

Three apparently unconnected women.

There must be a connection, something that made sense. A pattern, a logic.

The police seemed to have decided that the connection was illicit meetings with men after dark. That way, they could paint the deaths as punishments, and take the sting out of them for ordinary God-fearing people. In one sweep, they could issue a warning to the women of the city and remove any fear for any woman who kept her virtue. These killings weren’t random, after all. These women deserved their fates.

They knew that Ivy McLeod and Pauline Thompson had appointments with men other than their husbands. They didn’t know anything about where Gladys had been, what she’d done, or who she’d met. But the silence gave them room for whatever speculation suited their purpose. They wanted to pin something on her, issue her with a sin, so that her death made sense.

To Alice’s chagrin, Cassidy wrote, for the Herald: As none of the dead woman’s friends have come forward to tell the police that she was with them on Monday evening and as there have been no other reports of her having been seen after she left the University at 6.30, the detectives think now that the first person she met that night was the man who murdered her.

They suggested Gladys might have known this man. Simon Grant? The more Alice thought about it, the more she was convinced that he’d had something to do with it.

But she had given Constable Fredericks Mr Grant’s name, which must mean that the police had interviewed him and cleared him of any suspicion. Which meant – if it wasn’t him –
Alice looked down at Flinders Street, slick and shiny with rain. The tram tracks were filled now with water and with traces of crushed, sodden autumn leaves. Before long, if the rain continued, if it got heavy again, the tracks would be running with it, the trams sloshing through it as they moved through the city. These tracks were the veins that ran through the city, keeping it alive. She thought of Gladys, Ivy, Pauline. These murders had gripped the city by the throat. The detectives were stumped. Women were scared. Men were nervous. Whatever it was that ran through the veins of the city was infused, now, with fear. The city held its breath, as if it, too, were being strangled. The police and the newspapers had to come up with a story that made things all right again. She knew that – it was what she did. If it hadn’t been Gladys who’d been killed, she’d be the first one at her typewriter, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together in whichever way they fit. She tried to think about it dispassionately, to see only what they could see.

If it was a married man – or any man – Gladys met that night, the police would have a suspect and a motive, all wrapped up in one neat package. That was what they were hoping for. And it seemed they were stuck on it. That very day the headline in the Argus had asked: Where did Miss Hosking Eat? Mystery of Woman’s Movements.

Who bloody cared what Gladys had had for her tea, and where? But, it seemed, they did. They thought it was the missing piece of the puzzle. Alice realised with a growing horror that they would be stuck on this until it was revealed, putting all their faith in it. Alice knew they needed to move past it, that it would tell them nothing, but they didn’t know that. She realised, with a sinking feeling, that she had to come forward.

She thought of Gladys’s father, what Dot had said. She thought of her own mother, and of Kate. What it would do to them all, if the truth were to be revealed.

She wondered if there was a way to tell them only part of the truth, strip back its layers and say they’d stopped to get a bite to eat. Nothing wrong with that. She didn’t have to mention the exact café, and perhaps the tram driver and conductor hadn’t seen anything, after all.
But what would it look like, her coming forward now? Wouldn’t that make her look guilty? Time had passed, and time bestowed guilt. Questions would be asked: why didn’t you come forward earlier? Detective Fredericks would look at her, with that disdain, and ask why she hadn’t told him, when he’d asked her directly. They would work it out, and they would lick their lips. Not an illicit male, but something even more debauched. A woman lusting after her own sex. There was no statute against it, not like there was for men who committed indecent acts with men, so they had to leave the punishment in God’s hands, and the hands of whatever strong human instrument he had chosen.

She’d lose her job. Or, even if she didn’t, they’d take her off the case. Her career would be ruined. Her mother would be heartbroken, and Gladys’s reputation would be tarnished forever. Dot would never forgive her. Would her mother kick her out, as Kate had?

But if she didn’t do it the police would continue to labour under this potentially deadly misapprehension. More girls might be killed.

That evening, as she walked home from the tram stop in the rain, she raised the newspaper above her head to shield herself from the drops. She held it there as if it would protect her, hide her. She tried not to think about how much heavier that newspaper would feel tomorrow evening, after she’d told them the truth. It wouldn’t protect her then. It would expose her.

But what choice did she have?

As she drifted off to sleep, she thought about the killer. Who was he? Whoever he was, he was going to ruin more lives than he knew. She felt his hands around her throat. She thought she heard him laughing.
Alice! Alice! She heard Harry outside in the hallway, tapping softly on the door. ‘Psssst.’

‘What time is it?’ She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. The curtain was still drawn over the window; it was still dark. Alice could hear Sylvie’s light, rhythmic snoring from the other bed. She squinted at the wristwatch on her bedside table, but between the darkness and her sleepy eyes, she couldn’t make out the numbers.

‘Wait,’ she whispered, sliding out of bed and feeling clumsily for her slippers and her dressing gown.

‘Why are we sneaking around? What time is it?’ she asked.

‘Shhh. It’s early. Almost 6. Come with me.’

Alice plodded behind her uncle down the hallway, following the glow of his kerosene lamp, still half in a world of sleep, having no idea why he would have woken her. He sat her down at the kitchen table and set a cup of steaming coffee, and a small wireless, before her.

‘Drink this,’ he said. ‘And listen.’

Alice heard a crackling, static.

‘Blast,’ Harry said as he moved the dial slightly past the station. He fiddled with it for another moment.

After a few mouthfuls of coffee Alice began to feel a bit more awake and pay more attention to what Harry was doing. She watched him as he sat there, a wireless before him on the table.

‘Harry …’

‘Mmmmhhmm?’

‘Where did this come from?’ She tapped the wireless.

‘Fell off the back of a truck,’ he said, grinning, showing the gap in his teeth.
‘But –’
‘Shhh. I’m trying to get it.’
‘Get what?’
‘Police radio,’ he said, lowering his voice. She leaned in.
‘Police radio?’
He nodded.
‘There’s a way you can twiddle the dials of a normal domestic wireless to tune in to D24.’
‘D24?’
‘The communications centre at Russell St.’
Alice’s eyes grew wide. She pushed her coffee cup aside and leaned even further forward.
‘How do you know about this?’
‘The girls down at the ARP comms centre showed me,’ he said. ‘There are secrets an ARP warden must know, kiddo.’

Harry always knew all the secrets. It was why he’d become an Air Raid Precaution Warden in the first place, when the call had gone out for older, retired men to volunteer. To have an excuse to bang on folks’ doors at night, to stickybeak inside, and to book them for letting the merest chink of light escape. Not that there was much he didn’t already know, she thought, about the good citizens of Richmond, and what went on behind their closed doors. She turned to him.

‘Is it legal?’ her voice was a whisper. She looked over her shoulder as she said it.

‘It’s not illegal,’ Harry said. ‘It’s just that – well, your mother –’
‘Wouldn’t approve,’ Alice finished. ‘And nor would Sylvie, I suspect.’
He nodded, concentrating hard on the dials.

‘Hurry!’ she said. ‘They’ll be up soon.’
‘I had it before,’ he said, clicking his tongue against his teeth. ‘I heard they’ve made an arrest.’

Alice breathed in sharply.

‘Hurry!’ she said again.
’ity Watchhouse.’ The words burst out of the wireless, somewhat coarse, muffled. ’Ten-thirty last night.’

She strained to hear and caught a few snippets.

’Signed confessions for two of them – Camp Pell – he’s our man all right – strong as an ox – handcuffs almost too small –’

She wondered who it was speaking, and to whom. The man they described sounded monstrous, someone not quite human. She frowned.

’Sid – errgh Detective Inspector McGrath rather – spent hours with him yesterday,’ the voice said. ’Interrogating.’

’– in the morning papers.’

’He’s a funny one, they say. A real strange man. His hands. No wonder he tore them apart.’

’Bloody hell – Yankee bastard.’

The wireless crackled then and dropped out. Harry moved the dial back and forth a little, and occasionally they could make out a word or two, but then the signal went blank.

’Gee,’ she said, sitting back in the chair. She picked up the coffee cup and took a sip, wrinkling her face up, and spitting the bitter liquid back into the cup.

’It’s cold,’ she said.

’What do you make of that?’ he asked.

’Whoever that was sounded quite sure they had the right man,’ she said.

She put the kettle on, and distractedly moved around the kitchen, making toast, tea. Neither of them spoke for a minute as she clattered plates and knives around.

’Can you show me how to do that?’

She inclined her head towards his wireless as she asked, coming up behind him to slide a plateful of hot buttered toast in front of him. He took a piece.

’Your mother won’t like it,’ he said, through a mouthful of toast.

’Perhaps I shouldna shown ya.’
‘Oh Harry!’ she said. ‘I am a journalist who is trying her best to cover this rotten case, and it’s not easy when the coppers won’t even talk to me.’

She leaned both hands on the kitchen bench, looking down between them, her head hanging. Her unbrushed curls fell in her eyes.

‘I’m trying to do a job. Do what I can,’ she said, aware that her words were trite, simplistic, that there was more to it. And yet that didn’t take away from the fact that they were also true.

‘I know you are, love,’ he got up and put his hand on her shoulder. ‘Here. Look.’ He led her back to the table. ‘Watch.’

She twiddled the dials to and fro as he showed her, and eventually she found the crackly voice.

‘I can’t believe they’ve caught him. It’s over.’

It meant no more girls would be killed. It meant Gladys’s death would be avenged.

It meant her secret was safe.
he killer has been caught,’ said Mr Sykes, pacing the newsroom. ‘And not a moment too soon. The tabloids were getting carried away,’ he shook a copy of that morning’s *Truth* in the air, brandishing it above his head, then lowering it to read, ‘If you believed them, we’ve come to the end of the most baffling and terrifying crime wave in the 105 years of Melbourne’s existence. According to them, the killer was a diabolic killer who was roaming the browning streets of Melbourne, seeking defenceless women on whom he can prey with his sadistic lusts. I ask you, are we a modern city, or are we something out of the pages of a Robert Louis Stevenson novel? I expect we at the *Herald* to report this responsibly. We will not barrel in like a bull at a gate and denounce this killer as though he’s a fictional demon. By all accounts, he’s only a young man. And he deserves a fair trial. And the public deserve to know what’s happening. We will inform them, not terrify them.’

Alice was taking notes.

‘No charges have yet been laid,’ said Mr Sykes. ‘So let’s proceed on the assumption of innocent until proven guilty. Jenkins?’ she looked up. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘Yes Mr Sykes.’

‘I know it’s tempting to excoriate him. After all, he did kill three members of your sex with his bare hands. But we must be restrained.’

‘Mr Sykes?’

‘Yes, Jenkins?’

‘Are they absolutely sure they’ve got the right man?’

‘He has confessed,’ said Mr Sykes.

There were a few audible gasps from others in the room.

‘For all three of the murders?’
‘The police are confident he’s the man for the Thompson and Hosking murders,’ he said. ‘They are still making some inquiries into the McLeod case.’

‘The US authorities have not released his name to the press,’ said Mr Sykes. ‘But even if they had – at this stage – we should keep reporting on him in general terms. Refer to him as ‘the soldier’ or ‘the American soldier’. Not even ‘the killer’.’

‘Is he with the US authorities now?’

‘He’s their prisoner,’ said Mr Sykes, ‘and technically in their custody. But he’s being kept at the City Watch House on Russell Street, in close confinement.’

‘When will he be tried?’ Cassidy asked.

‘I imagine they’ll want to do that soon,’ said Mr Sykes. ‘They have designated an American court martial.’

‘What? He’ll be tried by an American court?’

‘Apparently so.’

‘But he killed Australian girls! In Australia!’ Cassidy said.

‘Even so. He’s their prisoner, and we must bow to them on this.’

‘Australia looks to America,’ said Cassidy, sarcastically.

‘How does the court martial work?’ Alice asked.

‘It’s similar to a Supreme Court. There are five or more – usually more – US officers, appointed by the Commanding General, who make up the court. Officers will be appointed for the prosecution and the defence, and it’s expected that the decision will eventually need to be reviewed in Washington before any sentence is carried out. The penalties for murder –’ he paused here, ‘include death. If that is the sentence, the court martial will decide if it is to be carried out by shooting or hanging.’

More gasps.

‘Jenkins.’ She looked up from her notebook. ‘The police told me that when they were investigating Miss Hosking’s murder, they learned that two other women were attacked in the same locality. See what you can do about interviewing them, won’t you? See if they have anything interesting to say.’
'Other women?'
'They escaped. They were scared but not hurt. Now, everyone get back to work.'

Alice sat there for a moment after her colleagues scattered back to their desks. Other women? Attacked in Parkville before Gladys was killed? Why didn't they come forward at the time?

'It’s such a relief, isn’t it, that they’ve caught him?’ Enid said, sidling over to Alice.

‘Yes. It is.’

‘Clive knows him.’ Enid’s voice was low, conspiratorial.

‘Clive?’

‘My American,’ she said. ‘The one I introduced you to on the night of that tea dance, remember? Say, wasn’t that woman you were talking to that night the one who was killed?’

‘Yes.’

‘To think I met her!’

‘Enid. Does Clive know the soldier’s name?’

‘He didn’t mention it. Said the GIs are boiling mad, though. Reckons this kind of stuff has made it mighty hard to meet Australian girls now. Said he’s lucky he already met me before it got out of hand.’ Enid giggled, covering her mouth with her hand.

‘Out of hand,’ Alice repeated, to herself.

‘Say, Alice. I should get Clive to introduce you to some of his buddies. Then you wouldn’t have to stay with the wallflower girls. You might get some fella to sweep you off your feet too.’ She gave a little swivel and a kick, showing off her white, strappy, low-heeled pumps, brand new nylon stockings – from Clive, no doubt – and dainty ankles.

‘Maybe.’

‘I’ll tee something up,’ Enid said. ‘We can double date! It’ll be a hoot.’ She reached over and took from Alice’s desk a cigarette Alice had rolled, ready to smoke. ‘He’s taking me dancing again tonight.’
She practiced a little jitterbug kick, and walked away, blowing smoke into the air.
What is the world coming to?

Mrs West didn’t quite throw her arms in the air as she exclaimed, but she might as well have. Alice moved behind her, doling out more green beans, waterlogged and boiled almost grey.

‘I mean, three women killed!’

‘Gravy, Mrs West?’

‘It’s a good thing they’ve caught the killer,’ she continued. ‘You can’t have a maniac roving the streets killing people willy nilly.’

‘Yes, it’s a relief,’ said Alice’s mother.

They took their places at the table.

‘Bless us, Oh, Lord, and these, thy gifts, which of your bounty, we are about to receive. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.’

‘Amen.’

‘Pass the mint sauce, would you, Alice?’

‘It’s been an awful business, though, these murders. It would never have happened in my day.’

‘Those poor girls,’ said Sylvie.

‘Of course we should pray for their souls,’ said Mrs West. Alice did a quick sign of the cross. ‘But I do wonder at their impudence, being out at night like that. Unchaperoned! We would never have dared.’

‘It’s a new world, now, Mrs West,’ said Harry.

‘And one in which women can leave their husbands and go gallivanting off with whoever they please, it seems! I mean, look at them. The first one – Ivy so and so – was separated from her husband. I wonder what happened there? Good women don’t just up and leave their husbands with no reason – no matter what their husband is like, they should −’

‘Ah, now, we don’t know what happened −’
‘And then the second one, whatshername Thompson, she didn’t even bother to leave her husband before she threw him over for someone else. And her with little ones!’

Alice grimaced.

‘And this last one. That does sound very strange.’

‘Strange?’

‘It doesn’t seem that anyone can say where she was before she was killed. There are a number of hours unaccounted for, you see. She must have seen someone in that time, someone must have seen something. I wonder what they are hiding.’

‘More lamb, Mrs West?’ Alice asked, holding the plate out to her.

‘Well maybe it will stop our girls from throwing themselves at the Americans,’ said Mrs West, spearing a piece of grey meat with her own fork. ‘They should all be like Sylvie, here, and make do with good old Aussie men. Like Sylvie’s John. Or your Ernest, or my Thomas, God rest their souls.’

‘Or me?’ Harry said, a glint in his eye. Mrs West huffed, disapproving.

‘Alice met one of the unfortunate girls,’ her mother said, giving Harry a scolding look.

‘Did you?’ Mrs West turned on her now, looking at her with much greater interest. ‘Which one, dear?’

‘Gladys.’

‘Ah. The third one. Don’t you think it strange that she disappeared and then turned up dead?’

‘She didn’t exactly disappear,’ said Alice, biting her tongue. ‘It’s just that no-one has come forward to say where she was.’

‘She was forty, you know. Never been married. If you ask me she was off with a fella somewhere, a married man, no doubt, up to no good. And now he’s got his head stuck in the sand, now she’s dead. She must have been quite an odd girl. Was she?’

‘Not at all.’

‘All I am saying is that, in my day, all those poor girls would have been at home with their husbands. If they had been – they would have been safe ’
‘Safe like Moira Wallace?’ Alice said.

A hush descended over the table. Everyone looked at Alice, and then down at their plates.

Mrs West and her mother both did the sign of the cross.

‘Who wants trifle?’ her mother stood up and jerked her head towards Alice. Alice started stacking the plates.

‘Get me a beer, won’t you, Alice?’ She looked up at Harry, who was sitting there enthusiastically picking lamb gristle out of his teeth with a toothpick. He gave her a sympathetic smile.

She helped her mother take the plates into the kitchen.

‘What’s gotten into you?’ said her mother, handing her a tea towel. She dried the plates in silence. ‘Get a hold of yourself before you go back there.’

Back at the table, Alice could hear Mrs West asking Sylvie about the baby.

‘Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?’

‘I don’t mind,’ Sylvie said. ‘As long as it’s healthy.’

‘If it’s a boy, and he looks like John, he’ll bring you great comfort.’

Alice put a bowl of trifle in front of Mrs West and handed Harry his beer.

‘How old are you now, Alice?’ asked Mrs West.

Alice groaned. She usually tried to avoid Mrs West’s house next door every time she went out, specifically to avoid this conversation.

‘Almost thirty,’ she said.

‘I thought you might find a husband in Sydney, like your cousin did,’ said Mrs West. ‘I said to your mother, I thought that was why you went up there.’

‘I went to help Kate out with the kids,’ she said.

‘You’d better be careful,’ said Mrs West. ‘You’ll be left on the shelf.’

Alice put a big spoonful of sponge cake and jelly into her mouth, so she didn’t have to answer.
‘I hear Fred Hogan has got himself a nice girl,’ said Mrs West. ‘He was always a lovely boy, wasn’t he?’ Alice nearly spat cake crumbs across the table. Her mother gave her a pointed look.

‘Who is she?’ asked Sylvie.

‘Some lass from the factory,’ said Mrs West. ‘So I heard.’

‘His mother must be very happy,’ her mother said.

Alice spooned the last vestiges of custard out of her bowl.

If only this was another Sunday, in another lifetime, and she could scrape back her chair now and head to the cove. She missed the feeling of salt in her hair, the smell of fresh air and the ocean. And the way the world felt when it was hers to do what she liked in, for a few hours. Even if it was only an illusion.
The ballerina twirled once when Alice opened the jewellery box that held all her keepsakes.

Gladys’s ribbon and her letter, from when she sent back the laundered scarf. Gladys’s handkerchief. Newspaper clippings, photographs of Gladys, reports of her death. A beautiful shell that Pat had found at the cove, and given her, on the first day they slept together. Pat’s engagement announcement, almost transparent with handling. Gladys’s funeral brochure. Pat’s ‘apology’ letter and wedding photograph. Alice couldn’t help feeling that this jewellery box and its collection of broken intimacies was the inventory of her guilt.

She had wanted to wrap Gladys up and keep her close in this box where she could dance and dance, and sing and sing. *But not like this.*

Like what, exactly, then?

Alice wound the ballerina up again. The tinny strains of the song squeezed out into the air.

All she had wanted was to preserve that moment, that moment of perfection, when Gladys was singing, when the world seemed full of promise. She tried to remember how it felt to stand close to Gladys, to kiss her, but there was nothing there. Only flimsy, fleeting memories that already seemed to have had the truth washed out of them.

It wasn’t like when her father had died, nothing like it. That had felt as though the past had been ripped out from under her, but she’d steadied herself quickly, and got on with things, plunging head-first to claim a future that lay in wait. Gladys’s death felt like it was precisely her future that had been torn from her, leaving her scuttled on the ground, just when she’d been beginning to find her feet again, after Pat. And now she felt like she was hurtling such a long way into the past, and towards a version of herself that she didn’t recognise, or want to be, anymore.
She tumbled everything back into the music box and shut the lid, her eyes wet and stinging.

She took the wireless out from under her bed, and plugged it in.

The signal was unusually clear. She curled herself on her bed, facing the door, the sound turned right down. She curved her body around the wireless, letting it nestle in amongst the bedsheets, ready to switch it quickly off and hide it under the covers if anyone should come in. She twiddled the dials.

She listened for a while to the menial chatter of the policemen on duty. They sounded bored – Sunday was a quiet day. No pubs were open, there was no entertainment for the soldiers. What had they said – Melbourne was twice as big as New York Cemetery and twice as dead. There was no footy, of course, not on the Lord’s day. Everyone went to Church, ate lunch and had an afternoon nap. She wondered how Pat spent her Sundays now, and whether she ever thought of her, or regretted her choice. She was beginning to doze off herself, when she heard a different voice, in a more urgent tone.

‘The soldier will be charged with all three murders,’ it said.

‘It’s all ready to go. The court martial has been appointed. Eleven military men.’

‘Blimey, that happened quickly!’ said one of the bored policemen, more animated now. ‘Are they all Americans?’

‘Yes. The soldier is a prisoner of the Americans.’

‘But surely Australian jurisdiction presides over crimes committed here,’ the policeman said, echoing the conversation they’d had in the newsroom.

‘Not in this case.’

‘That’s gotta be a first for Australia, that we’d let a man be tried by the laws of another country.’

‘Probably a first anywhere in the British Empire, I’d reckon.’

‘I can’t believe the PM is letting it happen.’

‘He needs to preserve good relationships with the Americans.’
‘So it’s all settled then?’

‘Yep. He’s been charged with murder under the 92nd article of war.’

‘Funny how murder can be a war crime,’ the policeman said. ‘Thought that was what it was all about. Thought it made a bloke a hero.’
The telegram boy rode his pushbike no quicker than walking pace. Alice stood with her mother and sister, the brownout curtains open most of the way, to let in the daylight, watching as he passed their house. Sylvie held her breath, one hand on her stomach, until he was safely past.

‘Oh thank God,’ she murmured, slumping forward in relief.

They followed the lad with their eyes. He stopped beside a hooded lamp post, putting one foot on the ground to steady himself, and pulled out the telegram, double checking the address. He looked up and down the rows of houses. Alice wondered if he had any sense of how many eyes stared at him from behind curtains all around.

He got back on his bike, making his slow and solemn way up the street. Alice guessed he was only about fourteen. Too young to be carrying death in his hands.

He stopped outside the Byrne house.

‘Josephine …’ Alice said it, under her breath, wondering if the bad news concerned her friend’s husband or one of her brothers.

She tried to see who it was who opened the door, Josephine or her mother. She couldn’t. She watched the boy hand over the telegram. He’d taken his hat off, and held it at his chest, as if in tribute. It was a nice touch that made no difference whatsoever.

She heard a wail.

‘Josephine!’

‘I should go to her,’ said Alice’s mother.

‘Not yet,’ said Sylvie. ‘Wait until tomorrow.’

Grief is not a moment, thought Alice, or even a day. It’s a lifetime, from this point onwards.
The boy got back on his bike and rode away. No-one watched him anymore. All eyes were on Josephine Kelly’s mother’s house, and through all their sympathy, all the women along the street couldn’t help being relieved it wasn’t their house that day. They hoped the boy wouldn’t return too soon.

Everyone in the city was in mourning for someone, Alice thought. Lives were snuffed out as easily as streetlights. It was just the way of things, in wartime.

Josephine was alone when Alice paid her a visit the next day.

She hugged her friend. ‘I think I’m all cried out,’ she said, but even as she said it little pinpricks of tears appeared in her eyes.

‘It’s amazing how many tears there are inside a person,’ Alice said. ‘As if we all contain an ocean.’

‘Come in, anyway,’ she said, opening the door wider. ‘Would you like some tea?’

‘Let me make it.’

Alice went into the kitchen. She saw four cake tins, lined up on the bench, a dozen fresh eggs and a haphazard pile of fruit and vegetables, plucked from local gardens, dirt still clinging to their roots and skins.

‘What’s all this?’ Alice asked. ‘The bounty of our neighbours?’

‘It’s as though they think we can’t cook or bake anymore.’

‘They probably suppose you don’t feel up to it.’

‘You know, Alice,’ said Josephine. ‘Nothing has really changed. He wasn’t here last week, and he’s not here now. The only difference is now I know he won’t be coming back – ‘ her voice choked up, ‘I mean, sometimes if I set my mind to it, I can forget that telegram, and pretend that nothing has changed. But then I remember – and it’s just awful – but it’s not as though it’s given me more to do, less time to do it in.’

‘They are being kind,’ Alice said, bringing in the tea tray. She set it down on the coffee table in front of where Josephine was sitting, perched it close to the edge to avoid placing it on top of the collage of photographs that layered the table top. Photos of George, mostly, or of the two of them
together. There was a scrapbook open on the couch beside Josephine, and a couple of empty photo frames. Josephine reached across now to sweep the photographs into a smaller pile so they had room for the tea.

‘More likely they are trying to assuage their guilt, because they feel glad it wasn’t their door that was knocked on, their men who were –’ she poured some tea, ‘I was the same, Alice. I wished it on someone else, on anyone but me. I even wished they’d knock on your door, that the telegram would be for Sylvie, that it would be John, anyone but George –’ She put the teapot down and did the sign of the cross over herself. ‘Isn’t that awful? Do you hate me?’

‘Oh darling,’ Alice got up and went to her friend. ‘You poor thing.’

Alice drew Josephine in close, against her chest. She stroked her hair and mumbled soothing sounds.

‘The funny thing is, there’s nothing to dread, anymore. The worst has happened. I’ve been expecting this for eighteen months, since he went away, every day waking up thinking it would be the day – I don’t have to fear that, anymore – there’s nothing left.’ She sobbed into Alice’s neck, spilling all the hope that had been holding her together, now useless. Alice felt the tears soak into her collar.

Josephine had already been busy with the photographs. There were at least a dozen new photographs in frames, on the mantelpiece, on the old rickety piano, and hanging on the wall. A large one of him in his army uniform, one of the two of them on their wedding day, not even three years ago, looking so happy on the steps of the Town Hall. She felt a surge of selfish despair. Josephine had lost her husband, yes, but at least she could put up photographs, she was given cakes and biscuits and vegetables, people came to hold her hand. People understood if she cried over her cup of tea. Alice had to bear her grief in silence, alone, her scant photographs and tokens hidden away under the bed, confined to the dust and shadows.

‘There there,’ said Alice, releasing her arms from around Josephine. ‘Let me finish pouring the tea, and we can get stuck into some of these biscuits.’
'Mum said the lemon curd ones Mrs West made are delicious,’ said Josephine, blowing her nose, ‘I haven’t been able to eat any. They’re in the Arnott’s tin.’

‘That lemon tree! People will be making curd from its fruit long after we’re all gone,’ said Alice. ‘I only hope that the next people in the house aren’t as sour as she is.’

Josephine laughed, despite herself.

‘That’s a terrible thing to say!’

‘Don’t mind me. We had one of our typical stoushes over lunch on Sunday. I’m still a bit sore about it.’

‘Again, Alice? Why do you provoke her, so?’

‘It seems I don’t have to do much to upset her, these days,’ said Alice, carrying over a tray with the tea things and a plateful of yellow lemon curd biscuits. ‘But as long as she keeps making curd as good as this, I suppose I’ll keep finding ways to forgive her.’

‘What was the stoush about this time?’

‘The usual. I need to get married, avoid being left on the shelf.’

‘Do you think you ever will, Alice?’

‘Get married? Nah.’

‘I always thought you and Fred would end up together, but –’

‘You and everyone else! Too bad no-one thought to ask me!’

‘You didn’t let me finish. I was going to say that I always thought you and Fred would end up together, but I don’t know that that would suit you, now.’

‘Oh.’

‘You’re too clever, or something. Independent, I suppose.’

‘He did ask me, you know.’

‘Yes. He told me.’

‘He told you?’

‘He was quite shocked that you said no,’ said Josephine. ‘Thought you’d fall at his feet. You should have seen him. I almost laughed, it was so
ridiculous. He said he thinks being in Sydney gave you some fancy ideas, made you think you’re too good for this place. For him, I suppose.’

‘Ha!’

‘He wondered if you had a sweetheart up there.’

‘I need more sugar,’ said Alice, jumping up. ‘I left the tea stewing too long. It’s bitter.’

‘Did you, Alice? Have a sweetheart?’ Josephine asked when Alice came back in.

‘Yes,’ she said, after a pause. ‘I did.’ She wished she could tell Josephine everything. But now was not the time.

‘What was he like?’

‘It was someone utterly unlike Fred.’

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing, really,’ said Alice, feeling sick at the thought of it.

‘Well if you ever want to talk about it –’

Alice shoved a lemon curd biscuit in her mouth. Crumbs fell down her top, into her lap.

‘You know, for a while I thought about not marrying George,’ said Josephine, looking at his photograph again.

Alice swallowed the biscuit, sweet and tart and buttery all at once.

‘What? Why? You’ve loved him since school. I remember you writing his name in your notebook, over and over.’

‘Yes. That’s why I married him, in the end. I loved him. I wanted it, more than I wanted anything else. I suppose I didn’t think about it seriously, Alice, but I did wonder for a moment what life would be like if I could do something else.’

Alice looked at their wedding photograph. Their simple, all-consuming happiness.

‘I was lucky,’ Josephine said. ‘We didn’t just do it because people thought we should. I can’t imagine it, marrying someone I didn’t love, someone other than George, but I don’t know that I would have been strong
enough to resist my mother. I admire you, Alice, I know it can’t be easy to say no. I was fortunate that I didn’t have to deal with that.’

‘What would you have liked to do, instead, Jose?’

‘I might have become a seamstress, perhaps had my own shop somewhere.’

‘If only we could have it all,’ said Alice. ‘It’s so silly that getting married means you can’t have your shop.’

Josephine was quiet.

‘I suppose it doesn’t matter now,’ she said. ‘I suppose I am not a married woman anymore, after all. Gee, that’s a strange thought, after all that time getting used to being married. Having a different name.’ She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they shone with tears. ‘Perhaps this is God punishing me, for having these thoughts. Because now I don’t know what to do without him, I don’t even know who I am without him. Who is this Josephine Kelly? It’s like my future has gone with him, somewhere on the other side of the world, but I can’t go back. The person I was before him is gone. There’s no such thing as Josephine Byrne anymore, but what does it mean to be Josephine Kelly without George?’

Alice went over to her, held her hand.

‘What’s going to become of the house?’ Josephine said, her voice wobbling again. ‘Our little shack, on Docker Street. I was so excited about –’

‘You could still live there,’ said Alice.

‘Oh no, Alice! Not all on my own. And besides, I told you it was upstanding, but it needs a lot of work …’

‘Harry can help fix it up,’ said Alice, ‘I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. And then you could live there. Get away from here.’

‘How could I –?’

‘Take in a boarder,’ said Alice. ‘Perhaps. For company, and a bit of an income.’

‘I wouldn’t want to live with someone I don’t know.’

‘What about someone you do know?’

‘What do you mean? … Who?’
’Well. What about me?’

It would be a way out of her mother’s house. Her own space, more freedom ...

’Oh! You, Alice? Would you think about living there, with me?’

Alice felt a twinge of sadness. If it happened, it would be the fruition of a seed she’d planted in her mind so she could spend time with Gladys. But now that was ...

But she could do it for Josephine. It might be good for them both.

’Why not?’ said Alice. ’We could make a go of it, don’t you think? A widow and an old maid …we could get a cat …’

’Do you think we really could?’

’I don’t see why not,’ said Alice, ’Let’s see what Harry says, about helping us get the place in order.’

’Oh Alice. That would be marvellous. You and me. Think of it!’
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The postie brought a letter from Kate today,’ her mother said.

‘From Kate?’ Alice croaked. Maybe this was it. Kate had waited until now, until she was home, to deliver the blow that would send her world crashing down around her, again. Alice felt panic rise in her chest and tried to breathe normally.

‘It’s wonderful news, Alice. They’ve heard from Charles. He’s alive. He’s wounded, but being cared for in hospital, in Singapore. Kate says the hospitals there are clean and well-equipped, not like some of those oriental hospitals. They expect him to make a full recovery, and perhaps even to be home by Christmas.’

‘Thank God! Kate must be so relieved.’

‘After all this time. Her prayers have been answered.’

‘Did she say anything else?’ She took the potato peeler from her mother and began to peel the potatoes.

‘She wrote a lot about the kids. Evie is all grown up now, apparently, such a little lady. A real help and comfort to her mother. Her father will hardly recognise her when he gets home, he leaves her a child and comes back to a woman. And Charlie and Robbie are doing well at school. The baby is walking! How time flies. I remember when you and Sylvie were that small. Doesn’t seem that long ago, if I’m honest. And soon we’ll have another little tot underfoot –’

‘And how is Kate?’

‘She is as well as can be expected, I’d say. She didn’t talk about herself much. I suppose she’s just relieved to finally have news.’ Her mother paused. ‘She did say one thing that was quite strange.’

Alice held her breath, again.
‘She said that Evie has been such a help around the house since you left in January. But you didn’t get home until a month ago. What do you think she means by that?’

‘Oh I suspect she’s just muddled,’ said Alice. ‘She probably can’t believe it’s only been a month. She once told me that she’s been losing track of time so easily since Charles went missing.’

‘Ah. That must be it,’ her mother’s brow was furrowed.

‘Do you need anything from the garden, Ma?’

‘What? Oh, yes. Fetch me a few stalks of rhubarb for sweets, love.’

Alice went outside and looked up into the mauve sky, her heart thumping in her chest.

In Sydney, that day, after she’d picked up the train ticket and her suitcase, Alice had gone to Sydney Central station. She’d sat there, watching trains come in and go out. They all knew exactly which track to take. It must be comforting, she’d thought, that certainty. Alice had gripped her train ticket in her hand until it grew limp with sweat from her palm.

She couldn’t go back to Melbourne. What would she find there? She expected that Kate would have written to her mother, telling her everything, and she couldn’t bear the look on her mother’s face, the judgment, the horror. The old life that she pictured in Melbourne wouldn’t be there waiting for her, anymore, even if she had wanted it back. Which she didn’t. When she thought of life before Pat, she thought of an old tired thing, outgrown, no longer hers.

Besides, she didn’t want to be in Melbourne if Pat changed her mind and came to find her. She would come to her senses. She had to.

She picked up her coat, sliding her arms into it, her hands into its pockets. She felt something there – a piece of paper, crinkling in her fingers. An old ferry ticket, perhaps, or a playbill from when she and Pat had gone to the theatre, just that once. Something that she had crumpled and thrust in
there, eager to empty her hand so she could hold Pat's, surreptitiously, under the cover of their coats, on the tram home ...

She pulled it out, wondering which now-painful memory would assail her. But it wasn't a playbill, or a ticket. It was a note. She recognised the handwriting, from all those shopping lists, hand-written recipes and all of Kate's letters to Charles.

It was only a few lines. *God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even the women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. They received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Romans 1:26.*

It was the final click of the lock in the door that had shut fast, now, behind her.

She'd found a room at a run-down boarding house in Rozelle, on Darling Street. Every day she'd walk up Darling Street, towards, but never all the way to, Pat's boarding house in Balmain. It couldn't mean nothing, them both living on Darling Street, a suburb apart. *Fancy that,* she heard Pat's voice, almost felt Pat's hot breath on her cold ear, *running into my darling on Darling Street.* And her laughter, the bitter cold bubbles of the beer tickling her nose and throat, the breathless dash from the pub, the bruising, forbidden kiss in the shadowy laneway. It didn't seem possible that it was all over, just like that.

She found a job in the Colgate and Palmolive factory, right on the harbour. She worked double shifts and snuck back into her boarding house at all hours. She thought about Pat constantly, imagining what she would do if she saw her again. Most days, she missed her so much that all she could imagine doing was leaping into her arms and kissing her all over, kind of like the romantic scenes in the American movies, but without the men. Other days her anger prevailed, and, in her mind, she screamed at Pat for leaving her, for giving up on her. Or she begged, she told Pat she couldn't live without her, and for a while she really did believe that to be true.

One day, she felt bold, and she walked up the steps of Pat's boarding house. The last time she'd been here Pat had dragged her up these steps, tugging on the buttons on the front of her coat, practically undressing her on
the street. She’d slapped at Pat’s hands, laughing, telling her to be patient, to hang on until they got inside, but burning with impatience herself. The door had opened, while they were still jostling on the steps, and Pat’s landlady had appeared.

‘Oh,’ Pat had said, nonchalantly. ‘I didn’t think you’d be here.’ The landlady had looked them both up and down. Alice had never seen such a withering look, but she hadn’t really cared. All she had been able to think was that, now, they’d have to keep their buttons fastened and sit through an awkward afternoon tea with Pat’s insufferable landlady, instead of passing the time much more enjoyably, in Pat’s bed.

It was an April afternoon when she went back there, four months after that last day at the cove. It was one of those days when the sun shines bright and it was hard to be as maudlin as she’d felt. She shaded her eyes as she rang the bell. The landlady’s face, when she answered the door, puckered, as if she’d just sucked a lemon. She had looked down her nose at Alice and told her that Pat was no longer there, that the young lady has been reconciled with her parents and has gone back to live with them, to make preparations for her wedding. Alice knew she got great satisfaction out of saying that, of burning the bridges Alice had thought might still be there. She spat at Alice’s feet, and told her not to come back. We don’t want your kind around here.

She knew Pat’s parents lived in Leichhardt. The newspaper announcement had told her that. She thought about going there, hoping she’d run into Pat, but her feet and legs ached too much to walk further, and she had no money for a tram. She turned around and went home, despondent.

Alice kept an eye on the papers for an announcement of the wedding. She saw none, and while she saw none some hope remained.

But the hope was fading fast. She knew that Pat had cheated her. Alice had known nothing of this kind of desire before Sydney. Pat had taught her what it meant to love women, had shown her this world of possibilities. Pat had guided her through it all, with a loving hand, touching every inch of her and leaving it changed. She had become something else, on those Sundays.
Something she couldn’t now discard, but didn’t know how to be, without Pat. And then Pat had retreated into the life that seemed so foreign to Alice now. Alice felt that Pat had set her alight and left her, inflamed by a desire she could not satisfy, to burn to death on her own.

And Pat had lied to her. Why had she told her that her parents were dead, that she had no family? It was just a story, she’d said, but what did that mean? The landlady had said that Pat had been reconciled with her parents. Does that mean she’d been estranged from them? Perhaps that was why Pat had said they had died. Was the story about Laura a lie, too? Alice didn’t know what was real anymore – was any of it real? Perhaps Pat had faked it all. But Alice knew something for certain – she herself hadn’t faked a thing. It had been real for her, the passion, the love. It was as though Pat had spun a web around her and created a monster, someone that Alice didn’t quite recognise when she looked in the mirror, but who she knew was the most truthful she’d ever been, ever could be. A magical creature. Herself.

A web of guilt, then, but not of shame. Because how could you feel shame for something that you couldn’t bring yourself to regret, no matter how wrong it was, no matter how badly it had turned out? But guilt, certainly, guilt for the very pleasure she had taken, the very pleasure she refused to give up on. That she wanted back, with every beat of her heart.

On weekday afternoons, she would often hide somewhere near the post office, hoping to catch a glimpse of Pat, taking extra care to hide from Kate, from the kids. She didn’t know what she’d do if she saw Pat, but she never had to decide. Pat didn’t seem ever to be there. It seemed as though she’d vanished off the face of the earth. But Alice kept going there, and to the cove, because she didn’t know what else to do. What else was there, for her, now? She walked on the circumference of an enchanted circle of footsteps, all facing backwards, tripping over themselves, into the past.

One Sunday, as she floated in the still, clear aqua-coloured water at the cove, she thought, what if I let myself float away? She could just slip under the water and peacefully drift away. It would be a mortal sin, of course, she knew that. But she was already an abominable sinner, she was already
damned. What would Pat think, when she read about that in the paper? *Woman drowns at Cameron’s Cove.* She tried holding herself under water, testing her limits. But it wasn’t just like letting go, and there was nothing peaceful about it. It *hurt,* holding herself underwater until there was not enough breath left. She couldn’t do it. She always emerged, coughing and spluttering and gasping for air, as if life was something she couldn’t bear to be parted from, even though she didn’t know how to live it, anymore. And then she, limp, would crawl out of the water and lie, naked, under their tree, sobbing into the earth, wondering how she was ever going to get up, again.
'What’s he like? The soldier?'

Alice leaned in, closer to the wireless, listening.

‘He’s really quite charming,’ said the other voice. ‘It’s hard to believe that he killed three women. That is, until you look at his hands. They are huge!’

‘Do you think he is remorseful?’

‘He doesn’t seem to be, but it’s so hard to tell. He must have a split personality, or something, like in that movie that’s been at the cinemas, Jekyll and something or other.’

‘Hyde.’

‘Yeah, that’s it. I’ve heard that he’s completely different when he’s drunk. Some people even say his accent changes. And he mixes things in with his beer.’

‘Mixes things? What do you mean?’

‘All sorts. Aspirin, tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper, even ice cream.’

‘Ice cream?’

‘Someone said that on the night he murdered that third sheila he’d had something like thirty beers and eight whiskies.’

‘Blimey. That’s impressive.’

‘Yeah. He’d even give Bluey a run for his money.’

Alice felt sick. It sounded almost as though these policemen were in awe of this killer. As though they wanted to go out for a beer with him. Or thirty.

‘I’ve heard, that when he’s drunk, he walks on his hands. On the bar.’

There was a pause. The second policeman had stopped laughing.

‘What?’

‘Are you sure? That he walks on his hands?’ The voice was serious now, all laughter gone.
‘That’s what the Yanks say, the ones who come here to deliver his food from the camp kitchen every day. I suppose they ought to know. Why do you ask?’

‘There was a message,’ he said. ‘Someone called, after the second woman was killed, before the Royal Park murder. They didn’t give a name or anything, just said look for the man who walks on his hands. We thought it was nonsense. And then one of the officers did see some Yank walking on his hands at the Parkville Hotel, but he hadn’t heard the message and he just thought it was some larrikin showing off. Never made the connection. Gee! If only he had!’

There had been so much, Alice thought, that might have prevented Gladys’s death. So many little hints and tips that had come in between the time Pauline Thompson was killed and the time Gladys was killed. The reports from these women who got away. These anonymous phone calls. This cop who saw the killer. The loop that circled in and around Parkville, the one that they’d allowed to close in around poor Gladys’s neck, when so many might have stopped it.

‘He’s all right, though,’ said the second voice. ‘Just a messed up kid, I reckon.’

‘Don’tcha gotta be a bit more than messed up to kill three people?’

‘Oh I don’t know. Reckon I know how he feels sometimes, the way my Mrs nags.’

The first man laughed.

Alice switched off the radio in disgust.
June 1942
utumn had well and truly given way to winter by the second week in June. The morning was bone-chillingly cold. Fog hovered in the air, obscuring the tops of buildings and changing the shape of the city. It was drizzly, but the rain seemed more to be carried on the wispy grey fog than to fall from the sky. Alice’s face was wet with it, and her coat and hat were covered in silvery droplets of wet, icy air. She stood outside the hall, dressed in her smartest suit, clutching the media pass so tightly her cold fingers hurt. Only fifteen reporters, Mr Sykes had told her, would be allowed into the court martial of the accused, one Private Edward Joseph Leonski. He’d told her she’d proven her dedication to the case, and deserved it, but that he still had reservations about sending her to cover the trial. The crimes were heinous, he said, and the trial would unearth some terrible, terrible things. She’d protested that she was prepared: the terrible things, she thought, could scarcely be worse than her imaginings of them. Could they?

She stood in a line, holding her head as high as she possibly could to show that she was not intimidated by these fourteen male journalists and the American soldiers who were checking their credentials and passes. Her stomach churned, her heart beat fast, but she arranged her face as neutrally as possible, smoking a cigarette, and hopping from one foot to the other to keep warm while she waited. Her fellow journalists glanced at her, giving her strange looks. They didn’t talk to her. For a moment, she wished she had asked Cassidy to come in her place, but he’d proven to be more interested in sport that the deaths of these women, and she wanted to see it through. She took a deep breath, and stepped forward to have her pass examined, looking straight ahead of her.

The hall was in an old building on Russell Street, opposite the City Watchhouse, and surrounded today by menacing US military policemen. It
was normally used for banquets and dances, but it bore no trace today of decoration or celebration. At one end there were trestle tables that had been pushed together for the eleven men of the court-martial. Upon the tables, there were eleven glasses and eleven flasks of water. And behind the tables, there was the stars and stripes of a gigantic American flag. There was no sign yet of Leonski.

Alice made her way to the media gallery, and sat there with her head down, doodling in her notepad, unable merely to sit still. A murmuring began to echo around the courtroom. Alice looked up, listened. The prisoner was on his way.

Leonski entered the courtroom under heavy police escort. Alice leaned forward to get her first glimpse of him. He was an inch or two short of six feet in height, with a round plump face, and he was young. Alice had heard he was young, but she hadn’t expected this. He looked like he was only a boy, mid 20s at best. His nose was an unusual shape, as if it had been broken and hadn’t healed properly. And he was smiling. She remembered thinking that the killer might have been a ghost or something demonic. But he wasn’t. Far from it. He was so ordinary. A man; just a young man. And what’s more, he looked like a nice man. Alice was jostled out of the way as news photographers scrambled to get a photograph. US officials swooped on them, telling them to put their cameras away. No photography allowed.

The prisoner was guided to a table alongside the military men who had been appointed to defend him, about six feet away from a table where Detective Inspector McGrath and the appointed military prosecutor sat. Alice saw Leonski smile at McGrath, but McGrath turned his head away. The boyish American soldier looked so alone.

The Trial Judge Advocate, prosecuting, rose, and gave his opening statement, which was mostly directed towards the eleven officers, designed to assess their appropriateness and readiness to pass judgement in this trial. He sat down at the end of it, apparently satisfied.

The Defence Counsel stood then, and began talking about Leonski’s sanity, or potential lack thereof. Alice listened carefully. He said that the trial
couldn’t proceed until this important issue had been addressed. He requested an adjournment.

Neither man addressed anything to Leonski himself.

And, just like that, the hearing was over. No-one objected to the request, so it was decided that court would be adjourned while Leonski’s sanity would be decided upon by an army medical board.

The military police descended upon Leonski, leading him out of the courtroom. He grinned and waved at everyone, turning around to make sure everyone saw that grin.

The hearing was over, and it wasn’t even lunchtime.

Alice sat in her seat while others filed out around her, and the din of many different conversations arose from the dissipating crowd. She sat there, looking at the page in her notebook. She’d written *Leonski insane? Court adjourned for assessment*. It wasn’t quite what she had geared up for that morning. She felt deflated, like she might burst into tears. Not because she was unhappy with the outcome, but she had been expecting to be walked through gruesome crime scenes, and the tension she’d been holding in her neck and shoulders was rapidly released, leaving her limp. It, like the case, was adjourned for another day. She felt as though the considerable energy she had had to muster to prepare herself for today had been wasted. The courtroom emptied out, and still she sat, slumped, in her seat.

She reported for the *Herald* that night that the medical board’s assessment was expected to take three to four weeks.
She had seen Pat again, once more.

It had been one evening, at dusk. Alice had taken to walking at night, just to keep warm. Her room at the boarding house was cold and she couldn’t afford wood for the fire. She felt like some kind of supernatural being, walking the dark streets at night.

And then she was there. Pat, standing on the other side of the street, under a hooded street light, not far from Alice’s boarding house, a tall, lean silhouette.

Alice blinked and shook her head, expecting the image to shatter. It must be a figment of her imagination, like it had been, all those other times. Any minute now Pat would fade away, and Alice would be left chasing an apparition.

But was it Pat? It looked like her, but it also didn’t. She looked smaller, slighter. The dress, the fancy hat, looked so strange on her. All the flounces and pleats, the ribbons and lace, all made Pat so much harder to see. But beneath those misplaced trimmings was a body Alice knew as well as she knew her own, a body that she thought would be entwined with her own forever, a body that a few feminine adornments couldn’t entirely disguise, if you knew her. The familiar-strange woman under the street light half-turned, and Alice could see little curls protruding from underneath the lace veil of her black pillbox hat. Her hair was growing. Like that last day in the cove, it was somehow Pat, and not Pat, at the same time.

She wanted to call out, but her voice wouldn’t come. Her throat was dry.

She moved forward, inching her way across the street, walking towards her, still expecting her to evaporate.

Almost close enough, now, to reach out and touch her.

Pat turned around.
‘Pat.’ Alice croaked. The two of them stood, facing each other, on the street.

Pat looked through her, as if she were the one made of air. She spun around with a flourish and walked away, as if she hadn’t seen her. In a moment, she had vanished, swallowed up by the night, leaving not even footprints behind her. Alice couldn’t even tell which way she’d gone. And it had been all Alice had wanted, for months, to catch a glimpse of Pat again. But somehow this, seeing her and watching her walk away, this was a hundred times worse than all those days of not seeing her at all.

Then, one day, a letter.

Pat? Her heart leapt. She must have seen her come out of the boarding house, that night, must have been watching her for longer than Alice had known. Maybe seeing Alice again had made her realise how much she missed her, maybe this whole dreadful ordeal was coming to an end, and she and Pat could reconnect –

But it wasn’t from Pat. She knew the handwriting – her mother’s. She turned it over and over, wondering how her mother had found her new address. But the letter was addressed to her care of Kate’s house.

‘Did this come by the post?’
‘No, it was delivered by hand.’
‘By hand? Who delivered it?’
Could it have been Kate, perhaps extending the hand of forgiveness?
‘A child, a girl, maybe about fifteen. Dark hair, pale skin.’
‘When was she here?’
‘Just now. A few minutes ago.’

Alice leapt up from the table and tore outside without even stopping to collect her scarf. Evie had been here, it must have been Evie. Somehow, she’d found her.

Alice stood on the front verandah and looked out, across the road, down the street left and right. She ran out onto the road, calling Evie’s name.

‘Shush Alice,’ said Evie, coming forward from behind a brick wall. ‘You don’t have to let the whole neighbourhood know I’m here.’
‘Evie!’ She stepped forward to hug her, but Evie put out her hand to stop her.

‘I only came to bring the letter,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’
‘Mum would tear strips off me if she knew I was here.’

‘What did she tell you?’

‘Only that you had to leave, and that we weren’t to try and find you.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘I saw you hiding behind a pillar near the court house, watching the post office one day, when Mum sent me down to send the letters to Dad. I followed you,’ she said.

‘Why didn’t you say something?’

‘I don’t know. Mum was so angry at you, I wasn’t sure I should.’ She frowned.

‘Thank you for bringing the letter.’

‘I thought you’d want to have it.’

‘Evie. I never wanted to leave –’

‘It was that woman, wasn’t it? The one from the post office?’

‘Pat. Yes.’

‘Why did she make Mum angry?’

‘Oh Evie. It’s complicated.’

Evie stamped her foot on the ground.

‘That’s what adults always say, when they want to keep secrets from kids. I’m old enough to know. Mum wouldn’t tell me either. I thought you might. I’m not a little kid anymore!’

‘Your Mum wouldn’t want me to. She wouldn’t want you to know.’

‘Why not?’

‘She might think it’s bad – that it’s a bad influence. That I am. I’ve already upset her enough.’

‘I have to go,’ said Evie. ‘She thinks I’m just out posting letters.’

‘All right,’ Alice said, wanting to hug her, but not daring to, ‘It’s really good to see you.’
Evie turned and walked away.

Alice wondered if Kate had, indeed, told her mother everything and had sent Evie here with the letter, wanting Alice to read her mother’s denouncement? It looked like the letter had been opened, already, stuck back together with tape. Perhaps it was the censors. Or could it be Kate? Or even Evie herself? Her hands shook as she opened the envelope.

My dear Alice,

I’m sorry that it’s been a few months since I’ve written. I’ve been thinking of you and including you in my prayers every night. I hope you are well.

Sylvie is due to finish at the factory next week, and as you know work on the fruit dries up a bit once the warmer months are over, so there won’t be much work for me. I am worried about how we might make ends meet. I mean, Sylvie gets part of John’s salary, of course, but that’s not much and she’ll need most of it for the baby.

I would, you know, never ask you to come back home if Kate and the kids still need you, but I wondered if you might be able to pick up any work up in Sydney, and send us some of your earnings? It would be such a great help – whatever you can spare. Of course, if Kate could see a way to spare you at some stage over the next little while we would dearly love to have you home.

Write to me when you can.

With love,
Your mother.

So Kate hadn’t told her mother. Alice wondered why.

It might be possible, after all, to go home. Maybe her life back there was still there, simply waiting quietly for her to come back and inhabit it. Her mother needed her, and that need be the only explanation for her return. And she knew, now, with a sudden certainty, that Pat was never going to come back. Alice couldn’t stay in Sydney any longer without her.
If she went home, maybe she could find a way to break this destructive cycle. Maybe she could slip back into comfortable obscurity and remember how to be who she had been, before she met Pat. Maybe she could begin to forget what it felt like to love.

She could write to Mr Sykes at the *Herald*, see if there were any cadetships open, if she could apply for the next round. She felt a very faint stirring of excitement at the thought of being in a newsroom again.

She pictured the familiar streets, and, right at that moment, the thought of a quiet, monotonous life back there felt like a huge relief.
Alice put the cauliflowers in her string bag and wandered through the market towards the primary school. She put her hand in her pocket to make sure that her identity card, and her mother’s, and Sylvie’s, were still there. She joined the queue to collect their ration books.

So much for her quiet life back here.

This was what she had pictured, meandering through the market, cauliflowers and potatoes and errands. But what about all the rest of it? Murder trials, killers, men with wide smiles, enormous hands and sinister intent. Falling in love, again, despite all her avowals. And having that taken away – her heart broken, before it had even had time to heal.

How could she report this trial objectively, when the big hands that Leonski rested in his lap were the very thing that had ripped Gladys from her world, just when things were getting started? Was that baby face the last thing Gladys had seen, before her death? When did she know she was going to die? Was she thinking about her, about that kiss, as she breathed her last breath?

Perhaps, she thought again, she should give the case back to Cassidy.

‘I am so pleased that I made time to go into Myer’s before this rationing, to get the kids’ winter coats,’ said a lady in front of her, pulling her fingers through the pony tail of the little girl beside her.

‘And for yourself,’ said her friend, nodding.

‘Well,’ said the first lady, stroking the wool of her new maroon coat. It matched her new woollen hat. ‘I did need one. And it’ll cost twenty seven coupons for a new coat, did you know that?’

‘Twenty seven? Oh. I knew I should have come with you. By the time I made it in, they barely had a pair of shoes left.’
Alice looked at the second woman, well turned out in a coat that, if not new, must only have been a year old. She looked at her own threadbare coat. She'd have to make it last til spring.

‘I thought it would be quieter here,’ the woman in the maroon said, ‘than St Ignatius.’

‘I walked past there from home on the way here,’ the other woman said. ‘And the line was all the way back to Church Street. I think it is a bit quieter here, even with the market.’ She jostled a bag full of potatoes and turnips, as if to explain why she was collecting her ration books here, at the State School on Gleadell Street, rather than at one of the stately halls on Richmond Hill.

‘Can you believe that the churches are allowing their halls to be used tomorrow, on a Sunday, to hand out ration books? And not only the Catholics, either! St Stephen’s as well.’

‘I agree, it’s outrageous,’ the other said, ‘but I suppose Sundays are the time people can get to them.’

‘But look at this,’ the first one said, waving her hand around, ‘all women here. It’s not like the men would have to take time off work, now that they’ve allowed one member of the family to collect all the books. Why not make it today and Monday?’

‘Probably lots of these women are working as well, these days.’

The first woman shook her head, a grey feather in the maroon hat blowing slightly in the breeze.

‘Yes, you’re probably right,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I do worry about what’s going to become of the children, growing up without mothers around.’

She pursed her lips and looked at a group of children in the schoolyard, chasing each other around and laughing.

‘I know! One woman in my street locks her child in the house at night so she can go and work night shift at the knitting mills.’ Both women shook their heads.
‘It is lucky that your little Julia and George still have you at home,’ the second woman said, patting on the cheek the little girl who stood primly beside her mother, dressed in a new bottle green woollen coat and matching gloves.

‘I want their father to be proud of them when he returns. Not having to go out to look for little Julia on the streets making a spectacle of herself, or, even worse, strangled in a gutter somewhere.’

Alice gasped then and hoped the women hadn’t heard her. She held her breath, half expecting them to turn around and draw her into this conversation. She put her head down, staring at her feet and the bitumen.

‘Oh could you imagine?’

‘That killer might be locked up,’ the first lady said, her voice growing more sanctimonious with every minute. ‘But even if they are saying he’s insane now, he’s only one example of the dangers on our streets. Good girls should be seen and not heard and be brought up to be good wives and mothers, like we were.’

Alice looked at the ladies again. They really weren’t all that much older than she herself was. How uninspiring, she thought, to believe that all you could ever be was a wife and mother, and to begrudge others the chance to be anything else. And this was what her mother wanted for her.

She kept shuffling forward in the queue, listening to snippets of the conversation that continued between the two ladies. She looked at poor Julia and noticed her looking longingly at the boys and girls who were rummaging around in the sandpit. She let go of her mother’s hand, as if she was contemplating making a rebellious dash for it. But she was too well brought up for that.

At the front of the queue, Alice showed their three identity cards, explaining that Sylvie couldn’t attend because she was eight months’ pregnant, and that their mother was at home, tending to Sylvie and to other errands. She spoke with the man behind the desk about what Sylvie should do to obtain a coupon book for the baby, when he or she was born in a matter of weeks. Good wives and mothers, both of them, and Alice loved them for it
with all her heart. Why was it different, then, to the scorn and contempt she felt for the version of wives and mothers that the women in the queue had been talking about? The little girl Julia was really no different from Sylvie at that age, or any number of little girls Alice knew who had grown into fine women.

But there was something shifting in the world, whether or not these ladies liked it. Julia would inherit a world that her mother couldn’t even imagine.

And Alice nodded a silent thanks to the lady in the maroon hat as she passed her on the way back to the school gate.

She had a chance to make something of herself, with this murder case. To be something other than what the world expected. There was no way she could give it up for Cassidy. She needed to do it for herself – and for Gladys.
July 1942
Monday July 13

Alice shuffled through security again and came into the hall. There were ten places, now, rather than eleven, set for the members of the court. She climbed into the media gallery.

The army medical board had declared Leonski sane. She looked over at the prisoner, and he seemed, almost, to smirk, as if that were good news.

The army medical board moved to admit their report as evidence, but the court would not allow it. In conducting the tests to determine Leonski’s sanity, said the trial judge, the board had speculated about whether Leonski had actually committed the crimes, or whether he had been telling the truth in his confessions, and it therefore contained too much conjecture. It would be prejudicial. It was enough for the court to hear that its prisoner was sane.

Then Leonski pleaded not guilty.

But, Alice thought, didn’t he confess?

It seemed confusing that this sane man should sit in court smirking and grinning in the face of death, having confessed to something he now denied doing.

An American soldier, Private Anthony Gallo, approached the dock. He was smaller than Leonski, and darker in complexion and hair. He sat with his hands in his lap and his head hanging, except when answering a question, or addressing the court. He looked uncertain, and very young, although not, Alice thought, quite as young as Leonski himself.

‘How long have you known Leonski?’

‘Since March 1941.’

‘And what is your relationship with him?’

‘We have always been on friendly terms, sir.’

‘Did Leonski ever speak to you about these murders?’
‘Yes.’ He paused. ‘The first time was –’ he seemed to think, to try and remember, ‘about 7pm, on the evening of the 9th of May, he was standing outside his tent. He appeared to be drunk.’

‘What did you say to him, and what did he say to you?’

‘I said what is the matter with you? He said he was going out. I said “What do you want to go out for? Why not go to bed? You are drunk.” Then he said I killed – I killed.’

‘Did he say anything else to you at that time?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘When Leonski said I killed – I killed, was he in a happy or unhappy frame of mind?’

‘He was in an unhappy frame of mind. He was crying.’

‘What happened next?’

‘Leonski went into his tent and changed from his fatigues into his khaki suit. We caught the tram to Flinders Street. It was raining. The tram was crowded. Leonski was talking about the murder.’

‘The second one?’

‘Yes. He said he had no idea where he’d committed the crime. He asked me to buy a paper so he could find out about it. I bought a paper and we went into a cafeteria in Flinders Street, where he had tea and sandwiches.’

‘What happened then?’

‘I was looking through the paper but I couldn’t find anything about the murder. Leonski kept asking me if I had found it. I did not find it until I had read the paper a second time. Then I found the murder of the second woman.’

‘What conversation did you have with Leonski in the cafeteria?’

‘When I found the article I handed it to him. It took him about a minute to read it. Then he said Doorstep, doorstep, that’s the one. He noticed in the paper that it said the woman was not criminally assaulted, but he said he had had intercourse with her.’

‘What happened next?’
'We left the cafeteria and walked up to Swanston Street to a milk bar near the Town Hall. While walking up Swanston Street, we talked a lot about the murder. He told me he had done the first and second murders. He said something about strangling them.'

'Strangling the two women?'

'Yes. He said he was sure of not being caught except for fingerprints. He had tried very hard to rub them off in the second murder.'

'Did he say anything to you about the third murder?'

Alice bit her lip.

'When I heard about the third murder I went to Leonski’s tent and lifted the flap suddenly. Leonski had his back to me. He turned round and he was very pale. He was not usually pale. It was the first time I have seen him pale.'

Alice looked over at Leonski. He was not pale today, in the court room.

'I didn’t say anything to him that day, but afterwards I told him that if I was sure he had done these things I would not hesitate a second in charging him. They were terrible things to do. He said Robbery is as far as I have gone.’

'Did he ever tell you the ages of these people, whether they were young or old?'

'He told me he wondered why he picked on these people older than himself.'

'Did he say he wondered why he murdered these people?'

'I don’t know whether he said murdered. He said picked on.’

Alice closed her eyes. Picked on. As if it was nothing more than a schoolyard fight.

It was yet another thing that happened to point to Leonski in the days leading up to Gladys’s death. If only this soldier had told someone about these strange conversations. She wrote down the witness’s name, and then crossed it out, remembering that journalists had been told not to use the names of any Americans, other than the accused. She looked at the swarthy American GI who had all this information in his hands while Gladys was still alive, and she would have felt angry at him if he hadn’t looked so sad.
‘He asked me if I had ever heard of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,’ said the soldier, ‘and I said I had. He said I am like him; I am two personalities.’

After lunch, Detective Fredericks was called to the stand. In the gallery, Alice leaned into the wall, not wanting to let him see her, but he was looking straight ahead at the ten men on the long bench. He was looking mighty proud of himself, although she couldn’t think why.

He had interviewed Leonski just after eight am on the morning of May 21, at Camp Pell. Alice was dismayed to learn that it had been Detective Fredericks who had heard Leonski’s confession. She thought of his leading questions to her, that day in his office. What was to stop him from leading Leonski in the same way? The man was obviously given to boasting, and was very suggestible. Alice, for the first time, wondered about those confessions.

‘With regards to the Hosking case,’ Fredericks said now, spreading his legs out wide on the chair, taking up all the available room. ‘He told me he’d been drinking at a Parkville hotel until about six-thirty pm that night, and that then he’d gone to the house of a friend. He left there, and walked to a corner nearby, although he didn’t know which one. He saw a girl, a very small girl, carrying an umbrella.’

Gladys. Alice leaned forward even further now.

‘It was raining and he asked if he could accompany her home and walk under her umbrella. She agreed. Then he walked home with her. They stopped outside her gate and he asked the girl to show him the way to his camp, which she did.’

So that was why Gladys walked past her boarding house.

‘She walked with him to a very dark part of Gatehouse Street and the girl stopped and showed him the way. He said she then turned to leave but he didn’t want her to go so he grabbed her. She had a fascinating, lovely voice. He wanted that voice so he grabbed her by the throat.’

A shiver ran down Alice’s spine. This was all new to her, but she felt, somehow, as though she’d heard it before.

‘She was very soft and didn’t make a sound. He carried the girl to the fence, pulling her through by her armpits and carried her up the hillside. He
then fell over a slope of dirty mud. The girl was making gurgling sounds which he had to stop so he pulled her dress over her face and smothered her.

‘He then became frightened and he ran away, and as he came out he ran into someone and asked the way to the camp.’

The law member stood up.

‘Detective Fredericks, did you feel that the defendant was telling the truth?’

‘I did, yes. But – he was a little strange when talking about this final case. It was almost as though he was talking to himself, sitting on his cot at the camp, with his head bowed. He was almost whispering. From time to time he seemed uncertain of what he had done, what he remembered. When he finished making the statement, I read it back to him. He called my attention to one mistake – regarding going back to the girl’s house.’

‘He says now that he did not go to the girl’s house?’

‘Yes.’

‘But initially he said he did.’

‘Yes.’

‘Detective Fredericks, was the defendant under any pressure? Was there an incentive for him to confess?’

‘An incentive, sir?’

‘Did you or anyone else tell the defendant that if he confessed he would be tried by an American court martial, and that if he didn’t he would be tried by an Australian court? Or that a confession would have a favourable bearing on his sentence?’

‘It might have been suggested that a confession would be more likely to mean the court martial, but certainly nothing was said about his sentencing or the verdict.’

‘Thank you, Detective Fredericks.’

Alice watched the detective stand up, hitch up his pants, straighten his belt, and sit back down in the court. He looked satisfied. She looked at Leonski, who was looking ahead of him, looking quite nonchalant. He looked
almost as though he was in a picture theatre or a playhouse, there to be entertained, with nothing on the line. As if he cared nothing for his own fate.

She frowned again. Took another deep breath.

The Law Member called Detective Inspector McGrath to the stand. She watched him make his way up from his seat. Leonski looked at him, smiled. He didn’t smile back, but Alice noted that he looked kind. She wished she’d had a chance to speak with him at CIB headquarters, rather than Detective Fredericks. She felt that he would have treated her with more respect.

He began to describe the morning of Tuesday May 19, when he was called to the murder scene, where he’d found Gladys’s body. He described it all – the two trees, the slit trench, the mud. Gladys. Face down in the mud.

‘The prosecution submits the following evidence.’

Alice’s eyes were wide as she watched the morbid procession. They brought up Gladys’s umbrella, her gloves, her grey costume and blue blouse, her cardigan, her hat. The clothes Alice had last seen her in, the collar she’d straightened, the umbrella they had kissed beneath.

There was a debate about whether the clothes should be admitted as evidence, or whether they were prejudicial. She tuned out. She could only stare at the dirty, flat, lifeless clothes.

McGrath talked about how they’d gone to the camp the following morning and found yellow mud on Leonski’s boots, his tent. How there was no yellow mud around the camp. How it was the same yellow mud that had been at the murder site – caked in Gladys’s eyes, nose, and mouth. Alice thought about the tracker she’d talked to outside the police station and what he’d said *that yellow mud is hard to get off*.

She felt like wailing. But she had to hear this. She sat, and watched, and listened, as the last scene of Gladys’s life was played out before her.

That night, she lay awake for hours. Every time she closed her eyes, she heard gurgling sounds in her ear.
Alice walked down Russell Street, the evidence from the trial swirling around in her head and making a beat for her steps. She walked quickly against the brisk cold of winter, and perhaps also to outrun the uncomfortable words. The twilight was deepening towards night, and the brownout swallowed her.

It had been two months since there had been a murder, since Gladys had been killed. Perhaps that, more than his confessions, was evidence enough that the police had their man.

She walked over Bourke Street and turned left at Collins Street, following a kind of non-linear map in her head, walking where the words took her – down Collins Place, past the Astoria Hotel, down Flinders Lane, past the Theatre Lover’s Club. She was alone, but also not alone, as she walked this path that Pauline Thompson and Eddie Leonski had walked, together, towards her home. You have a baby face, but you’re vicious underneath, Pauline had said to him.

There were ghosts on her path, made real now by the details she’d heard at the trial. She heard Leonski’s words as they’d been read out by the men during proceedings.

We walked along the street. As we were walking along, she was singing in my ear. She had a nice voice. We came to a long flight of steps. I wanted her to keep singing and I choked her. How could she keep singing when I choked her? I ripped her clothes.

Alice had reached the steps leading up to Morningside House, and she let herself picture the deadly scene. She wondered what song Pauline had been singing.

He’d choked her, and then he’d panicked, in the silence he’d created.
She felt a single raindrop fall on her head, and it brought her back to herself. It was now pitch black and the sky was heavy with clouds. Her skin crawled, as if Pauline was still here, somewhere, singing her silent song, watching Alice make this macabre pilgrimage in the dark.

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Harry was setting the fire when she walked in, almost an hour later, her clothes damp and her shoulders slumped. She unlaced her wet shoes and lined them up in front of the fireplace, and peeled off her wet stockings, hanging them over the top of the mantelpiece. She put her feet straight into her slippers and immediately felt better. It was luxurious, to have a fire. They could only afford to a couple of days a week now that fuel was scarce.

‘Tough day, kiddo?’ said Harry.

‘Tough week,’ she said, attempting a smile.

‘Why don’t you sit down and tell me about it?’

‘This Eddie Leonksi. He’s a very strange man,’ she said.

‘I’ve heard as much.’ He stacked the logs in the fireplace. Alice noticed a couple of old books in there, supplementing the logs.

‘They say he’s sane, but that he has a psychopathic personality. I think it means that he can be psychopathic under certain conditions – in this case, when he’s had too much to drink.’

‘But that doesn’t make him insane?’

‘Apparently not. But he’s so peculiar. One of the witnesses said that when he gets drunk he sounds like a girl, and he talks about poltergeists, werewolves, demons.’ She shivered. ‘I’ve heard so many odd things these past few days. Did you know that when he goes on these drinking binges that make him psychopathic, that he drinks beer with all sorts of things added to it?’

‘What things?’ Harry asked.

‘All sorts. Whisky. Mustard, tomato sauce, or what the Americans call ketchup. Ice cream, salt and pepper, milk, hot peppers, all sorts of combinations. And he walks around bars on his hands.’
‘On the bar?’ He struck a match, and she watched him as he lit a piece of the newspaper in the fireplace. She loved the moment when the fire caught.

‘I – think so.’ She shook her head, unsure now, and sighed. ‘And he **laughed** – out loud in the courtroom – when they talked about these outlandish exploits. He looked so proud of himself. I suppose it **would** be funny if it wasn’t so awful.’

‘Oh, love,’ he said, and he looked at her.

‘The defence is trying to cast doubt on his confessions, the confessions to his soldier mate and also to the police,’ she said, staring at the flames, speaking almost to herself. ‘Saying it’s in character with his boastful, show-off nature. I suppose it could be.’

‘It seems excessive to confess to the police that you committed three murders, just to big-note yourself, no matter how much of a show-off you are.’

‘Yes, it does, doesn’t it?’ She frowned. ‘But there doesn’t really seem to be convincing evidence **other** than the confessions. And the confessions didn’t tell police anything they didn’t already know from the other evidence. He doesn’t really seem to have a motive. There was no robbery, no – sexual **violation**. Why would he do it?’

‘You look like you need a sherry,’ he said, and got up. He stopped at the door, looking back at her. ‘Don’t you think he did?’

‘I do think he did,’ she said. ‘But I can’t quite figure out why.’

Harry nodded, and went into the kitchen.

She thought about something that had been said in court today, about how after one of these drinking binges, a publican had asked Leonski and his mates to move on, and how Leonski had responded by saying *Everyone is leaving me.*

He killed these woman to hold onto them, so he wouldn’t be alone.

‘He said he killed them to get their voices,’ she whispered, looking into the flames of the fire.
And, despite what she’d said to Harry, despite all her frowning and speculation, this was somehow motive enough for her, and something that she feared she understood all too well.
Alice watched Eddie Leonski stand when bidden to do so, facing the President of the Court and the members of the tribunal.

‘Private Leonski, it is my duty as President of this Court to inform you that the court in closed session, and upon secret written ballot, three-quarters of the members concurring, found you of all the specifications guilty, and of the charges guilty. It is my further duty to inform you that the Court, with all members present and all members concurring, sentences you to be hung by the neck to death.’

Alice’s gaze flitted quickly from the President to Leonski, standing alone, forlorn and now condemned, in this foreign court-room. She expected to see devastation, horror. But there was nothing on his face. For a moment she wondered if he had heard what the President had said, wondered if he had understood. He looked completely indifferent. She shook her head, trying to figure him out. A number of guards and military policemen stepped forward. Leonski didn’t resist as they took him from the court-room. It looked almost as though his cheeks dimpled as he tried to suppress a smile.

Throughout the trial, apart from pleading not guilty, Leonski’s words were presented by policemen, by witnesses, rather than by Leonski himself. This man, who had killed three women to get their voices, had not said a word.

Alice felt empty as she walked out of the room. The strong, freezing wind nearly knocked her hat off her head, but she grabbed it just in time.

She didn’t know what to feel. Was this what justice was supposed to feel like?

Numbly, she called back to the Herald office and told Mr Sykes the verdict and the sentence. She read from her notes, the President’s words, the Trial Judge Advocate’s summing up – that Leonski, ‘by the fiendish and
atrocious committing of those three crimes, had demonstrated himself to be a person unfit to live, and to continue to live.’

Mr Sykes thanked her and told her he’d file the copy, told her to take the afternoon off. Normally, she would have insisted on coming in, filing the copy herself. Today, she felt too flat to argue with anyone. She hung up the telephone.

She got on a tram to Albert Park.

The beach was grey and desolate. Empty, apart from a couple of seagulls, swirling around. She wasn’t sure if the stinging in her eyes was from the vicious, biting wind, or from threatening tears. She cast a glance over to the Bleak House Hotel. She saw the doorway, the beauty parlour, the dry cleaner, overlaid now with memories of the day she’d come here with Gladys. She turned away and went towards the beach.

She knew now that she had heard Leonski’s confessions that he’d been drinking that day and had come to the beach with another soldier and a couple of girls, that Leonski and one of the girls had necked for a while on the beach, before he’d left them. He’d felt homesick, he said, and then he’d seen Mrs McLeod, had some trifling conversation with her about her handbag. The thing he seemed to remember most clearly was that, when tearing her clothing, he couldn’t rip her belt, no matter how hard he tried.

She stepped onto the wet, cold sand and began to walk along. The normally modest waves were choppy today, whipped into frenzied action by this ferocious wind. She shivered, pulling her coat tightly around her. She felt a raindrop land on her nose, but she didn’t turn back.

He said he killed them to get their voices. He’d wanted their voices.
She shuddered. What did that remind her of?
She remembered. She had wanted Gladys’s voice, too. She had wanted to take a perfect day, a beautiful note, and keep it forever. What did that say about her?
Her cheeks ached from the cold.
His wanting had destroyed Gladys.
How did she know that her wanting, her desire, would not have destroyed Gladys too? She thought of Pat, and everything that had happened between them. Maybe this love between women could only be destructive. Maybe it shrivelled in the light of day, shrunk from innocence. Maybe there really was no place for it in this world. She’d been naïve, with Pat, and believed that if they’d really loved each other they could have made it work. What a fool. Now she knew that it was love itself that cast the shadow of death and despair, and when Alice looked, she couldn’t tell which was which.

Leonski had wanted their voices, and now they were dead, and he was going to die too. Those voices he’d wanted so much were there, now, singing his requiem. Perhaps, in the end, he’d got what he wanted.

Maybe he’d just beaten her to it.

She stopped now, on the beach, looking out towards the horizon, and it was as though all the sadness and turmoil inside of her was manifested in the dark and stormy sea. The destructive, beautiful sea. The bittersweet taste of desire. The craving for, and the utter, utter impossibility of, possession.

And the interminable emptiness that came when the thing, the person, she’d wanted so very much had been plucked from her grasp by a monster with enormous hands, a baby face and a will to possess that was even greater than her own.
It was to be at least three months until Leonski’s execution. There was a long process that had to be followed, protocol to be observed. Leonski was to be kept in the city watchhouse until then.

She tuned in to the police radio.

‘He is very calm,’ said one guard. ‘I don’t know how he can be.’

‘I think we’re more upset than he is, mate,’ said a second voice. ‘The other day he told me that we guards need to cheer up, said it was him getting his neck pulled, not us,’ he laughed.

‘He loves his little jokes. And one day I offered him a cigarette and he told me he was going to give up smoking. He said it’s bad for the throat.’

‘He asked me if I wanted to come to a swing party. Said he’d be the main attraction.’

‘He doesn’t seem to have let it affect his appetite. I’ve never seen a prisoner eat so much.’

‘And have you seen that sheila who comes to visit him?’ He wolf-whistled.

‘I sure have,’ said the other. ‘A bit of all right, she is, my word.’

‘Must be a great comfort to him.’ She could hear the smirks in their voices.

‘I wouldn’t mind some comfort like that.’

‘I’ll be sad to see him go, you know,’ said the first voice. ‘Strange, isn’t it? I don’t usually get attached to ’em.’

‘I know whatcha mean. He’s a good fella. If you met him in the pub you’d buy him a beer.’

‘And he isn’t all bad, you know. The way he plays that wireless they gave him, plays music and turns it up for all the other prisoners to hear. Really brightens this place up.’

‘Even though it’s that classical shit all the time.’ They both laughed.
‘And he loves his mother. Broke my heart the other day when he asked me to make sure news of this didn’t get back to her. Seems to be the only time he feels down.’

‘Yeah, I reckon he feels worse for her than he does for himself.’

They were quiet for a minute. And then one of them spoke again.

‘And he can play handball. Did you see him the other day against Smithy?’

‘I heard. Took him to the cleaners.’

‘Sure did.’

‘It won’t be the same around here, without him. You’re right. He’s the most interesting bloke we’ve had in here for years.’

‘Let’s hope Roosevelt takes his time signing the orders, mate.’

They both laughed, and Alice was almost relieved to hear the signal drop out.
August 1942
The framed photograph of her father in his army uniform had been sitting on the mantelpiece above the fireplace for as long as Alice remembered. Today, she looked at it properly. Her father was young – this must have been taken around 1915, she supposed, when he first enlisted. When she was two years old, and Sylvie a baby. She didn’t remember her father like this – the wide smile, the twinkling eyes. What had those eyes seen to turn them into the haunted eyes she remembered?

She got up from her seat and walked over to the mantelpiece, picking up the photograph. She almost expected it to be dusty, to have a starkly designated place on the mantelpiece defined by surrounding dust. In another house that might be true. But she knew her mother and her feather duster better than that.

She turned the frame over in her hands, her one-dimensional father who, in her memory, scarcely had had more dimensions when he’d been alive. She wondered if another generation of young men would come back faded like this from this current war.

Carelessly, she turned the frame over and over, until the old cardboard at its back gave way and came away in her hand. She looked around, half expecting her mother to see her and scold her. But she was alone. She tried to fix the cardboard back into place.

She felt something flutter to the floor and bent to pick it up. A piece of paper that didn’t look as though it was part of the frame.

*My dear,*

*I was put off today. My job is gone.*
I don’t want to see that look in your eyes, and know I put it there, that I have failed you and the girls. I’ve wanted nothing more than to be a good husband and father, a good provider. Know that, if nothing else.

I can’t go down the pub and have to stand outside with the down andouters, waiting for a sniff when the doors open because I can’t even afford a beer. I can’t line up outside the Town Hall for susso every week, not after everything. But I can’t let you and the girls work to keep me either. I couldn’t bear the shame. I can’t bear the nightmares. Not anymore.

You’ll be better off without me, love. I’m just another mouth to feed. I couldn’t live with myself if you gave me the only chop, which I know you would, while you and the girls made do with scraps. Not if it wasn’t even my sweat, but yours, that earned it.

I hope you’ll be able to find a way to forgive me for this unmentionable sin. It doesn’t feel like a sin to me, now. It feels like my saviour – and yours. Whatever punishment I receive in death has to be easier than this suffering

I love you as much as ever, and will be able to watch over you and look after you better from beyond this life.

She folded the paper up, along its well-worn creases, and put it back behind the photograph in the frame.

So it hadn’t been a factory accident.

She sank down onto the couch.

Her mother must have hidden the note there, behind the photograph, when he’d died. It was as good a hiding place as any, she supposed, in this small house. There wasn’t much room for secrets, anywhere else. But why had she kept it at all?

Her mother must have found him – afterwards, Alice suddenly realised. How awful. Where had he been? In the house? Out in the backyard? In his chair? And – how? Alice shuddered.

Her mother must have had him taken away and everything cleaned up before they’d come home from school. Oh my God, she thought. It had been so clean. Too clean. She’d resented her mother for that, then.
Her mother. Her mother had kept this secret for so many years. To protect him. Alice felt herself getting angry. To protect him! When he didn’t deserve –

And yet – how tempting it must have been, she thought, for him, with the prospect of an escape at hand. She remembered holding herself under the water at the cove, how much she had wanted to be able to let herself go – How weak is the flesh. How could she condemn him for that?

You’re just like him. Only stronger.

This note was her father made flesh. He’d been an absence in her life, more than he’d ever been a presence. He’d never been entirely real. But now she could see him, clearly. A shadow given substance. And humanity. And weakness. And sin.

Alice realised that her mother hadn’t kept the secret to protect him. She’d done it to protect them. Her and Sylvie.

He’d turned his back on them. That was the difference. When she’d willed herself to stay under that water, she had been alone. There had been no-one she had responsibilities for. No-one who needed her, no-one she owed anything to. Not like him.

The curtains fluttered then, in the morning breeze. She shivered; it was cold. She stepped back, and watched, half expecting him to emerge, to appear, to talk to her. But the curtains, now, were still. He wasn’t there.

Fred had told her that her grief would catch up with her one day. She hadn’t believed it. But now she felt sobs rise in her throat as her father, who hadn’t been there, left her once again, but this time with the taste of the truth in her mouth, bitter as coffee.

She remembered the washing, that day, and how it was still on the line when they got home. Her mother must have come inside for a cup of tea after she’d finished, and perhaps that was when she’d found him. Perhaps he’d done it while she was stirring the sheets as they boiled in the copper or putting the clothes through the mangle. Or maybe not, maybe it had been later: she remembered running out into the backyard and finding the washing strangely still wet, hanging on the line. Maybe her mother had had
to go back to the washing after she’d found him. It was a forlorn picture, her mother out in the cold shed, finishing off the washing, because it had to be done, no matter what else had happened that day. Feeling herself, suddenly a widow, about as wrung out as the sheets, with no Reckitts blue bag that could make her bright again.

And Alice realised at that moment that it wasn’t true that she was alone: it wasn’t true that she didn’t owe a debt. All at once she saw everything her mother had done for them, all that maybe, after all, she had taken for granted. She saw what she owed. It wasn’t true that she was alone, she realised. It never had been.
'Hush Little Baby, don't say a word, Mamma's going to buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don't sing, Mamma's going to buy you a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's going to buy you a looking glass.'

Alice looked at her mother over the breakfast table as Sylvie sang to little Peggy in the kitchen.

She tried to read her father's death in her mother's face; tried to see which lines it had left there. She looked over at Peggy, balling her little fists up and pushing them into the air, into her mouth. It seemed that children – girls at least – were schooled in silence from infancy, bribed with the promise of a song, a diamond ring and a pleasing reflection. As if that was all that a girl could want.

Her mother bent over her needlework.

'I'll do the market shop today, Mum, if you like,' she said. 'I'm not needed at the newsroom.' She needed to get out of the house.

'That'd be lovely, Alice.' She handed her a purse full of coins.

She stepped out into the icy morning, pulling her hat firmly down on her head. She walked quickly, to keep warm. She had to dodge the kids in their yellow and black beanies and scarves, kicking the footballs in the street, making their way to Punt Road Oval for the game against Melbourne that afternoon. She passed two blokes leaning against a fence, talking about what an important game it was, if they wanted to ensure they made the finals.

'Carn the Tigers!' a small boy yelled, racing across the road after his football.

She grinned at him and called back 'Eat 'em alive!' She was much warmer by the time she reached the market, and her mood had lifted. She meandered through the stalls, savouring the sensation of having a Saturday morning to herself. She checked the potatoes carefully, once, then twice, making sure they weren't rotten like they had been last
week. She turned around, her string bag bulging, a big bunch of dark green silverbeet sticking out the top, making it difficult to carry. She tried to adjust it as she walked along, and forgot to watch where she was going, running straight into someone coming in the opposite direction. The impact made her drop the bag, and she fell straight to her hands and knees, desperate to rescue the bruised apples. Some of them were good now only for stewing. She chased one down the street, and almost didn’t hear the man she’d run into call her name.

‘Alice!’

She stopped now, without looking back, the apple in her hand. Her hat had fallen off and lay on the street behind her, and her hair was dishevelled, but she had gathered all the apples and restored the vegetables to her bag. The man bent down and picked up her hat, handing it to her, forcing her to turn around and face him.

‘We did say we would run into each other,’ he said, smiling.

‘Fred!’

‘I’m sorry about your apples,’ he said. She took the hat from him and put it back on her head. She wanted to tidy her hair, but there was only so much she could do with one hand, and she couldn’t risk dropping the string bag again.

‘Never mind that,’ she said. ‘It’s good to see you.’

‘It’s good to see you, too,’ he said, looking at her with a curious mixture of affection and playfulness, as if she were a wayward little sister. It was nothing like the look he’d given her when they’d parted, that awful night after the dance, almost three months ago.

‘How’s your sister?’ she asked.

‘Very well indeed,’ he said. ‘And your family? I heard Sylvie had a girl.’

‘Yes! Little Margaret – Peggy. She is delightful,’ said Alice, beaming.

‘The spit of her father, I hear.’

‘Yes, she did look a lot like John when she was born, but I see some of Sylvie in her now.’
'Alice,' he said, touching her arm as she began to say goodbye and turn away. 'I am glad I ran into you today. There's something I must tell you.'

'Oh?' She turned back towards him.

'Not here,' he said. 'Come and have a cuppa with me.'

She nodded, and followed him down Gleadell Street towards Bridge Road, past the bowling club, the gas works, and the post office. He led her into a cafe, and sat down at a vacant table.

'Let me buy you a drink,' he said.

'Thank you. I'll have coffee,' she said, to the waitress who had approached the table. He ordered the same.

'Well, Fred Hogan, what's all this about?'

She wondered if he was going to propose again, to press upon her that they would be good together, that it would be a good idea. For a second, she wondered what she might say if he did: perhaps it wouldn't be the worst thing to spend the rest of her life with Fred. Perhaps, if he asked her again, she might even say yes. Imagine how pleased her mother would be.

'I'm getting married,' he said, and she noticed that his green eyes sparkled. Had she ever noticed they were green before? The waitress delivered a pot of coffee then, and a tray of milk and sugar, and she was relieved by the interruption. It gave her a moment to compose herself, process the information. 'Well, I'm hoping to. I need to tell someone, and we've always been such mates.'

'Married!' she said. And she smiled. 'Who's the lucky girl?'

'I haven't asked her yet,' he said, 'but I have every reason to expect she’ll say yes. I’m asking her tomorrow,' he sipped his coffee. 'It’s Nancy,' he said, appearing surprisingly shy. 'Nancy Pearson. I think you met her at that dance?' He looked a little uncomfortable, mentioning that dance, and she knew that they were both remembering the awkward encounter with Fred’s boss and his cherubic daughter.

'Your boss's daughter?'

'Yes,' he said, spooning sugar into his coffee. 'We spent some time together after that night, you see. Mr Pearson invited me to his golf club, his
tennis club. I can only imagine he orchestrated this. She's a bit dull, but she's a good girl, and comes from a good family, and will be a charming wife.’

‘Oh are you sure you aren't being unfair to her? She seemed entirely charming, that night,’ Alice said, blowing on the hot coffee in her cup, then taking a small sip.

‘Alice, I hope you don’t mind.’

She almost laughed.

‘Mind! Of course not. Congratulations. I’m sure you'll be very happy.’

‘Yes, I think we will. Her father is training me for management, at Pelaco, for after the war. It’s a wonderful opportunity to come back to. He’s getting on in years, you know.’

‘You're still going, then? To fight?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘Nancy does like me in uniform. And I must admit it’s easier to go, knowing that she is here, waiting.’

It was the same thing he’d said to her.

‘Congratulations again!’ Alice said. He would get his big house up on Richmond Hill now, no doubt about it, and have a lovely little wife who would never have to work, and who could devote herself to home, husband and children.

‘We never would have worked together, Fred,’ she said. ‘You know that.’

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right,’ he said. ‘But it would have been a fun ride.’

‘I think you knew that even then,’ she teased, remembering the look on his face when he’d been introduced to Nancy.

‘I had always thought that you and I would end up making a go of it – ever since we were kids.’

‘It’s funny, isn’t it?’ Alice said. ‘We seem always to want to make the world so small. How could we have known our future when we were fourteen, as if our paths had already been chosen?’

But Sylvie and John had known. And her parents. And Fred’s parents. They hadn’t wanted anything different.
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘So much has changed since we were fourteen, hasn’t it? What was that? 1928? Before the worst of the Depression, before the war.’

‘Before my father died.’ Before he chose, she thought, to die. She resisted the urge to tell Fred her secret, to unburden herself to him.

‘Where does your path lead now, Alice?’

‘Now?’ she laughed, changing the subject. ‘Home. I have to cut the bruises out of all of these apples and stick them in a pot with a mound of sugar, before Mum sees them!’

He smiled at her again.

‘I hope you and Nancy will be very happy, Fred, really,’ she said.

‘Thank you Alice. I’m sure we will.’

She stood up, put her coat back on, pulled on her hat, and picked up the string bag.

‘I hope we run into each other again sometime.’

He nodded, standing too, and doffed his hat to her as she turned away.
Alice cut into the supple flesh of the apples, cutting out the worst bruises, putting the rest into a saucepan with sugar, cinnamon, and a few drops of water, to stew. The flesh is weak, she thought, and couldn’t resist a glance towards her father’s photograph, which was in her line of sight in the next room.

Once she’d put the stewed apples in a pastry and put them in the oven, Alice sat down in the kitchen, with the oven for warmth. She stared out the window, the bare trees looking cold and desolate outside. The house began to smell of baking apples, spices. She breathed it in.

She was caught in a reverie, staring out the window. She had lit a cigarette but it sat, unsmoked, between her fingers.

Fred had asked her where her path led, and although she had given him a flippant response at the time, the question still burned her. Her path was less familiar now than it had ever been, and this felt puzzling at a time when she was doing so well at the paper, which should have been a source of great comfort and pride to her – and it was! But she wondered what else was around the corner, whether she would ever move in with Josephine after all, or whether she would live all her life in this little house at the bottom of Richmond Hill. Sylvie and John might live here for a while when he came back from the war, but soon enough they and their little family would want to get their own place. They would have more children, and Sylvie’s time would be increasingly devoted to them. Maybe this was why people married, she thought – to avoid being left alone. To become someone else when the person they had been born as was exhausted, had done all they could do, been all they could be. Maybe it was the best chance a woman had, to become someone else. Nothing really to do with security, or children, or money, or even love. But how could she have married Fred, really? Something about it seemed so awful. She couldn’t picture herself being his society wife at those
Pelaco Christmas parties he was so proud of. But she felt sad, too, now that the choice wasn’t hers to make.

Watching Sylvie with Peggy made her feel inadequate, as though she wasn’t fulfilling some sort of natural purpose. That there was something defective in her. She couldn’t seem to muster the maternal feeling that was supposed to be her natural due. Did other women feel it naturally, she wondered, or did everyone have to learn it? Could she? She watched Sylvie go ahead into motherhood, and she herself stood still, in some kind of limbo, not sure what the future held for someone like her. That path of hers that she’d claimed could go off in any direction suddenly seemed to go nowhere at all.

Was this how her father had felt? Like the future had dried up for him?

She sat for a while as the twilight settled over the naked trees and the dimming, empty street. She’d always thought the trees looked so sad and so barren in winter: it didn’t seem to make sense that they lost their leaves right at the time they should be pulling them closer, for warmth. But she supposed nature knew best. She got up and began to draw the curtains across the windows, slowly and methodically. And then she began to hear the shouts and cheers of the crowd returning home from the football. They were happy shouts, she thought, with relief.

Harry burst through the door, waving a yellow and black scarf that her mother had knitted for him years before. She laughed, feeling immediately better.

‘I take it they won?’

‘They did!’ Harry said. ‘Despite 5 goals from Norm Smith. He’s a very good player, Alice, but not quite good enough to beat the Mighty Tigers on his own!’ He reached his arms up into the air, feigning taking a high mark, then bringing the imaginary football down onto his boot and kicking it, then signalling a goal.

‘Did Jack Dyer kick any goals?’

‘Two goals for Captain Blood today,’ said Harry, his arms both raised in a triumphant salute.
'Good on him,' her voice sounded flat to her own ears. She wanted to ask Harry about her father, about his death. He must have known, she thought, imagining that he would have been the one her mother called on to help clean it all up. The secret filled her and threatened to overflow. She wondered if she’d ever have the nerve to ask him about it.

She went to the fire she’d set earlier, and lit it, becoming occupied with the jigsaw puzzle of newspaper and firewood, ashes and sparks. On Saturday nights when Richmond lost, Harry usually gave her his Football Record for the fire, tossing it into the flames in disgust, but not when they won. He was leafing through it voraciously now, as if he could watch the game again in its pages. Alice stoked the fire, prodding, willing it to catch, sitting on the floor and watching it until it did.

Harry had hung his footy scarf on the coat rack near the door and switched on the wireless in the living room to hear the report on the game – and the war news – on the evening news broadcast. Alice went back into the kitchen to check on the potatoes. She heard Harry give a little whoop, and she wasn’t sure if it was due to the voice on the wireless recounting the Tigers’ victory or giving welcome news of a victory in the Pacific.

She sighed. Something in her stung when she read or heard about the Allies making ground in this war. At least while the war lasted she knew she could have some purpose, she could be someone.

Alice felt guilty, unpatriotic. She knew these thoughts made her a traitor to her country, even, perhaps, made her guilty of treason. She thought of Sylvie, and how happy she would be when the war ended and John came home, to be a proper husband to her and father to Peggy. She must never tell anyone that she felt this way. It was just another part of herself that she sewed, delicately, into the lining of her being for secrecy and safekeeping.

She poured milk and tossed a knob of butter into the boiled potatoes and began to mash them for the shepherd’s pie. She mashed and mashed until her hand ached, and then she scooped them on top of the mince and peas and put the pie in the oven. She could see in the corner of the living room her mother and sister cooing over Peggy’s basket, tickling the tiny,
pink-cheeked child. Maybe it was too much to ask in this day and age to do things differently, but she was sure that something was changing. Maybe the new world order wouldn’t just happen, but the seeds of it were being planted now, surely. Maybe it was girls of Peggy’s generation who would grow up amongst its flowering. For her, perhaps her mother was right: what she had thought were her choices were appearing increasingly chimerical. She wiped her buttery hands on her apron and looked down to see her future in the grease stain they left there.
James and Amy Pearson of Richmond, Victoria, are pleased to announce the engagement of their beloved daughter, Nancy Theresa Pearson, to John Joseph Lacey of Brighton, Victoria. Nancy and John will be married at the Scots’ Church, Corner of Collins and Russell Streets, Melbourne, on Saturday, 12 December, 1942, followed by a private family breakfast at the Pearsons’ home in Richmond.

Alice caught the announcement in the Richmond Guardian classifieds, nestled in amongst advertisements from Toorak ladies for Richmond women to assist with housekeeping. Surely it was a mistake?

She saw Fred at Church on Sunday and knew then by his face that it wasn’t a mistake.

‘Oh Fred.’

‘I take it you saw it, yesterday?’

‘Yes. I assumed it was a mistake.’

‘It’s no mistake.’

‘What happened?’

‘I got it awfully wrong,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how I got it so wrong.’

‘She misled you?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Yes, perhaps,’ and then, ‘No. She was friendly to me, but there was nothing specific in her manner that made me think she loved me, particularly. I assumed, because her father was pushing us close together so much –’

‘Perhaps he doesn’t approve of the match? Of Mr Lacey, I mean.’

‘Oh he does,’ said Fred. ‘John Lacey is like a son to him, from what I hear. He’s been away on active service. They’ve been meaning to get engaged for two years!’

‘Then why did Mr Pearson –’
‘He was nervous about Nan taking up with an American while John was gone, apparently. So he threw me in Nan’s path, because he figured I wouldn’t be a threat, being Catholic and from a working class family. Even though we’ve got along and moved up in life, we’re still not good enough for the Pearsons, or so Mr Pearson thinks. I was only there to keep his daughter entertained while her intended was away.’

‘How did you find out?’ Alice asked this softly, almost scared of the answer. ‘I mean – you didn’t – propose, did you?’

‘No, thank God,’ he said. ‘I found out from another bloke at the tennis club on Thursday. They were talking about old Johnny Lacey coming back on leave and the date for the wedding being set. It took a while to dawn on me, I tell you. But thank God I heard it. Saved me the embarrassment of actually asking her, for her to have to tell me while I was down on one knee!’ His face went red.

‘I’m so sorry, Fred.’

‘You know what?’ he said. ‘I’m not. Not especially, once I got over the shock. It was more a strategic match, than anything else.’

‘Well I’m glad you’re not devastated, anyway.’

‘I’m glad you’re the only one I told!’

‘Your secret’s safe with me,’ she said.

They were quiet, for a minute. She sat, companionably, beside him on a short brick wall.

‘So, Alice,’ he said. ‘What’s new in your world?’

She didn’t speak, for a while. Then she said,

‘Can you keep a secret, for me?’

‘I owe you one.’

She nodded her head towards the back of the church, indicating that he should follow her to a quieter spot. He followed her around to the school buildings behind the church.

‘My father’s death,’ she said, whispering. ‘It wasn’t an accident after all.’

‘What do you mean?’
‘He – he –’ She found she couldn’t say it, after all.
‘Murdered?’ Fred’s voice was small. ‘That can’t be –’
‘By his own hand.’
She heard Fred gasp.
‘By rights we shouldn’t have had his funeral here, really,’ said Alice. ‘In the presence of God, him being a sinner. My mother covered it all up, all this time. Fourteen years!’
‘How did you find out? Did your mother tell you?’
‘No. I found his note. Hidden. Turns out he’d been put off, from the factory, and it was the last straw for him.’
They were both silent.
‘Sorry Fred. I needed to tell someone, and you said yourself that we’ve always been such mates.’
‘I’m glad you told me,’ he said, squeezing her shoulder.
‘You were right, you know.’
‘About what?’
‘Grief. It’s finally found me. Only took it fourteen years.’
He hesitated, perhaps remembering her running away, leaving him alone on the Pelaco rooftop. But he leaned in now and took her in his arms, not trying to kiss her, but just to comfort. For the first time in weeks, her world felt secure as she breathed in his familiar scent. She leaned in, and he held her to him while she cried into his chest.
Take two, he’d said, after she’d stopped crying. Let’s try again. Let me take you to the pictures. She’d nodded, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Now, when he opened the door, he stepped back, whistling.

‘You’re lovely,’ he said, and the simplicity of the words touched her.

‘Better than when you saw me last and I was a snivelling mess, you mean?’

‘You were lovely then, too,’ he said, reaching out his hand to take hers. She hesitated, a moment, and then extended her own. She curled her fingers around his, his hands warm from having been in his pockets on the walk over.

‘The pictures, then?’ she said.

‘I thought we might just walk about,’ he said. ‘Like old times. Perhaps we could go into the city. It’s a pleasant evening.’

‘Let me get my coat, then,’ she said, extracting her fingers from his.

She slipped her coat on over her red dress, stopping for a second to remember the day in Gladys’s room. Then she shook her head, and the memory dissolved.

It was, indeed, a pleasant evening. There was the faintest hint of spring in the wintry air. They stood at the tram stop on Bridge Road and watched the sunset – streaks of red and gold across the indigo sky. He stood behind her, taller, and put his hands lightly on her shoulders. The colours seemed to pulsate, moving all the time. She watched them change, and he watched her.

They sat beside each other on the tram, companionable. She didn’t flinch or pull away when he picked up her hand and held it, absentmindedly stroking her fingers.

On Princes Bridge, a little while later, he put his hand on her back as she leaned over to look at the dark expanses of the river.

‘I am getting so tired of this brownout,’ she said. ‘You wouldn’t even know that the MCG was over there,’ she waved her hand in the direction of
Richmond, where she knew the ground was. She was right: you couldn’t see it at all, with no streetlights or lights in the park to show up its shape. ‘I used to love standing here, with views in so many directions - the city and down St Kilda Road, over the river into Richmond, as though life lay waiting whichever way I turned. It seemed to be a place of choices, you know,’ she said, ‘so many choices at my fingertips.’ She swept her hand around her, at the unchanging darkness.

‘And you don’t feel that way now?’

‘I don't know. I just mean that without the street lights nothing is illuminated. I can’t see the bridges, the lights sparkling on the water. I can barely even see the trams that go right past us. It’s all the same. As though every road leads to the same place, in the dark. How do I even know I’m here, if I can’t see my hand when I wave it in front of my face?’

‘But you are here,’ he took her hand. ‘I can feel you. And at least you kind of know what’s there, in the darkness. Not like where I’m going.’ He turned and leaned his back against the railing, dropping her hand and putting his in his pockets.

‘Of course, Fred,’ she said. ‘I’m just being silly, a girl scared of the dark. And you’re going somewhere – somewhere that none of us can know.’

‘You were right, Alice. It wasn’t only the protected industry that kept me from enlisting. I think I am a coward, after all.’

‘No! No, Fred. It’s normal to be afraid. And you enlisted, anyway, which shows you are brave.’ She turned to face away from the river and moved a step closer to him.

‘I wonder what it will be like,’ he said, glumly, staring at his feet. ‘I saw what the last war did to the men who returned –’

‘Like my father.’

‘Like your father, exactly,’ he turned towards her and picked up her hand. ‘And the ones who didn’t return of course, like my father, and so many more. That’s not exciting, it’s stupid. I would much rather steadiness, you know. A good job, a nice house, and a family. A loving wife, a couple of kids. It’s so ordinary, but it’s what I want,’ he paused. ‘If I am honest, Alice, it
wasn’t only because it was the right thing to do that I enlisted. I did it for you, because you wanted it. Maybe you made me brave, but maybe I had a more selfish motive, too,’ he paused, again. She put her hand on his arm, to encourage him to continue. ‘I thought you might see me differently if I did, you might change your mind.’

‘Change my mind, Fred?’

‘That maybe you could be the wife waiting for me behind the white picket fence.’

The image conjured up that awkward day in St Kilda, before she went to Sydney, when he’d talked about their future. But it didn’t repel her now, as it had then. Something had changed.

‘Maybe it’s not too late,’ she said. ‘For that.’

‘What are you saying?’

She shrugged.

‘Maybe I could still – change my mind.’ Her voice faltered, a little.

He looked at her then, intently. She held his gaze.

‘Are you allowing me to hope?’ he asked. She nodded, the smallest nod. It was right, she thought. The right choice. The only choice. She thought of her mother.

‘I will carry that here,’ he said, putting one hand to his heart, holding her hand with the other. ‘When I leave. Tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow? So soon?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

She took up his other hand, and they stood, both hands joined, on the bridge, under the cold starlight. He looked at her, his eyes accustomed now to the dark, as if he was trying to memorise her features. She stood still, and let him.

Later, he walked her home from the tram stop, not speaking, holding hands, each lost in their own thoughts.

A few houses up from hers, he stopped.

‘I want to say goodbye to you properly,’ he said, ‘without your mother and Mrs West peering out through their curtains.’
She smiled.

‘They’ll probably have spies everywhere,’ she said. ‘Beware.’

He pulled her into a narrow laneway between two houses. She tripped on the uneven cobblestones, and he held out a hand to steady her.

They stood together, their fingers intertwined. She looked up into his face, seeing the stars in the sky beyond him, twinkling, as if they were winking at her. Daring her. He put his finger underneath her chin, to orient himself, to know where she began. He stroked her cheek, as if by tracing her outline he could keep her there, draw her into life by the tip of his finger. He bent down and kissed her. The stars stayed where they were, unmoved by the kiss, but aligned, somehow. It felt nice.

‘I’ve got something to fight for, now,’ he said, breaking away from her, but still holding her close. She leaned in to his chest, underneath his chin, so that he couldn’t see her face. ‘A future with the woman I love.’ He paused, letting his words spread out around him, like an inkblot on paper. ‘Will you come to the train station, tomorrow morning, Alice?’ he said. ‘To see me off?’

‘Yes,’ she said, into his chest, clutching him. She realised it was the first time he’d said he loved her. ‘Of course I will, Fred.’
She was late. The train was about to leave.

Mr Sykes had called her into an editorial meeting that had gone for longer than she’d anticipated. She should have said she had to go and see her fella off on the troop train, and she knew Mr Sykes would have let her go. But saying the words would make them real, and she didn’t want them to be. Didn’t want him to go, but also didn’t want those words to paint her into a corner.

She squeezed onto the first tram going to Spencer Street, looking at her watch. She still had time, she still had time.

The whistle blew as she ran into the station. She raced towards the platform, darting through the thronging crowd, dodging people in every direction. She approached the platform, following the crowd. The train was there: dark, ominous.

How on earth was she going to find him, in this crowd?

The soldiers surged towards the train, clambering to get on. Soon, the platform was full of women, girls and children, all wearing bright colours so that the men going to war would have this bright and merry picture to remember. Bright pictures, bright lipstick, bright smiles. Brave faces.

There were women on the shoulders of men so that they could reach the windows of the train carriages. Soldiers leaned out – some quite perilously – to kiss them. There were so many faces, all the same: young, excited, proud, their hair cropped neatly underneath their army hats, their crests facing directly forwards, shiny and new. Women on the platform clutched the hands of children dressed in their Sunday best to see daddy go off to war. She stood for a moment, observing.

She should be looking for Fred.

She pushed through the crowd again and ran alongside the stationary train, looking at every single eager face. She thought she saw Fred a dozen
times, and once or twice even called out to him, before she realised it wasn’t him. She began to panic that the train would leave before she’d seen him.

The train’s whistle rang out, again, loudly, making her jump.

‘All aboard!’

Oh! She ran faster, trying to make her way through the mass of people. She even asked a few soldiers if they knew Fred Hogan. No-one did.

Even if she could find someone who did – someone to whom she could give a message – so that he’d at least know she came.

The train began to move, starting its chug-chugging momentum out of the station.

‘Goodbye Fred!’ she called, to no-one, still scouring the faces that moved past her.

Then the train was gone, huffing and puffing on its way, leaving a cloud of steam. She slumped down to the seat behind her, and breathed in the smell of steam, oil and smoke that lingered in the air. An older lady sat beside her and patted her on the shoulder.

‘He’ll be all right, dearie. I’m sure he’ll be all right.’

She nodded, absently.

A hush came over the platform, replacing the flurry of activity it had been only moments before. From up the other end, she heard a single child begin to cry. Girls dabbed their eyes with handkerchiefs, probably embroidered with their boyfriend’s initials. Women clutched the hands of their children tighter, their mouths now set in a firm, thin, determined line. Older sons looked determined, also, their eyes dry and steely, some perhaps wondering if the war would go on long enough for them to enlist as well. Mothers looked at their sons, and tried to grab their arms, their hands. The boys twisted away, into their independence. Slowly, the colourful but now melancholy crowd began to disperse. Alice sat there for a moment longer until she was alone, and then she figured that she had better get back to work.

She waited at the tram stop, allowing the first tram to go – it was too crowded to get on. When the second tram was as crowded, she shrugged and started to walk.
She dragged her feet. She’d been too late. Their timing was a little bit askew, every time, she thought. She wondered if Fred would come home, and what it would mean if he didn’t. What it would mean if he did. She pictured it: the happy homecoming, his mother. Him, pressing her to his broad, strong chest and kissing the top of her head. The joy, the celebrations when the war ended. People would dance in the streets.

Their wedding. Was she to consider herself engaged now?

He hadn’t asked, she hadn’t promised anything. He hadn’t asked her to wait for him. But it did seem so important to him to have someone here, doing just that. What had he said? Something to fight for. And yet, she’d let him leave without seeing her there. He’d think she didn’t love him. But – did she? Was that what this was? It didn’t feel like it had with Pat, with Gladys. But maybe that was all right. She thought of Pat’s letter – *it is right and I am happy.*

She was sweating, despite the cold. She was hot. Too hot. She loosened the scarf at her neck, unbuttoned her coat. Felt the relief of the fresh cool breeze on her skin.

She recalled their kiss the night before, the warmth of it, the comfort. He was a good man. It would be a good life.

The war seemed to be a temporary adventure, a short time where women could make the most of opportunities they were allowed to borrow but not to keep. A fantasy novel that allowed one to escape, that made a different future seem possible for a while, but then reinforced the old ways, the way things had always been. So that the men recognised, when they returned, the world they had been fighting for. And the women would pretend it hadn’t looked different for a while and wouldn’t speak of what they’d almost had.

Was she ready to give it all up, without a whimper? Would she be doing this, if Gladys were here, if Gladys was offering something different? Perhaps she would be – retreating, like Pat had, into the ordinary. The expected. It did feel nice not to have to swim against the current all the time.
But she knew, deep down, that if Gladys appeared before her now, there wouldn’t even be a choice. She would take Gladys's hand and run off with her, anywhere she wanted to go, without a backward glance. Even if it meant disappointing her mother, despite everything she’d done. Even if it meant breaking Fred’s heart. Even if it meant risking everything she knew. At least, she wanted to believe she’d have to courage to do that.

But she couldn’t do it without Gladys, and if Fred came home, she supposed she would marry him. She would make the choice she had to make, and she would do it with a smile. She would, she thought, be happy with him, they could be happy together, and everything else that came after it would fall – naturally – into place.

She stepped onto Flinders Street and was very nearly scuttled by a bicycle that tore around the corner, without seeing her there.
October 1942
Monday October 26

The noises of the newsroom surrounded her as she sorted through bunches of letters. Women wrote to her, every week, telling her about their lives during the war. Picking apples at an orchard in Doncaster. Riding bicycles around the city for the Red Cross. Girls in the women’s services fashioning wedding dresses out of parachute silk for their weddings. Growing vegetables, mending, making do.

‘Is Miss Enid Allen here?’

The silky American voice broke into the collective consciousness of the newsroom. Alice looked up to see the same American from the tea dance. He stood at the doorway of the newsroom, holding the biggest bunch of flowers Alice had ever seen. She heard Enid’s shriek as she stood up and pounced across the room, quite immodestly, Alice thought.

He handed her the flowers, which obscured her almost completely from view. And then he got down on one knee. The whole newsroom gasped.

‘Enid Allen,’ he said, and Alice noticed he’d taken a little satin ring box out of his pocket. ‘Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?’

Enid squealed and sat on his bended knee, throwing her arms around his neck.

‘Yes! I will! Of course I will, Clive!’

Despite herself, Alice smiled. These Americans sure knew how to do things in style. As she watched, Enid put down the gigantic bunch of flowers and let Clive slide the shiny ring onto her finger, and tip her back in an elaborate kiss, like something out of the pictures. Everyone cheered.

With all the fanfare, Alice almost missed the arrival of Detective Inspector McGrath from Russell Street CIB. He huffed, not entirely approvingly, as he made his way across the newsroom towards Mr Sykes’ office. She wondered if he had come with news about Leonski’s execution.
They’d said it would take a few months for protocol to be followed, for the order of execution to proceed all the way up the ranks to President Roosevelt in Washington.

She cast her attention back to the letters, the photographs. Women working for the Australian Women’s Land Army, driving tractors, growing crops. Photographs of them, smiling, in overalls, leaning on tractors and fences, getting their hands dirty. Leaning on each other’s shoulders, cheeky glints in their eyes that made Alice wonder what some of them might get up to, with each other, after dark. She felt a flicker of jealousy, but at the same time felt that all that was in her past, now.

Detective Inspector McGrath came out of Mr Sykes’ office, and he seemed to be walking towards her. Alice put down her letters as the policeman approached her.

‘Miss Jenkins?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wanted to commend you on your coverage of the Leonski case,’ he said. The Leonski case, she thought. When had it stopped being the McLeod case, the Thompson case, the Hosking case? The focus had shifted, from the victims, onto him. And poor Gladys and her ill-fated companions would, from now, begin to be forgotten, overtaken by the infamy of the man who had taken their lives.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘The whole thing will be over soon.’ He looked, strangely, quite sad.

‘I suppose that will be a relief, particularly for the Americans.’

‘It will be. Although I, myself, will be sad to see him die. I’m not sure he deserves to die.’

‘No?’

‘He’s just a kid, really. A bit of a larrikin. You know what he said to me, last week? He said Detective Inspector, if you have any more dames you want choked, send them my way.’ He laughed. Alice pursed her lips. She felt quite ill.
‘Anyway,’ he said, when she didn’t laugh, ‘well done.’ He cleared his throat, loudly.

He put his hat back on his head and made a hasty exit through the front doors.

She caught sight, as she watched him go, of Enid’s bouquet of roses. It’s funny, she thought, that those roses would only last another day or so. It was a strange thing to give flowers as a token of love. They were beautiful, of course. But they were always already dying. Through the act of possessing them, you have condemned them to death.

Was it possible, she wondered, just to appreciate beauty, to see it, to hold it without destroying it? She thought of Leonski, and his three victims, whose voices he’d wanted to hear so much that he’d squeezed them into eternal silence.

Enid blithely arranged the roses in a vase of water as Alice stared ahead at the blank wall.
November 1942
Two weeks later, Mr Sykes called her into the office.

‘Jenkins,’ he said. ‘Alice.’

‘Yes Mr Sykes?’

‘Leonski. He was executed on Monday.’

‘It’s all over?’

‘Yes. President Roosevelt signed the warrant, and it was read to him in his cell two weeks ago, the day the Detective Inspector called in here. He was visited by two priests, just after that. And then they measured him, and weighed – he looked directly at her, seemed to check himself, and stopped speaking.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Please.’

He nodded, just once.

‘Very early Monday morning they took him in a Black Maria to Pentridge. My friend who is a guard at the watchhouse says Leonski didn’t look fazed, that he thanked them all for taking such good care of him. They got to know him quite well. He was there for twenty-four weeks. One week for every year of his life. Such a young man.’ Mr Sykes seemed to drift off a bit then.

‘And on Monday, Mr Sykes?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said, coming back to himself ‘Members of the US military and a priest accompanied him. The Detective told me he’d heard Leonski went to the gallows singing a song.’

‘What song?’

‘Oh. Um. It’s a *Lovely Day Tomorrow*, I believe.’

Alice was quiet.

‘A strange man,’ said Mr Sykes. ‘A strange story.’

‘Should I write it up, Mr Sykes?’
‘Just a small notification, Jenkins,’ he said. ‘Just the facts. We don’t need to drag all this business back into the news now that most people have forgotten about it. It won’t be on the front page, but we’ll run something small in this evening’s edition. It’s over now. I bet you’ll be glad to be rid of it, Alice,’ he said. ‘Get back to something a bit lighter.’

And so it was: Leonski’s execution got just thirty-seven narrow lines on the second page of the paper, and Alice was sent back to the Butterfly Department.

A week after Leonski’s execution, Alice was surprised to see Dot at the Herald.

‘I hope you don’t mind me coming here. It’s just – I can’t stop thinking about it all.’ Dot said, when she found her.

‘I’m glad you came. I can’t stop thinking about it either.’

Alice ushered Dot out of the newsroom and into a nearby café, where she ordered tea and sandwiches.

‘I thought I’d feel better,’ Dot said, ‘when he was killed.’

‘I didn’t know if I’d feel better,’ said Alice, carefully, ‘but I did think it would bring some sort of end to it. But it keeps going. After all, it doesn’t bring her back, does it?’

‘It seems barbaric, really. A funny kind of justice.’

‘The Detective Inspector didn’t think he deserved to die.’

‘Does anyone?’ Dot asked.

‘I don’t know.’ She bit into a cheese and pickle sandwich and chewed.

‘Did you see Truth on Saturday? A bit different to the modest little announcement we printed,’ said Alice, thinking about the two-page spread, complete with photographs of the killer and his victims.

‘I’ve got it here, to show you. In case you hadn’t seen it,’ said Dot, retrieving the folded newspaper page from her trouser pocket. She unfolded it, spread it out on the table before them. She read aloud, ‘Leonski in Life and Death; Full Story.”
‘I keep thinking about those other women,’ said Alice. ‘The ones who got away and didn’t report it.’

‘Victims who lived tell of killer’s attacks,’ Dot read. ‘This woman in April, in St Kilda. I wonder why she waited until two women were killed, before she bothered to report it. She still had his singlet, with his initials on it, for heaven’s sake. They could have caught him, much earlier.’

‘She could have saved them all.’

‘And then there’s this woman called Miss X, the one at the Glaciarium. What he said to her –’ Dot shivered.

‘What was it again?’ Dot read again, ‘I was going to kill a girl to-night – you might as well be the one.’

‘He sounds so creepy,’ said Alice. ‘I keep wondering why Gladys would go with him, why she’d walk with him and show him the way. Especially if he was drunk, as the papers have said. But he obviously didn’t appear drunk, and so many of these other people who’ve encountered him remark upon how polite and well-mannered he is.’

‘He’s a contradiction, all right.’

‘He described himself as like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.’

‘Imagine if you were the woman he was supposed to have a date with the night he was caught. He told her she had the voice of an angel.’

The girls both shuddered. Dot picked up a fish paste sandwich.

‘How are you holding up, Alice?’ Dot asked. ‘I’ve been thinking about you.’

‘I – I am all right,’ she said, surprised by the question. ‘I think.’

‘I miss her,’ said Dot. ‘I think Sadie’s getting tired of how often I talk about her. It’s funny, isn’t it, how things look so different once someone’s gone? I avoided her like crazy, in those last few months, but I’d give anything to have a cuppa with her now.’

‘Me too,’ said Alice. ‘There was so much we didn’t get the chance to talk about, to share. I wish I had the memories of her that you have.’ ‘Yes,’
said Dot. ‘He took so much more away from you, really. You had the future. It was all there, in front of you.’

‘I can’t picture it,’ said Alice. ‘I can’t imagine it any other way, now.’

‘Was Gladys – your first –?’

‘No,’ said Alice. ‘There was a girl in Sydney, when I was up there. Pat.’

‘What happened?’

‘She got married.’

‘They forced her to –?’

‘Actually, I don’t think so. I think she really chose it, herself.’

‘Maybe she did, Alice. But if she loved you, there would have been pressure from somewhere, for her to marry, to change her mind like that. Did she love you?’

‘She said she did.’

‘Do you believe she did?’

‘I did, at the time. But she told me so many other lies, I don’t know what was true.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Dot

Alice shrugged.

‘I never did tell Gladys about her. In fact, we never talked about any of this at all, her past or mine. That’s what is making me think it was never real, that I’ve imagined the whole thing. I still just feel so guilty, like all this is my fault. If I hadn’t – been with – her –’

‘Alice! How can you think that? You’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘Why can’t I believe that?’

‘You might have had something special with her. You might even have bloody loved her, one day. You had nothing to do with her death.’

‘But how does that work? How can it exist in the world, alongside everything that threatens to ruin it? It seems impossible. How do you do it, Dot?’

‘It’s not easy.’ Dot put her hand on Alice’s, on the table, fleetingly. ‘But it can work. You and Gladys might have found a way, you might not have.
But you shouldn’t try to grasp it, Alice, you can’t control it. It should make you free, rather than trapped. That’s the whole point. Can you imagine that?’

Alice shook her head.

‘Not really,’ she said, thinking of Fred, of her mother.

‘Listen,’ said Dot. ‘There’s a group of us, we meet regularly. At one of our houses, normally. It’s pretty informal, we don’t draw attention to ourselves. We talk and play cards and listen to music. Sometimes we drink beer, sometimes we drink tea. I think you’d like them.’ She put down her sandwich. ‘In fact, I think you’d fit right in.’ She looked right at Alice. ‘The next one is at our house, mine and Sadie’s, in Collingwood, on Sunday afternoon. Will you come?’

‘All – all right,’ said Alice, a little surprised to hear that Dot and Sadie lived together. She felt a thrill at the thought: imagine living with your lover, your lady lover, just like that, where life might mean tea and card games, and consist of more than breathless, stolen moments in the shadows. ‘Yes. I’d like that. Thank you, Dot.’

‘You never know who you might meet there,’ said Dot, winking. ‘When you’re ready, of course.’

The sounds of The Road to Gundagai greeted her from the wireless when she got home, the start of Dad and Dave. Harry sat in front of it, with a beer and his form guide in front of him. She laughed. Somehow her conversation with Dot had lifted her mood, made the world look brighter again.

‘You know the Snake Gully Cup isn’t real, Harry?’ The radio soap had been playing a storyline about a horse race in the fictional Snake Gully, in the lead up to the real Melbourne Cup that Saturday.

‘I know that, kiddo,’ said Harry. ‘But a bloke down the pub reckons Colonus is a dead cert in the real race, even though he’s a hundred to one. I reckon that if Dad’s ‘orse can get up at Snake Gully, it might be the sign I need to back the long shot.’
Alice sat down beside him, too used to his superstitious logic to bother questioning it.

‘It feels strange, the Cup being on a Saturday,’ Alice said.

‘The world’s gone mad. Anything could happen,’ said Harry. Even a hundred to one shot, she thought. ‘Still don’t really know why they’ve banned mid-week racing. It doesn’t help the troops to rob people back here of their entertainment.’

‘You know why, Harry. Austerity. Prime Minister Curtin doesn’t want week-day racing distracting from the war effort.’

‘Shhhh.’ He nodded towards the wireless. ‘The race.’ They both leaned forward a little, to listen.

‘Yee ha!’ Harry threw his form guide into the air. ‘That’s it then! Colonus is a shoo-in. He’s going to make me rich!’

Alice smiled. On the radio, the character Dad’s horse, Gay Pride, had won the race. Harry was hoping that real life could follow suit.

‘I hope he does, Harry,’ she said.

Harry took a long swig from his beer and picked the form guide up from the floor, where it had landed.

‘Oh. I almost forgot,’ he said.

‘Forgot what?’

‘There’s a letter for you, on the hall table. It’s from Fred.’

‘I’ll read it later,’ she said, and reached over to turn the wireless up.
Harry was onto something after all. Colonus won by seven lengths on a wet track with an eighteen-year-old apprentice jockey on his back. He’d started at thirty-three to one, so Harry must not have been the only one to follow the dubious prophecy of the popular radio serial. People clung to whatever they could, in war time.

He went down the pub to celebrate.

Sometimes people really could win, against the odds, she thought. It was possible.

The city was deserted as Alice stepped down from the tram: everyone was either at Flemington Racecourse, at the pub, or at home listening to the races on the wireless. Her footsteps echoed through Flinders Street Station. In a few hours, it would be packed with colourful punters on their way home. At time it was hard to believe there was a war going on at all.

But there were reminders – the station names were still all covered over, to thwart any advancing Japanese. She doubted that the Japanese, if they did come, would advance via the metropolitan trains, but she supposed the city couldn’t be too careful. She had to concentrate, count the stops, to figure out where she was.

She went past Royal Park and Coburg, where Leonski had lived and where he had died, as she travelled through the northern suburbs of the city he’d changed so much.

It was twelve stops to Fawkner. She counted the stops as the train moved through them. But it turned out she needn’t have: she could see the cemetery from the train, so it was obvious she’d arrived. She walked down the concrete steps, past a display of stone latticework covered in flowers. She hadn’t known the cemetery would be so big. How would she find Gladys’s grave?
She wandered around for a while, not minding the mizzle, the grey skies. It would have felt strange somehow, to be doing this in bright sunshine. Eventually she found what she was looking for, in a quiet corner of the Church of England section of the cemetery. *Gladys Lillian Hosking. Sleeping peacefully.* A picture of Gladys formed slowly, but fully, in her mind. She pulled a couple of weeds out from around the headstone, tossing them aside. She had brought no flowers, no offering. She stood still, listening to the wind whistling in the trees above her.

She began to hum, and then sing, remembering the tune Gladys had sung on the day of the tea dance, when they were stuck in the hall.

*Now add a couple of flowers, a drop of dew*
*Stir for a couple of hours ’til dreams come true*
*Add to the number of kisses, it’s up to you*
*Moonlight cocktail – need a few.*

She brought her left hand to her lips and kissed her fingers, then blew the kiss to Gladys. There were a couple of perfectly formed raindrops on the surface of the tombstone, and she watched them, trickle, and trickle, and fall. The trees around the grave drank the rain greedily, slurping up life.

‘So Gladys,’ she said, aloud. ‘It seems I might be getting married.’

The words sounded strange, to her ears. She kept talking, telling Gladys all about Fred, finding herself trying to explain it all, almost apologising. Explaining about her mother, and the way of the world. Convincing herself, as much as anything.

And then she fell silent, thinking. She forgot about Fred.

‘Gladys,’ she said, softly, after a long pause, ‘I never did tell you about Pat.’

Her voice had a completely different timbre as she recounted some of her times with Pat. It had been a different quality of delight, she thought. And a different quality of pain.

‘That was how I felt, with you, as well,’ she said, tears stinging, looking up into the sky, blinking. ‘You made life sparkle. The world seems so grey, now. Like the sparkle has been all used up.’
She picked up a twig and began to sketch patterns in the dirt.

‘He’s dead now,’ said Alice, and let the silence spread out around her.

She expected it to come, then: the guilt. The feeling that this was all, somehow, her fault. But, instead, she had a sudden flash of Gladys’s face when she’d leaned over to straighten her collar, that tiny smile. She remembered feeling Gladys swallow and then roll her head back just enough, welcoming the touch. Alice felt the lightness of her own touch tingle the tips of her fingers now, remembered that she’d drawn her fingers away. Remembered that she had wanted more, but that she had waited. Waited to see if Gladys wanted it too.

Remembered their kiss, her desire echoing hers. A moment of beauty that she had let go, because it didn’t belong to her. At least, not to her alone.

It was nothing like what had happened at the edge of Royal Park, just a short time later. It was nothing like Leonksi. She was nothing like him. They weren’t two sides of the same coin, flipping through Gladys’s life in alternating shades of love and death, waiting to see which way it would land.

She fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes and sat there, smoking.

She’d been too willing to accept the guilt and shame the world had given her. Too willing to let it colour her life. She wondered if she could ever let it go, or if it was too late to unpick it from her seams.

‘I saw Dot the other day,’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘I like her. I can see how you did too.’ She paused now, listening to the rustling leaves. ‘She makes things seem possible, even ordinary. Against the odds, you know.’ She broke the stick in half, concentrated on it for a minute, then threw it away. She looked back at Gladys’s grave.

‘She invited me to a gathering,’ she said. ‘It’s this week-end,’ she paused. Inhaled deeply on her cigarette, then let it out. ‘I think I’ll go.’

The drizzle had turned into rain, light but steady. A soft wash of afternoon sunlight suffused the grey sky, filtering through the trees, and Alice looked around her for the rainbow. There must be one, somewhere. She couldn’t see it, not yet. The raindrops dangled from the leaves like gemstones
from a lady’s earlobes, glinting in the sunlight. She watched as two drops joined, soaking into each other.

‘Yes. I will. I will go.’

She wasn’t sure if she’d spoken the words into the silence or if they’d come from the whispering of the trees above her. It felt as though they were real, and maybe that was enough.

The rain was heavier now, the sky darker. Alice stood up. She closed her eyes and let the rain fall on her. It slid down her forehead, over her closed eyelids, down her cheeks, into her mouth. She welcomed the rain. It made things possible. She parted her lips and stuck her tongue out to taste the drops. Like kisses. She remembered the day of the thunderstorm, under the tree with Pat. She remembered the night at the tram stop with Gladys. The night Gladys died.

The rain was like a sky full of tears, and that seemed right.

She raised her hand to give Gladys one final wave and blew her another kiss. Just like the one Gladys had blown her, out the tram window, that last day. If she was in a story, Alice thought, she’d feel Gladys now; Gladys would come to her on the breeze and plant an ethereal kiss on her neck. She waited, willed herself to feel it, but Gladys stayed dead, and only the raindrops touched Alice’s lips. She licked them off. Dismissing her fancy, she turned to leave, walking off towards the train station. Behind her, she left a row of clear footprints in the mud.

She stood on the train, trying not to drip water all over the seats. She pulled at her heavy skirts, hanging drab and shapeless around her legs, clinging wet. She tried to shake them out. As she looked out the window, it occurred to her that she hadn’t worn the red dress since Gladys had done it up. Was it too dressy to wear to Dot’s? Probably. They may well all be in trousers! Maybe she could buy herself a pair before the week-end. For a moment she pictured herself in trousers, leaning nonchalantly against a wall, rolling a cigarette, waiting for Dot to open the door and let her in. She quite liked the idea. But then she thought of her mother, of what she would say when she saw Alice leaving the house, dressed like that. Would she be brave
enough to leave her mother's house in trousers and step, unskirted, into such a new world? She imagined the look on her mother's face, imagined how it would feel to run, unhindered, away from her mother's disapproval, leaving it behind. She quite thought that might just suit her.

She leaned forward and breathed on the window, fogging it up. But it obscured her view of the world, so she lifted her hand and wiped the fog away, leaving the glass clear.
REALISM AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical fiction has long had a strong association with literary realism. This is largely due to the legacy of Sir Walter Scott, considered by many to be the inventor of the historical novel, and to Marxist critic Georg Lukács whose seminal work, *The Historical Novel* (1937) entrenched both Scott’s position and the association between historical fiction and realism. In this chapter I will consider this legacy and then go on to consider the many things that undermine or challenge this entrenchment of the historical novel as a realist form with Scott as its founding father. I will look at the inherent hybridity of the historical novel, and how this works to open up possibilities for writers writing from the margins outside the conservative ideologies that were accepted as ‘realism’. I will examine what realism is, what it means, the purpose it serves, and why we need to challenge it. I will look at an alternative history of the historical novel that centres around the Gothic and women writers, and that belies the claim that the historical novel was ever a singular, ‘realist’ form at all. I will consider modernism, postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, and the impact these discourses have had on writers representing the past and the choices they make.

Scott, Lukács and the ‘Realist’ Historical Novel

It is widely accepted that the western historical novel began with the first of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels in 1814 (de Matos 2015; Wallace 2013a, p.7). Scott’s novels focused on social conflict and the ‘progress’ that followed (Wallace 2003, p.78), and these became features by which the historical novel was defined and characterised (Price 2012, p.262). Scott, in the preface to *Waverley*, set himself out to be doing something new and different, and was an active agent in positioning himself as the father of a new genre (Lemke
However, it is through later literary scholars that Scott’s position has been further established. The most notable of these was Marxist critic Georg Lukács, particularly in his seminal 1937 work *The Historical Novel* (translated into English 1962), in which he valorises Scott and the literary ‘realism’ that he came to represent. In the monograph, Lukács seeks to ‘understand the social and ideological basis from which the historical novel was able to emerge’ (De Groot 2010, p.24). He suggests that, before Scott, historical novels were ‘mere costumery’ (Lukács 1962, p.19), in which ‘it is only the curiosities and oddities of the milieu that matter, not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch’ (Lukács 1962, p.19). Scott, though, sought to understand how the existence of men (sic) was historically conditioned, ‘for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them’ (Lukács 1962, p.24). The gendered statement here is faithful to Lukács and will be discussed later in this exegesis when I come back to the alternative tradition of women writing historical fiction. Both Scott and Lukács derogated these women, in a celebration of what Lukács called ‘the great tradition of realism’ (1962, p.62).

What, then, constitutes this literary realism that Scott and Lukács sought to privilege? For critics such as Lukács, realism was a means of ‘explaining what happened, why it happened, and to whom it happened’; these things combined to equate to historical accuracy, which meant that the characters in the novels, depicted at historically specific and significant moments, could be considered authentic, or real (Stocker 2012, p.309). This simplistic approach configures realism as a ‘somehow old-fashioned and naïve mimetic attempt at showing the world as it is’ (Zerweck 2001, p.170), a practice that equates seeing with knowing (Rignall 1991, p.2). In these kinds of historiographies, the past is knowable, static, fixed (Wallace 2013a, p.4).

But realism is something else as well – something that is more than just an attempt to reflect or mimic an accurate picture. Scott did use fictional elements in his novels, he did make up things that did not happen. According to Lukács, there was still a ‘necessary anachronism’ in Scott’s work (1962, p.62) – his work was not simply a ‘chronicle-like, naturalistic reproduction of
the language, mode of thought and feeling of the past’ (Lukács 1962, p.61). His characters expressed feelings and thoughts more clearly than their historical counterparts could have done – ‘but the content of these feelings and thoughts, their relation to the real object is always historically and socially correct’ (Lukács 1962, p.62). This sounds more like how an historical novelist in this contemporary world might approach their task, with research and rigour to get their facts straight and minimise anachronism. But the work of most historical novelists today does not feel like it is engaged in the same realistic project that Scott was, which leads me to think that Scott’s realism was doing something more than just aiming to reflect the past. But what?

It is the intention of the task, rather than necessarily the approach to it, that has changed. Most contemporary literary historical novelists are obsessive about historical research and historical detail. They get as much as they can ‘right’ but, in the end, write more to capture the spirit of a time and place, as Scott did. But Scott’s realism was doing something more. Writing realism as Scott did was a political imperative to privilege one type of being, one type of ontology, over another. Lukács claims that Scott’s novels denoted ‘a renunciation of Romanticism, a conquest of Romanticism, a higher development of the realist literary traditions of the Enlightenment, in keeping with the new times’ (Lukács 1962, p.33): it sought to replace the tropes of Romanticism with the more ordered, logical tropes of Enlightenment. It sought to privilege logic over emotion. Therefore, it was not just a lauding of realism as historically reflective, but a celebration of a dominant narrative for what it displaced and excluded. Scott used ‘realism’ not just to show the ‘truth’ of the past, but to communicate and uphold the ideology of his own times. Fredric Jameson says that ‘if it is social truth or knowledge we want from realism, we will soon find what we get is ideology’ (2015, p.5). Linda Hutcheon defines ideology as:

how a culture represents itself to itself – ‘doxifies’ or naturalises narrative representation, making it appear as natural and common-sensical; it presents what is really constructed meaning as something inherent in that which is being represented (2003, p.47).
Lukács’ discussion of Scott’s heroes is also interesting here. Scott’s heroes are always middling men, men who represent social trends and historical forces (Lukács 1962, p.34). Scott’s hero is ‘always a more or less mediocre average English gentleman’ (Lukács 1962, p.33), and never an ‘eccentric figure’ or someone who ‘falls psychologically outside the atmosphere of the age’ (Lukács 1962, p.60). In other words, they always exemplify exactly that ideology that the realist novel that tells their story is valorising. Closely tied to this, of course, is the role that the historical novel has played in forging nationalism and a national identity.

Lukács says that ‘Scott sees and portrays the complex and intricate path which led to England’s national greatness and to the formation of the national character’ (1962, p.54). Jerome De Groot says that this is not unique to Lukács, that historian Herbert Butterfield and writer Alessandro Manzoni also understand the value of the historical novel as a nationalistic tool (De Groot 2010, p.49), and that this ‘substantiation of a sense of national identity’ has long been associated with the historical novel (De Groot 2010, p.140). Lukács posits the progression of history as inevitable (Price 2012, p.262), as something that happens rather than something that is constructed. Contemporary historical novelist Hilary Mantel disagrees:

Commemoration is an active process, and often a contentious one. When we memorialise the dead, we are sometimes desperate for truth, and sometimes for a comforting illusion. We remember individually, out of grief and need. We remember as a society, with a political agenda – we reach into the past for the foundation myths of our tribe, our nation, and found them on glory, or found them on grievance, but we seldom found them on cold facts. Nations are built on wishful versions of their origins: stories in which our forefathers were giants, of one kind or another. This is how we live in the world: romancing (2017, emphasis added).

De Groot says that these sorts of contentious foundations mean that the historical novel has not only been a nationalising tool, but also its opposite: it has ‘equally been concerned with the destruction, querying or troubling of
the foundational myths of history’ (De Groot 2010, p.140). It is this more subversive historical fiction that I am interested in in this thesis. I will discuss nation-building and myth-making, particularly in relation to colonial gender types and colonisation/invasion in the Australian context in subsequent chapters.

This questioning, troubling type of historical fiction challenges the notion, cemented by Lukács, that ‘realism’ is the ‘only mode suited to the task of representing distant lives and experiences’ (Mitchell & Parsons 2013a, p.9). This type of historical fiction does not use middling gentlemen as its heroes, but focuses on ‘the ex-centricics, the marginalised, the peripheral figures of fictional history’ (Hutcheon 1988, p.113). In this type of historical fiction, Hutcheon argues, we do not get the stories of the ‘heroic victors who have traditionally defined who and what made it into History. Often we get instead both the story and the story-telling of the non-combatants or the losers’ (2003, p.49). For Hamish Dalley:

The apparent neutrality of the (Scott) focalising protagonist who drifts, almost involuntarily, to the winning side makes the direction of history appear natural. The violence of the conflict between different modes of social organisation is legitimised as the inevitable side effect of progress (2014, p.23).

Of course, this depiction of history as natural is precisely what Scott wanted to do and what Lukács appears to champion uncritically. But for Dalley, and other postcolonial theorists, this is hugely problematic, because ‘the destruction of supposedly peripheral societies cannot simply be accepted as a side effect of progress’ (2014, p.23). This is true, also, of other ‘losers’ and defeated, other marginalised people, whom progress trampled over.

The privileging of realism as the only mode of representing the past, Diana Wallace argues, does two things. It leads ...

... first to his rejection of the potential of any other modes of writing (whether Gothic historical novel, Modernist experimentation or fantasy) to express a relationship to history. But, secondly, as
numerous poststructuralist critiques have pointed out, realism itself, despite its ostensible ‘transparency’ is an ideologically loaded form (2005, p.11).

Lukács remains the most influential theorist of the historical novel (Micir 2017). In fact, Johnston and Wiegandt say that the genre has been haunted by ‘the Spectre of Lukács’ (2017, p.9). And, indeed, the historical novel’s association with realism and Marxism has persisted, often damagingly. But it does not tell the whole story, and, in fact, even in Scott’s own time, it never did.

The Historical Novel: A Hybrid Form

The historical novel has never been just one thing, despite the attempts to rein it into the constraints of a realist, totalising, nationalistic form that exemplified a particular dominant ideology. By definition, the historical novel is a hybrid form, melding fiction and fact, history and imagination (De Groot 2010, p.16; Wallace 2005, p.3; Dalley 2014, p.18; Rigney 2001, p.16). It is always a negotiation between what is known and what is invented, what the historical record shows and what it neglects to show or cannot show. Ann Rigney argues that this melding of history and fiction has often been seen as a threat to each one individually (2001, p.16) – that, for example, history is automatically rendered fictional the moment it is tarnished by a fictional or unverifiable element.

The other hybridity that is inherent to the historical novel is the disjuncture of the past and the present. Even where the novel is set entirely in the past, it still bears a relationship to the present. For Lukács, the historical novel was a way in which men could come to see ‘their own existence as something historically conditioned’ (1962, p.24), to see history itself as ‘the bearer and realiser of human progress’ (1962, p.27). We have seen, too, that although Scott was as faithful as possible to the spirit of the time in which his novels were set, his novels played their role in lauding the ideology of his own time. This interplay between past and present is certainly still relevant to the historical novel today, although often today writers are
more interested in challenging a singular ‘realist’ assumption than in valorising it.

Diana Wallace argues that although readers are attracted to historical novels because of what they might learn about the past, ‘any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written’ (2005, p.4). Alan Robinson argues that this interplay of past and present creates a necessary irony:

Narrative alteration between analepsis, from the perspective of the authorial narrator, and present-day readers, and prolepsis, from the perspective of the historical agents, opens up the possibility of irony, which one might regard as historical narrative’s default mode (2011, p.32).

In fact, Wallace goes one step further: when we are reading an historical novel we are engaging with at least three historical moments: the period in which the novel is set, when it is written, and when we are reading it (2012, p.211). We bring to the novel our own contemporary sensibility, which, as Robinson argues, can show the ‘fallibility’ of the historical characters who do not have the benefit of our contemporary knowledge. Yet this can enrich the fiction, rather than undermine it’ (Slotkin 2005, p.231). This irony, in turn, creates anachronism that may be conscious or unconscious, but reflects present concerns (Robinson 2011, p.26). For Robinson, the anachronism is significant to the contemporary reader, but its significance ‘could only be recognised with hindsight, as it results from later critical theories or from sociohistorical development which make relevant now what was then ignored’ (2011, p.48). This anachronism is unavoidable, and a writer has no control over it: they can’t make their contemporary readers unlearn everything they know in order to see only the past.

It was precisely this anachronism that was part of Inga Clendinnen’s criticism of Kate Grenville’s novel The Secret River. Clendinnen, in her 2006 Quarterly Essay ‘The History Question’, quoted Grenville’s claim that writing fiction allowed her to ‘get inside the experience’. In response, Clendinnen
said ‘Grenville would not have been Grenville in that situation. We cannot post ourselves back in time. People really did think differently back then – or at least we must proceed on that assumption’ (Clendinnen 2006, p.20). But perhaps that is the point – approaching the difference, and letting it touch us, as we are now, so that we may better understand ourselves. Paul Lynch argues, perhaps controversially, that there is, in fact, no such thing as historical fiction, because all historical fiction is about the present-day (2017). He challenges the assumption that the contemporary novel speaks of the times we live in, and the historical novel does something else. He does agree with Clendinnen that we can’t post ourselves back in time – he says ‘what reader from 1817 would recognise themselves in a novel written 200 years later? That reader would collapse in a cold swoon and wake up bereft and bewildered’ but he does advocate for the importance of drawing parallels between the people of the past and ourselves – ‘the novelist says, let’s not be concerned with who we are now, but what we are always’ (Lynch 2017).

Jameson says that when we look for history we are ‘confronted with questions about the uses of the past and even the access to it which, as unanswerable as they may be, take us well beyond literature and theory and seem to demand an engagement with our own present’ (2015, p.5). If we think about it, perhaps this is what all we want all fiction to do: allow something imagined to bring us back to ourselves.

If we accept that the historical novel is inherently a hybrid form containing not only fact and fiction, history and imagination, past and present, but also a necessary anachronism and irony, how can we then accept that a ‘realistic’ mode that attempts to generalise, simplify and homogenise is the one most suited to it? I contend that this very hybridity demands that we resist reading the historical novel as one thing – ‘realistic’ – and begin to look instead at its possibilities. Because historical fiction, as far back and much further than the time of Scott, as I will discuss, actually has a much more natural affinity with modes and tropes that ‘realism’ specifically sought to reject.
Another important opposition in relation to the historical novel is drawn along gender lines: men/women. Many of Scott’s predecessors in the field of historical fiction were women (Wallace 2003, p.78; Stevens 2010, p.6), and it was quite specifically in opposition to these women writers that Scott set himself and his work. Critics such as Lukács and George Saintsbury have acknowledged that Scott had predecessors but did not consider them worthy of attention (Stevens 2010, p.6). In fact, Lukács discusses no women writers at all, other than to note them dismissively (Wallace 2005, p.8). This is despite the fact that, as Ina Ferris claims, many of Scott’s works drew upon ‘generic innovations already established by women writers at least a decade before Waverley appeared’ (in Spongberg 2013, p.58). Scott himself was dismissive – even disparaging – of women writers and used the introduction to Waverley to draw a distinctly gendered line between what he was doing and what had come before (Wallace 2013a, p.9). Wallace (2013a, p.9) argues that this dismissal, and the later one by Lukács, has helped to erase women writers from the genealogy of the historical novel. Of course, this erases not only women writers, but also their stories. Women’s stories, women’s histories, were silenced.

The historical novel before Scott was considered a female form, but was ‘remasculinised’ by Scott, which had the effect of raising the status of the genre to one that became central to Victorian culture (Irvine 1999, p.228). In Scott’s own words, he wanted to write about ‘men, not manners’ (in De Groot 2010, p.22). Wallace argues that it is no coincidence that this ‘remasculinising’ of the genre was happening at the same time as history was being professionalised as a scholarly discipline by men who could be seen as usurping the ground from amateur women historians, whose work was cast as ‘superficial and trivial’ (Wallace 2013a, p.9). Leslie Fiedler called Scott’s historical fiction ‘the creation of a self-conscious attempt to redeem fiction at once for respectability and masculinity’ (in Wallace 2003, p.78), a genre
that rescued the novel ‘from feminisation and sentimentality’ by introducing ‘real history’ (in Wallace 2003, p.78).

This ‘real history’ refers to the social conflict and progress that Scott foregrounded in his novels, rather than the domestic, family history that was generally the domain of women. As Mary Spongberg (2013, p.53) argues, women during the eighteenth century were restricted (structurally and not necessarily by their own choice) to family history and often used this domestic history to explore their own pasts. The Gothic historical novel was one mode they used to do this, as I will discuss later in this chapter, and I will discuss in more detail in chapter two how women have used the Gothic to write back against the construction of themselves in both fictional and national discourses.

The Historical Novel and What ‘Realism’ Rejects

To make a claim that Scott was the inventor of the historical novel without acknowledging the women who came before him is a deliberate act that privileges a particular kind of historical novel, which, as we have already seen, was the historical novel in its ‘realist’ form. The novels that preceded Scott, as we have seen, were rejected from the new formulation of the historical novel because of lack of historical specificity, ‘mere costumery’, romance, the Gothic, or other non-realist characteristics. Exploring the alternative history of historical fiction shows that these elements which precluded a novel from being considered ‘realistic’ enough to be a classical historical novel had been associated with the genre for a long time before Scott. The novel attributed with being the first of all western historical novels is Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764), which actually had ‘a Gothic story’ as a subtitle.

Romance

The category of romance, according to Wallace, has shifted from its original meaning of a medieval romantic epic with a male hero, to a love story centred on a female heroine, and then in the twentieth century it became defined
even more narrowly as referring to popular romance fiction with a predominantly female readership (Wallace 2013a, p.31). During the time of some of the earlier women Gothic novelists, such as Clara Reeve, the terms 'novel' and 'romance' were used interchangeably in subtitles (Wallace 2013a, p.31), in novels written in English. Reeve herself attempts to separate the terms, saying 'the Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance, in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen' (Stevens 2010, p.90, emphasis added). It is interesting that Reeve includes the word ‘manners’ here in association with ‘real life’, where Scott separates them in his distinction ‘men not manners’ (where, for Scott, ‘real life’ or ‘real history’ was the domain of men, while ‘manners’ was the less-important domain of women). It is also interesting that neither of these descriptions fits neatly onto the historical novel as we know it today, which, I would argue, is a blurring of these characteristics: it could be described as depicting a story approaching real life and manners in times past, possibly describing what never happened, but is likely – or at least feasible – to have happened, or to have been possible. Wallace (2013a, p.31) argues that this blurring was present even in Reeve’s day, as there was a shift in what was considered the most appropriate form to represent the past – from Romance, to Novel. Scott himself, according to Diane Elam (1992, p.56), engages in an argument that both claims and rejects romance ‘in order to claim that romance is both necessary to the history of society and yet clearly distinct from the factual authority of social history’.

Reeve also made a distinction between romance and history:

History represents human nature as it is in real life; alas, too often a melancholy retrospect! Romance displays only the amiable side of the picture, it shews the pleasing features, and throws a veil over the blemishes (in Wallace 2013a, p.59).

It is interesting to consider this claim in relation to the Gothic, which I will discuss next. The Gothic can be seen as a response to the showing of only the pleasing features: the Gothic is the blemishes that come back to spoil the
pretty picture that Romance paints. And yet the two of them coexist as well: the Gothic Romance was a popular sub-genre of the time. Elam (1992, p.133) discusses what she calls ‘dark romance’, which she conceptualises as impossible, unspeakable female desire: ‘the reading of romance threatens the distinction between reality and romance by offering a dark or unspeakable desire which is too authentic to be dismissed as merely escapist romance’. Perhaps it is in this space of dark romance that the Gothic and Romance can infuse each other.

For Scott, and his champion Lukács, Romance, which covered both romantic love storylines and more fantastic, supernatural and uncanny storylines, was antithetical to the ‘real history’ of the historical novel. For critics such as Elam (1992, p.106 & p.108), the Romance novel and storyline was seen as the place where women were confined: where there is a love story in one of Scott’s historical novels, he uses the romance to restrict and confine the roles that women can play in the narrative. For Elam, this was how ‘realism’ dealt with women: by ‘relegating her to romance’ and excluding her from real history. One suspects that if the category of ‘realism’ and its associated ideological structures is left unchallenged, that is where she will stay.

_The Gothic_

The Gothic is notoriously difficult to define, and that is perhaps as it should be. Katrin Althans (2010, p.11) argues that to define the Gothic is to undermine its transgressive nature, as ‘a definition always also implies the setting of boundaries and limitations’. Wallace (2013a, p.15) discusses the ‘slipperiness’ of the term: she quotes Ellen Moers, who coined the term ‘female Gothic’ in 1976 and said that it was not easy to define ‘except that it has to do with fear’ (Moers 1976, p.90). Wallace (2013a, p.15) argues that fear and the supernatural are usually what distinguishes the Gothic novel from the historical novel, but she goes on to say that the early Gothic novels were, in fact, defined by their relationship to history. Sarah Parker (2008) says that
the Gothic, since its ‘birth’, has been associated with the unconscious mind and ‘the compulsion to articulate what was unspeakable or repressed’. Other characteristics associated with the Gothic are: menacing and unstable characteristics (Althans 2010, p.11), ambivalence and transgression (Smith 2007, p.3), ruins, castles, monasteries and monstrosity, insanity and excess (Smith 2007, p.4), abandoned houses, lone women, the inversion of the familiar (Davis 2013, p.33), doubling, female containment and entrapment (Hansen 2011, p.639), artefacts and evidence of the past such as documents, graves, hidden passageways (De Groot 2010, p.16), male violence and female oppression (Cooper 2012, p.166), and anti-Enlightenment thoughts and feelings (Smith 2007, p.3). Donna Heiland says that ‘Gothic fiction, at its core, is about transgression of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one’s own identity’ (in Cooper 2012, p.157). Smith adds that another key element of the Gothic is its representation of evil and othering: ‘the demonisation of particular types of behaviour makes visible the covert political views of a text’ (2007, p.3). Jean-Francois Lyotard’s concept of the postmodern as ‘unpresentable’ is useful here (Elias 2001, p.27). I will explore some of the ways in which the Gothic is useful in engaging with the unpresentable – or unrepresented – in the three following chapters, particularly as it relates to the female, the queer and the racial Other.

It was these Gothic conventions, Wallace argues, that Scott ‘lampooned’ and sought to replace with what ‘came to constitute literary realism’ (2013a, p.9). *Waverley* at this point became emblematic of the historical novel and other novels were judged by its standard (Wallace 2013a, p.7). Wallace argues that many of the novels that were considered not to meet this new standard of ‘realism’ were by women, in many cases because of the Romantic, Gothic or supernatural elements they contained (2013a, p.7). De Groot (2010, p.16) says that these novels were, from that point onwards, considered to be ‘a nightmarish type of historical novel’. He goes on to say that ‘the incipient historical novel, after the example of Scott, became a rational, realist form, shifting away from the excesses of the Gothic to
emphasise process, progress and transcendent human values’ (2010, p.16). Yet as we have seen, these weren’t necessarily values that were relevant, or consistently extended, to all humans: just to the middling gentlemen that characterised Scott’s idea of social trends and historical forces.

Because of course, as Wallace says, literary ‘realism’ needs scare quotes and is ‘no less of an artificial construct than the Gothic’ (2013a, p.9). While ‘realism’ sought to bolster conservative ideology, the Gothic was a vehicle for challenging that ideology, for asking questions about what that ideology represented, and what it excluded. It was therefore in the interests of the proponents and champions of that realism to belittle and demean the Gothic. It is because of this that the Gothic has been – and still is – attractive to women writers. Andrew Smith argues that it is a mode that searches for new ways of representing complex ideas or debates (2007, p.8). It was also attractive for its transgressive possibilities: it is a vehicle through which accepted version of ‘reality’ can be explored (Smith & Wallace 2004, p.6). Women writers may have turned to the Gothic because they felt themselves excluded from more traditional historiographies (Wallace 2013b, p.137), and they thereby created an alternate history that focused on the domestic sphere. Wallace (2005, p.2) argues that the historical Gothic novels by writers such as Ann Radcliffe use the setting ‘as a fantasy space in which she can centralise female consciousness and explore female fears and desires’. These women speaking from the margins of society tie history to the Gothic by creating spectral voices that were ignored by the traditional accounts of history: Julian Wolfreys has characterised these as ‘a kind of ghost-writing’ (2013, p.155). The women, excluded from the ‘real history’ that was being celebrated, became themselves the ghosts that haunted ‘reality’.

It is simplistic, though, to say that there was a neat divide between the Gothic and Realism, even in Scott’s time. As Robert Irvine (1999, p.226) says, Scott himself used the romance structure of historical fiction that was available because of the earlier work by Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, even while he distanced himself from those novelists and those works. It is not true, either, that women always eschewed historical
specificity while men celebrated it – Wallace argues that the first Gothic novel by a woman, Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1777), rewrote Horace Walpole’s earlier *The Castle of Otranto* and introduced a more ‘realist’ aspect to it by setting it in a specific place and time (2013b, p.136). Despite this, though, Scott was an exemplar at a time when literary critics privileged ‘realism’ and believed that Gothic novels were ‘disrespectful’ to the past, associating them with chaos, social upheaval and in ‘disrupting the past to provoke horror and terror’ (De Groot 2010, p.16). The Gothic historical novel was not a ‘repository of pastness, but a site where history might attack the visitor’ (De Groot 2010, p.16). When Scott himself wandered too close to Gothic tropes, as he did in his novel *The Black Dwarf* (1816), the writing was considered a failure by critics ‘because none of the characters possess any historical reality ... the result is a Gothic fairy-tale, of drastically limited seriousness’ (in Irvine 1999, p.230). Scott, it seems, had been too successful in his quest to privilege ‘realism’ over other modes of representing the past.

**The Historical Novel and the Gothic: A Natural Affinity**

The historical novel and the Gothic have a natural affinity that can be traced from the earliest historical novels to the most recent. In fact, critics have argued that these early Gothic novels were, in fact, predecessors of the modern historical novel (Stevens 2010, Wallace 2005, et al). Wallace argues:

> The early roots of historical fiction are deeply entangled in the Gothic tradition, so deeply that it is often difficult to separate the two genres. In fact, early Gothic historical novels are the unacknowledged forerunners of the historiographic metafiction of the late twentieth century, in that they lay bare the textuality and the subjective nature of history (2013b, p.136).

As we saw above, there has been a relationship between the Gothic and the past since the first Gothic novels. In a genre that is often about haunting, secrets, hidden documents and passages, inheritances, and the impact of the past, that is possibly not surprising. Fiona Robertson argues that ‘a novel
should not be categorised as Gothic if it makes no attempt to situate the
events of its plot in a historical setting (in Killeen 2009, p.1). Rosemary
Jackson (1981, p.96) says that the Gothic is a reaction to historical events,
particularly the spread of industrialism and urbanisation – or dare I say, of
progress? The relationship between history and the Gothic is so vital that it
is perhaps not possible for a Gothic novel to be contemporary, with no
relationship with the past.

The Gothic, particularly when combined with historical fiction,
problematises the idea that the past is completed. In reading the past and the
present through each other, relations between them take the form of a
‘haunting’ where the distinctions between them are blurred (Mee 2013, p.
175). We go back to the past not to see it just as it was, a landscape full of
people long dead who did only what the historical record declares them to
have done. We go back to the past to speak with the dead, uncover their
stories. Amy J Elias sees it as a desire for an impossible dialogue:

History is not a person; it is not a place; it is not even a text except in
its traces. There is nothing with which to have a dialogue if one wishes
to have a dialogue with history. Yet we strive to have a dialogue with
history, perhaps because we perceive it to be not a thing or a sterile
collection of written texts but rather a cacophony or voices of living
beings who preceded us in time (2005, p.168).

This dialogue with people from the past is, at its heart, a Gothic one. But we
go back to speak with the people whose stories did not make it into the
History we are presented with, not those who are lauded as having won the
battles that occasioned the progress we now, apparently, enjoy. Wallace
quotes Beryl Bainbridge, who says that ‘progress must always be achieved at
the expense of something else’ (2005, p.179). We go back to the past to seek
the people who were left behind when progress rumbled through. Julia
Kristeva’s concept of the abject is useful here: that you may know a culture
by what it abjects or ‘throws off’. The abject is not eliminated, but repressed:
it ‘lingers in the margins, representing a threat to stable cultural values’
(Horner & Zlosnik 2001, p.82). Robinson (2011, p.49) argues that the real-life
referent – what we know of the past from the historical record – is deconstructed by ‘altering the focalisation or narrative voice and thereby moving in the centre of attention what in the original had been marginalised or omitted’. The women writers writing their history in the Gothic mode know that those defeated are there, lingering in the margins of the past, waiting for someone to reach back and ask them to tell their story.

Modernism, Postmodernism and Historiographic Metafiction

Another thing that clearly works to undermine the totalising impulse of literary ‘realism’ is the fragmentation and experimentation that came with modernism and, later, with postmodernism.

Modernism

Melanie Micir (2017) argues that ‘Lukács’ view of historical fiction is incompatible with modernism’s view of the world as ‘fragmented, incoherent, and dependent on subjective perception’. For Lukács, this makes the modernist historical novel an impossibility. Jameson argues that ‘Lukács is scarcely in a position to assess the possibilities of anything like a modernist historical novel’ (2015, p.275), but this is only true in a world that privileges unifying ‘realism’. If we consider the Gothic and its transgressive possibilities, the way towards a modernist historical novel becomes clearer. Indeed, as quoted above, Wallace considered ‘modernist experimentation’ to be one of the modes Lukács rejected when he privileged ‘realism’ as the best (and only) form for the historical novel (2005, p.11). Modernist fiction, according to Patricia Waugh (1984, p.6), was important as it was an initial response to the loss of belief in an objectively existing world of history ... the frames of the construction of fiction and story began here to be visible (Waugh 1984, p.30) as writers began to experiment with notions of time, temporality, linearity and truth. One example of an experimental modernist/metafictional novel is Orlando by Virginia Woolf.
Micir (2017) delves into the ways in which modernism can represent the past, through a discussion of high modernist Virginia Woolf and contemporary British historical novelist Kate Atkinson. She argues that for writers such as Woolf, imagining impossible things into the gaps and spaces in the historical record was an act of ‘restorative fantasy’, something that was necessary for representing underrepresented lives like those of women (Micir 2017). This imagination, in response to ‘realist’ narratives that purported to tell us how things really were, filled the spaces left by those stories to imagine how things might have been – essentially a counterfactual experimentation (Micir 2017) with other (im)possible pasts. For Lyotard, modernity requires this invention of other realities, along with a shattering of belief and subsequent discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ (1984, p.77). Hayden White draws a connection between much literature of the early nineteenth century, which tended to ‘bring language into question, to indict its claims to transparency and univocity of meaning’ and the self-conscious crystallisation of this tendency in the modernist movement (2010, p.189). The connection does not stop there: it manifests itself as an integral part of postmodern historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction.

Postmodernism and Historiographic Metafiction
Once we have discovered this lack of reality it is not only historical fiction that comes into question, but history itself. If we understand ‘realism’ to be a scaffold for a dominant ideology as much as, or more than, a mode of writing reflective of the world, then we must ask the question: what is not being told? Once we begin to see that things have been left out of what passes for History, then we begin to see that ideological choices must have been made in determining what should be included, and what excluded.

Constructivist theorists such as Hayden White argue that stories must be constructed because they do not exist in and of themselves, and therefore cannot be fully formed (Philainen 2013, p.510). History is never merely a chronicle, which Louis Mink describes as an undiscriminating list of what
happened (in Robinson 2011, p.9). For White, there are no chronicles to be discovered; ‘there are only ‘histories’ more or less structured’: the literary historian must create the ‘chronicle’ by making decisions about which artefacts will form the ‘matter’ of the chronicle, and ‘this choice will be determinative of the kind of history that he will write’ (2010, p.160). White goes as far as to say that all narrative is ‘inherently fictive’ (2010, p.202) and that all stories about the past are interpretations (2010, p.212). Richard Slotkin says that what we call ‘history’ is not a thing, an object of study, but a story we choose to tell about things (2005, p.222). Linda Hutcheon argues that ‘we can only know it (the past) through its traces’ (1988, p.119), and that any historical narrative can only be an interpretation of the textualised remnants of the past, and never the whole story or a single, true interpretation of it (1988, p.114). Hilary Mantel says it beautifully:

Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge. And history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left on the record. It’s the plan of the positions taken, when we stop the dance to note them down. It’s what’s left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it – a few stones, scraps of writing, scraps of cloth (2017, emphasis added).

For Roland Barthes, ‘realism’ was only ever ‘the reality effect’ where ‘the real’ is never anything but an ‘unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent’ (1989, p.139). White articulates where this lack of objective reality takes us:

Without ‘historical reality’ (or its ethnographic or sociological counterparts) to serve as the baseline against which the ‘fictionality’ of imaginative texts can be confidently measured, every representation of reality becomes merely another ‘text’. Some of these texts may seek to pass themselves off as genuine ‘works’ illuminative of ‘reality’, but at best they succeed in producing only the ‘reality-effect’. They are not to be assessed as to their realism but treated rather as occasions for a performance by the reader-critic (2010, p.212).
It would seem, then, that there is no objective history: in both its construction and its consumption it is open to any number of interpretations. If history, then, cannot be ‘true’ or ‘factual’, then it begins to break down the oppositions of history/imagination and fact/fiction that I discussed above. For Heiland, ‘the real and the fictional emerge as versions of each other’ (2008, p.164), and boundaries are blurred. It is because of this that critics such as Robert Dixon argue that historical fiction is, in all its forms, an inherently postmodern genre (Dixon 2014, p.169). For Christine Harrison (2012, p.228), the historical novelist is fulfilling the contradictory postmodern desires to simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct the past. Linda Hutcheon calls this historiographic metafiction, which she says ‘plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record’ (1988, p.114). For Hutcheon, ‘historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualised accessibility to us today’ (1988, p.114). Mantel (2017) says ‘it is impossible now to write an intelligent historical novel that is not also a historiographic novel, one which considers its own workings’. We are never presented with History, but with a kaleidoscope of colourful traces, texts, stories, remnants from which we must choose when we write our story. And this choosing is always ideologically loaded.

In direct opposition to the classical historical novel, but not antithetical to the early Gothic historical novels that preceded Scott, historiographic metafiction engages the ‘postmodern view of representation as a matter of construction, not reflection’ (Hutcheon 2003, p.39). It is here that the past/present opposition, and the necessary irony, can be seen most clearly: it is through our contemporary lens that we choose how to construct the past. Hutcheon argues that any narrativised history, including fiction, ‘reshapes any material (in this case, the past) in the light of present issues, and this interpretive process is precisely what historiographic metafiction draws to our attention’ (1988, p.22). Robinson gives examples of Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters who, in the British context, ‘attempt to reclaim a female past either through transformative fantasy or by rewriting it, with conscious or unconscious anachronism in the light of
present concerns’ (2011, p.26). In chapter two, I will discuss some Australian women writers who are doing this same thing.

The act of representing the past through fiction has always engaged in the task of story construction, but the difference is the self-consciousness with which metafiction does it. Patricia Waugh (1984, p.5) claims that this practice is not new, but ‘as old or older than the novel itself’, but the self-consciousness of contemporary writers of metafiction give us insight into the fact that all fiction is constructed (Waugh 1984, p.5) and prompts us to ask questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh 1984, p.2). Importantly, for Robinson (2011, p.43), metafiction ‘foregrounds the invention’, as opposed to classical ‘realist’ fiction which ‘tries to camouflage the ultimate causal-manipulative level of the author’. The ‘realist’ novelist would be mortified for the seams and joins of construction to be visible, whereas the metafictional novelist makes no attempt to cover it, but instead celebrates it and lays it bare.

Re-Thinking Realism in a Metafictional World

How, then, can contemporary writers writing historical fiction present the past? I would argue that the lack of a totalising reality to be found when we look back is both a freedom and a constraint. Historical novelists can interpret the world however they want, but they still have a responsibility to get their research right. They still have a responsibility to write something that reflects the ‘reality’ of the time in which the novel is set: which is not to say that their novel must fortify the dominant ideology either of that time or the writer’s own time, but that they must present something that reflects, as closely as possible, life as it was. In my experience, historical novelists are obsessive with their research and with getting the details correct, with minimising factual errors and anachronisms in their work in relation to the flaws and gaps in the archive. British historical novelist Sarah Waters says: ‘I think we have a duty to take history seriously – not simply to use it as a backdrop for the purposes of nostalgia’ (in De Groot 2010, p.10). Australian
novelist Alex Miller, when speaking of his historical novel *Autumn Laing*, said that ‘writing a novel is an act of faith – and you’d better get your facts right – and that doesn’t mean to say you’ve got to be earnest about it, and god forbid you’re literalist about interpreting the spirit of what you are doing’ (Canberra Times 2013, p.1). The past did exist, and people existed in it, and therefore there is something there to be recovered, even if we know we can never recover it in its entirety, or completely accurately. For Hutcheon, ‘there is not so much a ‘loss of belief in a significant external reality’ as there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality and therefore to be able to represent it in language’ (1988, p.119). But the task of the historical novelist is to create and construct something which is able to pass for some kind of historical ‘reality’. This creates a tension: for many contemporary writers of historical fiction, the intention is to reach back into the past in order to tell the forgotten stories – the stories of the ‘defeated’, the colonised, women, queer people, the less privileged. But how do we tell those stories in a responsible way, in a way that negotiates the historical and contemporary mindsets without creating an unacceptable level of anachronism? We write these stories not to uphold a dominant ideology of the past or the present, but to challenge both, but how do we do that while presenting a character who was left out of the historical record, faithfully in her time, presenting without sustaining the very structures that rendered her silent? This requires a re-thinking of the realist mode of writing.

It is perhaps in the very imagination and construction, the negotiation and movement between unstable elements and the playfulness of stories that the potential for subversiveness lies. For Bruno Zerweck:

> Realism has the same subversive potential as all other forms of fiction. This subversive potential of all fictional texts is based on the instability of a system of signs that can never be wholly secured due to the ambiguous interdependency between the imaginary and the real. Realism, then, is not a mimetic project without a subversive aim (2001, p.170).
This might be a certain realism, a realism aware of itself and its operations. Perhaps it is in the difference in focalisation – perhaps the focus on the marginalised character is enough to disrupt the dominant ideology and make history look different. Hamish Dalley (2014, p.27-28) argues that ‘novelists can shift their ground of identification, so that what was peripheral becomes central and the alignment of imperial power, linear temporality, and heteronormativity is disrupted’. Perhaps it is through self-conscious heterogeneity that novelists can show their past as subjective, as open for questioning. Wallace cites EJ Clery’s model, which uses a ‘tripartite system of narrative’, ‘mixing the marvellous (including the supernatural), the probable (historical realism), and the sentimental (including a moral sympathy) to fully engage the mind of the reader’ (2013b, p.137). As we have seen, this hybridity is not a new thing for historical novels which have a long history of meshing together different modes of representation and ways of seeing, even, often, ones that seem to be incompatible with each other.

Authenticity, or the ‘feel’ of the past

Historical novelists will often speak about ‘authenticity’ when talking about their engagement with the past, and this is usually held to be something different to historical ‘accuracy’. Other words they might use to conjure up the same kind of idea are verisimilitude, plausibility, reasonableness, or the ‘spirit’ of the times. Dalley says that ‘plausibility and verisimilitude’ become the historical novel’s realism (2014, p.9). Elias says, of historical fiction:

We see it doing backflips, to try and wed two seemingly incompatible ideas: that history is not true, but that it is reasonable. Its distinctively pragmatist flavour derives from attempts to prove that absolute historical truth is different from the truth of consensus, and that history can be coherent and reasonable without being ‘factually’ true or tied to purely empiricist methods (2005, p.162-163).

For Bryony Stocker, authenticity is ‘a negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader’s existing understanding of the period and
the imaginative power of the author, which combined can only present the spirit of an era rather than its actuality’ (2012, p.310-11). For Frank Ankersmit, there is a contrast between the requirement of truth and that of authenticity (in Ward 2013, p.73). As Ward says, for Ankersmit, ‘the attraction of the concept lies in its providing a way to discuss the validity of fictional historical representations without the claim of empirical certainty implied in their recourse to truth’ (2013, p.73). Alexander Chee (2016), though, seems to equate authenticity with realism, but has a similar desire to Ankersmit’s: he says that ‘the benchmark for realism’ has shifted ‘away from authenticity and toward a feeling of it for the reader – a way for the living to argue with history and posterity’. Authenticity, the feeling of the past, in these accounts, seem to be a way of taking the traces left by the past and creating out of them a story that might have been possible, or at least would not have been impossible, to have occurred at the time and place the novel is set.

Of course, though, this authenticity is still subjective and historically variable (Robinson 2011, p.28). The ‘authentic’ past, like the ‘realistic’ past, is not something that exists to be discovered. James Ward argues that authenticity, like realism, is an ideological construct that ‘reflects as well as bestows value’ and pronounces something ‘valid, genuine, acceptable or worthwhile’ (2013, p.68). Hutcheon argues that ‘the interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike’ (1988, p.110). The objectively authentic cannot exist in historiographic metafiction.

It seems, then, that ‘authenticity’ should go the way of realism as an impossible – and undesirable – ambition. But Ward goes on to articulate here the dilemma of the historical novelist when he notes that this version of authenticity, following Ankersmit, ‘where novels create a plausible period ‘feel’ is often invoked by readers to endorse works of historical fiction that succeeded in creating a vivid impression of the past’ (2013, p.73). De Groot (2010, p.183) calls this the ‘authentic fallacy’ which he describes as ‘the concept that readers of historical novels want to believe that what they are reading is somehow real or authentic, provoked often by the realist or
mimetic mode of writing’. It seems that, in writing into and about an ideologically constructed historical space, we need to be very careful about the language we use to describe what we are doing, as it may actually be describing the very opposite of what we are attempting to do. Historical novelists talk about – and strive for – some kind of ‘authenticity’ or ‘reality’, where no undisputed ‘authenticity’ or ‘reality’ exists to be found, and, for the historiographic metafictional novelist at least, the nonexistence of this ‘one true story’ is partly what they are seeking to show. Therefore, historical novelists can potentially get stuck in a trap of striving to recapture the very thing that they are seeking to dismantle. We cannot get entirely away from this aim of course, as to be effective in writing about the past we must produce something of verisimilitude, something that is at least vaguely recognisable to our readers, and we must create frameworks that can scaffold our ways of talking about what we are doing (hence the dance and debate about words and phrases such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘historical accuracy’ that still proliferate in reviews and interviews). But for an historical novelist writing self-aware historiographic metafiction, and particularly someone writing in the Gothic mode, the project relies on what we cannot see as much as what we can; it relies on the shadows of the past rather that what is illuminated. And perhaps the success of the historiographic metafictional novel depends on how well the novelist is able to leave this tension unresolved, to allow it to simmer below the words on the page and infuse the story with its very unknowability.

*Allegorical Realism & Intertextuality*

Hamish Dalley, in his 2014 book *The Postcolonial Historical Novel. Realism, Allegory and the Representation of Contested Pasts* attempts to chart the ways in which realism and the realist imperative can incorporate techniques of literary experimentation such as metafiction or magic realism (2014, p.10). He discusses postcolonial historical novels where:
The realist imperative to represent the past in an epistemologically responsible way is combined with attention to the constructedness of historical narrative, generating a tension between the aspiration to truth and the awareness of its partiality (2014, p.101).

Dalley claims that this is characteristic of postcolonial novels where the past they seek to represent is contested (2014, p.101). Importantly, he does not seek to resolve this tension, but lets it sit, a productive tension that speaks to the contested past and the difficulty in representing it. For him, the realist imperative can exist alongside the self-conscious construction of the historiographic metafictional novel. His realism bears no resemblance to the ‘realism’ of canonical nineteenth century novels, nor is it a simple reflection of the way the world once was (2014, p.9). Instead, he argues that:

The genre is realist insofar as it asserts the epistemological claim that fictional narratives about history ought to be treated as serious interpretations of the past, open to dialogue with rival accounts and archival sources. In other words, the historical novel’s realism arises from its commitment to norms of plausibility and verisimilitude that frame narratives as meaningful contributions to knowledge (2014, p.9).

The separation between the referent (the past) and how it is represented in fiction is wide open in Dalley’s theory: it is allegorical, where the representation is presumed to be standing in for the referent, rather than providing direct access to it. This separation exposes and foregrounds the fictionality of the representation, and ‘demands that the novel be evaluated intertextually, in conjunction with alternative accounts or archival evidence’ (Dalley 2014 p.16, emphasis added). The reader is led to other texts and accounts because the representation does not, and cannot, exist alone, and access to the referent itself is impossible, as the referent no longer exists: ‘historical representation is premised as much on the loss or absence of past reality as on its former existence’ (Rigney 2001, p.2). Dalley challenges the ‘presumed antithesis of realism and allegory’ (2014, p.16). This seems contentious at first – how can something that is standing in for something
else, but is not the thing it is standing in for, be realistic? And yet we have seen how historical fiction has made space within itself for other of its apparent opposites, so let's explore this further.

What Dalley seems to be saying is that by presenting something that is clearly not exactly how things were in the past is opening up a space for the reader to think about all the stories that are not being told, all the possible worlds that are not being represented, as well as the one that is. By being more than one thing at once, the text is asking readers to actively engage in the production of the past by reading it alongside other accounts of the same, similar, or contradictory stories. Ann Rigney argues that historical novels ‘link up with the ongoing collective attempts to represent the past and invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources’ (2001, p.19). For Mantel, ‘if the reader asks the writer, “have you evidence to back your story?” the answer should be yes: but you hope your reader will be wise to the many kinds of evidence there are, and how they can be used’ (2017). For Dalley, ‘that intertextuality grounds an ontological connection to actuality that is the condition of possibility of the genre’s realist claims’ (2014, p.19). Dalley seems to be equating realism with meaningfulness here: that the allegorical representation, read intertextually, can be a ‘serious interpretation of the past’ (2014, p.9) and can inform the reader’s knowledge of the past and active engagement with it. And perhaps this kind of meaningfulness is what historical novelists are striving for when they aim to represent the past in the first place: they want people to learn about things that went before in order to have a different perspective on the past, and how it relates to the present, and the future.

The Politics of Representation

Linda Hutcheon says that historiographic metafictional novels ‘ask us to acknowledge that representation has a politics’ (2003, p.40). When writers seek to represent something in fiction, they are faced with choices: what to represent, what to leave out, and how to represent what is included. But these
choices are not made in a vacuum. Writers have a responsibility to understand the implications of their choices, and the way they represent certain figures or acts. For Hutcheon,

We cannot avoid representation. We can try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural. We can also study how representation legitimises and privileges certain kinds of knowledge – including certain kinds of historical knowledge (2003, p.51).

Writing historical fiction is an opportunity to ‘write back’ against a history of misrepresentation – misrepresentation of women, of colonised and first nations people, of queer people, of underprivileged or otherwise marginalised people. For Rigney, ‘the possibility of representation (of something’s being seen as standing for something else) entails the possibility of misrepresentation (the possibility of something’s being seen as distorting something else or inadequately accounting for it)’ (2001, p.39). Historical fiction is an opportunity to disrupt historical misrepresentations, simplifications, romanticisms. But it must be done responsibly – the writer should be aware of the ‘politics’ of what they are doing. In the next three chapters of this thesis, I will explore the damage that can be caused by both conscious and unconscious misrepresentation and examine my own attempt to write back against these misrepresentations, as well as facing the likelihood of my own elisions.

Representations, like allegory, must be considered intertextually. Rigney conceives of representation as ‘a project rather than a product’ (2001, p.2). She says:

It involves the attempt to portray the past in an accurate and a coherent way, whereby accuracy marks the realisation of the desire for a correspondence between the image of a past presented and the past as it actually was, and coherence marks the realisation of the desire to make sense of the past at a later point in time. Crucially, representation is defined here by the attempt itself and not the extent to which that attempt is successful. It involves an invitation to see a text as an adequate account of some aspect of the past. As such,
representation is the starting point for an exchange, rather than the endpoint of discussion (2001, p.2).

For Rigney, representation means ‘to establish a meaningful relationship between something that is presented ... and something that is permanently absent’ (2001, p.25). But Rigney knows that representation of something from a past reality ‘as a perfect fit’ is impossible. She says: ‘it involves rather the idea that the understanding of that which is presented is a possible way into understanding that which is absent’ (2001, p.25). There is perhaps a tension here between creating an historically and politically responsible representation that speaks back against past misrepresentations and creating a representation that may be unsuccessful but whose existence informs contemporary debate. Can a writer be justified in representing something or someone, even if that representation is criticised and considered (by some) to be wrong or harmful? As we know, writers can get representation wrong even when they take a responsible approach and ‘do their homework’. Is that writer able to feel justified in their attempt, even if they did not get it quite right, if their depiction prompts discussion and contributes to contemporary debate? Is it better to try but fail to do it well rather than not attempt it at all? With trepidation, my answer to this is probably yes, as long as the attempt is made in a genuinely responsible way that does not cause further damage. It will, of course, still be a matter of debate how ‘responsible’ each attempt was, whether the writer could or should have done more to avoid their mistakes.

The politics of representation is important to consider in historical fiction, which, Slotkin argues, is always political – ‘that is a given of the form’ (2005, p.231). Dalley discusses how political representation can give us a new perspective on history even when it is not entirely successful, in his discussion of Kate Grenville’s The Secret River. He describes that what Grenville has done is depict the violence of the Australian settlement as something that was not inevitable, but that occurred because of the very human choices that were made: he argues that Grenville’s novel shows that
it is fallible choices rather than necessity or inevitability that determine the course of history (2013, p.46). Dalley quotes Barthes in calling these moments ‘hinge points’: ‘this choice is the key hinge point which structures the narrative and represents the ‘risky moment’ that gives the novel its tension’ (2013, p.45). He goes on to say that ‘introducing contingency like this generates a proliferation of alternative or counterfactual representations, as each hinge point opens not only onto the past that did occur, but also onto pasts that might have occurred’ (2013, p.47). Grenville received a lot of criticism for her representation of the Australian frontier wars along the Hawkesbury River, which I discuss more in chapter three. She made a genuine attempt to represent the past in a way that would open up a dialogue, and it certainly did. It may not be conclusive whether or not her attempt at representation was a successful, or even an historically responsible one, but the discussion that ensued certainly reminded writers of historical fiction that which they must never forget – that they must tread carefully when representing the past, or people from it.

Historical Fiction and the Gothic: Transgressive or Conservative?

In this chapter I have attempted to chart a genealogy of the historical Gothic novel as a form that is full of transgressive and metafictional possibilities: full of alternate worlds and restorative representations. But the Gothic, particularly, although often defined by its transgressive potential, has traditionally been transgressive only up to a point, before a conservative ideology is re-entrenched. Rosemary Jackson says that it is rare, in the Gothic, for the subversive desires to win: the Gothic ‘conducts a dialogue within itself, as it acts out and defeats subversive desires’ (1981, p.96). Because of this, Jackson argues, it is actually difficult to read the Gothic as politically subversive (1981, p.96). Katrin Althans also comments on this, saying that ‘one of the most striking peculiarities of Gothic fiction is its double nature of subversion and submissiveness, challenging society’s values and beliefs while at the same time reinforcing those very values it opposes’ (2010, p.12). In this,
perhaps, it reflects the tension of the historical novel and the need for a writer to be faithful to the historical moment she is trying to depict, while at the same time undermine that moment and bring it into question.

The Gothic is a distancing tool: it makes things other so that we can feel threatened and thrilled from the safety of our own homes. Althans argues that this has been the success of the Gothic novel from its earliest iteration, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where ‘the readers were reassured of their own moral lifestyle precisely because the threats presented stemmed from a world alien and remote to theirs’ (2010, p.13). The Gothic used supernatural elements to emphasise threats, and to reveal truths that were beyond the reach of the ‘realistic’ novel (Garber 2015, p.143). However, perhaps the Gothic in itself can only hint at subversiveness, as we know that the threat will be dealt with or subdued by the end of the novel. This is, perhaps, where the ‘realism’ of the historical novel still has a part to play: the novelist can play with the idea of a different future for women, for example, imagine what their voices would sound like and what they would say, but cannot bring such a future to fruition without tipping the scales into something that would be counterfactual and anachronistic.

In the traditional Gothic mode, the dominant values centred around a European, class-based, patriarchal, heteronormative society and the dangers depicted therein were things that threatened the status quo: illegitimate heirs, working-class revolutionaries, desiring females, social outsiders or madmen (Jackson 1981, p.131). However, in a feminist, postmodern, post-structural, postcolonial world, this is flipped, and those writing back cast the threat as coming from the other side – from within the ideological centre: from misogyny, sexism, violence, colonialism, the invaders, compulsory heterosexuality: the things that confined them to the margins in the first place. Perhaps, though, we need to take the experimental possibilities of historiographic metafiction further, make the Gothic do more. Wallace argues that many of the conventional characteristics of the Gothic – ‘the snuffed candle, the explained supernatural, the unrealised fears’ – have become cliché and are ‘now more likely to raise smiles than fear’ (2013b,
Are we still scared of ghosts? Do they pose enough of a threat to be able to undermine a dominant ideology? And, if not, what does the Gothic have to do to be meaningful in this postmodern, metafictional world?

Critics have always, as we have seen, sought to define and limit what the historical novel is, following on from Lukács’ valorisation of ‘realism’. Recent scholarship has begun to pay attention to the myriad ways in which the historical novel is actually full of possibility. The historical novel, an inherently hybrid form, is anything but static. In this thesis I am particularly interested in the historical novel’s relationship with the Gothic, established above. I will use the next three chapters to show how the Gothic can both enable and confine representation in historical fiction, with particular emphasis on women, Aboriginal characters and queer characters in the Australian context.

Voice of The Shadows: A Note on Style

I have written Voice of the Shadows in a traditional realist style, although it is heavily infused with Gothic elements. The novel is based on thorough research into early 1940s Melbourne, the Leonski murders, and women on the Australian home front during World War II, amongst other things. I have attempted to achieve verisimilitude and show Melbourne as it would have been at the time.

The Gothic elements at play in the novel are: the dark, shadowy browned-out streets, a world where traditional gender roles were being questioned and challenged, an unknown killer strangling women, shadowy, mostly unspoken same-sex desire between women, a Gothic doubling between Alice and the killer as a manifestation of her guilt, shame and desire, and a killer who kills women to get their voices. I have taken care to ensure that the Gothic elements, though, are all possible: there is nothing here that would/could not have happened on the real streets of a real city when Leonski was on the loose.
In the novel, I quite deliberately set up the Gothic in a number of ways, and then unpick it. In this way, the novel is arguably also an anti-Gothic novel. Relatively early in the novel, we see Alice being seduced by the Gothic: the horror of the women being killed is exciting to her, and it is the thing that makes her see that she does still value life, even after heartbreak. She creates in her mind a picture of the killer as a storybook demon, rather than a man. At this stage, after two murders, she feels only a very vague sense of danger to herself. It is not until Gladys is killed that Alice feels the Gothic come too close.

It is at this point that Alice begins to feel that she and the killer are actually not so different – she feels that, over time, she would also have destroyed Gladys, through the destructive potential of her forbidden same-sex desire. When she hears that he confessed to killing the women to get their voices, she relates it back to herself, and her own desire for Gladys’s voice.

However, the novel ultimately dismantles the Gothic. The women in the novel all become more corporeal the closer they are to their queer identities, unpicking the Gothic trope of the ‘ghosted’ or ‘apparitional’ lesbian that I will discuss more in chapter four. There are no ghosts in the novel, except perhaps in Alice’s imagination. Throughout the novel, Alice has been building the killer up to be a monster, rather than a man, and she feels let down when she enters the court martial and sees a very ordinary young man sitting there. He is not a monster, after all. This let-down, or dismantling of otherworldliness, is actually precisely the point.

In 2014, Tom Meagher, whose wife Jill was violently raped and murdered by a man named Adrian Bayley in 2012, wrote an article in which he addressed exactly this, what he called the danger of the monster myth. He said:

I had formed an image that this man was not human, that he existed as a singular force of pure evil who somehow emerged from the ether. Something about his ability to weave together nouns, verbs and pronouns to form real, intelligible sentences forced a re-focus, one that required a look at the spectrum of men’s violence against women,
and its relation to Bayley and the society from which he came. By insulating myself with the intellectually evasive dismissal of violent men as psychotic or sociopathic aberrations, I self-comforted by avoiding the more terrifying concept that violent men are socialised by the ingrained sexism and entrenched masculinity that permeates everything from our daily interactions all the way up to our highest institutions (Meagher 2018).

In my novel, I hope, this tendency towards ‘self-comforting’ is removed, and with it the Gothic, and although this delivers Alice somewhat of a reprieve as she realises she’s nothing like the killer and not to blame for Gladys’s death (a dismantling of the Gothic doubling), the mirror continues to be held firmly up to society and the toxic gender constructions it insists upon, particularly, but not only, during times of war.

Writing the novel in a ‘realist’ style aiming for verisimilitude asks the reader to question what the Gothic is, and whether the novel is, in fact, truly a Gothic novel at all. The Gothic tropes in the novel are more psychological than physical – they are often subtle, and they are always realistic, always possible. It is, I believe, a scarier, more confronting Gothic, because we can’t escape it at the end. Because although the specific threat posed by Leonski is removed in the novel (as it was in 1942 when Leonski was executed), we know all too well that the kinds of threats explored in this novel – most notably the prevalence of violence against women – are still, unfortunately, all too real.
In this chapter I will explore how historical fiction is gendered: how history has been constructed to marginalise or silence the stories and perspectives of women, and how the historical novel has been a tool to write back against that. The novels of Walter Scott and others like him – the classical historical novel, as we have seen, charted progress and the men’s achievements in the public sphere: women were featured solely as romantic interests (Cooper & Short 2012, p.2). However, feminism has cast doubt over this depiction and brought to our attention the contested nature of it, showing that it has been ‘manipulated by male-authored or patriarchal accounts of history’ (Cooper & Short 2012, p.2). Contemporary historical fiction is often infused with feminist aims: to write women back into history, to give agency to female characters from the past, whether they be real historical figures or imagined.

Ellen Moers coined the phrase ‘female Gothic’ in the late 1970s and used it to mean ‘the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic’ (1976, p.90). Since that time, literary scholars have explored what the female Gothic actually is. For Paulina Palmer, its three most significant elements are: a woman’s problematic relationship with her own body, the transgressive aspects of female sexuality, and the psychological intricacies of female friendships and antagonisms (1999, p.10). She also mentions the haunting of one woman by another, and relationships between mothers and daughters as key characteristics (199, p.10). For Alison Milbank, it is characterised by its explained supernatural: ‘it evokes a spiritual world through unexplained
ghostly visions and sounds, yet finally provides a natural origin for all the effects’ (2007, p.157). Diana Wallace quotes Anne Williams, who distinguishes it from the Male Gothic in a number of ways:

First, whereas the female Gothic centralises the female point of view, and generates suspense through its limitation, the male Gothic uses multiple points of view to generate dramatic irony. Second, whereas the female Gothic explains the ghosts, the male formula accepts the supernatural as part of the ‘reality’ of its world. Third, the male Gothic has a tragic plot. The female formula demands a happy ending, the conventional marriage of Western comedy. Finally, while the female Gothic is organised around terror provoked by an imagined threat, the male Gothic ‘specialises in horror’ and focuses ‘on female suffering’ (2013a, p.17).

While not all of these points stand up in relation to every female- or male-authored Gothic novel, they are nonetheless useful in considering the differences in the different threats they present, and their different political or subversive aspirations. The female Gothic need not revert to the supernatural for its threats: its fears are real (although often revealed to be ‘imagined’), and they culminate in the conservative, traditional marriage plot ending, which is, itself, one of the fears. Early Gothic novels, with their relationship to the past, sought to shed light on the women’s lives and stories even when they reverted to the conservative patriarchal structures at the end. Sarah E Whitney points to criticism that figures the Gothic as a genre that illuminates inequities but doesn’t show how to transcend them (2016, p.9). Katherine Cooper argues that what she calls the contemporary female Gothic is a ‘combination of these traditional discourses of powerlessness and imprisonment, with more modern themes of female agency and liberation in order to highlight the continuing inequalities faced by women’ (2012, p.153). In this, we can see the contemporary Gothic moving away from the traditional Gothic trappings of haunted house and ghosts and focus more on the real plight of women, although this challenge of highlighting the position of women has always been there, hiding behind the billowing curtain in the abandoned room. But perhaps the contemporary Gothic wants to bring this
out from behind the curtain and allow it to stand, starkly, in the un-Gothic light, allowing it, in itself, to generate the fear and the challenge.

Gothic fiction from its early days has been casting light on women, on their stories and how they experienced life, in defiance of the stories of men that proliferated. Wallace says it can be seen as a ‘harbinger of feminist politics’ (2013a, p. 19). One early proponent of this was Jane Austen, whose novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* contained critiques of the ‘real history’ that writers like Walter Scott foregrounded:

Set during the period of ‘false peace’ between April 1814 and March 1815, with its focus on the impact of war on the home front, rather than the heroics of battle-scarred men, *Persuasion* presents a tone distinctly different from the euphoric patriotism of writers such as Walter Scott set during the same period. By domesticating history here, Austen clearly articulates a sense that women and men experience the past in very different ways (Spongberg 2013, p. 66).

Austen was, at times, quite overt in her criticism of Scott’s brand of history – most notably in the oft-quoted example of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, who complains about what she calls ‘real, solemn history’:

I read it a little as a duty but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome (in Wallace 2013a, p. 18)

It seems that women writers such as Austen were insistent upon emphasising the legitimacy of women’s perspective. Rosemary Jackson argues that it is no accident that so many writers of the Gothic tradition are women: she charts this movement from Mary Shelley, whose writings ‘open an alternative tradition’ of a ‘female Gothic’ (Jackson 1981, p. 103), which fantasises a violent attack on the patriarchal society. She cites others who have used the fantastic to do this: Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rosetti, Isak Dinesen, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath and Angela Carter (Jackson 1981, p. 103). Wallace goes so far as to suggest that this mode is suited to women because ‘history is a nightmare within which women are trapped’
This is a mode of feminist Gothic writing that is going from strength to strength, as women are writing themselves back into history, foregrounding women’s experiences as valuable. British novelist Sarah Waters, who uses the Gothic to great effect in her works, also talks about writing women’s experiences and domestic history in terms of writing the ordinary, the ‘prosaic daily lives’ of her characters’ (Alden 2013, p.80). She is speaking here of her most recent novel The Paying Guests but the following quote is relevant to all her historical fiction:

‘Ordinariness’, in fact, is right at the core of this novel. People have sometimes suggested to me that my fiction is full of lavatories, and it’s true that key moments in The Paying Guests take place in the most mundane locations – over a picnic in a park, in a Clapham back parlour, in a scullery. A final emotional admission is made, yes, in a ladies’ loo. But it’s the small, unlovely places of life that have always called most eloquently to me: they’re the ones that traditional histories tend to overlook, but they often provide the settings for some of our most personal dramas – especially, perhaps, if we are women (Guardian 2015).

These novels focussed on women’s experience are exactly those that Walter Scott disparaged when he said he wanted to write about ‘men, not manners’ (De Groot 2010, p.22). Patricia Meyer Spacks talks about these ‘manners’ as gossip and anecdote, which is, she says ‘defined as the type of talk that concerns itself with the trivialities of the domestic sphere. Gossip is defined by its opposition – and oppositionality – to public discourses’ (Bastin 2005, p.29). Generally, gossip does not occur in the midst of battle or a public political debate – and it, therefore, has been considered to have no place in the discourses of History. But if we cup our hands to our ears and listen to what is happening behind closed doors, we might just get a different perspective that allows us a new insight into what has gone before.
Mateship and the Colonial Woman’s Experience

These public discourses, traditionally the domain of rich, straight, white men, have been used to construct the world in their own interests: patriarchal structures, colonialism, compulsory heterosexuality. They have been used to construct stories of nationhood, national identity and myth. I want to turn now to Australia and look at the thread of public discourse that is our national myths, the story of our nation and of our past, and how that is strongly gendered and ‘whitewashed’. I will begin with the pervasive concept of mateship.

This concept of mateship goes hand-in-hand with nation-building in Australia, and it is often cited as a defining characteristic of what it means to be Australian (Page 2002, p.193). It is in the adversarial theatre of war, in risking lives and ‘making progress’ that men forge and develop ‘mateship’: a concept which, in current usage, connotes solidarity in times of conflict (Page 2002, p.194). Page argues that mateship is a construct, and one that relies on being exclusionary: these are your mates, but the others are not. This is often said to have originated in the ANZAC experience during World War I (Page 2002, p.194) but was actually firmly entrenched before that: in myths and challenges of the colonial experience and the Australian bush. Of course, these colonial experiences engendered conflict and war as well: the frontier wars that wiped out most of Australia’s Indigenous people, although that does not appear in the history books as war or conflict, but rather as the successful establishment of a colony, later a country – in fact, as progress. I will revisit this in chapter three, where I will look at the implications of invasion on how Australia’s First Nations people have been represented in literature and national discourses.

It is perhaps not surprising that the early years of white colonisation in Australia were cast as masculine: in the first fifty years on the settlement, the ratio amongst the 160,000 convicts was one woman to six men (Scheidt 2015, p.68). Of course, then, the first heroes of the colony were men, like the ‘discoverer’ Captain James Cook, and local (male) politicians, aristocrats,
judges and colony administrators (Scheidt 2015, p.68). These men are still lauded in Australia through statues and their white, colonial, masculine legacy lives on in the names of streets, parks, roads, universities, and other landmarks. As well as these highly-positioned men, other colonial types emerged: the selector, and several classes of itinerant bush workers such as swagmen, shearsers, drovers, station hands, and stockmen (Scheidt 2015, p.69). Mateship operated to some extent as a bond formed between these men in order to help them survive the harshness of the Australian bush (Scheidt 2015, p.69). This concept of mateship endures today: former Prime Minister John Howard attempted to make ‘mateship’ an official Australian value by including it in the Constitution (Scheidt 2015, p.69, Page 2002, p.193).

But mateship has no place for women. Dale Spender claims that women were excluded from ‘the contentment of the campfire, the opportunity to break bread, tell tales, make mates’ (Scheidt 2015, p.70). Instead, women were left for long periods of time in what was an unfamiliar and, to them, hostile environment, to cope on their own.

The Australian Girl

One of the primary colonial types into which women fell – or were constructed – was that of the Australian Girl. Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver claim that the Australian Girl ‘emerged out of a struggle between colonial independence and the influence of England – a struggle that played itself out across a great deal of colonial romance fiction’ (2017, p.122). The Australian Girl is healthy and attractive, she values freedom, expresses her opinion freely, and has a natural affinity with wild native species and a sympathy with the Aboriginal people (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.120). She has been raised in the colony, is resilient and capable, and unlike her mother, she doesn’t pine for the comforts of England, but thrives in the new world (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.121). She demonstrates a healthy resistance to Victorian prescriptions of white feminine propriety, and even to the institution and expectation of
marriage (Dalziell 2003, p.20). She is flirtatious and assertive, bold, and has a sense of humour and ‘an investment in the social wellbeing of the colony at large’ (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.118). In fact, she is an important part of the development of an emerging national identity (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.126) – she is unconventional (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.124) – but only up to a point. It is important to note that she contributes to generating national optimism rather than provoking national anxiety. Michelle J Smith says that the Australian Girl was not ‘defined as a threat to the gendered or sexual order and was not demonised in the periodical press. Indeed, rather than being lambasted by men, the Australian Girl was accommodated in burgeoning nationalism and national mythologies' (in Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.127). Tanya Dalziell adds that the Australian Girl is ‘unambiguously white’ (2004, p.103) and, for all her unconventionality, has conservative, ‘proper’, white sexual desires (2004, p.45). There was a huge ‘ideological investment’ in this character type, and, as Gelder and Weaver claim, ‘male authors could treat her with just as much enthusiasm as female authors’ (2017, p.127). This sets the Australian Girl apart from her antithesis, the New Woman, a ‘deviant’ woman, often a spinster or a lesbian, who didn’t slot neatly into the emerging nationalism, but instead posed a threat to it (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.134).

In Voice, I take this one of these ‘deviant’ women and make her into my heroine.

The Australian Girl was associated mostly with Australian colonial romance, which was generally considered to be a women’s genre, and often pitted against so-called ‘bush realism’ (Gelder & Weaver 2017, p.125) written by men. These were ‘realist’ accounts of ‘masculine independence and life in the bush, mateship, nostalgia for life on the goldfields and the ‘pioneering’ days of exploring and settling the Australian landscape’ (Lamond 2011a, p.35).

But, as Lamond argues, things were more complex than this and this demarcation didn’t go unchallenged (2011, p.35). One of the earliest and best-known examples of the Australian Girl novel, Miles Franklin’s My Brilliant Career, is a text that refuses to adhere to simple gender categorisations. Ian Henderson says of its heroine Sybylla Melvyn: ‘Sybylla ...
can never settle comfortably or decisively into ‘male’ realism or ‘female’ romance’ (1997, p.165). He describes the novel as one that blends realist and romance structures (1997, p.165). Franklin herself describes the book in its beginning, thus: ‘this is not a romance – I have too often faced the music of life to the tune of hardship to waste time in snivelling and gushing over fancies and dreams; neither is it a novel, but simply a yarn – a real yarn’ (2012, p.1). This is further complicated when we consider the placement of nostalgia and modernity/progress in these categorisations, which appears to be opposite to how Walter Scott had categorised them less than a century earlier. Gelder and Weaver (2017, p.126) argue that in the 1890s bush realism was seen as ‘trading on its nostalgia for character types who were already fading away (the swagman, the shepherd, etc)’ while ‘the colonial romance spoke directly to the dominant interests of colonial modernity’ – that is, to progress.

Franklin herself is keen to muddy the waters and evade categorisation with *My Brilliant Career*, although, conversely, Henry Lawson, who wrote the introduction, seems to want to insist on it – he writes: ‘I don’t know about the girlishly emotional parts of the book – I leave that to girl readers to judge; but the descriptions of bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me, and I know that, as far as they are concerned, the book is true to Australia – the truest I ever read’ (in Franklin, 2012, preface). Julieanne Lamond argues that Lawson here is:

... at pains to claim the ‘realistic’ aspects of the novel as genuinely Australian and genuinely good, at the same time disowning its ‘girlishly emotional parts’. Tied up in this is a distinction between himself and ‘girl readers’. His shoe horning of Franklin’s novel into a nationalist, realist, masculine mode ignores the novel’s deep ambivalence about all of these things. At the same time, his association of realism and masculinity with Australianness exemplified what had become ... a kind of consensus about literary value in this country (2011a, p.37).

Lawson’s insistence here on rigid gender lines is interesting when you consider that he, himself, was considered ‘feminine’: Frank Moorhouse
argues that he was aware of his femininity and ‘would have tried to suppress or modify it so that he could find acceptance in conventional male company, hence his adoption of the big moustache’ (2017a, p.26). Moorhouse argues that he was not particularly successful in ‘passing’ as a normal bloke in society, ‘yet he was successful in projecting through his writing the voice, manner and mores of the normal bloke of his times’ (2017a, p.26). Kay Schaffer argues that ‘Lawson is depicted as weak, womanish and unmanly when his writings no longer conform to the nation’s dominant idea of itself’ (in Moorhouse 2017a, p.32). The Australian bush was, to borrow the title of one of Lawson’s short stories, ‘no place for a woman’ – or, indeed, an effeminate man.

**Australia as Gothic Landscape & Colonial Women Writers**

*My Brilliant Career* was published in 1901, the year of Australian Federation, and early critics saw it as heralding a new cultural era in Australia that would ‘end the error of seeing Australia through English spectacles’ and focus instead on the stories of the emergent nation (Dalziell 2004, p.108). Perhaps Franklin, eschewing, as she did, the romantic in favour of realism, was signalling the emergence of the newly-federated Australian nation from its primitive, Gothic past. *My Brilliant Career* is not a conventionally Gothic novel, although it does explore the isolating vastness of the bush and the roles and restrictions placed on women within it, and Sybylla, with her refusal of the traditional marriage plot, could be argued to be a transgressive female character.

It is useful at this point to consider the context in which the novel was published, and how colonial Australia worked as a Gothic landscape. At first glance, it appears to be a prime candidate for the Gothic: Europe’s dungeon, a far-flung place to which Britain quite literally expelled its detritus, its unwanted, its criminals (Schaffer 1998, p.59). The landscape, too, seemed upside down: ‘its trees shed their bark, swans were black rather than white, and the seasons were reversed’ (Turcotte 1995a, p.10). Turcotte argues that,
in fact, the Gothic is the perfect mode to deal with the colonial condition, being preoccupied, as it is, with Gothic fears and themes: isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and of the unknown (1995a, p.11). Add to this an increasingly uneasy awareness of the land’s first people (Gelder 2007, p.119) – Katrin Althans argues that the indigene worked ‘as a metaphor for white society’s literal darker self’, standing in for ‘everything lying outside or being suppressed in Australia’s white settler society’ (2010, p.16). Althans goes on to argue that ‘it is the very invention of an uninhabited land along with the fiction of an Aboriginal absence which is behind many colonial Gothic stories’ (2010, p.17). This speaks to a tension in Australian colonial history that is inherently Gothic.

But there were some ways in which the Gothic absolutely did not suit the landscape of the so-called ‘new world’. In 1856 journalist Frederick Sinnett cast the Gothic novel in Australia as a sheer impossibility, because there are:

... no storied windows (to) cast a dim, religious light over any Australian premises. There are no ruins for that rare old plant, the ivy green, to creep over and make his meal of. No Australian author can hope to extricate his hero or heroine, however pressing the emergency may be, by means of a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons (Gelder 2007, p.115).

What Sinnett seems to be suggesting here is that there was no history – or at least, no history that the colonisers recognised or acknowledged as they tried to make the new world in the image of the one they left behind. They needed to tame this new land and its inhabitants in order for the colony to be a success, and they saw the Gothic as celebrating things (the landscape, the convicts, the Aboriginal people) that made the colony’s success impossible (Turcotte in Althans 2010, p.14). As well, the ‘Gothic terrors were pressing too close to be enjoyable’, so the colonisers ignored them and turned to realist and neoclassical values instead (Turcotte in Althans 2010, p.14). But perhaps it was because these Gothic terrors were ‘pressing too close’ that Australian realism has been infused with Gothic elements from its beginning. Women,
in particular, wrote realist challenges as nightmarish and grotesque, or as violent, but at the same time entirely possible, which made them all the more frightening.

In 1902, a year after *My Brilliant Career* was published, another female writer Barbara Baynton published a selection of short stories entitled *Bush Studies*. At the time, critics ‘lauded and deplored the realism of the work, often in the same breath’ (Lamond 2011b, p.387). Baynton’s bush is a place of violence and hardship (Neave 2016, p.125):

Not for Baynton the indulgent male tendencies of Henry Lawson or ‘Banjo’ Patterson, or the soft-hued images of Frederick McCubbin’s *The Pioneer* (1904). She saw almost nothing redeeming about life in the outback for a woman (Mills 2016, p.14).

Baynton’s fiction, according to Gerry Turcotte (1995a, p.14), delineated an entirely unromantic picture of the Australian bush, and we begin to see here, not the divorcing of the realist from the Gothic, but a clear relation between them:

Though it may seem oxymoronic, Baynton’s Gothic is intensely realist in method, describing with great detail the specificities of outback life – the arid and desolate land, the dangerous vagrants, the women besieged by nature and by men … Though at times melodramatic, her work makes it clear that the Gothic need not be escapist, excessive, or frivolous (Turcotte 1995a, p.14).

Baynton is writing back against the gender constructions of the early colonial period in Australia. According to Schaffer, ‘Baynton’s fiction provides a superbly ironic critique of the Australian tradition and the impossible position of women as she had been constructed and oppressed within it’ (1998, p.149). Turcotte believes that not only was Baynton’s work demonstrating a uniquely Australian fear but a specifically female fear as well (Steele 2010, p.34). Baynton’s realism is full of Gothic images: suspense, isolation, hysteria, doubling, being buried alive (Lane 2008, p.146). Unlike the traditional Gothic, though, the status quo certainly has not been re-
asserted at the end, and the threats Baynton’s characters face are real: she uses ‘shock tactics in a serious sense of direct conflict instead of the insinuations and atmospherics of Gothic with its emphasis on threats that are uncertain rather than direct’ (Hergenhan 1996). Kathleen Steele (2010) argues that Baynton’s characters are attempting to assert themselves on the landscape, to make history and culture where (apparently) none before existed, and it is the landscape’s rejection of this and the tension of imagining an empty landscape that was nonetheless full of very real threats that makes her works – and the bush in which they are set – nightmarish and terrifying. She compares this to Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock where Appleyard College ‘suggests establishment’ (Steele 2010, p.35) and is described at the beginning of the novel itself as ‘an architectural anachronism in the Australian bush – a hopeless misfit in time and place’ (Lindsay 2009, p.8).

The Gothic in Lindsay’s novel comes from an attempt to impose ‘Englishness’ on to what was seen by the white people to be a hostile landscape (Carleton 2015, p.14). We have no delicious sense, in either Baynton’s stories or Lindsay’s novel, of fear and threat that is resolved: we have no comfortable sense of safety at the end. Mills (2016, p.150) argues that the hero who usually appears has been replaced by a villain: there is to be no rescue here. We remain unsettled, the threat still at large.

Another female writer imagining herself into the ‘masculine space of adventure’ and writing back against a heteronormative patriarchy in colonial Australia was Rosa Praed (White 2016). Rosa was born into a pioneering family in Queensland in 1851 and was ‘constrained by her love for her father and by a culture which believed in the progressiveness of colonialism’ (White 2016). Jessica White (2016) argues that Praed turned to the fantastic and the Gothic to try and escape and subvert this constraint. Most of Praed’s work was about the position of women (Ontivero 2017), and her work has been reclaimed ‘as part of a feminist romantic tradition occupied with the position of women (particularly in relation to marriage) and questioning the overtly masculinist and nationalistic discourses of the Australian fin de siecle’ (Barlow 1996). Praed used the trope of the Australian Girl to do this, and
Dalziell, in her 2004 study *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl*, explores Praed’s use of the type in her 1902 novel *Fugitive Anne: A Romance of the Unexplored Bush* (p.25). Praed used the occult and Gothic tropes to explore, encode and write back against her marginalisation as a woman and the elision of her relationship with Nancy Harwood, incorporating queer themes into her work (Barlow 1996; White 2010). However, we do need to be careful of simply labelling Praed a ‘queer’ or ‘lesbian’ writer as we intend the terms today: while she certainly loved Nancy, lived with her for nearly thirty years and sought to contact her through spiritualism after she died, there is also evidence that she was ‘nauseated’ by Radclyffe Hall’s novel of lesbian desire, *The Well of Loneliness*, lamenting that it ‘seemed to attack and try to make impossible the purest friendship between women’ (White 2010). Linda Garber points out that few of the cross-dressing or women-loving women in history would recognise themselves as lesbians as we are claiming them to be (2015, p.130). In *Voice*, Alice is surprised when Pat uses the word ‘lesbian’ and feels strange that she has been given a name for it: this speaks to the problematic issue of labelling sexual and gender identities and comparing them across time.

Ada Cambridge, Catherine Martin, Catherine Helen Spence, Jessie Couvreur (Tasma), and many others, could be included in this ‘feminist romantic tradition’ from colonial and early Australia. Catherine Helen Spence explored female experience and – quite literally – the place and places occupied by women: ‘her drama is enacted nearly always inside – studies, kitchens, bedrooms, parlours – and the danger is in poverty and powerlessness’ (Mackellar 2016). Her novel, *Clara Morrison*, published in 1854, was ‘a novel of interiors, domestic events and personal relationships, set against the political debates of 1850s colonial society’ (Rutherford 2000, p.39). As a ‘novel of the hearth’, it did not ‘feature in the Australian Legend’ (Rutherford 2000, p.39), but it was revolutionary in that it was one of the first to subvert the marriage plot and explore the roles women could play beyond those of wife and mother (Mackellar 2016). In this way, perhaps, it paved the way for Miles Franklin when she wrote *My Brilliant Career*, fifty years later.
Ada Cambridge, too, used fiction to question the institution of marriage, even going so far as to represent it as a form of legally sanctioned prostitution (Lamond 2011a, p.35). Catherine Martin’s heroine of her popular romance, unambiguously entitled *An Australian Girl* (1890), calls marriage ‘the most foolish, faulty old institution going’ (Dalziell 2003, p.20). We see here a mundane Gothic – there are no ghosts, no vampires: there is enough for women to fear, and to fight against, without them.

Later authors such as Christina Stead, publishing from the 1930s onwards, and Elizabeth Jolley from the 1980s, continued this tradition of focussing on the domestic lives of women, using the Gothic. Stead’s work focuses on a domestic Gothic that operates very much in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, with ‘no logical or even psychological impossibilities’, but with distortions that, paradoxically, are what ‘make her stories real’ (Lidoff 1979, p.203). Stead saw this as particular to a woman’s vision and her ‘ability to tolerate chaos and accommodate fantasy and the everyday world simultaneously’ (Lidoff 1979, p.205) was a hallmark of her work. Stead uses this to show privacy and private spaces, and to express what is oppressed or taboo (Lane 2008, p.152). Similarly, Jolley’s Gothic, recounted in realistic prose, celebrates female experience in negative ways – often as a grotesque, excessive depiction of it that includes madness, deformity, or entrapment. (Turcotte 1995b, p.14). It is a corporeal Gothic: it is not the stuff of shadows, but of pain, of bodies that did not conform, of real physical – as well as metaphorical – structures that contained and entrapped.

### The Australian Girl Today

How, then, do colonial women and types like the Australian Girl look to us today, looking back? Female Australian historical novelists are reimagining her, writing her back into history, but letting the Australian Girl tug a bit harder at the boundaries that constrained her. Lucy Treloar’s 2015 novel *Salt Creek* is set in the Coorong in South Australia, beginning in the 1850s. The novel is told from the perspective of Hester Finch, a young girl who tells us...
all about her family’s struggles in their attempts to tame the land and civilise its inhabitants. Hester is the Australian Girl, clever and independent, compassionate and family-focussed. She dreams of another life but has few opportunities to chase it, stuck as she is looking after her family and making the best of her father’s misplaced ambition and doomed money-making schemes. Another Australian Girl in the novel is Hester’s younger sister Addie. Addie is the Australian Girl who challenges the type: she is true to it, independent, opinionated, and a bit wild, but where Treloar allows her to stray is by having her fall in love with, and fall pregnant to, the Aboriginal boy Tully, who the family takes under its collective wing. Dalziell’s investigation of Rosa Praed’s _Fugitive Anne_ shows the taboo of these kinds of miscegenetic desires for the Australian Girl (2004, p.45). Another novel in which the Australian Girl dares to fall in love with an Aboriginal boy is Kate Grenville’s _Sarah Thornhill_. This is the third novel in Grenville’s colonial trilogy and tells the story of the youngest daughter of William and Sal Thornhill, Sarah. Sarah is ‘wilful and adventurous, happiest outdoors on her horse or in the cave she uses as a hideaway and has no interest in being a lady’ (McKeon 2012). In another recent Australian historical novel, Kate Mildenhall’s _Skylarking_, the main characters are two young Australian Girls, Kate and Harriet, who are fourteen and sixteen at the opening of the novel, and roaming free on an unspecified Victorian cape, loving the outdoors, growing up together. There are hints in the novel of a homoerotic desire (On 2016): it is never realised, but Kate’s recounting of the story, years later, is wistful and she speaks at times as though she was in love with Harriet, a threat to the staunchly heterosexual desires of the Australian Girl.

But in these three novels the status quo is restored, as all three novelists are attempting to tell stories that could have happened in the time period they’ve chosen. In both _Salt Creek_ and _Sarah Thornhill_ Addie and Sarah do not end up with their Aboriginal lover but are married off to white men. In _Skylarking_, the young Kate treats her jealousy of Harriet’s potential love interest by attempting to seduce him herself in a performance of adult heterosexuality that leaves her feeling foolish. And then tragedy strikes, and
the girls are torn apart before either they – or we as readers – know if there might have been anything more than friendship between them. We know, reading the book, that Kate has been safely married to a man for years, as she tells the story looking back, years after the novel’s primary action. The message is clear: even if the Australian Girl rallies against the constraints placed upon her, in the end she must submit to them, or she will be cast out. This is a neat reflection of the female Gothic that plays with patriarchal boundaries, pulling at them, showing us where they are and how they work, rallying against them for a bit, but then allowing them to spring neatly back into place, reinforcing them through the conventional marriage plot ending.

A recent Australian novel that doesn’t end in the marriage plot or a conservative reinstating of the dominant ideology is Courtney Collins’ *The Burial* (2012), which is set in 1921 and tells the story of real historical female bushranger Jessie Hickman. The novel’s tagline is ‘Wife. Mother. Murderer. Lover. Bushranger. Fugitive. Legend’, already pointing to a woman who has broken out of the role set for her to play and been cast out of respectable society. Annette Hughes (2012) describes Jessie as ‘adaptive, resourceful and, best of all, active’ and draws a comparison between Jessie and Sybylla Melvyn, who brings with her echoes of the colonial Australian Girl. Hughes also draws a comparison between Jessie and another famous Australian Girl from colonial fiction – Lawson’s ‘drover’s wife’. Hughes says that Jessie is a ‘more desperate’ drover’s wife whose ‘life is in much greater peril than the threat of a mere snake loose in the kitchen’ (2012). I will revisit the story of the drover’s wife in chapter three.

Post-Feminism and Refiguring the Gothic

The conservative underpinnings of the female Gothic, and the Gothic novel in general, call out for a rethinking of the genre, which is already happening. It is helpful here to consider, as Wallace does, the peaks in the female Gothic novel against the waves of feminism:
The Recess and some of Radcliffe’s novels precede and influenced Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792); the Gothic-realism of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and the stories of Elizabeth Gaskell prefigure what we call the ‘first wave’ of feminism in the late nineteenth century, leading to the suffragette movement; the sudden huge popularity of the ‘modern Gothics’ in the early 1960s just predates the upsurge of second-wave feminism in 1968; finally, it is too early to tell precisely how but the rise of Gothic criticism and the popularity of Sarah Waters’ Gothic historical novels may well relate closely to what is now being called ‘Third Wave’ feminism (2013a, p.19).

As feminism grows, changes, and reinvents itself to respond to the demands and challenges of a continuing patriarchy, so must the forms, genres and modes of the literatures that have been used to represent it. This new wave of feminist novelists using the Gothic may bring with them a more destructive, less conservative Gothic. One of these, as mentioned in the quote above, is British historical novelist Sarah Waters. There is a vibrant and growing body of criticism focused on the work of Sarah Waters, a detailed analysis of which is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis. But what is important to note is that, although Waters does employ supernatural elements in her novels, they are very much anchored in the corporeal world of flesh and blood and bodies. Waters’ Gothic is focused on writing back against marginalisation, and particularly on carving out a space in the past for lesbian identity and agency. Waters plays with images of ghosts and spiritualism, darkness and doubling, but her lesbians are not unrepresentable: they are brought to the centre and ‘fleshed out’, as I will explore more in chapter four.

It is perhaps interesting here to consider the ‘postfeminist Gothic’, a term coined in 2007 by Benjamin Brabon and Stephanie Genz. They argue that there is a natural affinity between postfeminism and the Gothic, and that they are linked ‘by their transgressive and boundary-defying capabilities, their eschewal of a binary logic and the embrace of pluralism’ (Brabon & Genz 2007, p.1). Postfeminism itself, they argue, has a contested past, being defined as both anti- and pro-feminist, either a ‘backlash against feminism and its
values’ or a ‘postmodern, poststructuralist feminism that discredits discursive homogeneity and a unified subjectivity’ (2007, p.1). Sarah E Whitney says that the postfeminist Gothic is writing back against postfeminism’s claim that the struggle for women’s freedom is finished (2016, p.2). She argues that novels in the postfeminist Gothic mode emphasise gendered violence and female disempowerment, rather than its opposite, to show that patriarchal structures and oppression is still very much in place (Whitney 2016, p.2). These novels feature ‘abject protagonists who are socially invisible, physically broken or speaking from the grave’ (Whitney 2016, p.2). In these novels, Whitney seems to suggest, there can be no conservative reinstatement of the patriarchal order at the end of these novels, because the patriarchal structures are never lifted, never beaten. Instead, these novels show us how immutable those structures are. They don’t dress up their threats in the guise of shadowy spectres: they are brutal and violent, ‘producing in their readers feelings of anxiety, fear, anger and perhaps despair’ (Whitney 2016, p.2). And perhaps this is what we need to make us sit up and take notice of a patriarchal system that we have thus far failed to dismantle.

The Women’s Historical Novel in Australia Today

There is certainly an appetite for fiction that allows us to engage critically with the past. Although historical fiction has gone through periods of unpopularity, often due to its ‘damaging’ association with women writers and readers (Wallace 2005, p.104), its popularity persists. Wallace charts the recent renaissance of the genre from 1990 when AS Byatt won the Man Booker Prize for Possession, which coincided with the rise of feminist literary and historical studies, as well as with Victorian and Gothic studies, in the higher education sector (2013a, p.10). Certainly, literary awards shortlists have features novels set in the past quite prominently over the past twenty years. Irish writer Emma Donoghue says:
Nowadays it seems self-evident that there’s a big readership for novels about people (and women particularly) who’ve been underrepresented in traditional history, but in the late 1990s that wasn’t true at all. I published a novel (*Slammerkin*) in 2000 with great difficulty – my agent despaired of selling a historical novel (the genre seemed so uncool), my then-publishers on both sides of the Atlantic dropped me, and it took a lot of scrabbling around before new ones took me on. But then *Slammerkin* sold better than anything I’d written before. So for me, ransacking the past for odd women (whether real ones or fictional equivalents) has been crucial to my career (LitHub 2017).

However, the success of the revival is far from complete. Australian writer Hannah Kent says ‘I never set out to be a historical novelist. I really hate the term ‘historical novel’ – it reminds me of bodice-rippers. But I’m hooked on research and I really, really enjoy it’ (Cummins 2013). This hangover of the genre’s marginal status is mostly levelled at women writers and readers, and perhaps this comes from the association with bodice-rippers that Kent mentions. Women’s historical novels are often quickly categorised as ‘romance novels’ in a pejorative way, using the same language of nostalgia, escapism, domesticity and the supernatural that has haunted them since the time of Scott. This categorisation means that women’s writing is seen as less serious than ‘men’s fiction’ (Wallace 2013a, p.31). The ideological prejudice is reflected in reviews and criticisms. The following is a review written by Ed Wright, a male critic in *The Australian*, about Australian novelist Jane Rawson’s historical speculative/science-fiction novel, *From the Wreck* (2017).

*When From the Wreck arrived in the post … my heart sank a little: the cover all russet and sepia, colours of nostalgia, the slightly spectral image, the historical story with a family connection. I was concerned that Rawson, fuelled by some success but also finding her talents under-read, a curse of small markets, had turned to the mainstream and that most overpopulated genre in Australian literature, the historical novel (Wright 2017).*

Wright goes on to give the novel a favourable review, but this is in spite of the history, not because of it: ‘the historical part is true,’ he says, ‘but thankfully, Rawson hasn’t sold out on idiosyncrasy’ (Wright 2017).
interesting to note here that, for Wright, it is the supernatural, fantastic, speculative elements that save the novel from the drudgery (for him) of historical fiction when it was, after Scott, those very elements that precluded a book from being included in the category. Rawson’s novel is speculative, yes, but I would argue that it has great verisimilitude – a lifelike novel that just happens to have a strong supernatural presence, and that certainly does make a serious and meaningful contribution to knowledge about the past, and about the present. It is based on the wreck of the steamship Admella off the coast of South Australia in 1859 – a wreck that Rawson’s great-great-grandfather George Hills survived. Rawson, known for her experimental fiction, set out at first to do exactly what Wright would have deplored and write a straight historical novel based on her family’s history (Godfrey 2017). But, she says, it did not work, and Rawson found herself introducing a supernatural element: an alien who is a fellow passenger on the ship and who saves George, thereafter attaching itself to George’s son as a birthmark, and often shape-shifting into the form of a cat. And yet, despite this clearly unrealistic major element, the rest of the novel is based on thorough research of the South Australia of that time. The alien serves as an unsettling, yet sometimes also comforting and familiar, presence that reminds us not just to accept things as they are presented to us, even in a world that appears recognisable and trustworthy. The otherworldly alien also allows Rawson to infuse the world with contemporary concerns such as post-traumatic stress, intergenerational trauma and an awareness of our role in the destruction of the environment (Godfrey 2017) that would be anachronistic in a purely ‘realistic’ novel that aimed to reflect the values and knowledge of the time in which it was set. The Gothic element, the alien, therefore allows Rawson to do more than she would have been able to do in a straight, ‘realistic’ historical novel.
Gender Construction in *Voice of the Shadows*

In my novel, I play with the construction of gender, particularly with the character of Pat. In the first two flashbacks where Alice is showing the reader her relationship with Pat, I have used no gendered pronouns. Pat dresses in men’s trousers, and the first time we see her, she is pulling her trousers back on after a swim. She is seen as a threat, at first – something potentially dangerous that becomes alluring. I have chosen a deliberately unisex name for her, and I hope that the reader assumes she is a man. Alice’s cousin’s children certainly assume she is a man, from a distance, because she is in pants – this speaks to the rigid gender constructions of the time. I hope that it comes as a surprise when I reveal in the third flashback, at the beginning of chapter twelve, that Pat is, in fact, a woman. Later, when Pat turns back on herself and begins to embrace her womanliness, she seems to become more and more shadowy, because it appears to be a cultural construction of femininity, rather than who she really is. I will discuss this more in chapter four, in relation to her queerness.

*Voice* is a feminist novel, where Alice is constantly trying to work out where she fits in the world, and resenting the restrictions placed upon her, at the newspaper and at home. She is, at times, naïve, thinking that she will be able to break through those barriers if she wants it enough, or shows that she has worked hard and thus deserves it. She eventually comes to realise that it is a fight that is bigger than she is, and one that she might not always win.
It would be a glaring omission to consider issues of representation, character construction and nation-building in Australia without turning my mind to how Aboriginal characters have been constructed and represented in Australian fiction. This speaks to a history and tradition that is hugely problematic, and politically fraught. With women, we know they were there, if somewhat ignored and undervalued. With Aboriginal characters, in some cases they weren’t there, at all: this is due to colonial violence having done what it did to rid the land of them. And so, traditionally, white settler fiction has represented Indigenous characters simplistically: either as a threat, or a noble savage, or has contributed to a false notion of *terra nullius* by not including their presence at all. This is something that anyone living on the Australian continent is, very much, still grappling with today. Cathy Craigie, Gamilaroi and Anaiwon writer and director of the First Nations Australia Writers’ Network (FNAWN), has said that ‘the great Australian novel must include Aboriginal undercurrents, acknowledgements or whatever. If you want to show the psyche of Australia you’ve got to do that. For me I think that all Australian writers have to be able to put that stuff in, but there are certain things they can’t talk about’ (in Johnson 2016, p.212). This quote goes some way towards showing what is tricky terrain for white writers eager to engage with the colonial past: we should do it, but there are things we cannot say.

I want to revisit the story of the drover’s wife here. To say, as we saw in chapter two, that Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’ is a story where the protagonist is threatened by a ‘mere snake’ is to undersell it: of course, the primary action in the story is around a woman, left at home with her children, sitting up all night waiting to kill a snake that has slithered into her house,
but it is so much more as well. In the short story, as she reflects on her life, we see that she is threatened by itinerant bushmen, floods, ‘a mad bullock that besieged the house for a day’, crows and eagles that ‘have designs on her chickens’, bushfires, fever, loneliness and monotony (Lawson 2017, p.3-13). Moorhouse argues that the story presents rape as one of her recurring fears (2017b, p.47), but it is never explicitly mentioned. The other threat in the story is the threat of the racial other, the Indigenous people. It is, of course, an Aboriginal man who builds the woodheap hollow, which is what allows the snake to get into the house in the first place. But there are other mentions of Aboriginal people in the story, and they tend to be caricatured and simplified, painted as part of a threatening landscape (Moorhouse 2017c, p.67-76). Lawson’s depiction of the Wife herself shows what women had to deal with, but also the complex strength and fortitude with which they responded to it: conversely, his depiction of the Aboriginal people in the story is simplistic, tokenistic, and dismissive.

Leah Purcell, a Goa-Gunggari-Wakka Wakka Murri playwright, has reimagined Lawson’s story. Her play of the same name, *The Drover’s Wife*, won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Drama, and the overall Victorian Prize for Literature in 2017, amid many other prizes for drama and literature. Purcell’s version turns the original on its head: most strikingly, she takes the black man out of his role of antagonist in Lawson’s story, and portrays him as the hero (Purcell, 2016, writer’s note). She also takes the fear of rape and violence out of the realm of euphemism and gives them flesh: she absolutely does not shy away from the violence and brutality of the bush. There is clear domestic violence here, and rape, and murder: the threats faced by the Wife are much more than a ‘mere snake’ and more, too, than natural occurrences such as floods and bushfires – the threat here is from men. Leticia Caceres, the director of the play’s 2016 run at Sydney’s Belvoir Theatre describes it as a ‘postcolonial and feminist re-imagining of Henry Lawson’s short story’ in which ‘Leah unapologetically claimed this much-loved frontier narrative and infused it with First Nations and Women’s history, calling into question the shameful treatment endured by both, at the hands of white men’
(in Purcell, 2016, director’s note). In Lawson’s story, the drover’s wife manages to master the dangers she faces, and the ‘story of stoicism and fortitude in the face of abject loneliness and hardship stuck a chord and was almost singlehandedly responsible for the creation of an archetype’ (McEvoy in Purcell, 2016, introduction). Purcell’s re-imagining subverts this archetype by infusing it with a shocking violence, racism and misogyny that is merely hinted at in the original.

In doing this, Purcell is writing back against a long history of racist, negative representations of Aboriginal Australians. Tony McEvoy, in his Introduction to the play, writes:

‘Sinister’ is a harsh word. But is there a better word in the English language to describe the fondness for a demonstrably romanticised image of colonial Australia that conveniently forgets our Aboriginal ancestors were being massacred and forcibly removed from our lands? It does not require much imagination to wonder what became of the Aboriginal people who ought to have also been in McCubbin’s triptych or in Lawson’s The Drover’s Wife (in Purcell 2016).

Purcell’s play asks us to go back and reimagine what we thought we knew of the past, to question the national foundation myths on which we stand today.

Power and Colonial Storytelling

Larissa Behrendt, a Eualeyai/Kamillaroi writer and lawyer, embarks on a similar project in her 2016 book Finding Eliza, Power and Colonial Storytelling. The title of the book refers to Eliza Fraser, who, with her husband, was shipwrecked off the coast of the now-Fraser Island in 1836 and taken in by the Butchulla people of the island. Her husband and the other men died, but Eliza survived, going on to write an account of her experience in which she painted the Aboriginal people as part of the danger she faces: portraying them as savage, primitive, dangerous (Behrendt 2016, p.5). Behrendt examines how Eliza Fraser’s story has survived and the role it played in creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes that have persisted ever
since. She begins with the example of Patrick White’s 1976 novel *A Fringe of Leaves* that reimagines the story – a novel that presents the Butchulla people as one-dimensional (Behrendt 2016, p.5). The novel also contains a scene depicting them as cannibals which was present in Eliza’s account but had no bearing at all on the truth and, instead, demonstrated White’s ignorance and lack of research into what the Butchulla people were really like (Leane 2016). For White, it served his story better to follow Eliza’s erroneous depiction, and he even declined an opportunity to speak to Butchulla elders during a visit to Fraser Island, ‘because he thought the Aboriginal version of the story would ‘complicate’ matters. It was not necessary for the way he wanted to ‘place’ the Aboriginal ‘tribe’ in relation to his main female character’ (Leane 2016). White, here, is creating fiction out of an account that purports to be a ‘real’ one, but which we know (and he knew) to be an ideological construction of Eliza Fraser’s experience.

But why did Eliza Fraser include accounts of cannibalism in her story, if it wasn’t true? Behrendt (2016, p.40) argues that Fraser did this to serve the colonial imperative: most versions of her story set up a clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide, showing ‘white people as superior, good and civilised, and blacks as inferior, bad, and uncivilised’. Depicting the Aboriginal people like this allowed the colonists not only to justify their mission to civilise and Christianise the natives – constructed here as ‘noble savages’ – but also to justify taking their lands (Behrendt 2016, p.53).

The Danger of Sympathetic Accounts and Positive Stereotypes
The image of the noble savage is one of the sympathetic, positive stereotypes that Behrendt argues are as damaging as the negative ones. She says:

It is easy to look at Eliza’s story today and see how these negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people are simplistic, racist and offensive. But a more stimulating and difficult question is raised by the use of positive stereotypes when representing Aboriginal people. If painting Aboriginal people as villains and their culture as barbaric is antiquated, isn’t it the case that accounts of Aboriginal people in
popular culture that employ positive stereotypes are automatically a good thing? Well, at the risk of sounding like I can never be happy – no, it’s not (Behrendt 2016, p.7).

Even sympathetic, positive stereotypes are constructed by white people to serve their own purpose. Even writers of sympathetic accounts choose what to include and what to leave out, and write stories that aren’t their own, appropriating the stories of others for their own ends. This was true even of people who were progressive in their thinking, such as Louisa Lawson, Henry’s mother, who was an early feminist, and considered that women should ‘show consideration and kindness (towards the Aboriginal women) … sympathising in their troubles, alleviating, as far as possible, their hardships and honouring their womanhood’ but even as she said this she ascribed to the popular view of the time that Aboriginal people were a ‘dying race’ (Moorhouse 2017c, p.69). There is a disconnect here in the humanitarian impulses of Louisa Lawson, and many like her – they fought for the recognition of women’s rights but advocated only the condescension of sympathy and kindness for Aboriginal people.

Louisa Lawson could be said to be of the Australian Girl type, and as we saw above, it is not unusual for the Australian Girl to be sympathetic towards the Aboriginal people. But what did that look like, and how could it be damaging? Tanya Dalziell (2004 p.95) analyses the sympathetic attempts of colonial Australian writers, such as Catherine Martin’s colonial romance novel, An Australian Girl (1890) and Katharine Langloh Parker’s collection of Aboriginal myths, Australian Legendary Tales (1896), and More Australian Legendary Tales (1898). In compiling her legendary tales, Parker collects information from a number of Aboriginal nations in New South Wales but describes in her preface that she has chosen to use only the Noongahburrah language to tell them, ‘thinking it would create confusion if I used … each dialect – several different names, for example, for one bird or beast’. Yet of course, this means that she is collapsing several diverse oral cultures into a single language (Dalziell 2004 p.95). Dalziell argues that:
What this suggests is that Parker’s apparently sympathetic intentions and respectful collections are also requisitioning. They assume the prerogative of custodianship and meaning production from subjects who are variously identified as expiring, anachronistic, obliging and culturally incompetent (2004 p.96).

Parker, of course, is not alone in this. To give a few examples, I will go back to the colonial women writers discussed in chapter two, who were progressive in thinking about women’s place in society and consider how progressive or enlightened they were on the issue of race. Rosa Praed is one who was lauded by early scholars as being sympathetic to Indigenous people (White 2016 p.14). Dale Spender wrote that Praed was ahead of her time in highlighting injustices suffered by Indigenous people (White 2016 p.14). But, Jessica White (2016, p.14) argues, recent scholarship casts this in a different light, with scholars such as Jennifer Rutherford and Belinda McKay questioning this view. McKay argues that Praed included Aboriginal characters to assuage her white guilt, ‘to seek moral redemption for the white races’ (White 2016, p.15). Rutherford (2007/2008) also sees Praed’s writing as a reaction to a traumatic past, in which she ‘constructs an idealised version of herself as defender of the blacks while sustaining an intensely antipathetic account of murderous cannibals exterminated by necessity’. McCann also sees Fugitive Anne, Praed’s 1903 novel, as an attempt to ‘address the problem of how a European can meaningfully belong to an Australia in which the relationship between settler and land is fundamentally deformed by the violence of colonial history’ (2005, p.44). This is a novel that plays out the idea of the ‘vanished race’ and, rather than feeding into a cry for greater recognition of Aboriginal people. It may, in fact be an example of ‘colonial wish-fulfilment’ (McCann 2005, p.48), where traditional racial as well as gender roles are firmly reinscribed by the end (Dalziell 2004, p.49). We can see here the conservative Gothic at play, with the boundaries reasserted at the end, and we can also see ideology working to construct Aboriginal people in a particular way, for a particular political and moral end.
Barbara Baynton includes marginalised Aboriginal characters (Neave 2016, p. 128), particularly in her story ‘Billy Skywonkie’ (Lamond 2016b, p. 387). Her landscape, though, is haunted and violent, and Steele (2010, p. 42) argues that this may be linked to a sense of white guilt. She argues: ‘The anxiety and terror in Baynton’s bush suggests a sublimation of the clandestine and unspoken aspects of the Australian relationship with the Aborigines (sic) into representations of the landscape’ (2010, p. 42). Miles Franklin includes only a couple of references to Aboriginal people in My Brilliant Career, which has the effect of presenting the landscape as if it was empty of Aboriginal people. And, in fact, this was not unusual. In early colonial literature Aboriginal people were portrayed as ‘monstrous figures haunting the Australian landscape’ (Steele 2010, p. 36), as sympathetic members of a ‘vanished, dying race’ or as ‘noble savages’. However, the turn of the century saw a shift, and Kathleen Steele (2010, p. 36) argues that by the late 1890s Aborigines had ‘all but disappeared from Australian literature’. Dalziell (2004, p. 106) argues that this is indicative of ‘the efforts of colonial discourse to silence, or at least marginalise, Indigenous men and women’. This is significant for the building of national ideology and myth, particularly considering that this was the time of the Federation of Australia, and novels like Franklin’s were, as we have seen, lauded as being novels that spoke for the emergent nation. Australia was to be, it seemed, a nation determined not to acknowledge its past.

Telling Aboriginal Stories

White Australian literature has oscillated between telling Aboriginal stories – or stories with Aboriginal characters who were often (usually) poorly represented or denying Aboriginal history by leaving it out. Both of these things perpetuate the lies of history. All of the following representative types can be said to be Gothic: the absent or almost-absent (ghostly or dying) Indigenous person, the magical supernatural noble savage, or the threatening monstrous other. All of these representations and absences have had the effect of either demonising or romanticising the Indigenous other.
Amanda Johnson argues that ‘such tropes only lend a mysterious and elegiac tone to the progress narratives of colonial occupation’ (2016, p.5). It is no wonder, then, that Australian national stories and literature, particularly historical ones, have been underpinned by a Gothic tone.

Two examples of representations of Aboriginal people after the time of Federation, Catherine Martin’s *An Incredible Journey* (1923) and Katherine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929), have been praised as being among the first books to be sympathetic to Aboriginal women (Dalziell 2004, p.79). Behrendt (2016, p.82) cites that *Coonardoo*, particularly, was originally considered to be ahead of its time because of its portrayal of a relationship between an Aboriginal woman and a white man, but she goes on to say that the recent history of violence and displacement is absent from the novel (2016, p.86). Both Behrendt and Wiradjuri scholar Jeanine Leane (2016) argue that the novel does nothing to question or challenge the assumption that the white people had legitimate authority over the Aboriginal people – it was presented as ‘justified – it was to ‘save’ them from themselves’. Leane goes on to argue that ‘Coonadoo’s representation – along with that found in other ‘canonical’ texts – becomes the authoritative narrative of settler colonialism. For many Australians, it is through these texts that they learn about the Aboriginal other.’ (Leane 2016). Behrendt says that it is a story about white sorrow, not black empowerment (2016, p.95). She argues that ‘these stories reiterate stereotypes and societal perceptions and are far from harmless tales. They continue to have an enormous impact on the lives and bodies of Indigenous women in contemporary Australia’ (Behrendt 2016, p.81).

This is because, Leane (2016) argues, these are not Aboriginal stories. They are stories of and about Aboriginal people and experience told by white people through their colonial lens. Leane argues that these stories allow ‘for the cultural transmission of settler narratives and values, and in doing so (they) overwrite Aboriginal history and experience.’ Leane advocates strongly for more Aboriginal stories, told and written by Aboriginal people, because:
Black writing has interrupted the unquestioned privilege of whites to represent non-whites in Australia. This has unsettled the settler by rupturing the previous trajectory of writing and representation. In doing so, it has challenged the conceptualisation of the past, present, and future with which white Australians were familiar – a construction of time and space in which Aboriginality was contained safely within the margins of settler texts (Leane 2016).

As we have seen, postcolonial historical novels can be a vehicle to write back against a dominant ideology. Of course, in Australia where we do not have a Treaty with our Indigenous people and do not recognise them in our Constitution, we are not a postcolonial state (Johnson 2016, p.80). Aboriginal writers writing today are writing back from within a colonial state that has not begun a process of decolonisation or of atoning for the wrongs of our past, or the wrongs that continue. They are also writing back using the structure, language and tools of colonisation, which is, in itself, problematic. Amanda Johnson discusses how two-time Miles Franklin Award winner, the Noongar writer Kim Scott, uses this to his advantage: ‘Every small moment in *Benang* is jam-packed with discomfiting metafictional devices that permit a rereading of the ways in which language has enmeshed and determined colonial power-structures. Scott plays with the literary archive of (meta) fictional forms in order to deconstruct the language of the colonial archive’ (Johnson 2016, p.72). Further and detailed discussion of Scott is beyond the scope of this thesis: I want to focus on novels by Aboriginal women, particularly in comparison to historical novels by white Australian women who attempt to engage with a contested past. There are a number of Aboriginal women who are, like Scott, using the language and structure of colonialism – including takes on and innovations with the Gothic – to invert the structures they write within, and thereby to write back against them.

Aboriginal Gothic

Before I go on to discuss a couple of examples of historical novels by Aboriginal women, I want to spend some time on the Aboriginal Gothic
discussed most fully in Katrin Althans’ 2010 work *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film*. The Gothic is one of the tropes that falls within the colonial language and narrative structures that are problematic for Aboriginal writers, as it has been the very mode that for so long has consigned them to the margins and represented them as demonic, ghostly, or disappearing (Turcotte 1995a, p.10). Katrin Althans describes it as ‘one of the most disabling discourses of colonial history’ (in Bartha 2016, p.197). But perhaps there are ways to subvert this. Aboriginal author Bruno Starrs (2014, p.10) argues that the Aboriginal Gothic speaks to the historical horrors of colonisation, and reverses roles to make the invading white man the monster: ‘The previously presumed civil coloniser is instead depicted as the author and perpetrator of a violently racist, criminal discourse, until, eventually, s/he is ultimately Gothicised: eroded and made into the Other, the villainous, predatory savage’. Fred Botting (2002, p.286) says that ‘excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes’. Starrs (2014, p.10) argues Aboriginal novelists such as Kim Scott and Waanyi woman Alexis Wright, among others, ask the reader to accept the Gothic, the supernatural, as ‘not only plausible but realistic and even factual’: where the Gothic exists it is so close to the ‘realistic’ past that it becomes unpicked. Nayuka Gorrie, a Kurnai/Gurnai, Gunditjmara, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta writer, talks about the white science fiction canon that’s full of stories of white people warding off invasions or protecting themselves from the ‘other’ where, for Aboriginal people, that is all too close to home (Talkfest 2017) – the aliens invading were, in Australia’s case, the white men. Noongar writer Claire G Coleman says ‘we don’t have to imagine an apocalypse. We survived one. We don’t have to imagine a dystopia. We live in one – day after day after day’ (Radio National 2017). The Gothic here becomes the stuff of daily lives for Australia’s Aboriginal people.

For Aboriginal author and academic Tony Birch, the concept of the Australian Gothic is still a problematic trope:
In regards to the Australian Gothic, I’m not ambivalent about it, but I have a particular view that it can collapse into cliché. I often go to conferences where non-Aboriginal people will say things like ‘it’s not the sound of the Australian landscape that is so eerie, it is the silence’ and then the audience goes ‘ahhh’. Now that’s just bullshit and when people talk about a haunting landscape, and this might be sacrilegious, but I don’t give much credit to that ... I find that it is a co-option of the violence in a way that at the same time gets that person off the hook of responsibility because it gives it a supernatural quality. Whereas, when you read about those acts of violence there’s nothing supernatural about them, they are homicidal, but they’re systematic because there were people who killed them, so they’re all totalitarian regimes with brutal efficiency (in Sefton-Rowston 2017).

It seems here that the Gothic, used in this way, links us back to the fiction of writers like Rosa Praed and Katharine Susannah Prichard who used their writing about Aboriginal characters to express variations on white guilt and sorrow that do not actually go very far towards facing up to the reality of what the white invaders did, or of empowering or learning about Aboriginal people and cultures. Birch goes on to say: ‘I believe that ... country is not interested in some white person’s melancholia or their sense of being haunted’ (in Sefton-Rowston 2017). Birch seems to be talking here about a white person’s concept of the Gothic. What happens to the Gothic, though, when it is in the hands of an Aboriginal writer or storyteller? Althans says they must be wary, and that even when they ‘try to use the subversive potential of the Gothic, they are nevertheless caught in its narrations of colonial submission’ (in Bartha 2016, p.197).

Alexis Wright uses the Gothic in her novels but keeps it grounded and corporeal. Her early novel Plains of Promise, published in 1997 but set in in the 1950s, tells the stories of three generations of women affected by the stolen generations, where the government took children away from their parents and placed them in orphanages or with white families. Francoise Kral (2008, p.116) says that the novel ‘opens on a very realistic setting where one is at pains to find the traditional signs – or markers – of the Gothic’. Kral goes on to argue that this novel asks us to ‘redefine the Gothic as a mode, a mood.
and a posture, rather than a set of rules’ (2008, p.116). Kathrin Bartha says that the novel does not use the conventional Gothic tones of terror, horror and anxiety, but that ‘Gothic elements prevail’ (2010, p.190). She says that ‘Wright portrays nature as haunted by colonisation, as if place itself has been wounded by colonialism’ to the point where no-one can feel safe or at ease in the landscape (2010, p.190). Kral shows us how Wright plays with Gothic tropes, but does so in order to unpick them and show us the ‘truth’ of the past:

Its description thus introduces a well-known Gothic figure, that of the vampire, which does not appear as a transposition of European tradition but suggests a genuine experience inherent in the postcolonial context. In other words, what could appear as a Gothic prop soon vanishes and confronts us with the signified laid bare: colonisation as a parasite encysting a healthy organism (2008, p.117).

Wright herself says:

the novel expresses all the things that history did not mention, did not remember or suddenly stopped imagining … Such stories could be called supernatural and fantastic, but I do not think of them this way … These are stories of supernatural beliefs as much as the beliefs of the everyday … I wanted to stare at difference right now, as it is happening because I felt the urgency of its pulse ticking in the heartbeat of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The beat was alive. It was not a relic. It was not bones to examine (in Bartha 2016, p.205).

Wright wants not only to flesh out the ghost but to listen to its heartbeat.

Claire G Coleman also turns the Gothic as we know it on its head in her 2017 novel *Terra Nullius.* Like Wright’s novel, Coleman’s begins in a very recognisable past. We are not given any dates, but we know what we are seeing – or we think we do – as Coleman describes a land under colonial rule. There are the settlers, and natives, who have been taken to missions designed to ‘protect’ them. Coleman builds this world that is recognisable to us from history books and uses quotes at the beginning of each help to strengthen the authority of the narrative. But the quotes are all made up, and the world
is not what we think it is. There is a twist, where we realise that we are not in the past at all, but in the future, in 2041, and the ‘natives’ are all humankind, and the ‘settlers’ a race of aliens from another planet. This revelation is unexpected, and the white reader is immediately transformed from a position of coloniser to one of colonised. It is science fiction, but it plays with dystopian and climate change fiction, and it is much closer to what is possible than we are comfortable with. Donna Heiland (2008, p.164) talks about the affinity between science fiction and the Gothic: ‘while Gothic fiction has traditionally looked to the past and science fiction to the future, both present uncanny images of ‘the real world’ in which they are written, and they present uncanny images of each other as well’. The past, present, and the future are not separate, but bleed into each other, haunt each other with different versions not only of what happened, what is happening and what might possibly happen. The settler is unsettled.

White Writers Engaging with Colonial Pasts

Now that Aboriginal writers are claiming back the space and authority to tell their own stories, many white writers are questioning how they can best represent the contested colonial past – and even if they should. Behrendt argues that there is a contemporary fascination with Aboriginal culture – and a sympathy towards Aboriginal people (2016, p.144). She says that this has led to a romanticism of Aboriginal cultures, as well as ‘a reverence for the idea of the noble savage, which portrays Aboriginal people as mythical, super-wise, super-human figures’ (2016, p.144). This is not dissimilar to the reverence and awareness of haunting that Birch talked about. But instead of taking us closer towards reconciliation, this romanticism continues to sustain the unhelpful division.

There are a number of Aboriginal writers who do not believe that non-Indigenous writers should be writing Aboriginal stories at all. In Wiradjuri writer Anita Heiss’ 2002 article ‘Writing about Indigenous Australia – some issues to consider and protocols to follow: a discussion paper’ she quotes a
couple of them, including Wakka Wakka academic Sandra Phillips and Bidjara/Nirri Gubba Juru author and historian Jackie Huggins. Arguments against non-Indigenous writers writing Aboriginal stories include a lack of sufficient understanding about Aboriginal cultures and Law, and the long history of non-Indigenous writers doing this badly, resulting in damaging misrepresentation (2002, p.197-198). However, Huggins argues that there are some instances where white writers can write on Aboriginal themes such as historical evidence and colonial literature, as long as they have done their homework (in Heiss 2002, p.199). Aboriginal academic and poet Jennifer Martiniello says that white writers can write white stories that intersect with Aboriginal stories: ‘for many issues there is also a white story, not just a black story – after all, we didn’t create the last 200 years of crap all by ourselves’ (in Heiss 2002, p.200). Children’s writer Nadia Wheatley discusses what she calls a ‘no-win situation’ for white writers where:

Those who don’t include Aboriginal characters and themes run the risk of painting a white Australian monoculture and inadvertently fostering racism, while on the other hand those who do include Aboriginal characters and themes may depict Aboriginal people simply as tokens, including them to make white writers and readers feel better, or at worst, create a new form of exploitation and appropriation – however unintentional it may be (in Heiss, 2002, p.200).

Wheatley strongly advocated for consultation with Indigenous communities and people who are the subject of the work (in Heiss 2002, p.201).

It is still common to see novels set in the past that do not include Aboriginal characters or presence. Amanda Johnson (2016, p.72) discusses this in relation to two relatively recent novels, Delia Falconer’s The Service of Clouds (1997) and Murray Bail’s Eucalyptus (1998), both historical novels set in Australia; neither of which engages with the colonial past. Johnson says: ‘in novels featuring landscape themes as tropes of colonial conquest and possession, the omissions, even in an allusive sense, remain puzzling. Was it simply a matter of political correctness, or oversight?’. This is a very good
question, and one that goes to the heart of the tension white writers must negotiate when writing about the contested Australian past.

This tension between presence and absence, depiction or omission is at the heart of many debates and discussions in Australian literature. White writers, particularly those writing novels set in Australia, in the past, must make decisions about what to include, and how to include it. To leave out Aboriginal people and stories is to contribute to a damaging – and false – erasure of Aboriginal people from our past, but to include them in a meaningful way, without anachronism, is tricky. It is advised that white writers do their homework, but in many cases there is not much surviving information about Aboriginal people and what their lives would have been like, particularly not information that is not tainted by the colonial brush; we come up against both the silence in the archives and the ways in which Aboriginal people were constructed, marginalised, and removed from their land.

One recent novel with a huge ambition to tell the story of Australia’s history is *Storyland* (2017) by Catherine McKinnon. The novel is made up of five interlocking stories all set in the one place – Illawarra, New South Wales – and spanning four centuries from 1796 to 2033. Most of the stories have Indigenous women at the centre. The stories depict the shocking violence of the early European colonisers, different forms of prejudice and racism against Indigenous Australians, cultural appropriation, exploitation and erasure, and finally a dystopian future where the world is beginning to collapse. The different stories appear to chart ‘progress’ – in each, Illawarra is more and more ‘developed’ – but they actually chart a journey towards a destruction wrought by people who have refused to understand the land and its First People. The stories all blend into each other, past-present-future, and back again, and from the first settlers naming places and creatures in an act of possession, through to the imagined dystopian future, the novel shows a continuing colonisation of Australia. In addition to doing her research and consulting with Indigenous people in the Illawarra region, McKinnon’s strategy, particularly for the first story about a first contact encounter
between the settlers and Indigenous Australians, was to create an unreliable narrator: ‘letting that character also reliably report his uncertainty about the events that are unravelling’ (2012). She says ‘such a strategy might raise questions in some readers’ minds about the kind of cultural misunderstandings that could have occurred during first contact meetings. It might also suggest that there are multiple stories around a single historical event, some of which we never get to hear’ (2012). McKinnon might not be telling those stories or suggesting that she would be the right person to tell them or that she would have a right to do so, but she is metafictionally pointing out the gaps in the narrative, so that the reader wonders about what is not being said.

The Secret River and The Timeless Land

Perhaps the most talked-about modern historical novel that aims to deal with Australia’s colonial past is Kate Grenville’s The Secret River. As we saw in chapter one, this was the subject of heated debate about the role of historical fiction. It has been criticised both for what some have seen as unverifiable historical scholarship, and for being an exercise in white self-exculpation (Dalley 2014, p.45-46). Grenville herself has said that it is her way of apologising for her ancestors’ role in the colonisation of Australia (Dalley 2014, p.47). Odette Kelada (2010) discusses how Grenville’s characterisation can sometimes veer towards the Australian colonial types of the white man as battling pioneer, and of Aboriginal people as variously noble savage, primitive threat, and part of the landscape. Birch says that the novel ‘has real qualities but one of the characters … is a psychopathic menace who … drags this settler convict into this behaviour of violence, and it locates European violence against Aboriginal people in that pathological environment’ (in Sefton-Rowston 2016). Kelada goes on to talk about how this novel, and others like it, participate in a re-envisioning of nationhood that seeks to bear witness to the atrocities of the past and to come to terms with the shame of it, but in such a way that this acknowledgement can make us feel better about
ourselves, to the point where ‘shame can be converted to national pride’ (2010, p.6). Kelada says that this transition happens through how characters are constructed, and it is interesting to consider Grenville’s William Thornhill here. He is based on her ancestor Solomon Wiseman, but she has actually moved him a long way away from Wiseman – she discusses in Searching for the Secret River that she deliberately chose to make Thornhill a ‘softer’ and nicer man than the archives showed Wiseman to be. She says: ‘once that softer part of his personality was drawn in, the violence he might inflict on the Aboriginal people took on a different quality’ – he became ‘a man who wasn’t altogether bad, but who did bad things, might feel something like remorse’ (2006, p.188). This feels to me like a romanticisation of sorts: an attempt to make the violence somehow more approachable, a way in for us through that remorse and sorrow. A way, perhaps, for us to empathise as a starting point towards reconciliation. But if Thornhill had to be removed so far from the hard, violent Wiseman, is it really the ‘real’ past that we are reconciling with, or a sanitised, romanticised version of it? Is it really any different to what the less-aware Prichard, Martin and Praed did, in the past?

It is interesting to compare and contrast The Secret River with another historical novel set in the very first days of the colony in New South Wales: Eleanor Dark’s The Timeless Land, which was published 64 years earlier in 1941. Dark’s novel is the first part in a trilogy that charts early colonial New South Wales from 1788 to 1814. I will focus here primarily on the first part of the trilogy, The Timeless Land, which is told from the perspectives of both the white and the black men. Dark has been criticised both for romanticising Aboriginal life before invasion, and for attributing to Aboriginal people thoughts of which they could never have been aware (GA Wilkes in Doecke 1995). She, like many before her, is guilty of conflating a number of Aboriginal nations into one unified Aboriginality:

Where I have wanted to introduce songs, words, legends, customs, for which I have been able to find no record for these particular groups, I
have borrowed shamelessly from other tribes, often far distant. The result, from an ethnologist’s point of view, must be quite horrible; but I am not really very repentant. These people were all of one race and it is the quality of the race which I have tried to suggest, without regard to minor tribal differences (Dark, 2013, preface).

In her Acknowledgements, she quotes her sources for her information on Aboriginal people, and it is clear that all her information has come from white anthropologists and writers. She seems to feel no hesitation in telling part of the story from the perspective of a number of Aboriginal characters. And yet she quite clearly depicts – and names – the arrival of the white men as an invasion, as an act of stealing land without regard to the people who had been custodians of it for thousands of years. Humphrey McQueen wrote in the introduction to the 1990 edition of the book that she ‘remained a prisoner of her times, more liberal-minded than most but still accepting the common sense of White Australia’ (in Dark 2013, p.xxiv), and that, despite that, ‘character types are as diverse in her Blacks as in her Whites’ (in Dark 2013, p.xxiv). Barbara Brooks, in her 2002 introduction to the novel, wrote ‘Aboriginal writers are telling their own side of the story now. But writers like Eleanor Dark helped to open the minds of a generation of readers to another point of view’ (in Dark 2013, p.xxxi). Reading the novel, in the modern day, feels uncomfortable, but given it was a dissenting voice to the searing nationalism of Australia’s Sesqui-Centenary that told ‘an official story that turned its back on the convicts and ignored the destruction of Aboriginal society’ (McQueen in Dark 2013, p.xxiii), it remains an interesting text to consider (Doecke 1995).

If we compare Dark’s artistic practice to Grenville’s, what we can see is the greater awareness in Grenville’s work of how Aboriginal stories are told, and who should tell them. Both writers begin from a self-confessed point of ignorance: Dark said: ‘What I have read has only served to make me increasingly conscious of my abysmal ignorance’ (2013, p.xxxiv), and Grenville: ‘I was starting to realise how wrong my preconceptions about Aboriginal life and culture were’ (2006, p.128). But Grenville was aware of the
shortcomings of only relying on books by white anthropologists (2006, p.127). She also learned ‘that it was as useful to talk about ‘the Aboriginal people’ as it was to talk about ‘the European people” (2006, p.131) – that is, not at all – and thus did not make the unifying assumptions that Dark and other writers before her had. She also said that she always knew she wasn’t going to ‘try to enter the consciousness of the Aboriginal characters. I didn’t know or understand enough, and I felt I never would. They – like everything else in the book – would be seen through Thornhill’s eyes’ (2006, p.193). Grenville sticks to this tactic in *The Lieutenant* (2008), the second book in her colonial trilogy, where she resolves ‘not to invent any dialogue between the Gadigal people and the lieutenant. I would use only what was recorded in the notebooks’ (kategrenville.com, The Lieutenant reader’s notes). The lieutenant himself is based on William Dawes, a young marine who accompanied the First Fleet to Port Jackson in New South Wales, and there learnt the language of the Gadigal people, mostly through his friendship with a young woman called Patyegarang. Interestingly, Dawes features as a character in Dark’s novel, but Patyegarang and his relationship with the Gadigal people do not.

Lucy Treloar, in writing *Salt Creek* uses the same point of view strategy, deciding to view the Ngarrindjeri people through the eyes of her white protagonist: ‘one of the big advantages of a first-person narrator, especially a woman ... is that there’s a limit to how much they can see. So the questions I was always asking myself were what would this character have seen? What would she have noticed about these people? What would she have thought or felt watching them?’ (Lea 2017). However, even representing historically accurate attitudes to Aboriginal characters in novels is fraught: it is an act of engaging with racist language and attitudes, which contemporary writers must be careful not to perpetuate. It is not enough to say that it is how that person would have spoken, and that the writer has used that language in an attempt to capture ‘the feel of the past’: in a contemporary text, even as a deliberately uncomfortable anachronism, the language is
ideologically loaded, and writers must make choices about what to include with that in mind.

Interestingly, Grenville’s earlier attempt at representing Aboriginal characters, in her 1988 novel Joan Makes History, received nothing like the criticism attracted by The Secret River. Johnson argues that perhaps Grenville’s postmodern strategies in Joan enable her to steer clear of the debate. She says that ‘the novel’s burlesque characterological strategy enables Grenville to realise a humorous, symbolic Indigenous ‘character’ without necessarily co-opting the subjecthood of any one particular Indigenous identity’ (Johnson 2016, p.12). It was the stark presentation of ‘realism’ of The Secret River that made it ripe for the criticism it received.

Specificity of Place

Lack of specificity, though, has not saved other novels from criticism in recent years, and even dystopian novels aren’t immune. Wiradjuri writer Hannah Donnelly (2016) wrote a piece on decolonising Australian literature where she criticised author Charlotte Wood for ‘applying a colonial lens’ to the landscape in her novel The Natural Way of Things (2015). While not an historical novel, Wood’s is a futuristic novel that take stories from the past and the present and situates them in a dystopian near-future, in a similar way to Coleman’s as discussed above. Donnelly criticises Wood for her descriptions of a non-specific landscape, of mentions of trees and native species that didn’t grow in the place where the book seems to be set. Donnelly says:

Our species are far more than a casual backdrop. The story within our native species cannot be separated from the narrative. Species signify whose country you might be imagining. At the mention of a particular tree you could be identifying that the location is a sacred space protected by spirits. Species can signal the season and where the dhinawan is sitting in the stars on the horizon. They are creation (2016).
She goes on to say ‘In choosing to write wrong ways about country you are no different to the ‘explorers’. In choosing to remain ignorant of the diverse and beautiful species of this nation and in choosing to romanticise the harshness of our land, you are rewriting those same colonial myths’ (2016). It is not just the people, but the land itself, that has suffered the ignominy of misrepresentation in the colonial project.

The Tasmanian Gothic and the Black War

Other writers have made their own attempts to engage with the contested Australian past in recent years, with a particular focus on Tasmania. The focus on Tasmania may be because the state has been identified as a kind of Uber-Gothic space within Australia: ‘underpinned as its history is with both the violent mass dispossession of Aboriginal cultures from their lands and with the worst excesses of punitive convict imprisonment’ (Davidson in Carleton 2015, p.14). Amanda Johnson talks about how, at the time she was writing, recent literary historical novels about Tasmania had all been written by men, and none by Indigenous Australians – she goes on to say that ‘it is hard not to conclude that writing back to the compelling stories and images of Tasmanian first-contact and resistance histories is a white man’s game’ (2016, p.204). However, in 2017, the year after Johnson’s book was published, three historical novels written by (white) women were published: *Wild Island* by Jennifer Livett, *The Birdman’s Wife* by Melissa Ashley, and *Bridget Crack* by Rachel Leary. The primary action of the three novels is set within just ten or so years of each other: *Wild Island* and *The Birdman’s Wife* are set mostly in the 1830s and *Bridget Crack* just a little earlier in the mid-to-late 1820s. When I first read *Wild Island* and *The Birdman’s Wife* I was disappointed at what I thought was a failure to include a strong Aboriginal presence: at that time, I thought, they must have been there, on the fringes of society, and the characters would have been, at least, aware of them. However, I was wrong. The ‘black wars’ in Tasmania ended in 1831, after which the few surviving
Aboriginal people were rounded up and moved to Flinders Island mission (Clements 2014, p.169). This ended a very violent and bloodthirsty time in Tasmania, and according to historian Nicholas Clements, it was quickly out of sight, out of mind: ‘virtually overnight newspapers and private correspondents all but ceased discussing the blacks’ (2014, p.169). Reviewer Naomi Riddle (2016) describes, in relation to Wild Island, that an Aboriginal presence would have been ‘jarring and insincere’ and that ‘Indigenous history is present in its absence, that as readers we are encouraged to pick up and track these gaps’. The Birdman’s Wife, for example, includes things that hint at these gaps: the occasional Indigenous word or place name, the reaction of John Gould after he visits the mission, and his vague discomfort. These hints indicate that Ashley was aware of the genocide in a way that the characters, newly arrived from England, would not have been: she wants to point to these gaps, rather than cover them over.

The earlier-set novel Bridget Crack, though, is a different story, and it is interesting to read these three novels together to see what was happening in and around Hobart over those two decades. While Indigenous history is not the primary story in Leary’s novel, it has a significant presence, both through Indigenous characters that Bridget meets while she is on the run (she is an escaped convict who takes up with a band of bushrangers), and through the attitudes of the time seen through certain of the colonists. Bridget, in the bush, hears stories of people coming across massacre sites where bodies of Aboriginal people have been left where they fell, and she also meets an Aboriginal man who is trying to obtain guns in order to be able to fight back against settler violence. The novel shows that, in town, the governor is issuing orders stating that settlers could use force to drive ‘natives’ away from their properties. Richard Marshall, Bridget’s former master, wonders what this means, but chooses not to ask. His kind-hearted sister Jane implores him to do something about it, to convince the governor that the natives needed to be educated and civilised, not killed. Richard does not want to be faced with these questions. We, as readers, know what is about to happen, and we can see representations of the both the demonised other and
the noble savage in Leary’s novel. It is eerie, then, to fast forward to the two novels set in the 1830s where there are no Aboriginal people in the bush around Hobart, and no-one even talks about it anymore.

Aboriginal Characterisation in Voice of the Shadows

My own novel, Voice of the Shadows, has a minor Aboriginal character, and I have grappled with the idea of the depiction of him. I could have just left him out – in 1942 most people in the city would probably not have met an Aboriginal person or been aware of an Indigenous presence in the city. But I could not, in good conscience, do so, for two reasons. The first is that I saw a picture of a black tracker in a newspaper from the time, at the third murder site, and so I knew he was there – involved and active. And the second is that I wanted my male character Fred to work at the Pelaco factory in Richmond. The factory is no longer operational, but the Pelaco sign is still an imposing part of the suburb’s skyline, and the factory has an interesting wartime history, being part of the revival of industrial Richmond that the war occasioned. It also has, though, the blight of a long and racist advertising campaign, so while it was known for being progressive about the rights and conditions of its workers, many of them women, it was far from perfect. Pelaco Bill, as the caricature was called, was well-known, and featured on their advertisements from 1911 to 1950. Reference is made to the figure in Wiradjuri writer Anita Heiss’ historical novel, Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms, also set in the second world war, where someone is said to be ‘as black as a Pelaco shirt advertisement’ (2016, p.211).

My story is not the Aboriginal character’s story. I am not attempting to tell his story – I do not know it, it is not my story to tell. It is not a first contact or a directly colonial story. It is not a black story. It is a white one, but it is a white one that takes place on stolen land, and I want to acknowledge that. But at the same time I have not gone out seeking him, actively, in order to have him appear. He was just there, on the periphery of my research. And it would feel wrong to write him out now. So I believe that
he can have a part to play, however small, in Alice’s story, and that is what I have attempted to do.

My protagonist, Alice, would certainly never have met an Aboriginal person or been prompted to think about Aboriginal issues or history. It was certainly not taught in schools then – it barely is today – and Aboriginal people were not counted as citizens of the country. She may have been aware of them, but it would only have been in very vague terms. So when she questions Fred about the Pelaco advertisement, she can only do so in these same uncertain terms: I leave it up to my reader to understand her limited knowledge and insight. In earlier drafts I had Fred casually use the racist term ‘abo’ but I have removed that, as it is a derogatory term and it made me uncomfortable to use it, even in an historically-accurate way.

With regards to the tracker, I am on shaky ground again. The black tracker is one of the most common stereotypical roles into which Aboriginal men have been placed, both in history and in representations of it. This meant that it is difficult, particularly given that we only see him in a single scene, to avoid tokenism and stereotype. In fact, Heiss’ 2002 discussion paper specifically mentions these damaging ‘positive’ portrayals of Indigenous people that should be avoided: the good stockman, the domestic servant, and the black tracker (2002, p.199). I know that I am on dangerous ground in trying to unpick the simplistic depiction of the tracker, but I felt that it was important to attempt this. There was a black tracker working with Victoria Police at the time, and on this case: I have seen the photograph. And just as I want to show the restrictive roles into which women were placed in the 1940s in order to argue against them, I want to show him as he appeared in the newspaper photograph, but to criticise that, and give the impression that there is so much more to him that they, like Alice, can wonder about.

I have made use of (white) historian Gary Presland’s book *For God’s Sake Send the Trackers*, which gave me some useful information. However, most of the information it contained was about the work trackers did in the bush, locating lost bushwalkers or children. There was not a lot about trackers in the city, and yet historical records show he was there. So I
wondered about how best to represent him – should I give him a name? Should he speak? What should he say? How would he react to Alice, and she to him? Where, indeed, would they ever have crossed paths?

I wanted to make him a real person, rather than a caricature. Presland’s book showed me some of the simplistic ways in which trackers were seen by the white police force, which mirrors how they would have been seen by white people at large:

The successes they enjoyed were explained in terms such as the exercise of ‘magic’, ‘use of an uncanny sixth sense’, and ‘eerie skill’ ... it can be argued that in such cases the papers were not merely reporting the use of trackers’ skills; they were helping to sustain a specific discourse of the relationship between blacks and whites (Presland 1998, p.102).

I knew that Alice couldn’t know any of this history, but she is curious, and, being female and queer, she is already questioning the places people are forced to occupy in the world, so she is open to wondering about where he comes from, and where he fits. I have taken a leaf out of the books of writers such as Kate Grenville, Catherine McKinnon and Lucy Treloar, and only shown him through the eyes of my female protagonist and her necessarily very limited information and perspective. She asks him a little about how tracking works, what clues he would find, and what he tells her comes out of Presland’s book. She is interested because she wants to know what he saw, whether he knows anything, about Gladys’s death. He dispels the idea that he is magic. She wonders about him, and the land beneath her feet, and its history. She does not know the history of the relationship between black and white people in the country, so doesn’t understand that he is hesitant to speak with her – he is nervous, and deferential. I thought about trying to give him a bigger part in the story, but I could not think of any reason for Alice to see him again, and any conversation they realistically might have had, if she had run into him a second time. So he remains in his single scene, although he is mentioned again later, as she remembers something he said to her.
I wanted to show him, because I know he was there. I hope I have done so respectfully, and I hope I have presented him as he might have been. I wanted to acknowledge some of the Gothicised, simplistic representations of trackers and Aboriginal people in general by having him address them, and I wanted to dismantle them and have him appear as a man that one could wonder about, even if one didn’t have the historical context to know, and for his character to possibly unsettle the worst of novelistic representational practices.
Representing Queerness: Creating and Dismantling the Gothic in Voice of the Shadows

I will turn now to an analysis of how some of the tropes and modes I have discussed have informed the construction of my own historical novel, *Voice of the Shadows*. The novel is based in Melbourne in 1942, and its backdrop is the Leonski, or Brownout, Murders that occurred in May of that year. An American soldier, Edward Joseph Leonski, killed three women within 15 days during that month. They were called the Brownout Murders because Melbourne was under Brownout conditions – a dimming of lights that is less strict and less complete than a Blackout such as the one in London. I was interested in this story because of what it meant for women at the time: up until this point, the women of the city had been enjoying unprecedented freedoms – undertaking ‘men’s’ jobs during the day and being entertained by the dapper and exotic American troops at night. That is, until women started to be killed, with no immediate or logical explanation. I heard this story from my grandmother, who was twenty-three and newly-wed in 1942. In her self-published memoir, she talks about how the only time she remembered being scared during the war, or any violence being committed on Melbourne’s streets, was when Leonski was on the loose (Hamilton 2011, p.86). It was the first I had heard of this American soldier who killed women because he was fascinated with their voices, and I was drawn to this both because of the symbolic potential of ‘silencing’ women’s voices, and the fact that the memory of being afraid still loomed so large in my ninety-two-year-old grandmother’s memory, even though it was such a short period of time before Leonski was caught. It obviously had such a huge impact on the city.

During my research into the case, I discovered that it was a female journalist, Patricia (Pat) Jarrett, who covered Leonski’s court martial, and
that she was only able to do this because there were no men around to do the job (Tate, 1996, p.78). I had my heroine! I renamed her Alice Jenkins and made her working-class, which took her quite a distance from the middle-class Pat.

The Urban Gothic and Transgression in War Time

Melbourne at the time was arguably a textbook Gothic landscape: browned out, foggy, shadowy, cold. Robert Mighall says that this urban Gothic should be a contradiction in terms (2007, p.54), as the Gothic is traditionally associated with sprawling country estates. But Mighall goes on to characterise what an urban Gothic would be: a foggy city, where the fog obscures but also reveals (2007, p.56), where the terrors are real, here and now (2007, p.55). He says, ‘the premise of Gothic fiction, dividing the civilised from the barbarous, the progressive from the retrograde or anachronistic, is here located in the metropolis of the modern world (2007, p.55). It is to a Melbourne that displays all of these characteristics that Alice returns one Saturday morning in May 1942.

In fact, a lot of Gothic war fiction, including stories of Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, and Sarah Waters is set in the city – namely, in those three instances, London. Of course, a world at war is a world in a state of flux, a world whose shape is changing. This creates opportunities for all sorts of people who had previously been consigned to the margins, not least of all women. And while the men were writing about how the battles being fought on the front line were changing the world, there was also a lot of change going on at home on the domestic front as well. In Elizabeth Bowen’s stories, set in war-time London, there is very little presence of the actual war. There are none of the iconic war-time images that we see in ‘war fiction’ written by men: the air-raids, the trenches, the soldiers, etc. Bowen’s stories depict the atmosphere of a city in wartime – ‘an unsettled, often ghostly atmosphere that permeates all facets of everyday life in a war capital’ (Davis 2013, p.30). Likewise, the Pargiter family in Virginia Woolf’s The Years never experience
a bombing raid. Davis argues that, for the Pargiters, the war is ‘experienced through the impressions it leaves on the domestic, private interiors of the home’ (2014, p.9). In Voice, I also do not include any descriptions of battles or even people discussing war news. Rather, I attempt to focus on what the city was like at home, under the shadow of a war that had, until now, been fought far away, but was threatening to come closer.

Like Bowen’s stories, the city in Voice is ghostly and unsettled. Unlike London, Melbourne did not suffer bombing raids, but after the Japanese bombed Darwin in early 1942, it anticipated them and was preparing for them. For women, despite the threat of invasion or bombing, this was an exciting time. The city was full of exotic American soldiers for women to dance with and ‘date’, and there were opportunities to undertake work that would normally not have been available to women: work that was there because the men were away fighting. Although dark and ominous, the city was also somewhat of a carnivalesque city, with dances, parades, and frivolity. Although she is a journalist and quite engaged with the world, my protagonist Alice does not think much about the war itself, but is preoccupied with the effects of the war that she can see around her, and particularly with what this means for women like herself and Gladys. For Alice, the city is uncanny: a familiar place in which she has grown up that has been made unfamiliar by changes wrought both by war, and by the change in herself brought about by the awakening of her queerness and the experience of her relationship with Pat. Heiland (2008, p.78) says that uncanny experiences don’t resolve themselves, but settle uncomfortably on us, leaving us estranged from ourselves and ‘no longer knowing how to live in the world’. Freud defines the uncanny as ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what what once well know and had long been familiar’ (2003, p.173). This is true for Alice as she returns home: it is familiar, but not quite as she remembers it.

War-time is an interesting time in which to look at how gender is historically constructed. Wallace quotes Jeanette Winterson, who argues that traditionally war imposes strict gender roles: ‘soldiers and women. That’s
how the world is’ (2005, p.195). She goes on to argue that women have used the historical novel to interrogate the relationship between gender and war, and to write, in a coded way, about contemporaneous issues (2005, p.219). But it is, of course, this very coding of men as soldiers and women as other that is an essential step in women’s exclusion from reported history: to use Lukács’ terminology, one makes progress (on the battlefield) while the other stays at home.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, this exclusion is based on biology and physicality:

The warrior puts his life in jeopardy to elevate the prestige of the horde, the clan to which he belongs. And in this he proves dramatically that life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that is should be made to serve ends more important than itself. The worse curse that was laid upon women was that she should be excluded from these warlike forays. For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills (1953, p.95).

Deborah Scheidt sums this up by saying that ‘because of their procreative function, women have been held back from what is traditionally considered historical: exploit, battle and conquest’ (2015, p.67, emphasis added). I am joining many writers of historiographic metafiction in writing back to challenge ‘traditional history’ and the exclusion of women from it.

The Apparitional Lesbian

While there is a flood of historical novels by contemporary writers writing women and their desires, ambitions, stories, back into history, most of these heroines are heterosexual. This is beginning to change (Cooper & Short 2012, p.11), although in Australia there is still a paucity of historical novels, set in Australia, with a queer or non-heterosexual heroine.

The backdrop of war is a good one to use in the representation of marginalised sexualities. Rachel Wood (2013, p.308) has explored the
restrictions, but also the opportunities, of wartime, particularly for anything beyond the conventional: ‘wartime opened up new spaces and offered new opportunities for sexual encounters: the blackout in particular offered a sense of privacy in public spaces’. Australian author Anna Westbrook talks about how the war allowed women to go into the workforce, and there make connections with other women who had the same desires they did, women they would never otherwise have met (Gray 2017). Ruth Ford argues that the women’s services, particularly, did the same thing (in Damousi & Lake 1995, p.81). Westbrook’s novel Dark Fires Shall Burn (2016) set in Sydney in 1946, explores the impact of the war on the city’s underworld, and shows where there might be opportunities to challenge and subvert conservative gender roles and sexualities. Sarah Waters’ novel The Night Watch, set between 1941 and 1947 in London, also explores these opportunities. Waters depicts London as a city where ‘sexuality and gender identity in particular are heavily policed, watched and worried over; yet the rapidly changing city landscape and concurrent blurred moral codes of wartime are shown to allow thrilling moments of freedom from the policing of gender and sexuality’ (Wood 2013, p.306). The Melbourne of my novel does this too: women had more freedom than ever to roam the streets after dark to attend their jobs and their leisure activities, but then women began to be strangled at random. All of a sudden, women were scared to go out. It seemed to certain conservative commentators to be a divine intervention that stopped the unravelling of the moral fabric of society and its expected gendered behaviours, serving to keep women in their place (Darian-Smith 2009, p.184).

In Voice, I decided to make Alice queer, because although contemporary British novelists such as Sarah Waters, Emma Donoghue and Jeanette Winterson, are beginning to represent queer women in literary historical novels, the trend has not really carried to Australia, particularly for novels with an Australian setting. There are a number of recent literary historical novels by women with queer female characters and content: Kelly Gardiner’s Goddess (2014), Jesse Blackadder’s The Raven’s Heart (2011), Catherine Padmore’s Sybil’s Cave (2004), to name a few, but all of these are
set overseas. One notable exception is Pip Smith’s *Half-Wild* (2017), which ranges from Wellington in 1885 to Sydney in 1917 and then Sydney in 1938 and tells the story of the true lives of Eugenia Falleni. It’s a novel that, at its core, challenges and questions gender identity and sees its protagonist identify as both a man and a woman at different stages. There is certainly scope in the Australian literary landscape for more historical queer content - and my story seemed to step quite naturally into that space. I began from the starting point of Pat Jarrett, my inspiration – there is no evidence that Pat was queer or had relationships with women, but she was an independent career woman who never married and does not appear to have had any public or known romances – none appear in the biography written by Audrey Tate. So I decided to explore the reasons that a woman of that time might not have married, including the ‘unspeakable’ one of same-sex desire. This possibility appealed to me, and also fit in very nicely with the shadowy, Gothic city in which she was to move. The combination of browned-out city streets, a world at war, a killer at large, moral codes being challenged, and desire between women seemed to me a perfect Gothic cocktail, particularly at a time when women were going into the services, wearing uniforms and doing ‘masculine’ jobs. Gender roles and identities, previously strongly enforced, were now slowly being dismantled (Ford in Damousi & Lake 1995, p.81), or at least complicated.

Lesbian desires and figures have often been encoded in fiction through the use of spectral, ghostly, uncanny metaphors, according to Terry Castle:

> The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away, and she is dire (Castle 1993, p.2).

Laura Doan and Sarah Waters (2000, p.24) sum up the dilemma of searching for her – ‘the lesbian past grows increasingly insubstantial the nearer one draws to it’. Sarah Waters describes that ‘lesbianism has often been rendered
invisible, for one reason or another, in history and in literature. It’s always been marginalised. Once of the things I try to do in my books is put it in the centre of things. So in that sense I’m fleshing out a ghost’ (in Parker 2008, p.9). But it wasn’t always possible to put lesbianism in the centre of things, uncoded, without censure. Radclyffe Hall’s famous realist lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928, was the subject of obscenity trials. Conversely, another novel also published in 1928, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, managed to evade these censors, despite its gender-swapping, lesbian storyline – perhaps because of its fantasy elements (Castle in Parker 2008, p.16). Leslie Kathleen Hankins (1997, p.181) describes it thus:

> Orlando came out of the closet as a lesbian text in the 1970s and remains out as critics continue to discover and celebrate its subversive, pervasive, and persuasive lesbian strategies. The complex and witty lesbian text plays an elaborate game of hide and seek with the reader and the censor, teasing with taunts: “What can we suppose that women do when they seek out each other’s society?” (O 220). Woolf’s lesbian narrative in Orlando suggests love and erotica between women, mocks compulsory heterosexuality, challenges homophobia, and slips coded lesbian signatures and subplots into the novel.

Once again, the realist novel attracts censure while the fantastic one escapes; it is allowed to stand, its challenge still strong, although coded.

For Castle, lesbianism is ‘the repressed idea at the heart of patriarchal culture’:

> By its very nature (and in this respect it differs significantly from male homosexuality) lesbianism poses an ineluctable challenge to the political, economic, and sexual authority of men over women. It implies a whole new social order, characterised – at the very least – by a profound feminine indifference to masculine charisma’ (Castle 1993, p.61).

Emma Donoghue, in her study on desire between women in literature, explores how this ghosting or supernaturalising of the lesbian was, for a long time, a way to equate her with the monstrous, the nonhuman: ‘an eerie
turning away from nature’s law’ (2010, p.134). Donoghue goes on to discuss the work of Paulina Palmer who analyzes how writers have been turning this on its head since the 1970s, reworking ‘the conventions of the Gothic (including vampires, witches, ghosts and other spectral visitors), using them not to hide or denigrate eroticism between women but to celebrate its transgressive physicality’ (Donoghue 2010, p.138). In Voice, I want to follow in the tradition of this celebratory writing of real queer women and bring it out of the shadows.

Subverting the ‘Ghosted’ Lesbian

In Voice, I attempt to subvert the shadowy, ‘ghosted’ lesbian and have Alice be most aware of her body when she is succumbing to her lesbian desires: when she is dancing with Gladys at the tea-dance, in Gladys’s room when Gladys is pinning Alice’s dress, and when she and Gladys have tea at the cafe and stand waiting for the tram, sharing their first kiss under the cover of darkness. They become embodied when they are together, rather than the other way around. Conversely, Pat seems to be disappearing once she chooses to leave Alice and accept a proposal of marriage. Before that, we see Pat dressed in men’s clothes, and this seems to be the real Pat, at least to Alice’s eyes. When Pat dresses in women’s clothes she is almost unrecognisable to Alice and seems to disappear: she fades away and leaves no footprints, either at the cove or later in the street. Her women’s clothes seem to be the disguise, and Alice muses on the extra pleats and flounces, ribbons and lace, that make Pat difficult to see. Pat has chosen to obscure her queerness and hide it behind a mask of respectable, conventional heterosexuality: she loses her identity. Palmer (1999, p.86) says that the use of spectral imagery in the contemporary lesbian Gothic does not ‘disembody’ or ‘decarnalise’ her, but instead ‘foregrounds the importance of the body, its passions and vulnerability’. Castle discusses something similar:
The case could be made that the metaphor meant to derealise lesbian desire in fact did just the opposite. Indeed, strictly for repressive purposes, one could hardly think of a worse metaphor. For embedded in the ghostly figure, as even its first proponents seemed at times to realise, was inevitably a notion of reembodiment: of uncanny return to flesh (1993, p.62).

It works both ways: we see Alice beginning to disappear or to be re-drawn in a new shape when she begins to entertain the idea of a relationship with Fred. When they go out the night before he leaves, there are a couple of occasions when he draws her into being or reminds her where her outline is: when she feels she is disappearing in the brownout, and later, when they kiss in the darkness. He is making her in the shape he, and the world, wants her, and by entertaining the idea of herself in a heterosexual marriage, she is being overwritten by the conservative patriarchal male gaze.

Alice/Leonski: A Gothic Double?

Alice herself resists the marriage plot that Pat is forced into, as she feels it would be a denial of who she is. But she doesn't tell anyone about her queer desires: even she and Gladys don't address them – she is silent. Her anxiety about her identity and her desires manifest themselves in another Gothic way – that of doubling. Alice concocts parallels between herself and the killer, particularly after he is caught and confesses that he killed the women to get their voices. She equates his desire for impossible possession with her own, a way of making-same, and a response to her learned guilt. Her relationship with Pat is littered with images of possession, and that is the only model Alice can bring to her burgeoning friendship with, and desire for, Gladys. She frets that she and the killer might both be examples of a desire for possession that can only be destructive.

Throughout the novel, I attempt to draw parallels between sex and death that feed into the doubling of Alice/Leonski. Examples of this are: where the second murder victim Pauline Thompson admires Leonski’s huge hand and looks forward to it undressing her later, anticipating sex rather
than the murder that actually happens, and also after Gladys is killed and Alice, in passionate grief, sees images of her own loving hand stroking Gladys’s neck metamorphosing into the killer’s hand strangling her. There are other images of necks and throats as a site of both affection and violence: the neck is symbolic in Alice’s and Gladys’s brief relationship where Alice straightens her collar, or Gladys takes off Alice’s soiled scarf. These are juxtaposed with the broken necks of the three strangled women. Palmer discusses the use of this sex/death parallel in Emma Donoghue’s novel Hood: sex and death are the:

... two physical states which, according to Bakhtin, most clearly exemplify the grotesque body: the body in a state of sexual excitement and the corpse. Both, Bakhtin emphasises, involve transformation, presenting the body not as static, but in a condition of process and flux (1999, p.88).

Alice’s guilt and shame make her believe that she and the killer are one and the same, and that he just happened to get to Gladys first. This is an example of what Palmer describes as ‘encoded misogynistic/homophobic attitudes’ (1999, p.13). Gothic narrative, she says, ‘often includes in its cast of characters representations of the monstrous and the abject, and it is woman – and particularly the woman who identifies as a lesbian or forms primary relationships with members of her own sex – who tends to be assigned these roles’ (1999, p.13). This is an extension of what Natasha Alden says is presented in gay and lesbian fiction written in the 1940s – ‘crippling self-hatred and fear’ (2014, p.185). Alden analyses how Sarah Waters’ The Night Watch, set in the 1940s, plays with and subverts this trope: ‘Waters does not want to echo the apparent misery that gay life – tragic, unliveable – seems to bring in fiction of the period; she wants to show an alternative which, while not always happy, does allow her characters the possibility of not ending up dead, alone or married to a man, which are the options on offer in fiction of the time’ (2014, p.186). For most of my novel, Alice conforms to this image, but I attempt to unpick this Gothic misery at the end – Alice comes to realise
that she is nothing like the killer and we are left instead with a real, depraved killer and a grieving lover who has done nothing wrong, and who, in fact, is faced with a real, and hopeful, choice. The Gothic doubling that casts Alice as a monster is divested of its power.

The Monstrous and Victim-Blaming

Even the depiction of Leonski as the monster is unpicked when he is caught. While he is on the loose, killing women apparently at random, he is a supernatural force in Alice’s imagination. She wonders who he is, how he managed to kill these women without leaving a trace or making a sound. He is the threat that leaves nothing but a dead woman’s body in his wake; no clues, no pattern, no reason. And yet when Alice sees him for the first time in the courtroom, she is struck by how young he is, how much he looks like just an ordinary man. He is the supernatural explained, a smiling assassin who looks like the boy next door.

Violence is committed in my novel by normal men against real women. The other instance of this is Alice’s school friend Moira. Moira is a victim of domestic violence, but her husband is not painted as a monster. In fact, he is a particular friend of Alice’s and of her friends. The friend and the foe are all wrapped up together in the same, human body. This could, perhaps, be seen as a postfeminist Gothic reminder that women are always still vulnerable to male violence, whether on the streets or in their own homes. We see the excuses people make about this violence that allow it to continue: on a small, domestic scale with Moira and Tom, and then writ large when policemen, prison guards, and newspapermen make excuses for Leonski’s behaviour, and laugh it off.

One of the reasons I was initially inspired to write this story was because my early research showed that conservative critics began to use these killings as a way to condemn what they saw as ‘loose’ behaviour from women – women out on the streets alone at night were ‘getting what they deserved’. This echoed so loudly into the present, with the contemporary media’s
predisposition for victim blaming in cases of violence against women, suggesting that she 'got what she was asking for' or other variations on the same theme. Conservative critics, including some clergymen, considered the Leonski killings to be ‘divine intervention’ as, for a while, women were scared to go out alone at night, and stayed home ‘where they belonged’ (Darian-Smith 2009, p.184). I wanted to explore themes of violence against women, and victimisation, in the light of current attitudes towards the same.

The Marriage Plot

The marriage plot, in Voice, almost becomes the threatening spectre in itself. From the time we see Pat retreat into marriage, which is, as Claire O'Callaghan says, ‘the ultimate signifier of compulsory heterosexuality’ (2012, p.146), Alice is threatened by this fate. First, Pat’s marriage threatens Alice’s sense of herself, her equilibrium, and, indeed, her life. But more importantly, the expectation of her own marriage hangs over her head from the moment she arrives back in Melbourne. It is within her first day home that her mother and sister have lined her up again with Fred Hogan, the local boy with whom she was linked before she went to Sydney, with a view to marriage.

Fred Hogan makes several attempts to ask Alice to marry him. The first time she evades the question – or, rather, the assumption. The second time she refuses him, to his surprise and her mother's horror. Fred is a good man, with good prospects. There is no indication that he is violent or would treat her badly, and yet he doesn’t value her agency or opinion. He assumes that she will want to marry him and has a particular idea of what that looks like. Even the good men in this novel are complicit in the patriarchal structures that contain her, and all women.

The third time Fred attempts to have this conversation with her, she is more amenable to it. By this time, Gladys is dead, and she is feeling the weight of her guilt and shame about her desires. Her mother has also brought her back to earth with a speech about choices, and her lack thereof, which reminds her of Pat calling her naïve. And she has discovered the truth about
her father’s suicide, which makes her realise the debt that she owes her mother and makes her begin to think that she might be being selfish by not marrying Fred. In short, the traditional world and its structures have begun to wear her down, and the readers see that she is wavering in her independence, in her identity. It seems, for a while, that the story will be ‘straight-washed’ and that Alice will take the path Pat took and get married. The reader, I hope, is scared that this Gothic story will reinstate its boundaries and end with the ‘comfort’ of the conventional marriage plot. Alice herself feels that she barely has a choice, and for a while she is compelled to go along with the tide.

But this novel does not end with a wedding. Alice sees Dot, who functions almost as the character in the novel who helps Alice to unpick the trappings of the Gothic. She is the one who discounts Alice’s absurd idea that she is anything like the killer, or in any way to blame for Gladys’s death. She acts as an exemplar for Alice: an ordinary person making this work, without the drama, lies, false promises, and secrecy she had to endure when she was with Pat, and without the shame that she has been feeling since Gladys was killed. Dot is more like the characters in Waters’ The Night Watch, as described by Alden: ‘she is entirely free of this type of anguish’ (Alden 2014, p.197) that the self-hating, shame-filled lesbian carries: she lives with her girlfriend, wears trousers, drives trucks, and appears to be very comfortable with her sexuality. Dot gives Alice a pathway away from the marriage plot ending. At the end of the novel, we are not sure which way Alice is going to go – the novel is left open-ended – but I have tried to end on a hopeful, though still ambiguous, note. Alice says that she is interested in exploring the path that Dot has offered her, and she has a revelation that seems to leave her feeling clearer: she and Leonski are not, after all, two sides of the same coin. This realisation seems to allow her to consider what Dot is offering. The ending, I hope, is one where possibility is alive for Alice, and although the reader knows it will not be an easy path for her, they can see a way for her to avoid the heteronormative marriage ending. Perhaps she will choose the conservative ending, and marry Fred, unable to stand up to the pressure from
her mother and society. Or perhaps she will move in with Josephine, cultivate her friendship with Dot, and become part of a thriving group of queer women. It is up to the reader to decide.
CONCLUSION

My exploration of the Gothic in this thesis has sought to demonstrate that the transgressive possibilities, which are often cited as a defining characteristic of the mode, may have reached a limit. It shows, significantly, that the Gothic as a mode attempts to transgress from within the ideologies it seeks to challenge: it cannot exist entirely outside of them. This means that writers using the Gothic to write back against a dominant ideology must always be careful not to get tangled in the language that upholds that ideology. From this position, on the margins but still swept up in the groundswell from the centre, it is possible only to show where the ideological lines and structures lie, not to displace them or disarm them. In a postmodern, feminist, postcolonial, post-structural world, we need our transgressions in the face of the dominant ideologies to do more than this; we need them to go further.

As explored here, this is not to say that the Gothic has no place in our contemporary literary moment, but rather that we do need to rethink its contribution, legacy and future. Its subversive anti-'realist' unsettling of the status quo is an important first step on our way towards something that is transgressive and non-resentful. Contemporary scholars are thinking now about what the Gothic looks like in a post-Gothic world. Whether Catherine Spooner's happy Gothic, with its sparkling vampires and celebration of diversity, is the answer, or whether it is something else, should be the subject of further research and analysis. Spooner's book asks, ‘what stories does the twenty-first century need to tell itself?’ (2017, p.11) and she answers by making a case for a happy, irreverent, playful Gothic that is much more inclusive than the traditional Gothic was allowed to be. Spooner's Gothic is not about fear, but about celebration, and what we can learn about ourselves when we are enjoying ourselves, rather than when we are cowering and covering desire. Her Gothic is not frivolous or meaningless, however: it can still encode political messages; it can still be symbolic and allegorical; it can still be used to challenge and question our world. In fact, by including types of Gothic that
have traditionally been excluded we are arguably welcoming a greater diversity of perspectives and voices to challenge, or even bypass, ideological norms.

Throughout this thesis I have referred frequently to a Gothic that is not otherworldly at all but is very much a part of our own world, a Gothic that manifests itself in our everyday lives, in the challenges and fears of what is around us. This is perhaps something like the ‘explained supernatural’ that is a part of the female Gothic, but it is more than that. It is the Gothic that does not vanish when the lights are switched on at the end of the show: it is the Gothic that stays with us. This might sound like it is approaching something like a ‘realistic’ Gothic – an apparent contradiction-in-terms – but given the ideological weight of the term ‘realism’ I would prefer another name. Perhaps it is something like a worldly Gothic, a mundane everyday Gothic, a Gothic that is possible, and even more scary for its possibility. We might not be scared of ghosts anymore, but there is still plenty in our world to frighten us. As I have discussed, this more worldly, possible Gothic is not a new thing, but something that has been a feature of the specifically Australian Gothic since the early days of the colony and dispossession. It is a Gothic atmosphere that infuses certain Indigenous writing, as well as writing about colonial identity types and myths.

This worldly, possible Gothic is better placed to transgress because it is harder to get rid of: it is stickier, fleshy. It asks us to be uncomfortable, unsettled, and to sit with our discomfort. Particularly when it manifests itself in historical fiction, it asks us to question our place in the world and how we have got to where we are: what past actions have we benefitted from that may have oppressed someone else? Lukács was right when he said that we are all products of our histories and the past immediately concerns us, but this is not, as he saw it, a single, clear line from past to present. It is a proliferation of lines and circles, intersections and stories, that feeds into who we are and the world we live in. And the lines and circles do not form a coherent pattern that leads to the exact spot we are standing: there remain
things that are unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable. The world does not spring back into a recognisable shape.

During the process of writing *Voice of the Shadows* I enjoyed playing with the Gothic to see what it could do. I pictured the shadowy, browned-out streets of Melbourne, a woman with a secret desire, a killer lurking. I pictured three dead women, strangled, silenced, and the man who killed them to get their voices. But the fascinating thing about the story wasn’t that it happened, back somewhere in the past when my grandmother was young. It was that it has such strong resonance for us today, in the conversation we are having about violence against women and the way in which it is reported. It is not past. It is not history. It is here and now.

I particularly enjoyed playing with Gothic imagery around Alice’s sexuality, as she came in and out of focus, in and out of the shadows. The work of Terry Castle, Pauline Palmer and Emma Donoghue on the apparitional lesbian and the lesbian Gothic gave me a lot to play with here and allowed me to flesh Alice out as she came to know her own desires. Alice’s sexuality was also where I had the most room to play: it was the biggest invention in the novel, the one thing for which there was absolutely no evidence on which to rely. And I wonder about whether this historical silence is the reason there are so few Australian historical novels, set in Australia, in the past, with overtly lesbian content. Perhaps the fact that, as Waters and Doan have said, the lesbian past seems to disappear the closer you get to it, means that novelists have been reluctant to try to represent this thing that is hard to find, hard to imagine. Queer themes are appearing more and more in other genres, particularly in Australian Young Adult fiction, but they haven’t yet found themselves prevalent in historical novels in this country. Given the critical and commercial success of writers like Sarah Waters in the UK and Amy Bloom in the US, I find this surprising.

I hope that *Voice of the Shadows* shows how the Gothic historical novel is full of possibility. This is not unlimited possibility, nor should it be. It is possibility that is allowed by the fragmentary, allegorical nature of historiographic metafiction, but possibility that is constrained by the limits
of what we know about the past, and by the politics of representation and the responsibility this brings. Historical fiction can never be real, because we cannot know the past, but it is never entirely made up, because it speaks to things that did actually happen. It might – and we hope it does – feel real to the reader, because it does aspire to show a world that is as close as we can get to how it actually was, with minimal anachronism. But it is always a performance, even in novels like Voice that are not experimental at all in style but written in a conventional style aimed at plausibility. It provides us with a link, whether linear or circular or both, to the past and who we once were. It helps us to understand who we now are, and who we would like to be. The Gothic is useful in representing the past because it always does something other than show things as they were: it shows things as they might have been, through unreliable eyes, foggy vision, failures of memory and testament. It starts a conversation. It gives us a way in to the past, to things that we otherwise cannot say, and we should not be so quick to try and find our way out, and back into comfort again. We need to be scared, a little; and unsettled, perhaps a lot. The contemporary Gothic, to be useful, however, cannot be characterised by a temporary pleasurable thrill: it must be something that challenges the reader and makes them consider, as responsible agents, their past, their present, their future, and their place in the world, in a way that has momentum beyond the page.
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