

# *The Abortion Game*: Writing a Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction Work

A PhD research thesis (Creative Writing), with manuscript (creative component) and exegesis (analytical component), submitted for the College of Arts, Victoria University

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## Abstract

In this creative-writing research project, I set out to create a narrative nonfiction manuscript that investigates the contemporary politics surrounding abortion. The fundamental question driving the creative manuscript was, 'Why is abortion largely invisible in Australia?' Abortion is the second-most common therapeutic surgical procedure in Australia, yet the history, the politics and the practice of abortion remain hidden from view. This invisibility allows us to avoid grappling with and confronting the complicated issues abortion raises. Using techniques commonly associated with fiction writing, such as narrative arc, characterisation, dialogue and scenes, the 69,000-word manuscript investigates the factors, tiers and characters involved with abortion in Australia. The narrative nonfiction manuscript should be read first.

The manuscript is accompanied by a 31,500-word exegesis analysing the production, lineage and ethical implications of *consciously political* narrative nonfiction, a term that refers to works that make deliberate political interventions. Similarly to Hartsock (2000), I argue that when writing a consciously political narrative nonfiction work, the writer does not objectify the world as something different or alien from the reader, and instead strives to render characters as complex human beings. The exegesis reviews theories of ethics, objectivity and narrative within a form that is fundamentally journalism, yet can never fit within this narrow definition as it is primarily about mapping the cultural other (Sanderson 2004).

The exegesis also scrutinises the usefulness and complexity of *immersion* as a research methodology. While I initially attempted to immerse myself as a limited participant-observer in the world of pro-choice and pro-life politics, over the course of the research, my methodology resulted in a kind of radicalisation prompted by my fieldwork. For example, after witnessing the ongoing harassment of clinic patients and staff, I found myself openly hostile to the position and tactics of pro-life activists. While I felt I remained capable of transcribing and depicting the worlds of these subjects, a seditious need grew to challenge their authority and worldview outside the text. This led me to make a political intervention inside and outside the text, and I thus crossed the precipice from observation to active participation.

While I acknowledge that this is an unconventional narrative position, one that rejects ideals of journalistic objectivity, I argue that this subject position was born of the research and practice of this project – that is, of actually participating in the world of my subject, abortion.

Moreover, this level of participation in the world of the textual subject is a direct result of writing a consciously political narrative nonfiction work, a subgenre that allows for the practitioner's politics and reactions to situations to help shape the text, and the consequences beyond.

## Statement of Authenticity

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration (by creative manuscript)

I, Jacinda Woodhead, declare that the PhD exegesis entitled '*The Abortion Game: Writing a Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction Work*' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This exegesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this exegesis is my own work.

Signature:

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Date: 10 June 2015

*For my grandmother*

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Manuscript note: some names in this book have been changed.

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***The Abortion Game:  
How It's Played  
with Women's Lives***

## Prologue

‘Dear Peter Knight,’ I wrote. The cursor waited, blinking and hostile, while I struggled to fill in the rest of the letter. What to ask?

I had never tried to interview someone in prison before. I studied the online maps of Barwon Prison. The aerial layout, with its rotor-shaped buildings and cog-like flow, looked like a diagram for something unrealised yet profound.

On Monday 16 July 2001, Knight walked into a clinic that performed abortions and shot another person. It was Australia’s first, and so far only, anti-abortion murder.

As maximum-security prisoners don’t have access to the internet, my first attempt at contact was sent not to Peter Knight but to the Department of Corrections. It was more direct, I told myself: prison officials would open, read and most likely withhold my letter anyway.

I’d already interviewed a broad range of people with radical views, I told the Department of Corrections email recipient. But Peter Knight’s case holds a unique and extreme place in the struggle for abortion rights in this country.

On that Monday morning in 2001, when patients had been registered, anti-abortion protesters had disbanded and the lone security guard had left his post, a man walked into East Melbourne’s Fertility Control Clinic, the oldest abortion clinic in Australia, with a large duffel bag.<sup>1</sup>

Steve Rogers, the security guard, was still there although it was 20 minutes after his shift had ended. Rogers was 44 years of age. He lived in Melton, in Melbourne’s west, with his wife and seven children; his father had died a fortnight before. He had worked at the clinic for only two months. He was an atheist.<sup>2</sup>

Exiting the bathroom, Steve Rogers confronted an unaccompanied man – a conspicuous presence in a women’s fertility clinic – and asked if he needed help.

The stranger is believed to have muttered ‘gun’ and ‘shoot’. Of the 41 other staff and patients there at the time, most were out of hearing range.

‘Are you serious?’ Steve Rogers asked in return. ‘Are you for real?’ (Of Steve Rogers’ response, witnesses seemed sure.) They were the last words he spoke.

Steve Rogers died on a patch of worn, beige carpet between reception desk and filing cabinet. The gunshot wound, police said, would have proved fatal wherever the bullet from the high-powered Winchester rifle landed on his unprotected body.

As well as the stolen gun, Peter Knight was carrying 16 litres of kerosene, cigarette lighters, ropes and gags, a mass of ammunition, and a note he'd handwritten that read, 'As a result of a fatal accident of one of the staff, we have been forced to cancel all appointments today.'

Whatever Knight's plans, he was stopped by two men waiting for their partners in the next room. They, along with clinic staff, pinned Knight down by sitting on him until police arrived.

For almost three months following his arrest, Peter Knight refused to communicate. He remained anonymous for a fortnight, referred to as 'John Doe', a term reserved, in popular culture, for unclaimed dead bodies. His silence hung like a threat over the clinic: police knew nothing of his motives, nor even if he was working alone.

In the weeks and months afterwards, the staff were on tenterhooks. 'You'd kind of look at everyone suspiciously, wondering what they were up to, if they were connected or not,' said one of the doctors who'd been at the clinic when Steve Rogers was shot, who'd tried to halt his bleeding. 'We knew that things like that happened in America. But we never assumed that it would happen here.'<sup>3</sup>

When details of Peter Knight's character finally emerged, some traits were unsurprising, such as his deep, Christian-influenced religiosity. Other aspects hinted at something more aberrant: he counted his age from the moment of conception; he led a hermetic existence in a humpy in the Killonbutta State Forest in New South Wales; he refused to 'submit' to the Australian legal system because he opposed oaths; he had devoted himself to the fight against abortion after discovering the number of abortion services on display in the telephone book.<sup>4</sup>

Peter Knight had previously protested at abortion clinics and claimed to have some involvement with Right to Life Australia, a conservative, Catholic organisation opposed to abortion, stem cell research and euthanasia; but the grimness of his crime, along with his unique interpretation of the Bible, saw most pro-life groups swiftly distance themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The American-based Army of God, however, continues to laud Peter Knight as a Prisoner of Christ, 'incarcerated for saving unborn babies from babykilling

abortionists'. The Army of God portray themselves as a moral army in an amoral era, fighting abortion 'mills' with one hand, and a government that wants their truths silenced with the other.

The abortion divide has a more visible landscape in the United States; it is more like a battlefield. Between 1977 and 2010, there were 6462 recorded acts of violence against clinics and their workers, including bombings, arson, stalking, anthrax threats and assault. There have been 175,274 counts of clinic disruption (hate mail, bomb threats, picketing) and 33,384 clinic blockades. In Australia, similar statistics are not collated. While there were bombings of clinics, doctors' houses and feminist organisations in the 1960s and 70s, there has only been one in the past two decades, in Perth in 1998. Certainly, staff have been harassed, clinics blockaded or threatened, and homes picketed. In the US, such acts might legally fall under 'stalking' or intimidation, but in Australia there is less protection of personal rights and violations of them: a frequent reason cited as to why anti-abortion protesters aren't guilty of harassment here is because they're one-off incidents, although this clearly isn't true for staff.<sup>6</sup>

But then, nine doctors and clinic workers have been murdered in the United States.

The most recent fatality, Dr George Tiller, was shot while handing out service leaflets at the church he attended in Wichita, Kansas, in 2009. One of the few doctors to perform late-term abortions in the US, George Tiller was a hate-magnet for anti-abortionists. They picketed his clinic daily, and sometimes his neighbourhood. They shadowed him and harassed his family. In 1986, his clinic had been firebombed. In 1993, he had been shot – five times – in the parking lot of his practice. ('I was really lucky,' he told Susan Wicklund, a fellow abortion doctor. 'It was a small-caliber gun, and she was a lousy shot.') When George Tiller died inside his church's foyer, he was facing multiple indictments and lawsuits, a strategy used to keep doctors entangled in legal bureaucracy and out of clinics.<sup>7</sup>

The man who killed Dr Tiller, Scott Roeder, had been affiliated with the extreme anti-abortion groups Operation Rescue and Army of God.<sup>8</sup> The Army of God popularised the notion of the killing of doctors who perform abortions as a heroic act. The Army's manual, a how-to guide on tactics for interfering with abortion practice and clinics – from injecting butyric acid into walls<sup>9</sup> and gluing locks to building bombs and avoiding arrest – includes a declaration of justifiable homicide for 'God-

fearing men and women of the United States of Amerika' who choose to 'declare war on the entire child-killing industry':

All of the options have expired. Our Most Dread Sovereign Lord God requires that whosoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed. Not out of hatred for you, but out of love for the persons you exterminate, we are forced to take arms against you. Our life for yours – a simple equation. Dreadful. Sad. Reality, nonetheless.<sup>10</sup>

It is often said that the anti-abortion movement in Australia borrows tactics from its American siblings. Had Peter Knight known about the Army of God before he entered the Fertility Control Clinic? Had their methods helped shape his own?

The day after sending my email, I received a reply. The Department of Corrections had decided that such a conversation would impede Peter Knight's rehabilitation and could even increase the chance he would reoffend.

In many ways, Peter Knight is emblematic of the contradictions in the pro-life camp. *What is the cost of a human life?* is an inescapable question in this debate. Pro-life activists are willing to risk a woman's life in order to save the future of a foetus, a life they deem innocent. Yet, if abortion really is a form of genocide, as they claim, what is the appropriate response to such horror? Perhaps Peter Knight's crime was the logical conclusion of an attempt to fight a perceived genocide, while also highlighting the obvious paradox in this equation: of taking a life to save potential lives.

For me, this story started earlier than my attempted correspondence with Peter Knight, and with something less extreme: my own piece of anti-abortion hate mail.

## Chapter One: Introduction to Abortion Politics and Project

One day in 2011, I arrived at the small magazine where I worked to find an envelope leaning against my computer. It was addressed to me in faintly adolescent handwriting – black ballpoint, round ‘o’s and ‘i’s dotted with circles. There was no return address.

Our manager had added a post-it, ‘Crazy mail!’, code for the oddball correspondence we sometimes received. Several slim leaflets fell out when I picked it up. ‘HELL IS NOT A PARTY!’ screamed one.

There was a letter too, titled ‘God loves you’. The photocopy-and-paste technique made it look like a film-noir blackmail threat. ‘God wants to forgive us, He doesn’t want anyone to burn in hell forever.’ It listed the Ten Commandments, with ‘You shall not murder’ underlined.

So that was it.

My skin felt neon, as though I were an advertisement for iniquitous acts.

The fate awaiting me was everlasting fire. But, the post-script promised, there was still a chance to repent and accept my saviour, Jesus Christ.

The leaflets that came with the letter were a strange combination of biblical extracts and texting language: ‘[Jesus] paid the death penalty so we don’t have 2 go 2 hell’. Another, headed ‘Famous last words’, began:

JAMES DEAN: ‘My fun days are over.’

H. G. WELLS: ‘Go away!: I’m alright’ [*sic*]

BEETHOVEN: ‘Too bad, too bad! It’s too late!’

ANNE BOLEYN: ‘O God, have pity on my soul. O God, have pity on my soul.’

All the leaflets were stamped with the same website: 2besaved.com. Was the correspondence meant to shame me into repenting so I would turn to God?

When I got home, I looked up the URL. Many anti-abortion sites appear to have been designed when the internet first took off: animated gifs, information crammed into every pixel of every page, bolded passages with underlining for extra emphasis. Some of the American sites are a tangle of long, hyperlinked headlines and words dumped on the page for the reader to assemble into meaning. The 2besaved site

was all of these things too, and yet there was a total absence of foetal decoration, nothing to brand it specifically anti-abortion.

There was, however, an emergency-red ‘Click here if you need to be saved’ button, and a grotesque cartoon pig in a Santa hat offering lectures on ‘Vain Traditions’. I tried to listen but was quickly defeated by the litany of biblical verses.

2besaved had been careful covering their tracks: there was no ‘about’ section, no names, no contact details.

The anonymity of the letter plagued me. If the sender believed that terminating a foetus was a crime identical in nature to murder, an act that would see all souls implicated forever tormented, why would they conceal their identity? If they were convinced abortion was a sin that they personally could help prevent, why wouldn’t they embrace that role? Their anonymity implied an awareness that there was a touch of the sinister about what they were doing, something akin to intimidation. In another context – for example, a letter promising eternal damnation because someone was gay – it may be considered a hate crime.

Historically, other Christian groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan – who sometimes claimed to dress as the ghosts of the Confederate dead – adopted anonymity for intimidatory purposes: there was no certainty as to who was or wasn’t a member. Was there a similar motive here, one that relied on fear elicited by an unnamed spectre?

Anonymous action doesn’t only belong to the religious, either. A similar logic can be traced in the protests of hacker activists and black bloc anarchists – those involved in direct action or data breaches or smashing police cars, who are seen, in different epochs, to be on the wrong side of the law.

There could be another motive, too: shame. In essence, shame is an act of moral policing. It is often used to punish women for sexual expression or for disobeying God’s (or nature’s) intended purpose. Society rarely discusses women’s bodies: not what’s happening with them, why they bleed, what happens psychologically when they don’t bleed but want to, what happens when it’s the inverse. We live in a society where erectile dysfunction and its cures are advertised vociferously, where we can access pornography in a millisecond on any entertainment device, but we still can’t bring ourselves to discuss openly what a woman’s choices are when her biology operates in a predictable way.

The sender suspected I'd feel shame because abortion flouts the fundamental duty of women: to be good mothers, and to be good humans by nurturing all life. This was a prevailing concept, and one certainly evidenced in my own family, where there were far more women than men, and motherhood was an implicit ambition – I had only one cousin who hadn't yet had children, and even she worked as a nanny.

These perceived 'moral violations' are obvious in the circumspect language used to describe the deeds of backyard abortionists in newspapers past. Under the headline 'Illegal Operation' in the *Advocate* in 1923 is the case of Mary Rubina Brownlee, who, at 64, was sentenced to a year of light labour for 'having illegally used an instrument upon an 18-year-old girl with intent to bring about a certain event'. The archives are full of similarly coded charges – and full of the barely concealed dead bodies of both babies and women, presumably the aftermath of late-term or botched abortions.<sup>11</sup> The death penalty was often the sentence for performing an abortion that resulted in a patient's death.

Women's bodies have their monstrous, fearsome aspects: biologically, they can produce life, and they can snuff it out too. Women's bodies are full of blood and hormones and cycles that medicine has tried to control and regulate, but the natural corporeal processes can seem strange and secret.

'What makes for a *grievable* life?' posed the American philosopher Judith Butler about our ladders of human hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> Why are some lives worth *more*; how does that calculation happen? Some people perceive abortion as the definitive moral issue because it extinguishes a life even before that life – perceived as a vessel of innocence – has properly begun; and because abortion is a choice to impose a survival hierarchy and measure differently a potential life and a life already being lived. Such moral outrage, Butler would say, is disingenuous, because we regularly measure lives differently: a passerby in Kabul, a prisoner on death row, our next-door neighbour, our mother.

About a decade ago, I had an abortion. I then wrote about the experience and it was published in the small literary magazine *Meanjin*. Rather than exhausting the topic, writing the essay intensified my fascination. Despite abortion being so commonplace – one in three women in Australia will have an abortion by the age of 45 – it seldom makes an appearance in public life.<sup>13</sup> When it does, the treatment is clandestine – back doors, hushed tones, camouflaged clinics. Furtive. Urgent. Low profile. Day to day, we don't question where or why abortion happens; publicly, we

rarely speak its name, unless in political debate (and, more recently, on propriety-defying feminist spaces on the internet). Abortion can seem, at least to the uninitiated, a black-and-white ideological partition: the religious versus non-believers, ‘family values’ conservatives versus sexually liberated progressives.

Despite this *perceived* divide, 85 per cent of Australians – including the majority of Catholics and half of the Evangelical Christian population – believe a pregnant woman should have the right to choose abortion, a number again confirmed in various state polls.<sup>14</sup>

The more I immersed myself in the convoluted theories about what abortion signifies, the more I wanted to understand why we attached such significance to this five- to ten-minute operation (the approximate length of a standard abortion of up to 11 or 12 weeks<sup>15</sup>), and yet took it for granted as a right.

When researching a topic such as abortion, I learned to listen conscientiously. Every time I said ‘I’m writing a book on abortion’, the listener inevitably had their own story to share – the echo of a traumatic termination, or the time they helped their sister push through protesters hugging fetuses in jars. People had a need to talk through their abortion story with me, were relieved to have an audience hear their experiences, possibly because there was no room for that in everyday conversation. Abortion is something we usually push to the very backs of our closets; it’s something rarely spoken of again, after the event, unless in confession.

I brought up this idea with two close friends I met in the city for lunch in Melbourne one winter Sunday. Both were writers in their late 40s, older than me; neither had ever had an abortion.

Clare was animated, her dark, grey-dappled hair long and loose. ‘When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I felt that abortion was a huge thing for a woman to have to do. And a tragedy. Whether she was forced to go on and have a baby she didn’t want, or forced – see, “forced”,’ Clare mimed quote marks in the air, ‘by her circumstances to have an abortion that she didn’t want, it was a huge tragedy for the woman.’

Forced abortion is a horror frequently dragged out in discussions and debates about abortion, as if it is common practice for partners and in-laws in Australia to pressure vulnerable women to clinics. While research from hospitals and women’s organisations shows that women in abusive relationships are sometimes coerced into having or not having children, these do not appear to be the women anti-abortion

groups are most concerned with – if they were, wouldn't such groups devote more time and resources to support for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence?

She snatched a fry from the greasy bowl we were sharing.

My other friend, Elizabeth, and I waited for her to finish her line of thought.

She slowly wiped her hands on her serviette. 'Now I actually feel that that's partly manufactured. I met a doctor about three years ago and she was just so matter-of-fact about it: that a young person could just terminate a pregnancy and it was just this ordinary procedure, that it didn't have to be a lifelong, scarring thing. It was a bit of a turning point.'

There was a surge of silent respect for this doctor at our small table.

'When I was growing up and came into contact with ideas about abortion, guilt was a big part of it,' Clare added. 'That you would feel guilty for the rest of your life because you had done something wrong.'

Elizabeth sat contemplating. 'I'm the flip of that, the exact flip,' she said after she'd arranged her thoughts. 'When young, thinking about abortion, it seemed a small thing – an immensely practical thing. If a woman didn't feel, for whatever reason, that it wasn't the right time for her to have a child, then why wouldn't she abort and get on with her life? You already have one life in progress here, so why would you bring another one in and, in a sense, ruin two lives?'

Radiohead's 'Creep' crooned in the background.

'But then, for me, as time passed, it became something bigger. I still don't feel *against* abortion.' Elizabeth paused. 'I recognise more now – I sound like an old preacher! – the value of life. And the significance of what it is that's happening when abortion happens.'

'Do you think that's because you don't have children?' I asked clumsily. I instantly felt ashamed for reducing it to such a simple equation, though; because of her age and ill health, it looked unlikely that she ever would have children.

'I don't know.' Elizabeth's voice, always soft, fell in volume. 'Possibly. Quite possibly.'

My own curiosity about abortion began after I needed one, at the finish-line of those couple of years I've come to think of as my long, lost weekend, a time when I'd dropped out of uni and entered poverty and a hazardous relationship. And then my curiosity was re-ignited some time after that, after keeping the secret wound tight in

my chest, careful never to let it show its wary head at family celebrations, when relatives asked what I'd been up to, whether I had children yet.

I had chosen abortion and my life was better for it, of that I was almost certain. What I felt about my own abortion in hindsight was not shame or regret or any of the other wracking emotions that society and Hollywood press on women.

But self-acceptance, refusal to become a victim of biological circumstance, privileging one's own existence over the life of a foetus – these were not part of abortion mythology. Instead, women were selfish, reckless, caught weak in a moment of dissolute desire; engaged in sexual misadventures while slacking off at university; poor, young and uneducated, wrongly believing they'd find meaning in another human being. There were Hemingway's women, too – bullied into ridding themselves of their white elephant to hold on to their fragile bohemian routine – or Eliot's, phobic and cracked:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

[...]

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the routine nature of abortion – now a safe procedure that takes around the same amount of time as a circumcision to perform – the shadiness of the operation persists in contemporary culture. A 2013 sociological study on abortion in American film and television concluded that over the past four decades, as abortion has become more accessible and accepted, there's been a significant increase of abortion, or at least abortion mentions, on screen. And yet, of the 310 films and television shows that focussed on an abortion provider or where abortion was a major plot, an astonishing 9 per cent ended in death – some deaths occurring even *after* the character had decided not to go through with the abortion.<sup>17</sup> It's a striking figure for a country that has around one million abortions a year, with a mortality rate of 0.6 deaths for every 100,000 abortions (usually the result of infection), 'making it as safe as an injection of penicillin'.<sup>18</sup> Contrast that number with the 8.8 deaths that occur in every 100,000 pregnancies in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

It's not that I expect reality from Hollywood, but it is a world where medical miracles occur with remarkable regularity – victims gain consciousness ten minutes after resuscitation attempts cease, coma patients wake up, cancer disappears.

In cinema, abortion represents a disproportionate danger, and it's nearly always the less appropriate choice. In many films dealing with unplanned pregnancy, women keep their babies, or give the baby up for adoption – something that is again far more common in television and film than reality. Obviously, there's both narrative and metaphoric logic at play; as Mary Elizabeth Williams notes in *Salon*, 'An abortion is an action. A baby is a whole story line.'<sup>20</sup> So unless the whole film hinges on an abortion deliberation, there needs to be an entire other story.

But inescapable is the moral judgement these portrayals project on women and providers. 'Consider the entire premise of *American Horror Story*,' says Williams in the same article, 'a show that hinges on the rampant evil unleashed because an LA doctor did abortions in his basement back in the day.' I suspect such depictions of abortion are prevalent on screen for the same reasons as violent crime: an overrepresentation, a sensationalism, an overt sentimentality and a gripping story. According to Dr Gretchen Sisson, one of the 2013 study's authors, what their research does prove is 'an ongoing level of discomfort with abortion'.

These assumptions and depictions troubled me. Why did people have such starkly different views on abortion? This was the question the anonymous letter had triggered for me. When I further interrogated the representation of abortion, though, I had to confront a bigger question: if abortion was an inalienable right (as I'd always assumed), why had society in general still not accepted that access to this procedure is necessary to allow women full democratic participation?

The common perception that abortion leaves women broken lingers – it still appeared in the medical literature until a decade or two ago. Abortion seemed to strip from women something they could never grow back – an innocence oddly similar to virginity. It's almost as if, even by contemplating abortion, women were at risk of perversion or interference that would encourage them to – in an outburst of passion – give away the contents of their womb.

Sometimes, what bothered me about my own abortion was that I might be in denial because I didn't feel a gaping hole where a baby should have been. Other times I worried that my family would find out, and that my grandmother's fondness for me would evaporate. My grandmother, who as a young woman had given up a baby for adoption, once told me that she'd come to believe in abortion over the years in certain situations, like rape. 'Though I don't think it should ever be done for selfish reasons,'

she said. ‘Because we want to buy another car or something,’ she added when pressed. I laughed, and then felt bad. Then she laughed too.

Vaguely, occasionally, I meditated on whether something about me had been indelibly altered by abortion. Women I knew had abortions before and after mine, but it was a topic of discussion only late at night, in dark cars after work, when reassurance was sought. I was never a member of pro-choice or feminist collectives at uni, though I was involved with various protest movements. Perhaps I was a generation too late and abortion wasn’t the defining issue it had been, or perhaps it was that abortion was hidden from view.

The notion that abortion is not an issue in Australia today is another widespread belief. ‘So long as she works hard and doesn’t throw bricks or ask awkward questions, she can have as many qualifications and abortions and pairs of shoes as she likes,’ writes Jenny Turner in the *London Review of Books*, describing the settlement deal modern women have signed up to.<sup>21</sup> In Australia, abortion is generally assumed to be legal (even though it is not subject to federal law and actually sits in various shades of legality in every state and territory except the ACT, Victoria, Western Australia and, now, Tasmania), affordable (unless you’re poor, a mother, a rural resident, a student, in jail, sick, young, or in the casual labour workforce), and within reach (unless you live in a rural area, in prison, in an unstable or violent relationship, are more than 14 weeks pregnant, are young, or have doubts and nobody to share them with).

When abortion sits under the Crimes Act, as it still does in Queensland, it leaves the procedure open to allegations of illegality. These charges are often launched by pro-life organisations, and are an effective tactic, costing clinics and hospitals a lot of money and time. Such investigations can be, and sometimes are, also launched by police, as was the case with the Tegan Leach trial in Cairns in 2010, the first time a woman was charged in Queensland with crimes related to procuring a home abortion.

Generally, terminations at hospitals such as the Royal Women’s in Melbourne are covered by Medicare; private clinics vary in price, with, usually, only one-eighth of the cost rebated to Medicare-card holders. The Marie Stopes clinic, for example, charges up to \$480 for a surgical abortion in the first 11 weeks of pregnancy; patients could claim back \$60–\$90 of this amount. In Victoria, of the approximately 18,000 abortions each year, hospitals only perform 4000 or so – and, generally, only when

the woman is under the uncomplicated 14 weeks gestation (90 per cent of abortions occur in the first 11 weeks<sup>22</sup>). After that it becomes very hazy indeed as to what choices a woman on a low income has. Some clinics increase their prices enormously for every week a woman is pregnant after the first trimester.<sup>23</sup>

So I came to abortion politics late, and failed to tell my mother about my own abortion, or why I was so interested in abortion research. My mother: five foot four, usually blonde (though her hair style and shade change every six weeks), indomitable. A single parent, she has worked in pharmacy retail most of her working life. She has very definite ideas about contraception – ‘Everyone should use it! We need to make it attractive in the front windows of pharmacies so kids feel comfortable purchasing it’ – and unplanned pregnancy – ‘So irresponsible: everyone has access to contraception!’

It would take several revolutions of the Earth to convince my mother of the fact, but around 60 per cent of Australians who fall unexpectedly pregnant report they were using contraception at the time, while the World Health Organization estimates that even if *every* woman in the world used contraception *every* time she had sex, there would still be something like six million unplanned pregnancies a year.<sup>24</sup> Biologically speaking, women can fall pregnant for almost half of their average lifetime.

‘The thing is,’ I said to my mother as we drove back from my grandmother’s house on an overcast Mother’s Day, ‘they assume that women don’t want to talk about this. That they’re damaged and have no insights about it worth sharing.’ My mum was driving; she had her chic prescription sunglasses on and a vintage floral dress. I wore my muddy running clothes: I had fallen over in my grandmother’s dipped driveway following a short, rainy run. We were both staring at the distance, hypnotised by the unending bitumen.

Although my work was far removed from her world and her interests, she was trying to understand the problems I was having. I’d applied for ethics approval from the university where I was studying, so I could involve other human beings in my project, as I needed opinions and firsthand experiences other than my own. I still hadn’t received approval then, even after seven months, four lengthy redrafts, and phone conferences about the religious leanings of members of the committee and the merits of a project on abortion. I had noticed the resistance at every doorway: the more you try to know abortion, the more she’s locked out in the back alley.

My mother took the car around a bend, and commented, as if she had considered it a great deal, ‘I don’t think it’s something you’d get over, though.’

My heart quickened its beat: was this the moment I had to confess? The mere suggestion seemed to deoxygenate the car.

‘I mean,’ my mother went on, ‘I think it’s something you’d think about for the rest of your life. I don’t know how you’d get over that.’

I knew two things then: one, when I did finally confess to my mother, it was going to be a lengthy, possibly sorrowful conversation; and two, I would have to tell her before I finished this book.

I had other motives with my research, too. While there can never be justice for those who died from wombs butchered, abandoned in unmarked graves and never spoken of again, there can perhaps be a recognition of the injustices that they suffered; a declaration that their lives can’t simply be erased by the societal shame surrounding the manner of their deaths.

A spiritual finality marks the termination of a foetus, which is often perceived as simultaneously a corrupting agent – representing both carnal desire and murder – and an opportunity for salvation. So what would happen if women spoke more about abortion? Maybe we would learn how our grandmothers, mothers, sisters and friends have known abortion, in different eras, socio-economic conditions and ways. We might also see that abortion isn’t a modern development – the result of sexual liberation – or geographically isolated; it has an unbroken march through history.

Rarely do we tell these stories of women who will not be forced into pregnancy – and the lengths they will go to – as it goes against the natural documented order of a woman’s life and the stages that are usually put on display in public, in the home, in social interactions. Although it is not accepted as an ordinary, womanly biological function, abortion is part of a reproductive spectrum; in medicine, miscarriage is commonly referred to as spontaneous abortion. How do we reconcile these traces of the uncanny, bringing into the light that which ‘should have remained hidden’<sup>25</sup>?

This year, across the world, nearly 42 million abortions will be performed; almost half will be medically ‘unsafe’ (not even a third of the world’s countries allow abortion upon request). Between 65,000 and 70,000 women will die from ensuing

complications.<sup>26</sup> More than half of those dead women will have lived on the continent of Africa. This happens year in, year out.

The chance of dying as a result of modern abortion practices in Australia, like in the United States, is less than one in 100,000.<sup>27</sup> Here – where, yearly, one in four pregnancies ends in termination or miscarriage – abortion is safer than carrying a pregnancy to full term (five women die for every 100,000 births in Australia).

In Australia, the UK and the US, one in three women will have an abortion in her lifetime. It is a statistic that reproaches the silence surrounding the operation: one in three. Most people have no idea that abortion is seriously and frequently considered by women as an option in their lives, let alone commonly performed.

I wouldn't stake my reputation on these statistics, however. No-one is tallying all the figures, doctors and hospitals are seldom forthcoming, miscarriage can technically be counted under 'abortion' if a suction and curette is performed or vice versa, and accurate medical data is not always kept in developing countries, where peritonitis, septicaemia and other suspicious deaths may not even be recorded.

We often forget that concepts feminism fought to redefine and enshrine in law are interrogated in front of health clinics every day; women seeking legal procedures across the country are subjected to the suggestion that they are selfish, merciless and incapable of making informed decisions.

From Charlotte, North Carolina, to Melbourne, Victoria, the rhetoric exercised by anti-abortion activists is the same – 'baby killers', 'abortion mills', 'victims of "choice"', 'a holocaust', 'abortion hurts women'. Public opposition to abortion aims to subvert the general acceptance of the right to choose in Australia. If that opposition is left uncontested, where will public opinion be in ten years?

On each sitting Wednesday of the Victorian parliament, activists drag a dark green banner to Parliament House and stake out the MPs' car park entrance, just down the road from St Patrick's Cathedral. Propped up by a row of protesters, the banner bears a cross for every abortion since 1 January of that particular year, and grows longer with each sitting.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly why this performance makes such an impression; after all, the desire to recriminalise abortion in Victoria is held by merely 8 per cent of the state's residents. But the doggedness of their dutiful ritual goes part way to

explaining their visibility in the media and the legislative psyche. One MP tells me that, in addition to their continued presence outside, the group also regularly drops off a parliamentary petition listing their objections to Victorian abortion law.

Maybe this particular protest is striking because of the severity of the tiny, white crosses and their resemblance to the symbolism used for lives lost in war. Perhaps this resemblance is intentional: for many of the activists standing on either side of this fault line, it is a war. On the one side are the souls of the children extinguished, plus the souls of the women who murder, and the souls of everybody remotely related to the termination – the doctors, the family members who chauffeur the women to the clinic, those taken into confidence who don't contest the decision, the clinic workers who assist, the bystanders who fail to intervene.

On the other are those who believe, to varying degrees, that whether to continue a pregnancy or not is a decision that belongs to the woman familiar with her own circumstances – her desires, her economic circumstances, her relationships; and that it is her life that will be irrevocably changed by the addition of a child.

The Parliament House protesters belong to the Helpers of God's Precious Infants, an American organisation founded in New York City that has since spread to Australia and the UK. The group is dedicated to preventing terminations, via sidewalk counselling, and converting people to the mission of eradicating 'mills'.

'Someone once told me,' said a young Helper wearing a thick silver cross in one video testimonial, 'that if people knew about 9/11 before it happened, you would do everything in your power to stop it from happening. And 9/11 happens every day at the mills.' Her words were slow, as if uttered beneath water, her brow solemn. She looked dazed but maybe she was just camera shy. There were many more testimonials. Frame by frame, pale, waxy faces described the moment they were 'called to pray, sacrifice and witness for the unborn'.

One nameless defender in a pale pink polo shirt was gripped by fervour; a headband pushed her bobbed, brown hair back; her gaze was sharp. 'I think I've been pro-life my whole life,' she said, explaining why she devoted so much time to the Helpers. 'I know a mother is very special because she's a co-creator with God.'

But surely there had to be more to it than that – a belief structure or logic that accounted for the vehemence and the relentlessness? I watched a video on sidewalk counselling on YouTube, given by Monsignor Philip Reilly, the Catholic priest who founded the Helpers in 1989, to 'pray' and 'counsel' outside abortion clinics and

women's health centres. (Six years later, in 1995, Pope John Paul II penned *Evangelium Vitae – The Gospel of Life* – which encouraged followers to prioritise the rights of the unborn by practising pro-life activities.) Reilly's two-hour lecture began with an anecdote about a phone call he'd received from Sydney the week before, in which his advice was sought after a clinic doctor's wife had come out and kicked the Helpers' signs and thrown their plastic foetuses into the street. Their lawyers believed they had a case. Should they pursue it, these Sydney Helpers asked.

'You're not going to win through the courts,' the monsignor replied. Theirs was a war that could only be won by God, he argued. The one reason Helpers may take such a case to court was so they could 'continue to do what we have to do' – that is, attempting to deter abortion at ground zero, the clinic, rather than attempting to stop abortion legislatively.

When people think of an active pro-life movement, they think of the United States – Texas, Kansas, Florida, Dakota, South Carolina. But as well as Sydney, the Helpers routinely protest at a number of Melbourne clinics too, maintaining a near-constant vigil at the Fertility Control Clinic in East Melbourne, from 7.30am to about 10am, Monday through Saturday. This schedule means they're present when staff and patients begin arriving for clinic.

The prayer and protest at this battleground – the first clinic in Australia to offer women safe and affordable legal abortions – was a ritual I wanted to study. But I was determined not to just lurk outside. I wanted to know what the view was like from inside the clinic, too.

## Chapter Two: The East Melbourne Clinic

An elegant gold plaque by the front gate read: 'Fertility Control Clinic'. A high wall and leafy garden shielded the two terrace houses from passing eyes. On a street filled with cafes and restaurants, it was the only business that sat far back on the block, away from the clatter. A brick path led to a security door inside an alcove newer than the original façade. There were bars on the windows and door.

Though essentially a women's sexual health centre, specialising in pap tests, STD screening and treatment, counselling, and pregnancy termination, the clinic also offered vasectomies. (The FCC runs one-day termination clinics in Albury and Hobart, too.)

'Press the buzzer', invited the handwritten sign sticky-taped to the intercom system.

I did.

There was a clicking sound. 'Push the door,' replied the intercom.

Surprised I didn't have to explain the reason for my visit, I pushed into a small waiting area. On the left was a front desk divided in two by a shoulder-high partition; anybody speaking on either side would have to slouch down to achieve a degree of privacy. A couple of blue plastic chairs sat against the wall on my right. The desk was empty, except for a small porcelain vase of flowers.

I sat in one of the chairs in the reception foyer, alone. Behind the desk, a large computer screen split into nine cameras was turned toward me, monitoring scenes from the various borders of the property. The bottom three screens were dark.

After five minutes of sitting, waiting for somebody to emerge, I started to feel uneasy. It had been a long time since I'd been in an abortion clinic, and this one in particular had taken on mythic proportions for me because of its history. In six days' time, it would be the anniversary of Steve Rogers' murder in, quite possibly, the same room. He may have died 11 years ago, but I'd only read Dr Allanson's book on the subject, *Murder on His Mind: The Untold Story of Australia's Abortion Clinic Murder*, the week before.

Ten minutes went by. Fifteen.

I was curious about Dr Allanson and her mechanisms for coping with the protesters out front. In her book, she'd commented, frequently, that the protesters

made her feel uncomfortable, unsafe. Did these emotions exist before the invasion and shooting? I wanted to ask. Did she have a relationship with any of the protesters, some of whom had been rallying at the clinic for a decade or more, or were they a nameless mob? Dr Allanson confessed that she judged Peter Knight incapable of normal human emotion – did that mean she thought him beyond redemption?

From the book I'd gleaned that, before the murder, staff had perceived their security guard as a deterrent to incendiary behaviour, but mostly the guard was there to help escort patients, to put them at ease. Protests at the clinic were relentless. Staff had come to accept that the daily taunts and prowling went with the job, but they still worried about the effect on patients.

Protesters had, for instance, returned to demonstrate at the clinic the morning following Steve Rogers' murder. He was a nice guy, one of the protesters told the *Age*, but they had a mission to prevent abortion. Besides, warned then president of Right to Life, Margaret Tighe, 'violence begets violence'. It was a refrain repeated on newspaper front pages across Australia.

Two women came downstairs, one tear-stained, and the other, with shoulder-length blonde hair, I recognised as Susie Allanson. I averted my eyes as they spoke quietly at the door.

In her early 50s, Susie Allanson was petite and composed. Dressed in a grey tunic and white shirt, she radiated kind pragmatism. She led me upstairs to her light-filled and spacious office, which a tall bay window and children's paintings tacked on calm, green walls.

Susie Allanson had worked at the Fertility Control Clinic for more than 20 years. Even though she still led the team of counsellors, she only personally saw women struggling with the decision to terminate or continue a pregnancy, both pre- or post-operatively.

'I see a distortion, if you like,' she began. 'One out of ten women might have some question marks surrounding the decision and they'll go away to think. Some don't return. Some do, clearer about their decision. The others are referred to me.'<sup>28</sup>

Susie's role was one of crisis management, helping patients consider other angles or examine contradictory feelings – say, being morally opposed to abortion while simultaneously contemplating undergoing one. Sometimes the question of whether to terminate would be the only matter a woman is struggling with, Susie told me, other times it would be the latest in a series of 'emergency predicaments'.

‘Aren’t there times the boundaries blur, times you want to tell them what you think would be best for them?’ It seemed that counsellors in an abortion clinic were uniquely placed to point out that the pregnancy was the latest infelicity in a bad relationship, or that having a child at 15 would be rough, and lonely.

Sometimes, Susie replied, when someone suffered from schizophrenia or if they were really young. ‘You can see with some of the young ones that they’re all keen about becoming a mum, without being really aware of all that entails, and the grown-ups in their world are so freaked out, they’re basically pushing them to come in here. Part of my role is to be respectful of where that woman is and if she wants to continue the pregnancy or if she’s ambivalent about where she is.’

It sounded like an exacting job.

Susie disagreed. She leaned forward, hands clasped toward me. ‘The bottom line is, if a woman doesn’t have control over her fertility, she’s got little control over her life.’

It was a central pillar of feminist theory: if women can’t choose if or when they bear children, then they don’t have agency – because how can women participate meaningfully in society if reproductive functions determine their contributions?

‘It’s important that staff have someone they can refer the more ... complex cases to,’ Susie said, ‘but I don’t think there are that many days when my job is difficult.’

I remained politely sceptical. Aside from my not being equipped to help people make life-changing decisions about issues deemed morally ambiguous, I couldn’t imagine pushing through protesters just to get to my office each day.

‘When I have to think about the protesters out there, or when I hear them with their yelling or singing, or when I see a woman who’s particularly distressed because of experiencing that, then my anger comes up. And I guess some fear – because they are so radicalised and because we have a history of a fanatic killing a security guard, and other violence in the clinic, and violence toward doctors elsewhere.’

By ‘other violence’, Susie meant the stalking and harassment of staff and patients over the years. One doctor told me how he was once followed home, then protests were organised outside his house: a ‘name and shame’, exposing his alleged ignominy to the neighbourhood. It’s a tactic used by groups to embarrass a corporation or an individual; activists simply show up at a workplace or home and turn the spotlight on the target’s deeds. It’s very popular among US pro-life activists

who aim to smear doctors. This doctor explained that one of the Fertility Control Clinic protesters had worked for VicRoads – at least that was the rumour – and so traced the names and addresses of all the staff licence plates, which explained the letters and the unexpected visits.

Protesters also used to regularly pull stunts like padlocking the gates out the back so staff and patients couldn't come or go, but that was all years ago.

For Susie, though, the harassment was unflagging. 'Saying that I'm a murderer, and that I'm just doing this for the money and that I'm harming women – they trash my professional integrity, they trash the professional integrity of my colleagues, and they personally insult us. And that happens every single day.'

I considered the daily stresses in my workplace – my computer taking too long to load, crazy mail, a writer missing a deadline. The feeble comparison made me feel like a voyeur.

'You're meant to be able to go to work and it's a safe environment,' added Susie.

I wanted to know more about the anti-abortionists. 'I have heard there is a large monthly demonstration?'

'Well,' Susie replied, 'they are backed by the wealthiest, most powerful institution in the world: the Catholic Church. They go to mass at St Patrick's and are blessed and everything and then they have a march up. There can be 50 to 80 of them. They have a statue of the Virgin Mary. They have children in pushers.' Susie sounded as though she couldn't quite believe their audacity, even after all these years.

I, on the other hand, was surprised that a church as established as St Patrick's, the biggest Catholic Church in Melbourne, also notable for being Australia's tallest and largest church, fostered such confrontational behaviour. Then again, it had once been Cardinal George Pell's home, before he moved to Sydney and then the Vatican, and was now overseen by Archbishop Denis Hart, both archconservatives.

'So has anyone from the clinic ever spoken to an official from St Patrick's church?' I asked.

'I don't really see the point in trying to negotiate something with people who are so ...' She bit her lip, sifting for the appropriate word. 'Extreme! And they are zealots. If they hold that basic tenet – that basic axiomatic truth – that abortion at any stage is murder, you can't argue with that. In fact, they think the contraceptive pill is

murder. They're against abortion, against contraception, against sex ed. And in America – I don't know about here – a lot of them are for capital punishment.'

'I think,' I said tentatively, 'some people would be surprised to know that St Patrick's church was involved in this kind of harassment.'

Susie shook her head. 'Denis Hart is the archbishop there. He has quite a record of disregarding people as people.'

An example, perhaps, of the 'history of disregard' Susie referred to: when Archbishop Hart was called before the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sex Abuse in 2013 and asked why it had taken so long to defrock a priest for such crimes, he replied, 'Better late than never.'<sup>29</sup>

Homosexuality and abortion are of equal preoccupation to both the Catholic Church and many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, who believe engaging in either permanently scars the soul. As Amanda Lohrey concludes in her *Quarterly Essay* on Christianity and politics, no other issues, from poverty to global warming, elicit as much concern or rhetoric because nothing else undermines the structure of the family and church – and the political beliefs that sustain them – to the extent that abortion and homosexuality do.<sup>30</sup>

Clinic protesters were extremists, Susie said, and also a minority.

'They are radical and they are dangerous. We had one of our staff speaking with police today because one of them [the protesters] bailed her up as she was being dropped off from her car. As they do.' Susie shook her head again. It wasn't the audacity she was shocked by, I realised, but the fact that they still got away with such behaviour.

'She put up her hands for them to go away and said, "I am a staff member." And it was a female protester,' Susie added, as though women would be less inclined to treat other women in that way. "'Oh, you are a murderer," the protester said. They really believe we're murderers! And that if we work at an abortion-providing clinic, which also provides contraception, and pap testing, and goodness knows all sorts of other things, that we are working at a slaughterhouse.' She groaned. 'Their rhetoric encourages people in the belief that's it's perfectly okay to be violent towards us. That you'd be doing the world a service.'

Every now and then Susie half-stood and peered over her window ledge, as if she were watching protesters in the street below, even though they'd long gone for the day.

‘There’s something that’s just not right about them selling God on the street – and their version of God. They call themselves Christian and they’re so disrespectful of women. But that’s okay, because life in the womb takes priority over everybody else’s life. And for them to pray in public on the street, to kneel down on the street and be praying, there’s something exhibitionist about it.’

I asked the question that felt inevitable: all these years on, how did she feel about the day Steve Rogers died?

She shuffled a thin stack of papers on her desk. ‘It was a moment where it was time to hang our heads out the window and say whatever they said in that movie. “I’ve had enough.”’

Picturing the much-cited scene from *Network*, I prompted, “‘I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore’?”

‘Yes, yes!’ she laughed. Susie laughed a lot in fact, despite the weight of the subject matter.

‘But of course we are taking it. It continues. The low point in my whole working life probably is the fact that nothing much has changed, in terms of Right to Life protesters being allowed to be out the front of the clinic and harass women, disrespect women, distress women, and that our society, by not stopping that, is saying “That’s okay. That’s okay.” And I just cannot get my head around that.’

The legal avenues investigated by the clinic have so far proved dead ends, with the local government body, Melbourne City Council, claiming that curtailing protest rights doesn’t fall under their jurisdiction or scope, and that the police can’t act either because they’re limited by the state laws they enforce. For the clinic, the bureaucratic to-ing and fro-ing has been about as satisfying as a decades-long game of Pong.

One option was to seek an injunction. That’s what the Royal Women’s Hospital, where 3000 abortions are performed each year, did in 1992. Injunctions, however, need to be tied to specific organisations – in the hospital’s case, Right to Life – and specific individuals, such as Margaret Tighe, Right to Life president, who at one time was a routine presence at pro-life protests.

It’s a costly option (and the clinic doesn’t have the pockets or the legal department of the Women’s Hospital), but it’s also unlikely an injunction could even be granted under the same grounds: protesters outside the Fertility Control Clinic are not technically trespassing unless they enter clinic grounds. Because of the clinic’s

entrance, women will always have to walk past that stretch of path the protesters favour. Moreover, an injunction would have to define the protesters as ‘public nuisances’, meaning they obstruct and beset spaces people wish to move through, and deter people by their presence.

The justice who awarded a temporary injunction to the Royal Women’s Hospital in 1986 summed up the competing sides of the right to protest: ‘whereas the defendants assert their freedom to stand in an orderly manner on the footpath and hand out leaflets and display shoe-boxes representing coffins of babies, that same freedom is a restraint on the freedom of other people to walk along the footpath without being handed leaflets and shown shoe-boxes representing babies’ coffins.’<sup>31</sup>

Since 2001, the East Melbourne clinic has appealed to Melbourne City Council to establish a ‘bubble zone’ outside the clinic: a perimeter that would prohibit certain actions or utterances within that space.

In the Canadian province of British Columbia, the Access to Abortion Services Act 1995 prevents protesters from ‘sidewalk interference’ or intimidation of patients, staff or abortion providers. Some bubble zones are actually floating areas that apply specifically to doctors at their homes or other workplaces. Similarly, the US has the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act 1994, though that hasn’t eliminated murders or bombings at clinics.

The legislation in both countries was written explicitly for health clinics that work with vulnerable groups – that is, women seeking abortions. In late 2013, Tasmania became the first Australian territory to pass bubble-zone legislation. For the Fertility Control Clinic, the proposed zone would be a 20-metre area that would relocate protesters to the other side of Wellington Parade’s wide asphalt sea.

Cathy Oke, a Greens member of Melbourne City Council and a researcher at RMIT, says the council is aware of the situation at the clinic, but their hands are tied: it doesn’t fall under the Council’s jurisdiction. Cathy herself is sympathetic to the clinic’s problems but also feels that any law introduced to curb the behaviour of the pro-life protesters could be used to deter other political protest, too.

She has similar concerns about the bubble-zone legislation: that it could be used to limit political protest, and that there is the potential for, say, mining companies to establish a bubble zone around their offices, preventing pickets or blockades (such as the blockade outside Rio Tinto during the Jabiluka Mine protests

in the 90s, which, as a teenager, I'd travelled by train to attend for a number of days), or to shut down movements like Occupy Melbourne.

Such rights are written into the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, which, though not actually enshrined in law, are nonetheless supposed to guide the decision-making and legislation of the state's politicians (public servants are also directed to adhere to the charter within their employment duties). The Act addresses the political and civil rights of individuals in the state. Section 15 specifically addresses the freedom to expression of every person within Victoria: 'Every person has the right to hold an opinion without interference.' A clause in the same section states that there are certain responsibilities that come with this right, such as the obligation to 'respect the rights and reputation of other persons'.

Section 9, to boot, states that 'Every person has the right to life and has the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life.'<sup>32</sup>

Paradoxically, pro-life groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby vehemently oppose, and still lobby against, the Charter. In their view, the code limits their religious freedoms – in the power awarded to judges rather than politicians, the strengthening around equal opportunity and religious faith (something many religious organisations had previously been exempt from), and, of course, Section 48, which states: 'Nothing in this Charter affects any law applicable to abortion or child destruction.'

In other words, even if doctors or medical professionals are morally, politically or religiously opposed to abortion, they are still subject to Victorian abortion legislation, and so must give patients a referral to a doctor or service that will provide a termination.

The problem from the Council's perspective is, Cathy Oke explains, that the existing harassment laws under the *Crimes Act 1958* actually belonged to the sphere of state government. Legislatively, councils are responsible for public spaces and city property: placards and information signs and the like. 'The next level at which a response to the situation at the clinic needs to occur is at the state level.' In other words, the state government would have to create legislation that curbed or prohibited protest outside clinics, and have the police enforce these laws.

Cathy's comments took me back to the infamous eviction of the Occupy Melbourne camp on 21 October 2011. Part of the global movement interrogating

contemporary economic inequality, Occupy Melbourne was a motley collection of socialists, anarchists, students, Indigenous activists, artists and hippies that were forcefully evicted from City Square by Victoria Police at the behest of Robert Doyle, Lord Mayor of Melbourne and head of Melbourne City Council, in full view of Town Hall and council offices. An irate Susie Allanson had contacted the media during the eviction, demanding to know what the difference was between the situation at the clinic and the camp. I'd been at the expulsion, and the same question had occurred to me.

One of the criticisms of the eviction was that police had been so quick to respond to the City Square camp, even though their presence wasn't threatening or dangerous, yet refused to intervene with the harassment at the clinic, which had led to actual violence.

'I don't support the action the council did for the Occupy movement either!' Cathy stresses. 'But that was all about the hanging of signs and not being able to have structures without permits. So for Occupy it was about the tents. For the pro-choice group, they'd hung up a banner, or something ridiculous like that,' says Cathy Oke.

In 2010, the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights, a small collective that runs a monthly 'clinic defence', was fined by Melbourne City Council bylaws officers for stringing their royal purple banner reading 'Free abortion on demand NOW' between two parking poles out the front of the clinic. At first, the fine for an 'unauthorised portable sign in a public space' was \$250, but the group refused to pay it, and the amount increased heftily to \$1250. It was Cathy who took the petition to the council that eventually saw the fine revoked, a feat rarely performed by MCC.

Nonetheless, the pro-choice activists felt unfairly harassed.

'We've only got a certain number of compliance officers, and the threat to public safety is a policing issue, not our local government's officers' role. So if we're receiving the phone calls, I know there's frustration from the clinic when we then say, "Well you have to call the police because our officers can only go by the local laws, which are littering, dropping cigarette butts and tying banners up.'" Ultimately, though, the Council deemed issues of harassment and security as policing issues.

It was an unusual situation. As well as protesting at clinics, pro-lifers across Australia were filming people going in and out. It's probably a breach of the Privacy Act, Cathy agrees: it might be possible for clients of the clinic to sue or place charges if they caught someone in the act.

Except, of course, few women harassed on their way to get a termination feel like pursuing the matter with police and the courts.

‘I don’t know where the film ends up, but if they could see it posted anywhere, it’d be a clear case of breach in privacy.’

The idea of protesters taking all that footage – it was so invasive, and sinister. What could they possibly be using the footage for? If nothing, why record it at all – just to reinforce the notion that the women were being observed in an unforgivable act? Was it a proxy for God’s judging eye, ensuring permanent record in case his eye was turned another way that particular day? Whatever the logic, it was something I couldn’t abide about the pro-lifers.

Filming has long been associated with oppression, from Winston Smith’s inability to escape the eye of Big Brother to government surveillance of activists. Now, at rallies, police film faces and actions, and protesters and human rights observers film them in return. Occupy Melbourne was an interesting modern phenomenon of this tactic: police filmed, and so did protesters’ iPhones, footage they uploaded instantly to social media or even streamed live. In the past, a brutal eviction would have to have been witnessed by media, but social media helped the Occupy movements, and to some extent the Arab Spring, overcome the narrative of the status quo. Yet, obtaining abortion for most women is a private act, so the act of filming them is intimidation, and another attempt to shame.

When I finally heard back from Melbourne City Council after four months of pursuit, they informed me of nothing I hadn’t already learned: the clinic had repeatedly requested they intervene through local law; the council wouldn’t because it would limit the right to peacefully protest (they cited the Charter); that all protest in Melbourne was approached in the same way, using the same guidelines; that the clinic had requested MCC enforce a bubble zone, but that would breach the limits of local laws outlined in the *Local Government Act 1989*.

In Australia, despite the increase in anti-abortion protest since the emergence of the 40 Days for Life vigil (a worldwide pray-in at abortion clinics that lasts the length of time it takes, biblically, to ‘transform’ people and ideas<sup>33</sup>), the only legal protection in place for women trying to access an abortion clinic in Australia was in Tasmania.

There remain a number of mysteries concerning the reluctance of Melbourne City Council or the Victorian state government to act in defence of the clinic, or the

other routinely protested clinics, such as Marie Stopes. After all, the purpose of both institutions is lawmaking and governance. Their claim of adherence to the charter was also surprising, given the heavy-handed and exorbitant response to Occupy Melbourne trod all over the peaceful right to protest.

Besides which, there were already examples of laws effectively operating in the same way a buffer zone would in Victoria. In her report into legislative possibilities to resolve the situation at the clinic on behalf of Greens MP Colleen Hartland's office, Hilary Taylor cites as one example the *Parliamentary Precincts Act 2001*, which limits protest on the Victorian parliamentary preserve – as a result, it is illegal for protest to take place above the first step, and officers have the right to request protesters leave the grounds.

A lawyer friend audibly sighed when I sought her counsel on the matter. 'There is no right to protest in Victoria,' she declared. The Charter only applied to government bodies, so while the Melbourne City Council and state government were bound to it in terms of governance and staff, the Charter wouldn't apply to the clinic in the same way. 'Anyway, no right is absolute,' she reminded me.

How easily could these laws be applied to other kinds of pickets, say, workers striking outside Grocon offices who try to prevent managers or temporary workers from entering the site? The US and Canada, where such freedoms are written into law, had ostensibly avoided this issue through the transparent titling of the law: the Access to Abortion Services Act, the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act.

Besides, from a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the cost to council and police of monitoring the clinic on a daily basis would be exorbitant. Cathy had pointed out that council officers spent more time at the Fertility Clinic than at other places. A Victoria Police spokesperson didn't agree with that assessment, but did say they sent officers there when there was a large gathering, or anytime there was a complaint from staff or protesters, which was often.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thwack.* Items clattered from my bed-head to the wooden floor while my hand fumbled in the dark to still the alarm. It was only 6am and I'd gotten home late the night before, but I coaxed my bones out of bed.

Every fourth Saturday of the month sees the Rosary Parade – when a sizeable convoy of pro-life protesters, who meet at the sprawling, gothic St Patrick's

Cathedral, wind their way through East Melbourne streets to the Fertility Control Clinic, where they hold a 30-minute vigil, before returning to the church.

A response to the parade is organised by the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights. CWRR is an action collective founded by Radical Women (an offshoot of the small but unwavering Freedom Socialist Party) that also includes members of the Sex Party, Socialist Alliance, the Labor Party and unaligned activists. The major difference between the once-a-month protests and every other day of the month is the number of people in attendance. Most days at the clinic, there are between three and eight members of the Helpers of God's Precious Infants (HoGPIs), and no counter-presence – the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights just don't have the numbers.

Bleary-eyed I showered, dressed, stirred a glass of instant coffee in the only receptacle I could fit in the cup-holder of my car, fed the cat and made a dash for the fringe of the CBD.

I parked outside a stately mansion on the Richmond side of Alexandra Gardens. Approaching the clinic, I saw an older man's with a 'Friend of the Fertility Control Clinic' tag around his neck. He was rugged up in a blue jumper, with a jacket on top, and a grey scarf too. 'Good morning,' he greeted.

It was quarter past eight and the only sign of protest was three older people huddled before a tree on my left, holding pamphlets and rosaries. They stood close together.

'Can I help you?' the man asked me genially. He had a firm American accent and was, I guessed, about 60. Possibly he assumed I was having second thoughts about visiting the clinic.

'Are you Susie Allanson's friend?' I blurted. Susie had mentioned a colleague who'd started the Friends of the Clinic.

'Yes,' the man replied, wary.

'I interviewed her a couple of weeks ago and she mentioned your group.'

He was a psychotherapist, I learned from the swish-looking business card he passed me.

'How did it all start?' I pointed to the tag hanging around his neck.

'I don't want to tell you that.' His gaze was sharp.

I nodded slowly, expecting an awkward silence to follow. Instead, he started to offer slices of information. Something had upset him personally a couple of years

ago. He'd contacted Susie to see if he could help out at the clinic. They exchanged some possible ideas. A few months later, with the clinic's permission, he'd started coming regularly to attempt mediation with the protesters.

'After a few months, it was clear that wasn't going to work. So I started doing this.'

'Running interference,' elaborated a second man, who'd joined our conversation. He too was about 60, and a member of the Australian Sex Party. (The Sex Party was founded in 2009, with funding from the Eros Association, a lobby group for the adult industry. It tended to attract civil libertarians – people interested in personal freedoms, the free market and opposed to censorship in all its forms, particularly internet restrictions.)

I'd seen a demonstration of them running interference a few minutes earlier when one of the Friends stood on the kerb talking to a Sri Lankan couple with two small children. The Friend shadowed them closely as they made their way to the security guard waiting at the clinic gate, placing his body between the HoGPIs who were waving pamphlets at the family.

A young woman in black exercise leggings and hoodie walked through our conversation. One of the HoGPI protesters, a thin woman in her 70s wearing a bicycle helmet, approached the woman, proffering a pamphlet.

'She's not even coming here!' bellowed the second man. Contempt crept onto the faces of the clinic Friends. He raised his voice and repeated the statement.

The young woman walked on, doing a good job of ignoring everybody.

'Don't let the bicycle helmet fool you. She's a nun,' he said to me.

I nodded, not at all sure what he meant. Hunched over, the petite old woman rejoined her compatriots. I worried how it made her feel to have people talk to her like that, and then registered the irony – of how women attempting to enter the clinic felt when approached by the protesters.

Curious, the security guard joined our conversation. He had inquisitive eyes, thick eyebrows and brown skin, and was dressed in a black bomber jacket, the kind commonly worn by guards.

'They have no regard for people,' one of the Friends said.

'Or marketing,' added the first Friend I'd spoken with. We all looked at him, perched on the step, wearing an amused smile. 'They don't market themselves well.' He spread his hands wide, a *what are you going to do* gesture. 'When I first started

talking to them, I offered to train them, to help with their behaviour – and to be more effective! I just want them to treat people better. I don't mind if they're more effective too!' He laughed.

It struck me as a strange thing to say. Why would people who volunteered their early mornings and risked their safety to ensure women could access a reproductive health clinic want pro-life protesters to be more effective in convincing women not to exercise choice?

We watched the nun with the helmet get on her bike. The other two protesters, also elderly, crossed the road and disappeared into a van.

'They promise women all kinds of things – money and support when the baby comes,' the second Friend said quietly, watching them leave. 'But it's not real. It doesn't last.'

'Have you ever seen them convince anybody not to enter the clinic?' I asked. All three shook their heads.

'They say they have,' offered the guard.

'Yes, I've heard maybe one or two a year,' one Friend said. 'Not very many.'

'Why are the protesters leaving early?' I asked, thinking the larger protest might have been cancelled. 'I heard there was a march.'

'Oh, these are the ones who try to deter women from entering the clinic. They always leave at about this time.' The Friend glanced at his watch, then at the security guard for confirmation. The guard nodded.

'But soon they'll march up here from St Patrick's, and they'll be over there with their children, praying and kneeling. They'll sing for a while and then they'll go home.'

'They bring a lot of children with them,' added Friend two. 'A lot of children.'

'But in general they're quite old, right?' I prompted.

They shook their heads again.

'No, definitely getting younger,' Friend two answered.

This was news to me. When I'd driven by in the past, I'd had the impression that being 35, I'd stick out like a sorry interloper if I actually stopped. Attendees looked to be between 60 and 80 and male, characteristics I'd come to suspect were common to Melbourne abortion protests – the opposite end of the spectrum to the young, feverish protesters in New York, or the Hillsong faithful in New South Wales.

What did it mean if the political movements around abortion in Australia did not count as members anyone under the age of 30, ages for whom questions of reproduction were significant?

Perhaps the movement no longer mattered in the same way. Women in Australia could, generally, get abortions, even in states and territories where it was still, legally, a crime, so why did they need to be out the front of a health clinic at 7am on a Saturday instead of catching up on sleep? It's hard to convince people they should go into battle for a right they can't remember not being theirs.

This logic could equally apply to the pro-life camp. What was the point of spending so much time protesting an act that was enshrined in Victorian law, and one that was conducted mostly out of sight anyway? In the last Australian census, 72 per cent of Catholics and 53 per cent of evangelical Protestants indicated they believed that women should have the reproductive right to choose abortion, while 50 per cent of all Australians supported abortion *on demand*.

'Is that what you've observed too, that they're getting younger?' I directed my question to the guard, who'd spent more time observing the clinic goings-on than the rest of us.

'Yeah, I have lately. The number of protesters has definitely increased, too. We used to guard the Carlton clinic as well, but that's shut down and so all those protesters come here. There might have been only a few in the past, but now most days there's nine or ten, and then once a month on Saturdays, there's a lot more.' He mulled over it for a beat. 'And much more aggressive. We have the police out here once or twice a week now.'

'What do they say when they come by?'

He shrugged. 'They try to encourage them to move on.'

'Of course, they've called the police on us,' Friend one interrupted. 'Numerous times.'

'For what!' I exclaimed, sucked into the drama of the moment.

'Assault, last time,' said Friend two.

'But it's the council as well,' Friend one explained. 'When the clinic defenders come, they have to move everything up here.' He indicated the brick stoop at the front of the clinic path. 'If they even leave a bag propped up there against the wall, council will slap them with a fine.' He pointed to the far side of Wellington Parade, a strip of tar about 120 metres in width that allowed for several lanes of traffic

going in both directions, and tram tracks that ran through the middle. ‘Meanwhile, they can come over there, and kneel on the ground with all their stuff – and nothing! Nobody notices.’

‘It makes me angry,’ Friend two was focussed on the street. ‘As someone who used to work in bylaws, just to think that people can let their own beliefs influence such decisions ... It’s wrong.’

I wasn’t so sure. If local laws were routinely used in that way, it couldn’t only be an issue of council officers selectively applying the law based on individual politics. It sounded more like policy, or bureaucracy.

Friend one offered to shout us all coffee. I felt guilty for accepting but had left my money in the car. ‘Go on, my treat. I can afford it.’ He came back with three takeaway cups and his metal cup, steam escaping from the lips of the lids.

There was a nervous tension among the 12 people standing on my side of the street, the clinic side. There was Debbie, the feminist-socialist from the Freedom Socialist Party, Chris, from the Sex Party, and Gaye, an independent midwife, all of whom were on the planning committee of the Committee for Women’s Reproductive Rights.

Other members of the Sex Party were there, too: a guy in a black hat, chequed shirt and blaring yellow party t-shirt; a young member, perhaps 20 or so, who’d travelled down from Bendigo for the day; and Friend of the Clinic two, who’d stuck around despite his flu.

Pro-choice protesters lined up facing the road. They held their ‘Free abortion on demand NOW. Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights’ banner between four of them, the same sign Melbourne City Council fined them for when they tied it between two poles instead of holding it by hand.

Other homemade protest signs were on standby: ‘Right to Life: Your name’s a lie!’, ‘Free abortion on demand’, and the group’s favourite, a large placard that read ‘HONK if ur pro-choice!’ The last, they told me, always elicited a response from passing traffic.

The procession from St Patrick’s Cathedral snaked its way along the street, past Alexandra Gardens, slowly, a practised ritual. I watched it grow more life-sized as it neared. I was surprised by the number – at least 80. My side of the street felt suddenly insignificant.

‘They’re small today,’ Friend two commented.

‘There’s usually more?’

‘Oh yes.’

About one-third were children or teenagers, and the rest were mixed in age and gender – from 30-year-old women to 80-year-old men. They used up the footpath and spilled onto the road. Two or three immediately fell to their knees to pray. Another two carried a statue of the Virgin Mary on a wooden plank; it reminded me of the sedan chairs used to carry royalty.

A man stood on the road, where cars would conceivably try to park, and proffered a cross to the clinic. Most of the congregants turned to face Mary. One woman struggled with an unwieldy framed picture of the Virgin Mary that reached her knees. They had a megaphone, too, which they used to lead the prayer. From where I was standing, it was impossible to make out individual words, though the singsong tone of someone leading the chant and being answered by the congregation was unmistakable. Two young priests in black robes and white starched collars earnestly prayed along. The pamphlet I’d collected earlier called it their monthly ‘Pray to end abortion’.

‘An egg is not a chicken, a seed is not a tree, a foetus ain’t a baby, so don’t lay that shit on me,’ chanted the clinic defenders next to me.

A red car drove out of the clinic’s parking lot, its horn singing. The mood of the counter-protest immediately swelled. That was followed by a honking tram. Then, a white ute with two men in union hoodies tooted obnoxiously at the congregation, did a u-turn and sped past us, tooting all the while.

Every third or fourth car honked, in fact.

I overheard the young Sex Party member propose a new chant: ‘It’s not Mary’s fault she likes a bit of cock, abortion rights rock!’

I wondered what everyone in the clinic could hear, and how mad it must all sound.

A short time later, when all the protesters were busy chanting, I found myself alone with the guard. I asked his opinion on the competing sides of the parade.

‘Well, it’s different for me. They all have different, passionate reasons for why they’re here, but for me it’s just a pay cheque. So I get to come, work and then leave again. It doesn’t matter in the same way to me.’

‘Did you have an opinion about abortion before you started here?’

‘Not really. I didn’t really think about it much. I always believed that what other people do, that’s up to them. The women who come here, some of them are undecided, but there’s counsellors and doctors inside who can take care of them, talk to them about that. But I talk to them about why they’re here.’ He gestured to the protesters on both sides of the road. ‘I am curious as to why they keep coming back.’

‘And what do they say?’

‘That guy over there,’ he pointed to an elderly man in a cream-coloured sunhat, ‘he used to be a plumber. He’s been coming 14 years. Another guy’s an accountant.’

‘One guy,’ he gave me an amazed smile, like he had a secret and I wasn’t going to believe it, ‘he was a barrister for years, really senior. But then one day he found God and now he just comes here all the time.’

The guard tilted his head at the clinic defenders on our side of the street. ‘Do you think any of this helps?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘It used to be worse,’ he confided. ‘They used to have a megaphone and it was so loud that I’d just do a lap around the building and then go back and wait inside. But you could hear it even in there. The staff in the clinic didn’t really like it, either.’

I don’t ask him about the shadow of Steve Rogers’ death, and he doesn’t volunteer anything.

A car pulled out of the clinic’s driveway. A young woman stared out at the world, her forehead against the glass. Expressionless, she watched the ritual outside the clinic, while the car drove on.

### Chapter Three: The Clinic Defenders

Outside Parliament House on a spring afternoon in 2012, amplified songs about Jesus thrummed through the air. A line of police stood between 120 pro-choice protesters and the March for the Babies, a Christian throng that started before the stately steps and flowed onto both Spring and Bourke streets. There were, one of the marshals estimated, about 2500 pro-life attendees.<sup>34</sup>

It was like the monthly parade outside the clinic, only on a grander scale.

Since 2009, in the afternoon of the second Saturday in October, the March for the Babies has gathered in Melbourne's manicured Treasury Gardens to commemorate the state's decriminalisation of abortion. The 'remembrance' parade is organised with the support of prominent pro-life organisations Right to Life and the Australian Christian Lobby. Liberal MP Bernie Finn is the march's celebrity front man.<sup>35</sup> The event, attended by people from all around Victoria and interstate, is a slighter, more contemporary version of the (larger) Right to Life rallies of the 1980s.

'Our goal,' the march's website declares, 'is to overturn this terrible law and provide full legal protection to our most vulnerable Victorians.' Specifically, they want the legalisation that allows women in Victoria to seek an abortion up until 24 weeks' gestation rescinded.

Bernie Finn is a man famous for two acts in particular: founding the March for the Babies, and his speech in the Upper House during the 2008 debate over Victorian legislation that would lift abortion from the *Crimes Act 1958*. '[W]hen Liberal MP Bernie Finn rose in State Parliament to speak on contentious legislation legalising abortion, everyone present knew he would denounce the bill,' the *Age* observed the following day. 'But few predicted he would take six hours to do so.'<sup>36</sup>

I'd been reading Bernie's Facebook posts for a while, mostly because they were so brazen. One day, Youth for Life (a group of young pro-life activists) published some photos on Facebook of the waste bins outside the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic. The photograph showed two big, yellow wheelie bins, lined with yellow plastic bags, adorned with the logo of intersecting arcs indicating medical waste. 'Where babies are laid to rest at the Fertility Control Clinic Melbourne ...' the caption read.

Beneath the image, Berne Finn had written, ‘Australia’s Auswitch [*sic*]’, alluding to the holocaust many pro-lifers believe regularly occurs at clinics. ‘People need to stop and confront themselves with this horrific reality,’ another commenter wrote.

Replied Stephanie Ross, the peppy teenaged leader of Youth for Life, ‘They need to do more than that ... They need to start DOING something.’<sup>37</sup>

I stewed over my laptop: did she know it was the same clinic where an employee was murdered solely because he’d gone to work one day? A fact that didn’t stop Bernie Finn from ‘liking’ the comment (Facebook’s method of indicating enthusiasm for a sentiment).

Whenever I spied Ross, I remembered *The Education of Shelby Knox*, a documentary that followed the trials and tribulations of a proselytising Christian high-schooler in Texas who led a youth commission into sex and teens. Beginning as avowedly pro-abstinence – indeed, the only sex education taught in her school – Shelby Knox was forced to confront the alarming rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs in her district. By the film’s conclusion, she had transformed into a feminist campaigning for comprehensive sex-ed classes at her school. Today, she is a well-known women’s rights activist.

Pro-life participants at the March for the Babies had been asked to dress in pink and blue. About a third carried balloons, also pink and blue, released at the end of the rally to signify the lives lost to abortion in Victoria each year. Every year the march has run, a counter-rally has also been organised. This was the first year I’d attended.

Friction ran up and down the separation line that ran from the steps of Parliament to the kerb of Bourke Street.

Students wore purple National Union of Students t-shirts and jeans. There were also members of the Freedom Socialist Party, and other socialists and anarchists, standing around in two or threes, along with independent feminists with a militant edge – young women clad in cut-offs and holey stockings, thick kohl around their eyes, wearing don’t-fuck-with-me glares. They were red-faced and screaming at their opponents behind the thinned-out police line.

There were a number of hippies too, in flowing layers, calling themselves the Global Noise Movement – a spontaneous kind of happening that operated along the

same organic principles of the Occupy movement. In this instance, that seemed to be largely about the right to make noise without constraints imposed by structures or city. It had a similar logic to the Occupy camps: the idea that space is public, and cannot be owned by corporations dictating behaviour and expression.

They brandished whistles and whizzers and noise sticks and various ad hoc instruments – all of which were running at once to compete with the mega sound-system the March for the Babies had invested in. Bernie Finn pointed at his stage manager, and gestured to turn the music louder. Their two towers of speakers sat either side of the makeshift stage that had been cordoned off for their rally. Police stood on either side.

Older Christian attendees winced from the din and looked stunned by the animosity. Younger ones danced, their fingers making heart shapes that they thrust from their chests to the air above, in an attempt to ignore the ‘Go home, bigots’ chant flung at them from behind steely-faced officers.

Fury zapped through the pro-choicers every time Bernie Finn took the microphone to talk about the shame women should feel, or when he introduced a 16-year-old with a straight blonde mane and pink headband as the ‘future of the pro-life movement’ (met by thunderous cheering), or whenever one of their speakers compared their work to that of the civil rights movement. (Pro-life theory argues that black citizens were once denied the rights that Victoria currently denies to foetuses. They even borrowed one of the civil rights slogans for their pamphlet: ‘There’s a long road ahead, but we shall overcome!’)

Two young punks stood in front of me, one in shorts and polka-dot tights. She had a piece of cardboard that read ‘My body, my choice’ tacked to her back.

I tried to strike up a conversation. ‘I’m sick of the church interfering in our lives,’ she grudgingly told me. ‘There’s just so many fucked things about them.’

Was abortion a major issue for her?

‘Yes. I’m a political person because I’m a sex worker. But I also care about civil rights and animal rights.’

The sex-worker comment threw me. I didn’t understand how being one automatically made you a political person – surely it was not always a political labour choice. The phrasing was unusual too, as though her job defined her.

The friend beside her nodded along. She too was a sex worker, she too agreed about the church. Abortion and contraception were really important in her industry, she said.

The Global Noise band was building to a crescendo.

Five pro-life teens strode up and down the edge of the crowd, hungry for an opportunity to pounce on the dwarfed pro-choicers. An old man with a cane chatted to police like they were old friends.

After an hour and a half, the larger crowd turned and walked away to the sounds of a chant – ‘Fuck off bigots, fuck off’ – led by a lone protester with a megaphone. I suspected this only confirmed all the fears of the retreating Christians. The last pro-lifer to leave was a grey-haired woman who stood waving her floppy, red hat to a barrage of jeers.

As they withdrew, our numbers fell too. A man in a white shirt grabbed a megaphone. His voice rang out strong and clear across the now-empty intersection: ‘Why aren’t you concerned with paedophile priests covering up their sex crimes?’ he taunted. ‘Shame. On. You. Shame. On. You.’

It struck me, then, how shame, which to my mind had such religious connotations, was used as a weapon by both factions. Shame takes root in the breaching of our moral expectations and has become an instrument to make people socially conform. The Christian right seeks conformity to their religious ethics. Their opponents see that as hypocrisy, and so attempt to use that shame against them.

During the rally, the pro-lifers had taken on demonic proportions for me. I was aggrieved by their accusations on stage: that women were good or saintly and worth protecting if they had babies, or the inverse if they ended a pregnancy. Their enlistment of children – who had not yet faced the unpredictable nature of existence, but who spoke to the crowd on how to live a moral life or appealed for others to join their clinic-picketing crusade – seemed particularly ugly.

Later that night I watched the news at my mum’s house. Other than the impetuous language, there had been no signs of violence at the rallies, yet the tone of the broadcast hinted at something far more vicious. It showed a serpent of Right to Life protesters marching peacefully with balloons, suddenly ambushed by a mob of protesters set on revoking their civil rights. Footage showed a sole protester carrying his placard over to the other side and being dragged back by a cluster of police; he was supposed to be the threat.

Pro-choicers seemed the unreasonable, belligerent ones, and the media looked as though they were siding with the more ‘civilised’ position – the one that protects babies.

Even after the rally ended, the fury burned in me: why shouldn’t a woman have the right to autonomy simply because she can become pregnant? The march I’d just witnessed came to represent all the things still holding women back. How could economic independence and the ability to make choices about one’s own body – two core tenets of feminism – still be unrealised in Australia today? But they were, or women wouldn’t have to endure harassment and public shaming for attending a health clinic, or be humiliated because they needed government support to help raise their child. More than 30 years ago, in *Sex and Destiny*, Germaine Greer argued that the ‘management of fertility is one of the most important functions of adulthood’; it should correspond with the arrival of active sexuality, she argued.<sup>38</sup> I saw, suddenly, how little advance we’d made.

That was something that feminist, agitator, academic and writer Jo Wainer, who had spent a lifetime ensuring that women had access to safe, legal abortion, observed too. Jo’s life had been, really, a very public affair. She wrote about it, her husband, Bertram Wainer, wrote about it, and others have written about it too; both her working and private lives have also been documented and dramatised.<sup>39</sup> We met in her spartan office at Monash’s Faculty of Medicine in Box Hill where she works as a researcher.

So what did it mean to her to be a feminist, I began.

‘It means that women are fully human.’

That was what I believed too.

‘The patriarchy’s based on processes which have been put in place to achieve a number of objectives,’ she went on, pushing up her sleeves – the air in the office where we met was stuffy. ‘The first is to deal with men’s anxiety about paternity. That means they have to restrict sexual access to the women that they’re interested in so that they know they’re the father of the child. So that’s number one, and that’s all about property and inheritance and passing on existing structures.’

Yes, I could appreciate that historically, but how much relevance did that have to the world today? Perhaps it was still deeply embedded, but largely unconscious.

‘The other is that the project of capitalism is dependent on the unpaid work of women, and that requires that women be financially dependent on men,’ continued Jo.

‘In order for men to commit themselves fully to the workplace, somebody has to be at home doing all the homework. So women now do what we call the triple shift: the workplace work, the homeplace work and the gender work as well.’

I was no fan of capitalism but, again, that seemed more of a historical reading to me. Jo seemed disappointed by my doubts.

‘Of course, the idea that underpins all of that is the assumption that we need to continue to have babies to continue the society that we have.’

‘We don’t need to have babies anymore?’ I asked.

‘We’ve now reached a point, in human evolution, where the planet is severely over-populated and the continual push to reproduce is going to lead to the destruction of the habitat that we enjoy. The imperative to reproduce is fading – it’s now a genetic dead-end.’

It seemed a utilitarian approach to society, reducing society to its functions in much the same way as pro-lifers reduce women to their functions.

In 1967, following the abortion-law reform movement in Britain, while still a student activist at the University of Melbourne involved in the antiwar and anti-hanging movements, Jo went to a meeting about abortion. Unexpectedly, she was made the inaugural secretary of the Abortion Law Reform Association.

‘It just rather overtook my life in the end,’ she confessed. ‘It was a turbulent time in the period. There was a lot of challenging going on by students at the time, particularly through Europe, to existing structures. And feminism had woken again, for the second major wave, of which I was part.’

‘So you were a radical?’ I teased.

‘No. I’m totally middle class, totally privileged, totally secure in the existing structures of society. So not a radical.’ Jo was sharp. All those years of activism and working as a journalist, of thinking and articulating on the spot, showed.

Eventually, Jo and Bertram established the Fertility Control Clinic, where Susie Allanson worked and the Helpers of God’s Precious Infants picketed.

One of the most radical things about Jo Wainer was her belief that abortion was totally normal. ‘Women have very long and complicated reproductive journeys,’ she elaborated, ‘that start with menarche and go through to menopause and include stillbirth, miscarriage, spontaneous abortion, childbirth and abortion. So lots of things happen along that journey. Abortion’s just one of them. It’s absolutely normal

behaviour! The fact that it's been *awfulised* is a political process that's designed to keep women in their place.'

*Awfulised* is a term coined by Australian academic Margie Ripper to describe the way abortion has been transmogrified in public discourse and thinking so that it can never be tackled in a positive light. Instead, it's always couched in negatives: the regret, the anxiety, the marked distance from radical feminism and its critique of the family.

But despite the lack of contraception and the expectation of marital sex, Jo said, it wasn't clear that women had more abortions back then.

That was what the Royal Commission into Human Relationships found in 1976 too, when they compared abortion rates before and after quasi-legalisation: no discernible difference. One in four women had an abortion then, now it was one in three.<sup>40</sup>

A couple of years on from their stoush with Melbourne City Council about their banner and free speech, the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights (CWRR) was still diligently active; they even had weekly meetings. Yet they remained largely misunderstood. Placard-wielding, chanting activists are often treated with a detached disdain from onlookers – with a sort of smug disgust – but even other progressive activists were confused by the campaign's modus operandi and its indefatigable commitment despite very small numbers. I would include myself in that group.

Each month members (and, at times, a handful of supporters) congregated on the strip outside the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic to ward off the mass Catholic prayer happening on the far side of the road. If a mere six people turned up to a clinic defence, CWRR would reckon it a success, and be encouraged to repeat it again the following month.

For all their steadfastness, they seemed to me disconnected from broader society and activism. What was the point of a campaign if you couldn't draw other people in? To be successful, to result in change, a campaign has to rally support so it can show the issue matters to a great many people.

Mentioning CWRR to other activists would inspire puzzlement and a terse reply. Now that abortion was decriminalised in Victoria, most couldn't really see the point of the ongoing demonstration. As one friend put it, 'At a time when people hate

refugees, and women aren't so obviously discriminated against, how are you going to convince anyone this is an issue worth caring about?

The CWRR straddled the divide between a number of divergent political groups all working toward the same shared objective: they wanted the Rosary Parade, the monthly march that started in the car park of Archbishop Hart's St Patrick's Cathedral, to end. The coalition first began organising demonstrations in the early 90s, when there was talk of abortion no longer being covered by Medicare. At the time, with third-wave feminism flourishing on campuses and the procedure still legally foggy, abortion rights activists received a deluge of support and the funding query disappeared. But the matter of who was funding abortion and why resurfaced when Tony Abbott was federal health minister in 2004.

Before the induction of the Howard government in 1996, abortion laws had been growing more liberal. Decades of feminism had shaped attitudes – and, for the most part, abortion was accepted as a question of a woman's wellbeing. Blanket silence around abortion had been thrown off; 'choice' had become part of the Australian vernacular; more women in parliament meant more women voting on women's affairs and health. While there had been no legal overhaul, abortion was partially covered by Medicare.

Under John Howard, there was a 're-moralisation' of abortion.<sup>41</sup> Suddenly there was talk of 'too many' abortions, and comments on the number of working women who left their children in care.

One of my favourite writers on abortion, Barbara Baird, a gender theorist from Flinders University (who wrote one of the first Australian studies on women's own experiences of abortion, *I Had One Too*), has observed that the politics of abortion swung backwards in those years, constructing 'maternity as a moral imperative' for Australian women.<sup>42</sup> In other words, motherhood was a service Australian women owed their country.

Abruptly, abortion went from being viewed as a health matter to, once again, a potentially harmful act for women. Given that, as a medical procedure, modern early surgical abortion is relatively unobtrusive, and takes only five to ten minutes, it was surprising that it could be so easily snared in a conservative ambush.

As Barbara Baird puts it, '[T]he federal government turned away from gender equality to pro-natalism, where individualistic understandings of women's circumstances were promoted, and where hostility to feminism became

mainstream.’<sup>43</sup> In this climate, the ‘best, healthiest, most moral outcome of pregnancy’ was motherhood.

Baird goes on to say that the weight placed on Anglo-Celtic, family-focussed, Christian values also reinforced the racism of the period. Because much of the political discourse echoed the idea of Australia as a nation in danger, it tapped into the dictum embedded deep in the national psyche of this colony – ‘populate or perish’, an instruction that resurfaces whenever the birth rate is in decline and nationhood is threatened, such as in times of war.

I remembered the period she was describing: it was hard to think of those early Howard years without also thinking of Pauline Hanson, and the ease with which racist ideas – and, weirdly, a fear of regional invasion – became a motif in popular speech and policy.

Several major interventions succeeded in curbing women’s pregnancy choices during the period, even if only briefly, including the Bill introduced by Brian Harradine, which made abortifacients (that is, drugs that cause a miscarriage, such as RU486) a unique category subject to ministerial approval, and separate to the process other drug approvals went through. In 1996, Australia passed ‘the global gag’: no Australian funding could be used in developing nations to provide services or care that were in any way related to abortion – a law first introduced in America under Ronald Reagan, and then reintroduced under George W Bush.

These were public acts debated at the time, and have been thoroughly dissected since. But it’s the other less scrutinised but equally shocking stories Baird recounts that surprised me, like the case of US doctor Warren Hern, who was detained at Brisbane airport for two-and-a-half hours en route to an Abortion Providers’ Federation of Australasia conference. Hern reported that he was quizzed about his plans in Australia and late-term abortion more generally. He was then asked to sign a statement about not inciting ‘discord’ on Australian soil. He claimed that other doctors, such as George Tiller, had signed the letter and also surrendered their passports upon arrival.

Around the same time, Tony Abbott notoriously referred to abortion in Australia as an ‘epidemic’, ‘a question of the mother’s convenience’ and a ‘stain on our national character’ (again, men didn’t seem to factor into the equation). It echoed historical attempts to lay a veil of shame over women and their sexual lives – arguably one of the reasons we talk so little about abortion.

Tony Abbott argued that abortion was a ‘morally clear-cut’ issue, unlike war or refugees, which he believed had shades of grey. Speaking to seniors of the Catholic Church in 2004, he said that if ‘Catholics devoted as much moral energy to these 100,000 extinguished lives as we do to the far smaller number of children in detention, if senior Catholics were as morally indignant about the unambiguous moral tragedy of abortion as we are about the less clear-cut question of immigration detention, then there would be change’.<sup>44</sup> It is a statement that reads particularly perversely a decade on: under the Abbott government, the treatment of pregnant asylum seekers borders on torture, with some women opting to be flown to mainland Australia for an abortion rather than give birth on Nauru, where they think their children will die.<sup>45</sup>

Observers at the time read Abbott’s overestimation of abortion by approximately 20,000 as deliberate, and an appeal to the concerns of both conservative and progressive citizens: maybe there were too many abortions; after all, how many were too many?

‘White women’s reproductive behaviour has been a central concern of the Australian state since federation,’ writes Barbara Baird. ‘Indeed a number of historians have argued that women’s reproductive duties were more rigidly represented in discourses about national identity until the 1960s than in most other countries in the same period.’ Population pushes do not always have the same cause, though they generally have the same motive: a healthy nation is still one filled with plump, mostly white babes. Treasurer Peter Costello encouraged families to have three children, ‘one for Mum, one for Dad and one for your country’. The history of ‘baby bonuses’ speaks to this fostering of a colonial nation and its ideals. There was, for instance, also a baby bonus in 1905, and it was only available to white, married women.

Another important political development during the Howard years was the strengthening of the bond between Australia and the US, which took on a significance that hadn’t been seen since the days of the Second World War. But even before Australia entered the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the fortification of national identity was happening within domestic borders already: the fear of ‘refugees on boats’ and the Australian ‘way of life’ they jeopardised can be traced to that time.

What we experienced under Howard and Abbott was a return to the ideas above, but with a modern twist – what Barbara Baird calls a hybrid logic that

‘combined support for women’s choice with the acceptance that women were likely to be harmed by abortion and should be encouraged by law to proceed with caution’.

For the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic’s 40th birthday, there was a celebration organised by the Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights. That morning it was gusty, with only a smattering of people out on the streets, most looking for coffee, the others walking their dogs.

‘Where are the balloons?’ asked one woman as she approached. She wasn’t sensibly dressed enough for Melburnian weather to be a protester.

‘Just about to blow them,’ Debbie Brennan, the feminist socialist, grinned. Her earrings glinted in the morning light; they were always striking because of her cropped strawberry-blonde hair.

‘I can’t stop,’ the woman, a clinic worker, said.

Debbie nodded. ‘Last year we had a joint celebration for the anniversary of Steve Rogers,’ she explained to the new security guard.

The guard gave a tight smile but said nothing. He was less sure of himself, this guard, less interested in the motives behind the ritual before him. It was his first time working the clinic on a Saturday. He hoped it was going to be exciting, because on the whole he loathed the job. He wanted his shifts at McDonald’s to increase so he could leave. ‘I hate security,’ he said. ‘It’s an awful job.’

I had to agree, especially in this case: who’d want the ghost of a dead security guard, a casualty of the abortion war in Australia, looking over your shoulder?

Bored, he started to blow up balloons; I did, too.

The first time I’d met Debbie, she’d told me that everything that was wrong in the world was the fault of patriarchal capitalism, reminding me very much of Jo Wainer. She said she’d discovered Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party in Cuba 30 years ago. ‘Naturally I was there fully supporting and defending the Cuban Revolution,’ she had laughed.

For most people, *naturally* would not belong with that sentence. I thought it was a gutsy commitment to an ideal of how the world should be.

Why did she, someone who’d been involved in campaigns for gender equality for four decades, think abortion was often not spoken about?

‘It’s under the radar because it’s put there!’ Ordinarily, Debbie was a soft talker. ‘It’s not even a compulsory part or mainstream part of medical training! It also has a lot to do with sexuality – a no-no generally. Invisibility is so enmeshed with women’s bodies and women’s sexuality, something that’s oppressed and repressed, so it’s a deliberate and pushed-away thing.’

Her long earrings swung and clinked as her gesticulations grew.

‘On the flip side of that is the sensationalism. Whenever abortion gets mentioned, there’s the hysteria that the anti-abortion movement does so well. The ambivalence in a lot of people’s thinking, particularly about late-term abortions, is part of that. When pro-choicers and feminists say, “Oh, but I don’t know about late-term abortion,” it makes abortion a moral business. “Oh, there’s actually a developed foetus in there – got to think a bit more about that one.” It completely clouds why anyone would have a late-term abortion anyway! The woman knows better than anyone why she must have one.’

That rang true for me. But I gave myself the test I always do when faced with the concept of late-term abortion: I imagined how I’d feel if it was my job to terminate a seven- or eight-month-old foetus. Not to question the necessity or the right, but to acknowledge why some people feel it’s more difficult than an abstract hypothetical allows. There are, in truth, only around 140 late-term abortions in Victoria each year – and only 1 per cent of abortions across Australia are after 20 weeks.<sup>46</sup> (Most abortions, around 90 per cent, are performed by nine weeks; however, a number of tests that check for severe abnormalities or disorders aren’t taken until the second trimester, such as the anencephaly test, which occurs between 15 and 20 weeks.)

A late-term abortion is legally classified as over 24 weeks, though in fact it’s hard to get a termination after 16 weeks in Victoria.<sup>47</sup> To happen ‘lawfully’, the post-24-week termination needs to be signed off by two doctors. In truth, these late-term terminations only take place at hospitals, with the decision made by a hospital committee comprising doctors, specialists and hospital staff. The procedure is reserved for serious medical and psychosocial conditions: severe foetal abnormality, a medical condition endangering the life of the woman or the foetus, a mental health disorder, an intellectual disability, or if the woman was a victim of sexual assault or rape. In such instances, women and their families learn to what extent they are at the

mercy of the medical profession: the hospital board's decision – made by a committee the patient is not allowed to speak with or appeal to – is final.

The problem is, one doctor I spoke with observed, that foetuses can survive outside the womb earlier and earlier. The ambivalence to late-term termination, and abortion more generally, will only get murkier as the technology improves.

Debbie pursed her lips and paused. 'If women had the right to choose and if women truly had the right to be independent, then none of this would even be an issue.' Indeed, that rang true too.

Was the pro-life movement getting bigger in Australia? From my observations at the clinic, steadfast elements of the movement seemed small. Most people weren't especially vocal about wanting to ban abortion – even Tony Abbott claims he doesn't want it to be illegal. In fact, it's so rare to encounter people with pro-life views outside of political posturing and debate that I'm always a little shocked when I hear them. My suspicion was that, like Debbie and the other members of the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights, pro-lifers were on the fringe of society's fringe. A late 2013 poll in Victoria, following some rumblings that the Liberal Party supported a repeal to at least one section of the *Abortion Law Reform Act 2008*, revealed that only 8 per cent of Victorians were in step with Bernie Finn and his March for the Babies' aim to recriminalise abortion.<sup>48</sup>

From what I'd observed, there were mainly older people at the daily demonstrations but a mix of ages at the monthly ones. Occasionally I'd seen younger people at the marches and conferences, and even some younger local groups, like Youth for Life, but numbers were very low. Out of 50-odd attendees at one conference I went to, only three were below the age of 30. One practical explanation for that, suggested Debbie, was retirement: it was much easier to be outside parliament for five consecutive working days if you don't actually have to work.

Ageing and diminishing congregations was a phenomenon apparent in other Australian Catholic and Anglican groups, too. The average age of a Catholic churchgoer in Australia is 60. Around 25 per cent of Australians don't believe in God(s). On the other hand, Pentecostal mega-churches such as Hillsong, often influenced by prosperity theology, are expanding.<sup>49</sup>

Why were people less willing to attend rallies in support of abortion, though? The continuous prayer-protest at the clinic was something passersby and Melburnians expressed outrage about, and yet only ten or so ever turned up to the clinic defence.

The reason for the small numbers, Debbie explained, was that people assumed things were all okay and that a woman's right to access a termination, should she need one, had been won. 'Before the decriminalisation,' Debbie said, 'people honestly did not know it was on the Crimes Act. They thought it was legal – all that time.'

I remembered my younger self in the community doctor's office, the silhouette of the Dandenong Ranges like a painting outside her window. I had already taken a pregnancy test, which had confirmed my suspicions; my periods were never late. Granted, I didn't know how to get an abortion, which is why I went to the doctor: I imagined I needed her permission. But it had never occurred to me that, in legal terms, it was murky.

My lips felt bruised from blowing up so many balloons. How many people would turn up for the birthday? There were already a dozen of us, yet only 20 minutes until the Rosary Parade was expected.

Debbie distributed conical party hats decorated with streamers and glitter. I imagined the horror of the pious across the road when they saw the hats – an abortion party! If I was being honest, it felt slyly satisfying.

Even with all the publicity they'd done in the lead-up to the protest celebration, only 20 people came to the CWRR birthday; 12 of them were from the Sex Party.

Around 85 people from St Patrick's lined the far side of the road.

'Not the church, not the state, women will decide their fate,' chanted the protesters on my side of the street.

The battle cry rang somewhat hollow: women were in the clinic deciding their fate; women were on both sides of this stretch of road deciding their fate; there were women in the clinic working. All of the women in the space of one city block were already making decisions about their fates regardless of what was happening in this monthly ceremony.

I stood in my conical party hat, as did a young man next to me. Neither of us chanted. He was a local who worked for Melbourne City Council – one of the few to turn up because of a leaflet in his mailbox. He seemed uncertain as to why he was still there: his friend was meant to meet him but she cancelled at the last minute. He wanted to leave, but was attempting nonchalance. He was surprised by how many church members we stood facing.

I told him what everyone else had told me: ‘If we weren’t here, they’d be over this side of the street, harassing patients as they tried to enter the clinic.’

We shook our heads, dismayed.

An enraged man barrelled into the party-protest, leaning in close to the faces of the small crowd, yelling something impossible to make out. He stopped at the nearby police car, there to keep an eye on proceedings.

Two policewomen exited the vehicle and approached one of the Sex Party members. They talked to him for a minute. They looked disapproving.

‘They told me to get off the road,’ he said, after they’d returned to their car. We had all been standing on the kerb; I hadn’t noticed he’d strayed onto the road.

Across the stretch of bitumen, pro-life congregants spilled onto the road and huddled in parking spots. The police didn’t approach them.

I felt a lot of sympathy for the Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights and the work they were doing. I’d noticed, too, that I’d started thinking of them as ‘my side’, and caught myself jotting down ‘our side’ of the street. That these rituals of harassment and prayer went on every day outside the clinic felt terribly unjust, and it was strange because I hadn’t realised it would affect me so.

Yet, the low turnout to the clinic defences and the counter-rallies made the concern seem marginal. Every weekend only seven to 11 people turned up to keep a congregation at bay, chanted for at least an hour, then packed up and went home again.

If only they could display a real show of force.

The night before, unbeknownst to those of us at the rally, Melbourne woman Jill Meagher had disappeared on her way home from a bar in Sydney Road, Brunswick, half a block down from Solidarity Salon, home of the Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights and Melbourne’s feminist socialists. Jill Meagher was 29; she worked at ABC radio; she was photogenic, smart, well loved; her facsimiled dark eyes and bright red lips watched from every telephone pole and every newspaper.<sup>50</sup> Almost a week later, her body was found 50 kilometres outside the city.

Nobody predicted the outcome of a rally called in her memory on social media: more than 30,000 turned up in solidarity, some in tears, and walked down Sydney Road in near silence, mourning something akin to hope.

We grieve publicly, claimed writer Patrick West in 2004, because we are trying to fill that hole that religion once took up. ‘Mourning sickness’, he called it: ‘Its flowers and teddies are its rites, its collective minutes’ silences its liturgy and mass.’<sup>51</sup>

There was a suggestion that the mourning of Jill Meagher was a false intimacy, that those who marched were not truly grieving her passing; rather, her murder represented their most nightmarish fear.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this was true. But perhaps she also represented the appeal of a life that seemed full of potential. She embodied many of the material qualities women, especially women yet to have children, are supposed to aim for: a career, intelligence, beauty, charisma, friends, a dotting partner.

One month later, it was the annual Reclaim the Night, a march against violence against women that had been running since the 1970s, and was originally known as Take Back the Night. Numbers had dwindled over the years, and everyone was curious to see if the rally would tap into the anger over Jill Meagher’s death. There was a desire to shape that mass presence into a show of force with a voice, even if that voice simply said, *Enough with the violence against women*.

When I arrived the street was still light; the weather had that gentle spring warmth. Over the next hour, the rally swelled to 5000. The initially quiet, broken chanting was eventually swamped by music and singing from a group of young women with hair dyed teal and purple. The rally paused outside the street where Jill Meagher had disappeared, catching its breath, thinking about her. After 15 minutes of delaying cars and trams we walked quietly back down Sydney Road.

It felt like a statement – perhaps not a definitive one, not one that actually changed much, but the possibility for change was there. For so many people to venture out to express their hurt and rage at the wrongs done to women was an indication that people were ready to commit to a cause or a struggle that wanted to change things.

Discussing the march later that night, my friend Stephanie and I decided to run a meeting for groups and individuals who identified as feminist: an open meeting to discuss ways to get women’s rights back on the public agenda and in the public discourse, of possible actions we could unite for.

The first thing I wanted to change was the situation at the clinic.

Crossing that line – from journalistic observation to organising rallies against the people I was supposed to be interviewing – was dangerous, I knew. For one thing, it meant any attempt at objectivity had gone AWOL. But, witnessing the toll of pro-

life tactics, I'd been wound up to a point where I couldn't simply stand still anymore – looking on as protesters fell in beside people visiting the clinic, as if they were a close friend who cared, whispering low, proffering pamphlets and plastic foetuses.

This didn't feel like a struggle I wanted to be impartial about: that would imply I didn't think anyone was wrong. I found the behaviour of the pro-life protesters appalling – as well as callous and unscrupulous. Such intimidatory practices eroded the confidence of staff the patients were relying on, and made women doubt their rationality and decisions at a time when many felt extremely vulnerable.

Honestly, I didn't even believe they had a right to protest at a health clinic. If God could hear them anywhere, why did they need to pray there? They were relying on guilt and shame to save what could maybe, one day, possibly be a baby, at the expense of the woman and her welfare.

Perhaps the others involved – staff, patients, the handful of regular pro-choice defenders – weren't in a position to change the dynamic outside the clinic, but what if more people could see the daily injustice occurring? Pro-lifers might believe they had God on their side, but on our side would be the indignation of all the people I'd spoken to and would speak to, and all the women the pro-lifers said were going to hell.

I had fallen in love with Shulamith Firestone again, which could explain my leap from outrage to organising.

Shulamith Firestone had emerged at a time when '[h]omemaking was women's highest calling, abortion was virtually illegal, and rape was a stigma to be borne in silence', Susan Faludi wrote in her *New Yorker* essay about the vision of Shulamith Firestone, and the evolution and disintegration of the period's small feminist collectives.<sup>53</sup>

Those conditions are virtually unrecognisable to many women born after 1975 in Australia or the United States. By that time, women were leaving kitchens and enrolling in universities. Abortion was available (albeit with hurdles), and when it wasn't, networks of women were banding together to access it or were teaching each other how to perform it. And society knew that rape occurred on campuses, in homes, on dates, in workplaces and, sometimes, on the street walking home (even if women

were still portrayed as instigators, their clothes or their inebriation a causal, inviting factor).

Shulamith Firestone founded the New York Radical Women, which, unlike its Australian counterpart, was not a socialist group. Rather, it was a radical feminist, anti-pornography group, one of the first of its kind. In a letter to her sister in 1968, Shulamith wrote, 'I think we're really onto something new & good, that is, radical feminism, and if we don't get fucked up, we'll take a decidedly different direction.'<sup>54</sup>

Around the same time, the group pulled off their greatest coup, the Miss America protest. This involved 400 feminists renting buses that couriered them to the streets of Atlantic City, where they tossed make-up, pads, bras, mops, magazines, girdles and other 'instruments of female torture' into an empty oil drum tagged 'FREEDOM TRASH CAN', crowned a sheep as the winner of the pageant, and infiltrated pageant proceedings, unfurling a bedsheet declaring 'WOMEN'S LIBERATION'.

'It should be a groovy day on the Boardwalk in the sun with our sisters,' reads a blurb for the Miss America protest. 'In case of arrests, however, we plan to reject all male authority and demand to be busted by policewomen only.'<sup>55</sup>

It was the first such act of brash feminist defiance and public rage since the 20s, and the protest that saw the infamy of burning bras spread (an act which never actually occurred because the trash can was never set alight). The rally made women's liberation a topic across America.

Although I knew that the group only lasted two years, New York Radical Women made a public demonstration seem so easy, like all you needed was a theory that could unite, a daring stunt challenging the acceptance of the state of things and an audacious front.

On second thoughts, which I had soon after trying to think of an anti-abortion stunt, not so easy. Still, the lack of ingenuity was to be expected: if there was an easy solution, it would already have been realised, and pro-lifers sent back to church.

Shulamith Firestone, the visionary of the group, reckoned pregnancy 'barbaric', childbirth 'like shitting a pumpkin', and childhood 'a supervised nightmare'.<sup>56</sup> At the time (or even now!) the ideas were world-deconstructing; the way they were expressed, vulgar. A revolutionary reimagining of society that

focussed on the specific trappings of women's roles and New York Radical Women signified the move from paternalistic protection to collective empowerment.

The opposition to a woman's choice to procreate or not, or to procreate at a particular moment in time, is largely a denial of the autonomy of individual women – with the womb depicted as a resource or *potential* resource, that in times of low-level population, or an ageing population, or an ageing working population, belongs to the nation. If society makes it easy for women to get abortions, or to control their reproductive cycles, what's to stop all women desisting with their procreative duties? And who would then own that resource?

The president of the National Union of Students and I were Blu-Tacking A4-sized sheets on the columns outside Trades Hall. The grand old building on the border of Carlton and the Melbourne CBD, built in 1859 by workers who financed it themselves, was a warren of rooms and stairs, and especially difficult to navigate for anyone with a disability – the accessible entrance involved a ten-minute walk around the façade, through the car park and into the first floor of the building. Hence the signs.

'Don't let anyone see you doing this,' the president whispered, giving me a meaningful look. 'We're not meant to use Blu-Tack on the building!'

For the rest of the sign-posting, I watched over my shoulder, fearing being ejected from the building, and losing the space that Trades Hall had provided us, free of charge, to host the inaugural Melbourne Feminist Action meeting.

The name wasn't inspired, but it was simple, captured the purpose, and was, we hoped, broad enough to appeal to various issues of emancipation and equality on a local level. Rather ambitious, really.

We set up ten rows of seats, and a desk up the front with a whiteboard, where Stephanie was to sit as convener of the meeting. Next to her was another laminate table, arranged for a volunteer to record the minutes.

Just after 6pm, people were squeezed into the space, with standing room only. The room was filled with 120 activists, domestic violence groups, multicultural women's groups, women who looked angry, women who looked sceptical, and a couple of women who looked petrified but had shown up anyway. There was even a handful of men in attendance.

Despite the animosity on social media in the lead-up to the meeting – haranguing about whether there would be safe spaces for trans people, women who’d been raped, women who had been abused, queer people, sex workers, or people who were offended by assertiveness – people stuck to Steph’s fixed rules: speakers could only take the floor initially to propose actions. They would have two minutes to speak to that action. After a series of actions had been proposed, we could debate those proposals, again sticking to the two-minute limit.

From the outset, we argued that the group wasn’t about ideology, beyond a general progressive consensus that collective women action was the way to change things. Basically, if you recognised that gender-based inequality existed, but believed that all women deserved to be equal and their welfare mattered to you, that was sufficient. (No doubt that was ultimately our downfall. That appeal was too broad-based, unable to cater to the needs of everyone in that meeting, or any subsequent meeting. That, and the sheer volume of time individuals needed to devote to such a project.)

Steph and I were exhausted even before the meeting: we’d spent a fortnight contacting every group independently fighting gender oppression in some way in Victoria, and writing articles, managing social media, and, mostly, trying to win support for a group devoted to organising around concrete demands.

Very few people came to the meeting with a concrete plan. Although we’d told them to bring ideas, people didn’t really know what to expect. There were a few vague proposals about highlighting the needs of women in domestic violence situations, issues of poverty facing single mothers, and a media education campaign about sexism in advertising and society, as well as an objection to the way the meeting was being conducted, which one woman felt was dominated by educated activists.

My proposal was for a large rally outside the Fertility Control Clinic.

‘There’s a clinic less than a kilometre from here that is picketed daily by anti-abortion protesters. This is the same clinic where a man was killed in 2001. They harass staff and patients on a daily basis, and try to shame them for accessing their legal choice.’ My voice kept breaking, and I was sweating, though I wasn’t sure if anybody could tell. It was all the eyes in the room boring into me, waiting for my two minutes to be over so they could propose their cause. I suggested a loud, vibrant action that defended our bodies, our choices and our clinic – a way of reminding the

Helpers of God's Precious Infants and co. that we knew what they were up to, and we objected to it.

Objections were immediately raised, first by the NUS president: 'Um, I don't think the clinic is going to like that. We tried to organise a big show of support there a while ago and they asked us not to.'

I'd liaised with the clinic, I explained, and received their permission, with the understanding that this would be a once-off. Susie Allanson and I had had some back and forth about the proposal. She had, initially, raised concerns about the noise and the traffic and the increased pressure all of that placed patients under. Then we agreed that they were under pressure regardless.

It was put to a vote, with the majority of those in the room supporting the action. Some in the room looked disgruntled; one person stood and told the room off for being smug and superior. We were trying to set up an activist organisation, I argued – surely it involved debating ideas and making decisions about priorities. But of course, I'd gone in with my agenda, and doubtless would've felt differently if it hadn't been backed.

The allegation was merely a hint of things to come – yes, we'd got everyone in a room and most had left daggers at the door. But the discussions of the need for 'safe spaces' and the resentment about who got to make the rules persisted.

And all the while, we were conscious of how many groups had tried this before, and all the barriers that had to be overcome for a room full of individuals to share the same goal.

It became apparent why Shulamith Firestone and the other feminists of her era had had to start so many different groups.

Leading up to Melbourne Feminist's Action's rally outside the Fertility Control Clinic, we focused on outreach and publicity to build the demonstration, appealing for support from people with high profiles – from politicians like Greens MPs Adam Bandt and Colleen Hartland, and public women's advocates Eva Cox, Catherine Deveny and Leslie Cannold, to health groups, unions and radical collectives. We bombarded every individual and group with the leaflet justifying our impending action:

Under the slogan *Our Clinic, Our Bodies, Our Choice*, Melbourne Feminist Action is holding the rally to show very clearly that we think the ongoing harassment of women trying to access a health clinic and the bullying of staff is unacceptable – and we oppose it. Abortion in Victoria is both legal and safe, and we trust women to make informed decisions about their own bodies and lives.

We had demands too. For St Patrick’s Cathedral and the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne to publicly condemn the ongoing protests and harassment of patients and staff at the clinic. For the federal government to recognise abortion as a national health issue, legalising it and making it safe and free across the country. And for the state government to increase funding for abortion and women’s health services across Victoria (this one was really a concession that the second demand, for free abortion on demand across the country, probably wouldn’t be won from this one rally).

We handed out the leaflets on Bourke Street Mall, near Elizabeth Street. Rivers of faces rushed by, eyes on the ground avoiding us. Only one in every ten took a pamphlet. Often the tenth lurched forward to avoid us, then fell back when they heard ‘Pro-choice rally this weekend!’

‘You wouldn’t want to have low self-esteem and then go leafleting,’ I joked to Chris, a member of the Sex Party. We were standing on opposite sides of the path outside the GPO. He laughed.

Steph took a photo of us and posted it to Twitter. ‘Go back to Russia!’ one of our friends replied.

I found myself getting irrationally annoyed with the nine out of ten people who overlooked us. ‘What, not pro women’s rights?’ I asked two young businessmen testily. ‘You didn’t even look at it!’ I snapped at others.

One old man stopped in front of me, peering at the sheet in my outstretched hand. He hadn’t bathed in some time; he wore a corked hat and a hearing aid. Growing revulsion emanated from him. Finally, after what felt like a month of holding that pamphlet out so he could painstakingly and deliberately read every single letter, he looked me in the eye and pronounced, ‘Disgusting. You should be ashamed.’

Pausing, thinking on all the injustices of the church and the contempt they had for women, I laughed. He didn’t notice, having already shuffled off to catch the tram.

The rally was a moderate success, depending on whose shoes you were standing in. That, on a day when the temperature reached the 40s, we'd managed to get 200 people out to slowly march a couple of kilometres into the city (afterwards, the collective agreed that the march was at least 15 minutes too long, particularly in the heat) felt like a tiny victory.

That the Rosary Parade didn't show up felt like a bigger victory. The word on Facebook was that they felt threatened by our presence, and concluded they were in physical danger.

We later learned that they had simply protested at a different clinic in East Melbourne, which felt like less of a triumph.

All of those factors meant that, on the day, Youth for Life (Stephanie Ross' gang of pro-life teenagers) showed up by themselves: a line of ten young people in 'CHOOSE LIFE' t-shirts, holding yellow balloons.

During the speeches, they stood across the stretch of road looking uncertain. When we marched, I was leading a little too fast and sensed the rally halt. The chanting was intensifying. I glanced back to see the mid-section of the rally yelling in front of the small group, 'You don't care if women die.' One hundred adults yelling at ten kids made me a bit uneasy – really, they weren't our targets. Back at home, though, I reflected on that temptation to excuse them, to say, *They're just kids who currently have this idea that life is uncomplicated but will eventually find out that it's far more messy.* As soon as I mentally conjured all the adults who hadn't grown out of it, and pictured Bernie Finn, their mentor, and his priggish face, the niggling doubt vanished.

A rally medic later told me that one of the Youth for Life members fell over on the tram track as they bewilderedly followed in the rally's wake. They had been surprised that the Rosary Parade hadn't turned up. The medics gave them all bottled water, because they were dehydrated. The kids thanked them and returned to shadowing the march.

The following day, I opened a Facebook message from a Sydney University student named Joshua, whom I didn't know. He had sent it before the rally. 'I'd be careful at that abortion rally tomorrow if I was you,' he wrote. 'I know someone who's going to be taking photos and sending them to employers and workplaces. Nasty shit is about to go down, especially if Socialist Alliance are involved.'

A few weeks earlier, I'd written to Jo Wainer to ask if she'd consider talking on the day of the rally, outside the clinic she helped build.

She replied that while she supported our cause and our desire to help, and agreed that it would briefly boost morale of staff and draw media attention to the ongoing issue, she felt the event would also give oxygen to pro-lifers. Her long email had the tone of someone who had exhausted many avenues over the years, and had since reached an uncompromising conclusion.

'One idea I have had is to identify who the abusers are by following them home and then holding them to account for their actions in their own neighbourhoods,' she wrote. 'Perhaps assigning a small team to each of the handful of people who do this, standing next to them, surrounding them, following them, photographing them, putting their photos on the web alongside some of the horrible things that they say and do, that sort of thing.'

While I admired everything she'd done for the rights of women, it wasn't a direction our collective was ready to pursue. We were trying to visibly grow the support that already existed in the community – the 85 per cent of the population who supported abortion on demand. Though audacious, Jo's campaign would, most likely, prove alienating – those who'd never experienced or witnessed pro-life tactics wouldn't comprehend the need for intrusion into personal lives, or why, in a democracy, people weren't entitled to express dissent, even if it took place outside a women's health clinic.

More than that, the idea was retributive – where would it end? Quite possibly with feminists in jail – a waste, given that abortion was more accessible and legal than ever before.

Both my mother and grandmother called to tell me they saw the rally on the news. With the ability to recall minutiae deserting her, my grandmother had taken to jotting down all the mentions of abortion she'd come across, so we could discuss them at a later date. She did the same with literature.

'What do you think of that Geoff Shaw?' she asked when my mum and I visited one Sunday.

'Awful!' I assured her.

‘Oh.’ It was not the reaction I expected. ‘I imagined you’d like him because he’s trying to do stuff to help abortion.’

My grandmother was an avid watcher of the news; clearly, the ABC and other stations were failing to explain the intricacies of section 8 of the Victorian Abortion Law Reform Act.

I offered them a rundown of the legislative changes Shaw desired.

‘I see,’ my grandmother said uncertainly.

It could leave women stranded and alone if doctors were no longer compelled to pass on information about abortion, or a referral to another doctor who would, I clarified.

‘What a jerk,’ my mum said.

They’d both come to think abortion was a crucial issue because they knew I considered it crucial. They had seemed to conclude, perhaps jointly, that I was working on something bigger than individual experiences or irregular contraceptive usage, yet neither of them ever asked me whether I had had an abortion, if that was the reason I was so attached to the topic. To me, this was the obvious question, and one I always expected anti-abortionists to ask too.

As we munched apple and rosemary scones and sipped sweet tea, my secret was a gigantic, glaring elephant seated on the blue couch in the corner.

Possibly, they thought I was being noble, taking on a fight on behalf of all women.

I wanted to tell them that afternoon, to come clean about the multitudinous personal and political reasons that abortion rights and access mattered to me – because it was only fair. They trusted me and had shared confidences with me over the years, things mortifying or still raw, and both women deserved as much insight to my life as I felt I had to theirs.

In some moments, the confession seemed so easy: *You know, I had an abortion years ago and the experience convinced me that abortion can be liberating. And now I appreciate, intimately, how easily pregnancy can happen and I am proof that abortion is not permanently scarring.*

I almost let it escape into the ether that day.

But I couldn’t. I had been the one who broke the mould of our poor, rural lineage: the first to go to university, the first woman not to have given birth by age 20,

the first to be interested in the wider world and its politics, all because I didn't face the same demands or restrictions of the other women in my family.

I wasn't ready to risk ruining our familial dynamic, not yet, and I couldn't shake the feeling that they were going to be disappointed in me, as though my abortion was a failing or a flaw. And it kind of was: motherhood was the gauge my grandmother used to measure success and happiness, but she wasn't alone there.

To further complicate my dilemma, I was confused: did the fact I'd had a personal relationship to abortion compromise my attempts to document its existence? Did it really make my perspective any different from that of anyone else who believed women should have reproductive autonomy – or did it just make it more 'authentic'?

This was an ambiguity that Leslie Cannold embraced.

## Chapter Four: The Pro-choice Business

The rehearsal for the End Abortion Stigma flash mob was in the University of Melbourne's Union House, a fawn edifice east of the law school's hallowed archways. Inside, Blu-Tacked arrows directed visitors to a student magazine, a theatre group, a woman's group, a queer group.

Spawned by social media's ability to connect large numbers of strangers, flash mobbing amasses a group of people in the same area at the same time to stage an unexpected performance before a public audience. Upon completion, performers disappear back into the crowds.

To be eligible for my first flash mob, I had to take the 'Let's End the Stigma' pledge on the Reproductive Choice Australia (RCA) website. Started by Leslie Cannold and Cait Culcutt (of the Brisbane-based organisation Children by Choice), RCA was a self-appointed peak national body that brought together various women's groups and organisations working for reproductive rights. All that was required for the pledge was to add my full name and email address below my promise not to shame women about abortion, and, importantly, not to stand by in silence when I heard or saw others shaming women for ending pregnancies. (Their goal was 1250 signatures. When last I looked, a year after I signed, they had 1165.) The flash mob would first take place in Melbourne, at Federation Square, then work its way around Australia, building its profile and message along the way.

I studied the online instructional video shot on the grounds of the university. A smiling Leslie Cannold – athletic, glossy, in her early 40s – explained that the idea of this flash mob was to start to eliminate the shame surrounding abortion. Ending stigma in its many manifestations, I would learn, had become a mission for Leslie.

On one side of the screen, Leslie, in knee-length skirt and cowboy boots, stood in front of a wall-length mirror in an old dance studio. On the other side, two students and an older man and woman repeated the basic movements Leslie described, including a number of spirit-finger sequences.

Leslie, an ethicist by trade, was at one time the protégé of Peter Singer, and is now a commentator and speaker, listed as Thinker No. 10 on *The Power Index* (a *Crikey* publication documenting power and influence in Australia).<sup>57</sup> I had been trying to meet with her for some time. If Jo Wainer was the doyenne of a chapter of the

abortion war now ended, Leslie Cannold was the child of a feminist movement that came after the back alley had been boarded up. She recognised, however, that the struggle over women's bodies was not over yet. Other advocates who worked in hospitals, clinics or organisations providing abortion or helping women to access them spoke of Leslie admiringly, as a force to be reckoned with: she had brought together the numerous groups and individuals seeking reproductive freedoms into an orchestrated campaign to overhaul Victoria's archaic state laws in 2008, and had become the public face of pro-choice Australia.<sup>58</sup>

Surlier veteran activists knew of her, too. 'Have you spoken to Leslie Cannold yet?' one asked. I hadn't, I admitted, as she was fairly busy. 'Too busy to talk to someone who wants to write that abortion is still a concern?' she asked pointedly. Some activists took issue with Leslie's style of activism: a battle of PR and resolve – and how many politicians you could convince you had the more compelling case. Really, her approach was the antipode of activism. 'I'm not surprised,' said my activist friend as she shrugged and sank back into her seat – she assumed Leslie would have no time for activists who directed their energy to people, not politicians.

I hadn't met her, so had no opinion on the matter.

Generally, pro-life activists viewed Leslie Cannold as The Enemy. Her 1998 book *The Abortion Myth*, the result of a master's thesis, was seen to draw all the wrong conclusions about why pro-lifers opposed abortion, largely because Leslie's study of the differences and similarities between pro- and anti-choice beliefs almost relegated religion to absurdism – a kind of anti-intellectual superstition that could never be the genuine motivator behind their actions, as these positions didn't hold up to academic scrutiny.<sup>59</sup> These days, Leslie Cannold is a New Atheist, subscribing to the same school of scientific rationalism as Peter Singer, as well as the late Christopher Hitchens, with whom she shared a panel at the Australian Atheist Convention in 2012.<sup>60</sup>

To make up for missing the first rehearsal, I had practised the joyful sweeping arm actions that would have made the Jackson 5 proud, repeatedly ran in and out of an imaginary circle and crouched, waiting for the crescendo in my living room, all set to a song I didn't know, Florence and the Machine's 'Dog Days Are Over'. My bemused boyfriend and cat sat in the corner watching me lurch through the entire track eight times. 'My favourite bit was the jazz hands' was the only feedback.

Wondering if I would be ready for the second rehearsal, I followed the room numbers in Union House until I reached a well-trodden dance studio. A mirror ran along one wall and the windows on the opposite side looked out over spires and grey sky. Leslie and Casey, a student at the university and a member of Reproductive Choice Australia, whom I recognised from the guerilla dance video, were rearranging chairs.

I was the first to arrive. ‘Hi!’ I said brightly. I deposited my bag in the corner. The floor was old wood and my shoes clicked as I walked across to help Leslie drag chairs.

Other people filed in: a young guy with lean limbs and bulky headphones, a PhD student in a music-related field; two long-haired students, one wearing bright blue jeans, the other bright pink; an older woman, who I learned was in government and high-profile – a commissioner, I think.

Leslie stood in front, ready to lead the routine. Casey grinned as she crouched and fiddled with the portable CD player. ‘We got the idea from a really inspiring video on YouTube from Israel,’ she said over her shoulder. Her long ponytail was as shiny as her smile.

We practised four or five times. It was a bit gawky and earnest, but everyone arced their arms wide and tried to keep to the beat.

Before we left, Leslie mentioned that Triple J radio would be at Federation Square to record the performance. She would be speaking on air afterwards and we – the 20 or so gathered in the room – were all welcome to join her and share our abortion stories, too.

‘Men as well,’ she added.

As we were leaving, the commissioner shared a punch line with Leslie, loud enough for everyone else to hear: ‘I only told the media I had one abortion but I actually had two!’ She gave a wild laugh.

I understood where she was coming from: one abortion could be understandable in some situations, could sway judging hearts into accepting that mistakes happened. More than one, and it started to look like a pattern.

Everyone received a t-shirt on the way out. ‘Abortion – it’s a fact of life: let’s end the stigma’ it said on the front; ‘Take the pledge’, it invited on the back.

I felt uncertain about the flash mob’s potential as a subversive or empowering stunt. The commissioner had had an abortion and so had I, but everyone else there?

Maybe the procedure wasn't a prerequisite for participation, but wasn't it a more powerful stigma-defying statement if participants were happy to declare that they'd had one and weren't ashamed? And on what kind of scale would such a stunt need to be to 'end' or even lessen abortion stigma?

Still, I recognised the lineage in the tactic.

In 1971, the *Manifeste des 343 salopes* (known in English as the 'Manifesto of the 343 Bitches' or 'Sluts', depending on the translation) was published by a French magazine. The manifesto was composed by Simone de Beauvoir and signed by women who confessed to having had an abortion, even though the operation was still illegal. Next to de Beauvoir's name were the signatures of 342 other women of note – Catherine Deneuve, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, Françoise d'Eaubonne, Brigitte Fontaine.<sup>61</sup> At the time, France was still very Catholic and abortion still taboo. A few decades earlier, under the Vichy government – motto: 'Work, family, fatherland' – seeking or providing abortion was deemed a crime against the state and punishment was severe, as it was for any form of treason.<sup>62</sup> Those found guilty of performing abortions were sometimes sentenced to death.<sup>63</sup> In post-war France, as in post-war periods more generally, reproduction was a national anxiety.

'One million women get an abortion in France every year,' the manifesto rebuked. 'They're doing it in dangerous conditions because they're condemned to clandestineness, although medically controlled abortion is a simple thing. Everyone keeps silent about those million women. I declare I am one of them. I had an abortion.'<sup>64</sup>

Whether any of the signatories had actually had an abortion was immaterial: the manifesto was a statement of solidarity. We could have been these women, the sentiment reminded; we could still be these women.

A year later, in the town of Bobigny, a 16-year-old rape victim was put on trial, alongside her mother and three colleagues, for procuring an illegal abortion. Gisèle Halimi, the radical lawyer who with Simone de Beauvoir had founded Choose, an organisation devoted to decriminalising abortion, represented them.

Feminists leafleted outside the court, chanting, 'England for the rich, jail for the poor', because women who could afford it went to other countries to abort, or, indeed, if they could pay 4500 francs (about three months' salary of the single mother on trial), their own gynaecologist.<sup>65</sup>

It was precisely the chance needed to test the allegedly criminal nature of abortion itself.

Simone de Beauvoir was called as a witness and asked whether she had had an abortion. ‘Yes, a long time ago,’ she replied. Then she went further: ‘What I have been doing for a long time and frequently since then is to help women who come to ask me how to abort. I give or lend them money and I give them addresses. Sometimes I even lend them my home so that the intervention can take place in good conditions.’<sup>66</sup>

For luminaries and intellectuals across the nation, the trial became a cause célèbre. In the end, the mother was sentenced to a fine of 500 francs, suspended.

France is often portrayed as a nation where a revolutionary spirit is fostered, yet women were only given the vote in 1944, and then only because, as President Charles de Gaulle proclaimed, voting would continue the ‘feminine tradition of duty and thinking of others’. Birth control (the advertising and use of which had been criminalised in 1920) was finally legalised in 1967, followed by access to first-trimester abortions in 1974 – three years after the manifesto’s publication and two years after the Bobigny trial.

Leslie Cannold’s tactics were a legacy, I assumed, of this history of feminist provocation.

‘I had an abortion. Or maybe I didn’t. Who cares?’ was how she launched her TEDx talk in September 2012. (The talks – ‘ideas worth spreading’ – are a contemporary reimagining of the motivational speaker, using today’s technology and internet dissemination techniques. Beaming, successful individuals have 18 minutes in which to tell their story with a requisite artistic flair. There are more than 1000 of these talks now on YouTube; the appetite for them seems to be insatiable.) The problem with abortion, Leslie said, was that women were ashamed of the procedure, because we live in a society that shames people on the basis of personal life decisions.

‘We feel flawed in comparison to other people, and [worry] that other people will find out about this flaw.’ Like all TEDx speakers, Leslie Cannold wore one of those ear mics that allowed her to pace the stage with purpose.

Shame doesn’t stop women having abortions, she continued, because one in three women in Australia, the UK and the US still chooses them – but the consequences of people finding out, largely because women don’t talk about their

abortions, are very real: women are still ostracised from churches and community groups, gossiped about by friends, shunned by loved ones.

After the rehearsal, I walked back into the city with Chris Johnson from the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights.

'Why did you join the Sex Party?' I asked him when we had exhausted a conversation about classic cars. Chris was so much taller than me that he had to lean down to hear what I said. He was broad too, an almost giant with a genial manner. I couldn't picture him behind stalls crammed with toys designed for adventurous orifices, or at the sad parades of titillating women and washed-up men that Jeff Sparrow wrote of in his book *Money Shot*. Then again, I often forgot that the consumption of porn was a regular pastime for people.

'I had been going through depression.'

There were two signs that had already given this away: his eyes always looked slightly distant, as though he were living on some waterlogged continent. And he was always busy: Sex Party campaigning, Sex Party meetings, Sexpo, the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights, campaigns for same-sex marriage and the environment, football, writers' -festival events, flash-mob rehearsals, clinic defences, Melbourne Feminist Action meetings.

As part of the Sex Party, he felt like he could make a difference.

He grew up in a pro-choice house, which partly explained his involvement with reproductive activism; he was often the only man at actions and meetings.

'As I became aware of sex and reproduction and stuff, it just always seemed a woman's choice. I can't really fathom how a man could be anything but pro-choice: men can't get pregnant, they don't have to carry a foetus around for nine months through to birth. Men have probably no real understanding of what it is to be a woman, to have a period and so forth. So it's a woman's business. And when the only choice is birth or birth, it's not really a choice.'

We ended up at the Exeter, the old Communist Party pub that sits on a corner of Chinatown, opposite what once were the offices of Melbourne's Industrial Workers of the World. The pub is large and saloon-like, with stained-glass windows and a wooden floor.

'Finally, we can get a drink!' I said with relief.

‘I don’t drink,’ Chris replied.

‘I just made you walk across half the city looking for a pub!’

He shrugged. ‘I’m happy to go to pubs. Great atmospheres.’

He shouted me a pint.

‘As I’ve become a political person,’ he said when he returned with my beer, ‘it’s become apparent that the church has a massive influence on the viewpoint of reproduction in parliament and elsewhere. And I’ve probably become a lot more militant in my campaigning because of that and I’m sure I sometimes sound like an obnoxious prick.’ He laughed and slid off the peaked cap he often wore.

Chris had joined the Australian Sex Party in 2010, after the federal election. At first, it was just leafleting and passing out how-to-vote cards, something he’d done for Labor over the years before becoming disillusioned with the party over their policies on climate change and same-sex marriage. But after attending a few Sex Party meetings, he started pitching in ideas. After a while he was invited to the logistic committee, responsible for the party’s campaigns and events.

In 2011, Chris was made the party’s Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights liaison. Even after working on campaigns with him, I still wasn’t quite sure how or if the Sex Party members fitted in. Many activists on the left were suspicious of a political party started by a business lobby for the sex industry. The Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights’ defences are a curious combination of radical feminists and male Sex Party members. At the Melbourne Feminist Action—organised International Women’s Day last year, Chris brought along two other members and a stall. They stood in their bright yellow and red uniforms behind a table with untouched Sex Party leaflets. Passersby and attendees treated them with condescension, as they grew increasingly red under the baking sun.

It seemed to me that there were two main reasons sex-industry business owners and the Eros Foundation and, by extension, the Sex Party would be pro-reproductive rights, and they could both be traced back to economic interests. The first was purely pragmatic: so sex workers didn’t get pregnant. The second was more ideological: it was a way of normalising sex and emphasising the empowerment of sexual liberation, which was necessary to the growth of the industry.

A corollary to this economic imperative was the right to sex without consequences, whether they be moral (shame) or physical (pregnancy or STDs).

Written the same year as the *Manifeste des 343 Salopes*, Judith Thomson's 'A Defense of Abortion' begins with a memorable ethical quandary:

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back-to-back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own.<sup>67</sup>

Through a series of hypotheticals, Thomson reasons whether women are morally entitled to choose abortion *even if* a foetus has a right to life by virtue of being a human-being-in-progress.

'The director of the hospital now tells you,' the violin thought-experiment continues, "'Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you – we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist now is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you.'"<sup>68</sup>

Would it be your moral responsibility to comply and function as a life support machine, asks Thomson. What if you had to remain attached for nine years? 'What if the director of the hospital says, "Tough luck, I agree, but you've now got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons.'"<sup>69</sup>

It's an artful analogy that considers an argument pro-life advocates regularly rely on: the unrealised *potential* of the foetus. The foetus is innocent, but also has a whole life ahead and could be destined for greatness – as long as it has a loving mother. In this line of reasoning, Thomson claims, the inference is that even when a pregnancy is the result of rape, the foetus would be no less deserving of life: it still has a fundamental right to exist, and could still grow into a world-class violinist.

In fact, she continues drily, by the act of leaving the house or by being in possession of a womb, women open themselves to the possibility of pregnancy by

rape, and thus the contemplation of abortion; the only way to absolutely avoid such a fate, Thomson suggests, is for women to undergo preemptive hysterectomies.

In other words, a woman cannot avoid all sexual acts that could lead to pregnancy, and so abortion can never be abolished.

Perhaps part of the appeal of the foetus – and of human beings in the abstract – is the myth of ‘potential goodness’ attached to them. When debating abortion, neither pro-life advocates nor philosophers posit the inverse: that a woman could give birth to a serial killer, or be kidnapped by some macabre devotees and plugged into a murderer. Possibly that’s because it would complicate the moral question involved: many may argue, when faced with that scenario, that the woman should pull the plug.

But it seems to me that ‘potential’ is a utopian concept, and intellectually, there’s some fraying once we push at its margins. We don’t, for example, treat a handful of seeds in the way we would a field of corn, because they’re at very different stages of their life cycles, and that difference changes our comprehension of their nature. Or, as Peter Singer observes, we wouldn’t usually drop a live chicken into boiling water, even though that is how we treat eggs.<sup>70</sup> Life is a continuum but also a hierarchy: for most people, mosquitoes are not equal to fish, which are not equal to dolphins or giraffes, which are not equal to a human life. But even human life has tiers of worth: someone we’ve never met who lives in Mumbai versus the lover sharing our bed.

While woman, violinist and foetus do all have a right to life, concludes Thomson, they are not necessarily entitled to use the unwilling bodily resources of another being. A woman who ends a pregnancy would not be depriving a child of life, she argues; rather, she would be denying them the use of her own body.

Responses to the essay have spanned decades and spawned many critiques – from the suggestion that the violinist parallel could only be applied in instances of rape, where there was no ‘tacit’ consent to sexual intercourse, to intentionally causing harm versus harm as a side-effect of unplugging from the violinist – and I lost the thread more than once among the interminable debates about self-awareness and moral values. Yet, four decades on, Thomson’s defence still influences abortion ethics and rationale. I saw it cited on social media just last week when a young woman commented that she loathed the ‘lazy feminist’ defence of ‘it’s just a bunch of cells’. Read Judith Thomson, she advised.

Perhaps it is contradictory, but I can appreciate both perspectives – and even suspect it is possible that a foetus can be both a bunch of cells *and* a world-class violinist simultaneously, and that a woman can still choose to abort.

Surely a central weakness of Thomson’s parallel has to be that functioning as a kidney supporter for nine months is not like the lifelong attachment most mothers share with their offspring, and the hopes, nightmares and realities that accompany that connection. One doctor I spoke with noted of Thomson’s thesis, ‘It’s a strange debate because babies are still dependent on mothers even a couple of years after birth. For years, actually.’

Is it ever possible for abortion to seem like the right moral choice? Perhaps not, perhaps our conception of abortion still fits most comfortably within a simplified ethical frame, where everyone understands that murder – the stopping of another life – is fundamentally wrong, at least as far as human beings go. Which means that when people don’t reduce a foetus to a clump of cells, abortion can feel hard to defend. The idea that murder is wrong is embedded within the origin stories of modern society and consequently our laws, and, nowadays, foetushood is sometimes seen as part of a biological continuum of the human lifespan, largely due to the pro-life influence over reproductive discourse. So ending potential life retains its merciless silhouette.

In principle, humanity agrees that life is of value, even if many of our preoccupations, from war to eating, defy this tenet. In practice, we justify killing in copious situations – self-defence, war, punishment, the food chain. People don’t actually believe life itself is sacred, writes Peter Singer in his essays on practical ethics. ‘If they did, killing a pig or pulling up a cabbage would be as abhorrent to them as the murder of a human being.’<sup>71</sup>

Actually, the sanctity of life and the immorality of murder are recent ethical developments that followed the ascendancy of Judeo-Christian religions over the past centuries. Before that, in Ancient Rome and Greece, there were various degrees of humanness – slaves weren’t considered humans, for instance – and disabled or sickly babies and infants were abandoned on rocks and hilltops.

Both Plato and Aristotle justified abortion or infanticide if it was suspected the foetus or infant could become a burden on the state. The size of the family, the age of the parents, whether the baby had a disability or sickness, bigamy, adultery, incest, sex outside marriage and population control were all factors to consider.<sup>72</sup> Aristotle wrote that a city-state ‘ought not to exceed a specific population limit; hence, if

abortion and infanticide promote the observance of that limit, then both are fundamental to its prosperity’.

Today, in a time of population explosion and growing competition over the world’s resources, Aristotle’s anxieties seem eerily contemporary, and hint at how the abortion debate may change again in the near future.

Yet, even in Ancient Greece where such ideas were publicly aired, abortion was still a crime if procured by a woman, who was, ipso facto, the property of a husband, father, brother, son or politician.

Some centuries after Plato, in his defence of Cluentius, Cicero lectured on the need to severely punish women who stopped a pregnancy:

I remember that when I was in Asia a woman of Miletus was sentenced to death for having drugged herself to procure abortion, in consideration of a bribe received from certain heirs-in-default. Hers was a righteous sentence: she had destroyed the hopes of a parent, the continuity of a name, the support of a family, the heir of a house, and the citizen-elect of a state.<sup>73</sup>

Values change, obviously; it’s been a couple of thousand years since Cicero and, thankfully, first- and second-wave feminism helped to separate the sexual and the reproductive functions of women’s bodies and lives, and establish some autonomy for some (predominantly western and white) women. But other beliefs appear far more deep-rooted. Many of those ancient philosophers were metaphysicists, too: while Plato reasoned that the soul was drawn in ‘through the infant’s first breath’, others believed the soul entered the body at conception.<sup>74</sup> The latter is an idea that many pro-life Christians still preach.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that Christianity, in its earliest stages, changed the classical conceptual framework of abortion when it equated abortion with murder. ‘It is remarkable that the Church at times authorises the killing of adult men, as in war or in connection with legal executions,’ she writes of the Catholic Church in France, ‘[yet] reserves an uncompromising humanitarianism for man in the foetal condition.’<sup>75</sup> Christianity also infused culture, literature and aspirations with the promise of Heaven and immortality, of an all-powerful God and the seed that taking a life is a sin directly against God.<sup>76</sup>

Flicking through my Picador copy of *The Second Sex*, the second line of de Beauvoir's bio note jumps out: '[S]he took a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1929, placing second to Jean-Paul Sartre.' Outrageous! Not merely the ironic repetition of *second*, but what exactly was a reader meant to infer? That she was almost as good as a man, or that she was trustworthy because she was in the company of an intellectual giant? Why not include that she was the youngest person to sit the exam, the first to pass on her first attempt, and the jury was said to have debated about whether to award her or Sartre first place?

When the book was published in 1949, the entire population of France was only 41 million. In a country that outlawed contraception and its promotion, and where poverty and cramped, shared living conditions were common, a high abortion rate might well be expected. Even so, one million abortions a year over decades indicates that many, many French women have had abortions.

When I arrived at the stretch of asphalt between Federation Square and the Yarra River on the day of the flash mob, 60 or so waiting dancers were scattered about in small huddles. About a quarter were men. The dance was to begin at 11am sharp, but we'd been under strict instructions to meet by 10.15, to ensure things ran smoothly.

The sun was out. My sunglasses were donned. A passing couple peered curiously, sensing something was afoot.

The commissioner stood to my right, leading two ten-year-olds through the dance steps. Colleen Hartland, from the Greens, and Jude Perera, a Labor MP from Cranbourne, talked with Susie Allanson nearby.

'Is anyone else from the Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights coming?' I asked Chris when he arrived.

'They weren't interested.' He rearranged his cap. 'Sometimes I think it's the prospect of a fight – that confrontation – that some people like.'

'You mean you get addicted to that exchange?'

He shrugged noncommittally.

Maybe he sensed I was fishing, but I also empathised with those who had opted out: that adrenaline can feel empowering – and something bothered me about the flash mob method, too.

Over the next few weeks, I would obsessively scour YouTube for these displays of controlled anarchy. Two stood out in particular. In one, a band and singer performed ‘Here Comes the Sun’ in an unemployment agency in Spain at the height of the economic crisis; in the other, a young girl dropped a coin into the hat of a tuxedoed double bassist in Vienna, which became a full-blown orchestra playing Beethoven. They had been organised by a Spanish radio station and an Austrian bank, respectively.

There was a sour, late-capitalist overtone to using fabricated guerilla communities to create a public space and mood to promote a commercial enterprise. Flash mobs are supposed to break up the humdrum of life, for performers and audience both. You could argue these two examples did, I suppose, but you can’t sell hope. It probably wouldn’t get better for many of the people lining up in the Spanish unemployment office, and the orchestra players weren’t there because they wanted to support their peers; they were there because they were paid to be.

‘I’ve had my eye out for antis but I haven’t seen any.’ Chris squinted in the direction of Flinders Street Station.

‘Did you hear they were planning something?’

‘No, but they were all over our Facebook. They were disgusted.’ He smiled.

‘By the dance for death?’ I teased.

‘Something like that,’ he replied, not laughing.

Maybe abortion belonged to the same taboo chamber as rape – no humour allowed. I made a note to be more tactful.

‘Okay, everybody ready?’ a cheery Leslie Cannold called across the square. She climbed on one of the park benches running along the river walkway. We dancers lined up in five rows behind her. The Triple J crew turned their camera to us.

‘Be brave.’ Leslie gestured to the wide space up front – the group had only filled the back half of the space. Everyone laughed nervously and shuffled forward.

The first notes of ‘Dog Days Are Over’ fluttered from the speaker to our right.

I worried about forgetting the steps: suddenly, it felt important that arms swayed and hands jazzed on cue.

It happened when we turned and crouched, a pause of white t-shirts inviting an imagined audience to ‘Take the Pledge’. I detected voices, barely audible over the music. I peeked at the rows of dancers behind me – maybe someone had spontaneously started a chant?

The song ended with our nonchalant dispersal, and I heard the chanting clearly.

At the end of the walkway, where Federation Square meets St Kilda Road, a collection of 25 or so balloon-carrying Youth for Life members stood in uniform: white t-shirts exactly like the ones George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley wore in their film clip for ‘Wake Me Up before You Go-Go’.

They held strings of bright yellow balloons that yelled ‘LIFE!’, followed by a hand-drawn smiley face.

‘Life, choose LIFE,’ they chanted in unison. Two or three had megaphones.

The dancers stood transfixed by their opposition. Three security guards stood warily watching everyone.

The chanters changed tack: ‘Abortion hurts women!’

According to Leslie Cannold, there are two common types of anti-abortionists in Australia. The more traditional, more overtly religious group – ‘the Margaret Tighe set’ (named for the woman who was president of Right to Life Australia for many years) – claims that pro-choice supporters want to cull the weak and the vulnerable, those who are less valuable to society. They’re traditionalists who see motherhood as ‘compulsory’.<sup>77</sup>

Then there’s the ‘woman-centred’ approach to abortion opposition. On the surface, Leslie says, it has a glimmer of science, and of even being feminist, in that it appears to be motivated by a concern for women’s welfare. This second group is much slicker, savvier and harder to repel; I could see it myself. Anybody who approached the young, life-affirming crowd would appear spiteful: from the singsong chanting to the balloons, they were so full of hope. The group had gone to a great deal of effort to coordinate a cheer-filled opposition to the flash mob.

I noted the branding in their protest *and* in our flash mob, the uniformity of movement and dress. It was a battle to capture the public imagination – ours, dancing; theirs, yellow balloons.

‘Human rights for babies too!’ they called out. The point was to drown out the dance, the winner whoever made the largest impression on passersby.

Our performance had only lasted a little over three minutes. Since then, we’d been standing around, entranced by the youths.

Someone in our flash mob launched a rival chant: ‘The right to fight!’

Someone up front changed it to ‘The right to choice!’

Leslie put her finger to her lips, silencing the chant. ‘Okay, guys, one more time?’

We actually danced it two more times – three in total – the pro-lifers competing alongside the entire time.

‘You have to wonder,’ said Chris when the crowd finally scattered, ‘why Leslie didn’t keep it to a private email list. We could’ve avoided that.’

Maybe. Or maybe that was the point her organisation was trying to make: that you can’t declare in public that you’re not ashamed of having had an abortion without being drowned out by reminders of the shame you should feel.

Back in 1973, just after the Menhennitt ruling in Australia and around the time of *Roe v Wade*, philosopher Mary Anne Warren wrote the provocative ‘On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion’, identifying five characteristics, based on various philosophical texts, that define personhood: consciousness, capacity to reason, activity driven by the self, an ability to communicate on various subjects, and a concept of ‘self’.

Personhood laws bestow certain basic human rights, such as the right not to have a life terminated. ‘Personhood’ as a concept has been around for about 150 years – a trajectory that coincides with capitalism. With the conception of personhood came a certain economic privilege involved in litigation and tort litigation: the idea that an individual can be injured, even pre-natally, and be entitled for compensation because their quality of life has been affected by the accident or wrong. There are other legal consequences, too: citizenship, the ability to own property, being subject to the law and protected by it, and so on.

Even so, these legal options were never separated from the health and life of the mother – or the mother’s rights, or her wishes. And historically, mothers would often pursue such damages on behalf of their children.

The Personhood Movement, born of the United States though edging onto other continents now, seized on the concept around the same time as Mary Anne Warren and her co-philosophers. Over the past few decades, it’s been successful in splitting the rights of a foetus from the rights and interests of a pregnant woman – as though the two are utterly separate entities, both with competing rights to life, and

equal in personhood. So far, four American states have instated laws giving equal weight to foetuses as they do to the pregnant women involved.

In 2013, Fred Nile championed a similar Bill in New South Wales. ‘Zoe’s law’, named after a baby stillborn following an accident caused by a drugged driver, sought to bestow personhood on foetuses more than 20 weeks old. Brodie Donegan had been 32 weeks pregnant at the time of the accident, and was devastated first by the loss of her baby, and then because she was unable to get a death certificate for Zoe, who wasn’t recognised as a person under NSW law. The Bill was defeated in the upper house in 2014, following a wave of public concern about how the law could be used.

On the phone the other day, my mum told me that she’d had dinner with some of our old neighbours, who’d asked what I was up to now. She told them about my project.

‘I know what side she’d be on!’ chuckled one.

‘Which?’ my mother asked, curious.

‘That it’s wrong,’ he replied.

‘No, actually. She thinks it’s the woman’s choice,’ returned my mother.

‘Don’t you think that’s strange?’ she asked me on the phone. ‘Why would he think that?’

I remembered what I was like at 16, when I knew those neighbours well: I was idealistic, antiwar; a pacifist, I might have said back then. A memory stirred: an essay I wrote for a legal subject at about that age, on whether you were for or against abortion.

I was against it, I recalled. I couldn’t remember the logic – probably something about how murder was wrong. I got an A.

Was that what our former neighbour remembered, that version of me?

Mum must remember that teenager too – what did she think had changed me?

The converted warehouse was sparsely decorated: some wooden tables and chairs and metal stools. The music was boisterous. I was waiting for Leslie Cannold on a sweltering summer’s day.

I’d heard that she was moving away from academia and into public speaking

and popular discourse. Maybe she was simply over speaking on abortion. She'd been heavily involved in abortion politics since *The Abortion Myth* was published in 1998; talking about an issue for more than a decade and a half had to be wearying.

I spied her struggling to chain a red bicycle to the metal stand out front.

'Can I get you a drink?' I asked.

Her face was red with that urban riding glow. She waved her hand dismissively. 'I'll get something if they come and hassle me.'

As if on cue, a waiter appeared at her elbow. 'I haven't seen you in a while!' he grinned.

'At the start of every feminist movement we're talking about abortion,' she began after the waiter took her order, 'and it never goes away because people on the other side who have a problem with women making that choice also understand that it is fundamental. That if you can't decide when you're going to bear, how many children you're going to bear and the kinds of children you're going to bear, then you really can't make commitments to anything else in this life.'

She rapped the table firmly with the edge of her hand every time she uttered 'bear'.

'On a core level, I've felt that way my whole life. From when I was very young I knew I didn't want to have an abortion but I would fight to the death to make sure I had that choice. And I feel like that's how most women feel about it. It's not a fun right, like the right to equal pay or the right to work or ...'

Leslie's nose crinkled as she trailed off. Perhaps she was thinking, like I was, how un-fun the fights for those rights actually were.

'It's kind of a right that you don't really want to have to exercise,' she finished.

'So how did you become an activist?'

'I wrote about it in *The Abortion Myth*, which you can probably find in a secondhand shop if you really wanted a copy.'

I had a copy. I'd read it twice. What I wanted to know was if the how or why had changed for her over time.

'Right at the beginning, I talk about how the issue came through my mother because this very unknown former actor Ronald Reagan was running for president. My mother said, "There's this guy coming in, he's going to try and stop women getting abortions – we have to do something!" So we went and stuffed envelopes for a

candidate.

‘Then I did some clinic escorts. By now we’re talking about 1987, so it was on for young and old. This was in New York, and then I came to Australia and started working with Peter Singer, who had just written this book called *The Reproduction Revolution: New Ways of Making Babies* and he was, you know, very very hot.’

Her hands moved in times with her words, acting like a microphone.

‘He had written this book that said: “We’re going to end this abortion problem. Pro-choice and pro-life people can all hold hands and be friends because we’re going to use humidicribs and everyone can just evacuate their pregnancies rather than terminate them and make the foetus die.”

“That’s got to be wrong!” I thought,’ Leslie said with dramatic horror.

Interestingly, artificial reproduction was the conclusion Shulamith Firestone had come to, too. Peter Singer even quotes her in the book. Marxist economics and theories of exploitation overlooked the fundamental oppression of women that would always remain for as long as they were forced to be the sole reproducers of children, Shulamith argued. ‘To make women and children totally independent would be to eliminate not just the patriarchal nuclear family, but the biological family itself.’ She speculated that this be done through artificial wombs and communal child rearing, freeing both women and children to engage with the world as equals.

Peter Singer wasn’t so much interested in the liberation of women and children as population control in 1984’s *The Reproduction Revolution*. At the time, IVF was still a young science, but it attracted the relentless ire of the pro-life movement, as it does to this day. It’s not only the artificial conception process they object to, but also the lost embryos. Embryos only have a limited lifespan, and in IVF they are harvested in groups, some fertilised, one selected, then inserted, and the rest destroyed. For pro-life advocates, all of these stages are part of the human-life continuum.

Leslie’s tea arrived.

The waiter apologised for interrupting.

‘That’s okay,’ Leslie replied. ‘I’m being interviewed because I’m terribly important.’

We all smiled.

Leslie’s own book started at Peter Singer’s hypothesis and asked whether the fate of the pregnancy was really the problem underlying the chasm between pro-

choice and pro-life women. Would not extinguishing those potential lives resolve the conflict?

She found that it would not. Furthermore, she argued, if women continued along this path, they would no longer be able to decide if and when they became mothers, but only how – naturally, or via the womb for a few months, a crib for the rest. ‘If this slow but steady encroachment into women’s rights and responsibilities was to be halted,’ she wrote in *The Abortion Myth*, ‘the women’s movement was going to need to change the way it justified a woman’s right to choose – and fast.’

She reminded readers that women have very long reproductive lives; women can fall pregnant from early teens to almost 50, with exceptions outside those margins. That’s more than 30 years in which women are expected to be able to have sex without unexpected consequences.

‘Do you see abortion as a rights-based issue?’ I asked. It was a question I’d been weighing ever since I met Jo Wainer. If abortion wasn’t a human right that women had – to choose to be pregnant or not, regardless of what that meant for the foetus – abortion could become mired in the technicalities of when life begins.

‘Look, it’s confusing. I do think it has to be articulated as a political right because that’s the language in which our politics takes place. Often Australian feminism has done a lot of articulation of women’s needs through that more passive model – you know, they got women money for their kids through the idea that they were mothers, not that they were entitled.’

She stirred her herbal tea and sipped it.

‘But in an ethical sense, I don’t see it as a right. I see it as a right to take a responsibility. I see the decision to not take on children one doesn’t feel one can parent as a duty a woman has.’

It made me think of the feminist slogan, ‘Every child a wanted child’.

‘The whole “abortion hurts women” thing is much more difficult to address. Basically, what they’ve been doing is using pseudo-science to foster doubt, because the way most people feel about abortion – which is that it’s not a very nice thing but it’s worse for women if they don’t have it – is to make them wonder, “Well is it really worse, or does abortion hurt women?”’

There was a definite art to the way Leslie used her hands for expression – a form of etheric portraiture. I could almost see characters unfolding in the space between us.

Was she happy with the state of abortion law in Victoria now, I asked, genuinely curious. The credit given to her for her work in changing the law in Victoria was huge.

‘I’m not happy about the gestational limit. I don’t think it ever deserves to be anybody’s choice but the woman’s. For the few women who need that, they’re in terrible, terrible need and have terrible, terrible traumas associated with it. I don’t feel like it’s anybody’s business to judge. We fought as hard as we could not to have those gestational limits and we lost.’

It had been a public relations war, of sorts: they ran an information campaign via the Pro-Choice Victoria website, and bombarded MPs with emails.

Leslie paused, then said with pride, ‘That was the only loss we had in fact. We managed to get that bill through without amendment. Overall, I can’t help but feel like we did a pretty good job. You’re never going to get an entirely pro-choice Bill through parliament. You’re going to have to make a compromise.’

She took a breath. ‘Luckily, most terminations take place before 24 weeks, so most women are in control of this decision and no longer have to prove shit to a doctor and they don’t have to deal with any of the “have to pretend I’m crazy” or any of the crazy, crazy things that were going on.’

All doctors and clinics have such stories: women they advised to pretend they were mentally ill or depressed or suicidal to obtain a ‘legal’ abortion.

‘It’s hysterical, because the antis call it the worst legislation in the world and in fact, it’s not.’ She laughed loudly. ‘[Pro-choice supporters] managed to get something through the ACT parliament without any compromise at all. That’s what we wanted. Model C was essentially pull it out of the Crimes Act, get rid of Menhennitt and everything associated with it being in the Crimes Act and then do nothing.’

Her hands smoothed the empty air in front of her, wistful.

‘Because all the existing medical regulation will of course apply, and it doesn’t need any other regulation. They don’t really have specific legislation in the Criminal Code or anywhere else legislating open-heart surgery and yet it seems to go along fine.’

She tapped her fingers on the wooden table, then added, ‘But you know, we’ll never get another go at it.’

‘What do you think the solution is – to continuous protest situations, like at the

East Melbourne clinic, which, to me, looks a lot like ongoing harassment?’

She stiffened, searching my face. Maybe she had connected my name to the clinic rally.

‘I think the solution is a legal one. I understand the impulses and good hearts of the people trying to do those counter-demonstrations, but I don’t think they’re constructive. From the point of view of women using the clinic and the staff, it just makes it more unmanageable out there.’

Leslie’s mouth became sterner with every sentence.

‘There have been a couple of interventions from overseas that have been incredibly helpful for this situation. A couple of women from Britain brought cakes for the clinic. So instead of adding to the cacophony of what was happening with people barricading the clinic, these women would come at other times and deliver these cakes. It just made the people who worked in the clinic feel appreciated. It made the women feel happy. It was a positive response, which I see as more of our kind of flash-mob response, to a wicked problem. And of course, in the US and Canada, they build bubble zones around the clinics.’

Many activists were, of course, concerned about how such legislation might be used.

Leslie nodded. ‘My understanding is that they worry that concept will be extended to the logging co-ops, say, or other places they want to protest, and they’ll be forced to keep a distance. It’s not a concern I have. I think you could sculpt the law in such a way that you make clear this is about a medical procedure. I also think there are arguments about being able to protest but not being able to disrupt, and that if you do disrupt, it runs into the area of civil disobedience rather than conscientious objection or anything else, and there have to be consequences for that.’

‘The bubble zone will only move the antis across the road,’ I replied.

‘And you know what? That’s. All. They. Want.’ Again, she rapped the table with each word. ‘It’s the obstruction that’s so problematic for the women, so scary for them and for the clinic.’

‘When I spoke to the Friends of the Fertility Control Clinic, their ideal solution was for the protesters to keep their signs, but move a safe distance from the clinic.’ Leslie nodded in agreement. ‘But that doesn’t really change anything,’ I finished.

She regarded me with gleaming blue eyes.

‘The reality is that we live in a society where we’re trying to protect the right to protest and the right to free speech. So you do have to be contained in your expectations around what the law can and should do to limit the right of what people can do.’ She pulled her phone out of her bag and flicked through her messages. ‘On a decency level, you could make an argument they are *indecent*, and ought to be ashamed of themselves, but ...’

I sensed our talk had ended. I thanked her for her time, and headed to the counter to pay for our coffee and tea.

I left uneasy, about the fate of the clinic and about the Melbourne Feminist Action rally. Because, after all the hassle and work to get 260 people outside a women’s health clinic on a ridiculously hot Saturday morning in Melbourne, had anything really changed?

To answer that, I’d have to scale the fence.

## Chapter Five: Religious Wedges

The line ‘a dead foetus is worth a thousand words’<sup>78</sup> came back to me, puncturing my aplomb as I stepped into the foyer of a Christian convention centre, in a stately monastery not far from the Melbourne zoo. ‘Chaste silhouettes of the foetal form or voyeuristic-necrophilic photographs of its remains litter the background of any abortion talk,’ Rosalind Petchesky wrote in her 1987 study of the American pro-life push.<sup>79</sup>

I was there for the annual Right to Life convention, a very American-influenced assembly, and was preparing myself for dead and marred foetuses in photos, slides, videos, literature.

I’d spent 20 minutes in my car giving myself a pep talk: gearing up for the prospect of hours on end of not only listening to pontificators on the sins of women and doctors, but also the countless in-between moments that happen at symposiums – morning teas and lunchtimes and networking opportunities. All those moments when I’d have to make small talk more counterfeit than such chatter usually is.

My feet dragged all the way to the entrance, expectations flitting from being refused entry to being asked to give a short speech summarising my research and the methodology. (Something similar had happened when I first attended a Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights meeting.) I’d been honest in declaring my intention to attend as a researcher.

Well, honest up to a point. I was pretty conflicted by then. On the one hand, I was there to take the temperature of the pro-life movement: objectives, influences, organisational structure, the thinkers they relied on. Did Right to Life really believe they’d succeed in turning Australians against abortion? And what did they believe about women in society more generally? Did they want women to work, to flourish, to have the same rights as men? If not, if they believed, as many strict religious households did, that the man was the head of the family and delivered the Lord’s words to those below, then what were the implications of such beliefs in contemporary Australia, where secularism, feminism and single parenthood were rapidly rising, much more so than religious conviction?

If this was the national convention, how many people attended, and did they return to their own churches and masses across the country with strategies and

directions decided upon? Did it work like a socialist meeting, with attendees debating tactics and purpose?

In the 1980s, Right to Life could rally 10,000 supporters, but today?

My conflict, however: I was also there as a spy, no matter how much I denied it. Penetrating this world was fuelling my desire to confront these traditionalists, but also giving me knowledge of their inner workings – strategies, members (membership lists of such groups were tightly controlled<sup>80</sup>) and their threat potential.

I was curious, too, about this established organisation's matriarch, Margaret Tighe, who had nurtured Australia's pro-life movement for many years, and who had met and corresponded with Peter Knight before the shooting at the Fertility Control Clinic. During the investigation, Tighe had claimed to be wary of Knight's behaviour and downplayed any organisational connection.<sup>81</sup>

Presumably, the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) would also make an appearance. The ACL were not the grassroots activists, outside the clinic day in, day out. Rather, they were the lobbyists and petition drafters, the opinion writers and the media liaisons.

I'd dressed in my most wholesome feminine attire to increase my chances of blending in. One of the women running the chaotic DIY registration table, a mismatch given the genteel setting, stood on her tiptoes, peering over my shoulder, squinting through the blinds. 'Did you see anyone out there?'

The action reminded me of Susie Allanson, peering out her clinic window.

I shook my head. I'd only seen the wealthy couple who entered before me.

'A gang of pro-abortionists descended on us last year. Loud and violent!' She shuddered. 'It might happen again this year.'

I could've reassured her and said I'd heard nothing about a counter-protest, but she seemed kind of thrilled by the prospect.

A woman in a rose-dotted scarf asked me for help with her nametag, as the stickers wouldn't allow the ink to form legible shapes. Instead, we were handed recycled tags, leftovers from the formal dinner the night before. I crossed out 'Mike Kronberg' and paused, momentarily flirting with the idea of an alias, before writing my name over the top. It remained illegible.

I stared at the glossy folder I was handed. A purple, child-sized foetus curled self-protectively below the maxim 'LIFE: the basic human right'. The large, fully formed feet were the giveaway: the global symbol of Right to Life.

Back in the car, I'd pictured backdrops of swollen torsos and misshapen skulls, anatomised and enlarged, more extraterrestrial than human, but the room set aside for the presentations was plain and neutral, furnished with five rows of chairs. The interior of the stately building was the same hue as the outside; everywhere my eyes fell, the same tonal cream. A podium sat at the front, while pro-life pamphlets and photocopied copies of books – *Is Rescuing Right? Breaking the Law to Save the Unborn* – were offered on tables up the back, opposite some cushioned chairs next to a window that looked onto manicured gardens.

In loose-fitting jeans, cable-knit jumpers, pleated skirts and thermals, most of the 30-odd attendees seemed unconcerned about matters of fashion. One older nun with a walking frame wore a blue windcheater that read, 'I walk with Mary'. A few older men in suits – politicians and speakers – parked themselves stiffly near the front. I recognised John Madigan, the only Democratic Labour Party (DLP) senator in federal parliament.

It was almost 10.15, and Margaret Tighe, founder and long-time president of Right to Life Australia, was introducing celebrity speaker John-Michael Howson. With her pearls, stiff grey hair and starchy comportment, she looked like a slightly heavier version of the cinematic renderings of Queen Elizabeth II.

Surreptitiously googling Howson on my phone, I discovered 'John-Michael Howson rant' was a frequent search term. One of his most ostentatious stunts was *sieg heil*-ing Julian Assange's mother, Christine, on air.<sup>82</sup>

Before his career as a shock jock or Hollywood entertainment reporter or creator of musicals, Wikipedia informed me, he'd worked with Graham Kennedy, starred in the ABC's *Power without Glory* and was known for his sketches and scripts.

I took a seat in the second row from the back, far from the temptation of the exit, to listen to his talk, 'Why Not Be Pro-Life?', in which he spanned pet reactionary topics from attempts to silence his straight-shooting opinions on 3AW, where he worked the Sunday morning slot speaking on subjects meant to vindicate or irk, to the sanctity of life, to the writing and production of musicals. He found late-term and partial-birth abortion abhorrent and had recently debated it on his radio show. A 'tirade of abuse' followed – but why was it more disgusting to air this debate than perform an abortion, he asked.

Everyone else clapped.

I was surprised when he alluded to his same-sex relationship, but he knew his audience, quickly assuring them that most gay people didn't want to marry anyway.

Around me, the army of grey hair and lined faces nodded. I counted four people I guessed were younger than 40, and just one person who wasn't white.

It wasn't only Right to Life's suspicion of same-sex relationships that evoked an earlier era. The clothing, the reverence for authority, the cradled cups of tea, the fear of wildness – it was as though I'd stepped back into the 1950s.

Although I wasn't the only attendee scribbling notes, a nearby conference-goer watched me carefully throughout the morning.

'Are you recovered now?' she asked finally.

'Recovered from what?' I was reluctant to agree to a mysterious ailment.

'Is it all better now?'

'Is what all better?' Any moment now, she would admit she mistook me for someone else.

'Getting here and settling in to the conference!' She sounded exasperated, as if I were being deliberately dim.

'Oh yes,' I smiled, though it felt as if I was sprinting to catch up with the conversation. The man sitting between us turned to stare, waiting for me to say something of consequence.

'Except I'm getting a headache,' I babbled. 'I try to listen and write everything down – *like a sponge!* – and it always gives me a headache.'

Unexpectedly, she cackled. 'I saw you taking all those notes and I thought, "She must be a journalist!"' She let out another jagged laugh; it felt as though we were on opposing sides of a fault line, and neither of us would ever understand why the other found the event so fascinating. My response was stalled by the introduction of the next speaker, John Madigan.

Senator Madigan of Ballarat was an odd blip on the modern-day radar: he was the first federal representative of the Democratic Labour Party (originally the Australian Labor Party – Anti-Communist) since 1974, because the party had been largely impotent after the double dissolution, when they lost all their seats.<sup>83</sup>

Built on the ideology and influence of BA Santamaria, who admired Francisco Franco and Benito Mussolini and championed a kind of economic agrarian socialism, the party was influenced by an Italian country workers movement in the lead-up to and during the Second World War.<sup>84</sup> The DLP used to be the party that traditionalist

Catholics called home, though a number of former members, including Gerard Henderson and Greg Sheridan, had moved out of politics and into media commentary. In his younger days, Tony Abbott was mentored by Santamaria, too.

DLP policies were rooted in ‘preserving, protecting and building’ the family.<sup>85</sup> Though not as anti-capitalist as the party once was, it still revered the rural life and pushed a protectionist agenda, one that regulated trade with foreign companies and encouraged Australian ownership. ‘Fair trade not free trade’ was one of their slogans. ‘It’s time to rebuild manufacturing’ was another. DLP promotional material featured Madigan carrying hefty objects – fenceposts and barbed wire, long metallic tools and red-hot irons (Madigan had been a blacksmith).

That day, Madigan was speaking on the Bill he had written and tabled in parliament back in March, the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013, which would remove Medicare funding for abortions based on the gender of a foetus. While Madigan conceded he didn’t have statistics on the subject, he believed it was ‘likely to be happening’ in Australia. ‘I resent taxes being used to knock off boys and girls for gender reasons. Children are not accessories and are not handbags,’ he proclaimed earnestly.<sup>86</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Brian Harradine was a hero to John Madigan, who expected to have a similar balance of power in parliament and hoped to use it to restrict how abortion was performed in Australia. Surprisingly, he did not believe outlawing abortion should be the endgame.

‘We need to change hearts and minds.’ Hearts and minds, Madigan repeated, gazing on the audience, as if delivering a sermon.

Official bodies representing obstetricians and gynaecologists had dismissed Madigan’s claims, stating there was no ‘credible data’ on the practice, and that the majority of sex-selective abortions were due to ‘sex-linked chromosome abnormalities’.<sup>87</sup>

The less recognised National Association of Specialist Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, however, suggested the solution to the non-existent problem was for doctors to not disclose the gender of the baby until after 20 weeks – by which stage, an abortion would be almost certainly unattainable.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps predictably, there was a strong current of racism and Islamophobia peppering the story. News coverage depicted gender-selective abortion as common ‘overseas’ – Madigan had in fact drafted his Bill in the wake of a UN report on the

practice – in countries such as China, India and Pakistan. The implication was that certain cultures didn't value women equally to men, even when living in Australia.

Even though gender-selective abortion cloaked a racist worldview, other, non-Christian religions also opposed it. The Victorian Board of Imams had written a letter supporting proposed abortion-law changes, such as overturning section 8 of Victoria's Abortion Law Reform Act, which ensured doctors provided referrals for patients seeking abortion, even if they were morally opposed to the procedure.<sup>89</sup>

Madigan's Bill was debated in parliament, and debated again in late 2014, and was then put on hold to raise again sometime in the 2015 legislative year.

Some months after that, after Victorian MP Geoff Shaw had proclaimed on television that he was 'a Christian first, then an MP' – a commitment he'd concealed from his constituents – and announced his intention to introduce a Bill to parliament to overhaul sections of the abortion law, including section 8 and gender-selective abortion, he was interviewed on ABC radio. 'I'm trying to think about whether these things actually happen,' the interviewer began. 'You mention gender-selective abortion. Does that happen in Australia? Have you got any evidence of that?'

'Well, there's more than 100,000 abortions a year in Australia,' responded Shaw. 'To get figures on what actually happens, that's a bit difficult because they don't actually record those. But the legislation allows it and maybe if you did your research a little bit you might be able to find out yourself from children from failed abortions that are alive today.'<sup>90</sup>

From what I could gather, Right to Life's primary aim was to stop the 80,000 (or more) Australian abortions, or the 44 million globally, that happened each year. 'One doesn't need legal arguments to convince us that, wanted or unwanted, the child in the womb is equally a member of the human family,' Margaret Tighe reminded subscribers of Right to Life's newsletter. 'We only need to use our eyes to tell us that!'<sup>91</sup>

They may be outliers, but the pro-life movement knows how to lobby, meaning the topic shadows political discourse about women and health. Even if the majority of Australians support abortion, the movement only needs a few members in parliament to introduce legislation restricting availability, increasing costs and embroiling doctors in bureaucratic red tape. These days, in Australia, such laws rarely

succeed, but it's thin-edge-of-the-wedge politicking: Bills like Madigan's, which appear to not really infringe on patient rights, are the beginning; the end is removing abortion from any Medicare coverage. Moreover, under the ultra-conservative Abbott government, and with the fragile alliances in the Senate, it's entirely possible that Madigan's Bill will pass.

Right to Life's national conference was small, even with its interstate attendees. But that is not to say the group wasn't influential. There was obvious financial backing behind the organisation, and they understood the legislative mechanics of abortion opposition: wedge, then limit.

Right to Life's Margaret Tighe ran for the Victorian Legislative Assembly in 1976, on an anti-abortion platform.<sup>92</sup> She hasn't run again since then, though Right to Life Australia has been active for 41 years, distinguishing itself from other pro-life groups by its non-denominational membership. Still, a majority of the convention's attendees were Catholic, including a number of Helpers of God's Precious Infants. These days, Right to Life lobby at a state and federal level around abortion, IVF, euthanasia, infanticide and stem cell research, fund a 24-hour-a-day pregnancy hotline, and fundraise for and encourage outreach programs such as activism and education projects in schools.

During a short break in the proceedings, the man from my earlier conversation was still seated beside me. He'd fidgeted and squirmed throughout the presentations, sighing every five minutes or so.

He was drawing a crude outline of a cat's head. He added a smile. He paused and looked up at me.

'Do you like cats?'

'Umm, yes.'

He nodded, like it was the right answer.

I watched him sketching.

'I have a cat, actually,' I offered.

A woman in front turned around. 'Are you taking about kitties?'

It seemed like a safe topic.

'How old is yours?' she asked.

'Two. He's very needy.'

'My baby's 20,' she said, her mouth sad.

'She must require special care?'

‘She’s really good, but yeah, she has kidney problems, and I’m not sure how much longer she’ll be around. Twenty years is a long time.’

I nodded sympathetically.

‘Does she poop and wee everywhere?’ The cartoonist grinned. There was definitely something a bit askew – it was in the glaze of his eyes, the oddness of his questions.

‘No!’ the woman replied. ‘She’s a lady, she would never!’

‘There are three cats always coming to my lawn and doing that,’ he said bitterly.

The next speaker began and we turned to listen.

A little later, I glanced down at his lap to see what was happening in the illustration. He’d made the foetus on the folder a soldier, replete with AK47, grenades and other military accoutrement. It wore a maniacal grin. Underneath he’d written ‘BABY LIBERATION FRONT’, then underlined it.

Speakers over the day bemoaned the state of the world today: liberal views, promiscuity, loss of meaning, others not walking with Jesus.

They wanted, it seemed, a facsimile of Australia 50 years ago, where morality was based on Christian values, when Australia was superficially monocultural and women were domesticated, but with some of today’s perks. Not technology, which they outwardly rejected – ‘Did you bring your laptop with you too!’ my watcher commented when I pulled out my iPad, and I noticed that no-one else even had a phone out – yet clapped when the profitability of businesses or the invisible hand of the market was mentioned, as if businesses could be trusted but people could not. It reminded me of what Republican Governor Scott Walker, who brought Wisconsin to a standstill when he announced his plan to eliminate collective bargaining for public employees, is said to have regularly remarked in college: ‘God has told me I’m chosen to cut taxes and stop killing babies.’<sup>93</sup>

The conference’s keynote speaker was Republican Representative Bette Grande, of Fargo, North Dakota. Grande had just introduced two Bills that promised to further curtail abortion in the state: one that banned abortion due to foetal abnormality and another that prevented abortion after detection of a foetal heartbeat – that is, after six weeks’ pregnancy.<sup>94</sup>

Grande told us an AAP journalist had asked her: ‘Are you proud of yourself?’ ‘It’s a good day for babies,’ had been her retort.

The Right to Lifers cheered.

‘We do not have a doctor in North Dakota who will perform an abortion.’ She grinned. A doctor who travelled from South Dakota periodically performed abortions in the state; her records were closely monitored and audited twice a year by Grande herself (with patients’ identifying details blacked out).

Both Grande’s Bills passed, but in late 2014 would be found ‘invalid and unconstitutional’ by the federal Supreme Court, again demonstrating the significance of *Roe v Wade*, the landmark decision that led to a woman’s right to abortion being enshrined in the constitution. In the US, women can legally have an abortion until a foetus can live outside the womb, defined as 28 weeks’ gestation, although states like North Dakota are perpetually creating legislation to thwart access, which must be taken to the federal level to be overturned.<sup>95</sup>

In her history of Planned Parenthood, historian Jill Lepore writes that once upon a time, abortion and birth control were not partisan issues.<sup>96</sup> The movement for birth control, once led by socialist Margaret Sanger along with the likes of radical anarchist Emma Goldman, was not simply about women’s equality; it fantasised of a society where the black populations and impoverished masses could be bred out through sterilisation and controlled procreation.

Sanger ‘did court eugenicists’, Lepore observes, but her other socialist politics also put her at odds with such groups. However, it’s the same kind of logic that religious conservatives use to paint abortion as anti-feminist because the hidden intention is to abort girls. Still to this day, American pro-life groups mark the abortion rates of black communities as a crisis, even though the pro-life movement is predominantly white and, according to religion historian Randall Balmer, yearning for a time before desegregation.<sup>97</sup>

In 1927, the American Birth Control League’s membership was more Republican, with a membership makeup similar to that of the Rotary Club. Several evolutions later, in 1942, that league was christened the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. During the war, family planning was a dominating topic. Several years later, anxiety about population control influenced the political approach to birth control more generally. After his election, Nixon even increased funding to Planned Parenthood.<sup>98</sup>

So when did Republican support wane? It was a Republican strategy to beat the Democrats, Lepore argues, because they feared losing Catholic voters to pro-life Democrats. ‘Favoritism toward things Catholic is good politics,’ one Nixon strategist advised in 1971. ‘There is a trade-off, but it leaves us with the larger share of the pie.’

Up until the late 1980s, Republicans generally supported abortion. But, concludes Lepore, ‘Republicans made abortion a partisan issue – contorted the G.O.P. [Grand Old Party] to mold itself around this issue – but Democrats allowed their party to be defined by it.’<sup>99</sup>

Conversely, in Australia, abortion is a bipartisan issue, and pro-life politicians exist in both major parties, arguably because of the move of Catholics from the Labor Party to the Democratic Labour Party to the Liberal Party, coinciding with a class shift among those communities.

At least once a year, I’m a Catholic. Growing up, it was only me and my mum – an atheist, though she didn’t use the term. I was, therefore, a blank religious canvas. I’d never been to any kind of religious mass or gathering, save a couple of weddings and two funerals; I also have a hazy recollection of a christening from when I was 16. My mum’s lack of religious affiliation was partly the reason I was surprised she thought abortion wasn’t something a woman would recover from. Where did that belief come from?

Until recently, any knowledge I had of Christianity was gleaned from *Ecclesiastes* (lit degree) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (original London cast recording on vinyl), with my understanding of Judaism and Islam largely gleaned from popular culture. But when I was an adult, my mum married a man named John, a former Catholic whose extended family are practising Catholics. His sister, Maureen, a nurse, goes to weekly mass, and his nieces and nephews all attended private Catholic institutions before university.

Every Good Friday I find myself at my mum’s or Maureen’s, catching up companionably over hot cross buns and coffee or tea. Last year I was late because *Jesus Christ Superstar* was on TV and I was swept up in the saga anew. I apologised upon arrival. There was a pregnant pause before Maureen spoke. ‘That’s a great film.’

‘Yes, the 1970s one,’ I replied, ‘when they were all hippies, not just Jesus.’

They weren’t reproachful, at least not openly, about my impiety, or my interest in abortion. On the other hand, as the distressing accounts leaked from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse or

unimaginable tales emerged from the brutal history of the Magdalene laundries, instances where the Catholic Church as an institution was so obviously to blame, I started to wonder how rank-and-file Catholics could not be having a crisis of faith.

In *God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australia*, Marion Maddox unpicks the John Howard–led Liberal Party’s fixation with family values, which resembled the same notions of propriety and moral standards I would witness throughout the Right to Life convention. Such values, Maddox claims, united and steered the party, not unlike the Republicans with abortion, entrenching ‘the conservative social agenda as a benchmark’.<sup>100</sup> Whenever Howard’s hold over the party or the country started to weaken, ‘a new “family values” crisis’ would emerge.<sup>101</sup>

For many, John Howard’s worldview grated, and was often perceived as old-fashioned, but his conservatism was usually attributed to his Methodist upbringing. Yet, Howard’s ‘personal experiences’, those that appeared in his speeches and political justifications, were often a ‘fiction’, Maddox writes, coloured by nostalgia, which can never hold up against reality.

Moreover, Methodists were much more progressive than Howard’s views allowed: their publication *The Methodist* was one of the first to call for reparations for Indigenous Australians in the 1960s, and they were wary of capitalism, conscious of its potential to corrode communities.<sup>102</sup>

What made Howard’s religious conservatism unique at that time was his adoption of the ‘prosperity gospel’, a thread running throughout the American religious right and also the Right to Life convention: the belief that individuals make their own fate, and that if they only work hard enough and follow God’s will, the market will reward them.

Abortion rights and access are tied up with other, great needs, Rosalind Petchesky wrote a decade ago: ‘health care, child care, housing, jobs, education, and the whole cluster of social rights and needs that make having wanted and healthy children possible’.<sup>103</sup> All issues that go to the heart of what kind of society we’re drafting a blueprint for.

But increasing welfare, even if simply to encourage people to continue a pregnancy or to keep families together, was not something mentioned once at the conference.

Just as with politics, organising is crucial for religious organisations – a way

to pull earnest converts together, a cause for them to focus their energies on once they're in the church, and a method of keeping the modern world at arm's length.

It's about being in the world but not *of* the world, writes Randall Balmer in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, a study of evangelical movements across the United States. Beyond the mythology and rhetoric of church expansion, he notes, 'there is a symbolism that represents the displacement evangelicals feel in a pluralistic world that they believe has turned against them and their values'.

Enter, stage right, abortion.

Nothing better symbolises a pro-life evangelical's place in the world, their 'alienation and vulnerability', says Balmer, than a foetus. 'There is nothing more pure and innocent than a foetus. Indeed, the foetus serves as a marvelous symbol, not only for its Freudian or psychoanalytical connotations of crawling back into the womb to escape the buffetings of the world, but also because it represents evangelicals' own sense of beleaguerment and helplessness.'

To the Christian fundamentalist, abortion is a crime that takes innocents – a gift from God not yet tainted by the transgressions of sin and modernity – and extinguishes them in a barbaric manner. Murder is a sin – but so too is sex for anything other than procreation.

In essence, as Amanda Lohrey writes in her *Quarterly Essay* on Christianity and politics, the fundamentalist Christian faiths mimic the traditional family model of the Old Testament: 'the world is a dangerous place and always will be, because there is evil out there in the form of Satan.'<sup>104</sup> It therefore falls to the all-knowing father to protect his flock.

Something linking conservative Catholics and Evangelicals together lately, including at that very conference, is the indefatigable and deep-pocketed Australian Christian Lobby. Much about the organisation is hush-hush: they don't disclose membership or donors, though are frequently portrayed as speaking on behalf of the 'Christian constituency', a self-appointed role, as a number of Anglicans I interviewed pointed out. As Marion Maddox puts it, 'reputable polling has found that more than half of self-described Christians support same-sex marriage, and even larger majorities support a right to assisted voluntary euthanasia and abortion. It could be said that ACL does indeed lobby on "issues of concern to Christians" – but on the opposite side of those issues from positions that most Christians hold.'<sup>105</sup>

Again, influenced by the American Christian right, and by business, the lobby

appears to be behind much of the perceived growth and ubiquity of the Christian right in Australian politics over the past decade, and most certainly played a critical role in securing a huge boost in funding for the school chaplaincy program in the 2014 federal budget, while welfare, health and education were slashed.

That morning, I had spied Dan Flynn, ACL's Victorian director, taking photos with John-Michael Howson and John Madigan.

We had met a fortnight before the conference, when he outlined for me what he saw as the purpose of the ACL. 'We're a group organised around representing church concerns to MPs and influencing the law, influencing public policy in relation to key issues that the church is concerned about.'

They didn't seek to impose Christian views, he claimed, but rather to influence politics and the law with Christian values.

Dan was tall, with blue eyes; an ex-lawyer who looked more like an ex-footballer. He was distracted, he confessed, because he'd just learned his father was in the hospital.

Beforehand, I'd been fretting about the meeting. The opposition to abortion I had become used to; however, the lobbying against gay marriage and gay couples adopting children made me prickly, and I didn't know how to sit in close conversation with the representative of a group I deemed to be, pretty much, hatemongers. I hadn't expected him to be so frank about their strategy, or so pleasant.

'This issue gets right down to how we define a life in the womb, whether it is a "foetus" or a "baby". Jacinda, if we found life – if we found one living cell – on Mars, the scientists would trumpet, "There is life on Mars!" It'd be massive news.'

He grinned widely, a gotcha moment – we both knew he was right. The unnerving technique of sprinkling my name throughout his responses was working, too.

'You won't see abortion much in mainstream media.'

That was true.

'The mainstream media will portray things like the killing of whales or seals in horrific detail and create a strong emotional reaction to that. But you wouldn't see the destruction of a foetus or an unborn child in the mainstream media, because the effect would be too damaging to people.'

He smiled and returned to his favourite topic: 'Impact of ultrasounds: a bit of a gamechanger.'

Interestingly, that was the argument *Silent Scream* made back in 1984. The film promised to show ‘for the first time’ – ultrasound technology was then fairly new – a foetus ‘being torn apart, dismembered, disarticulated, crushed and destroyed by the unfeeling steel instruments of the abortionists’.<sup>106</sup>

The film was a bizarre mash-up of 1980s educational video and horror film, narrated by Dr Bernard N Nathanson, an obstetrician and gynaecologist fond of the term ‘foetology’, who had moved from pro-choice to pro-life activism.

A ‘chilling documentation of the horrors of abortion’, Ronald Reagan said upon its release, though much about the film, from the size of the foetus to the dead babies littered throughout, has since been disputed. The reason the film was so influential, Rosalind Petchesky muses, was because “‘the foetal form’” itself has, within the larger culture, acquired a symbolic import that condenses within it a series of losses – from sexual innocence to compliant women to American imperial might. It is not the image of a baby at all but of a tiny man, a homunculus.’<sup>107</sup>

There was no denying the film won ground, though. As Petchesky says, it gave ‘life’ to the foetus, and moved the debate from the realm of the religious to the medical.<sup>108</sup>

Still, that was 30 years ago. If ultrasound was really going to change the debate, shouldn’t we have seen that already?

‘There needs to be some pause and reflection and some real, open conversations about what can be done to help women in a better way,’ Dan continued. ‘The big stick of the law is not what I’m advocating for here in the first instance, but some discussions about the ways forward. It’s one thing to change the law, it’s another thing to change the culture.’

I didn’t believe him. He’d just finished telling me that 48 per cent of Victorians believed late-term abortion should be illegal.

As we were leaving, I discovered my phone hadn’t been switched on.

‘It didn’t record?’ His smile weakened.

‘That’s okay,’ I sighed. ‘I’ll remember the gist of it.’

‘I can spare another half an hour. But let’s get a coffee first.’

He insisted on buying mine.

The convention broke for lunch.

For anyone who's ever been to a political meeting, the scenario I was facing will be familiar: you're standing by yourself and someone approaches and asks your opinion on various topics. If you obviously fit a certain demographic, they'll try to introduce you to others who fit that same demographic.

The woman who suspected me of being a journalist approached.

'Do you know Sophie?' the woman, Mary, asked. She called a young, flame-haired woman over. Thick red curls spilled over her shoulders. She crossed her long legs and clasped her hands in front, head bowed as she stood listening; a prayerful stance. She was studying philosophy.

A young man, dressed in a suit, joined us.

'I was saying that Jacinda was writing so much, I thought she was a journalist!' Mary laughed.

'Not a journalist, but I am writing a book,' I explained.

They stared.

'On abortion, and what it is about that we can't reconcile. Why it's invisible.'

Sophie nodded her head slowly.

'Really!' Mary replied. 'Sophie started the Melbourne branch of Life Choices at the ACU [Australian Catholic University].'

I smiled at Sophie. 'Did you?' I didn't know how long I could keep up the façade.

'Yes, there are seven other branches in New South Wales and Queensland, but we were the first in Victoria.'

'How many members do you have?'

'Only 15,' she said. 'We're still trying to build interest.'

ACU had had abortion controversies before. A couple of years back an email had gone out to the entire student body, a mixture of religious and secular students, asking them to support and donate to a pro-life organisation.

There must be a lot of support for the issue at ACU, though?

Sophie disagreed. 'The subject came up in my philosophy class and straight away the room inflamed and people started yelling that it was a rights issue.'

'Because a university like ACU is trying to shake off the image of a religious institution, they can react too strongly to such things,' offered the besuited lad. He had a politician's polish.

Mary was annoyed. 'They're just so selfish!'

Mary launched into a story about a Thai couple she knew who'd had a baby. She'd met the woman one morning at a clinic. This woman had already tried numerous times to get an abortion, but because she was an international student, a number of clinics had refused. This final clinic wanted several thousands of dollars in cash. Mary convinced the girl to keep the baby, but then had to help her through a series of immigration hearings. At one she told the judge, 'She only wants what every mother wants: maternity leave!'

She seemed equally amazed that one, she had become involved in their lives, babysitting weekly and doing their laundry to help out, and that two, the plea had worked on the magistrate.

Her eyes were wet. 'Every time I see that little boy ...' She put her hand to her mouth, as if to catch the emotion leaking out. 'And to think they just force these women into it – for the money!'

Mary was by far the most easy-to-read person I'd met there: every idea she had rippled across her face.

'It's not always about money,' Sophie disagreed.

I was astonished. Judging by the looks on the faces around me, others were too.

'I mean,' she began, realising she had to articulate the objection quickly, because one of the worst things you could do at a pro-life congress was express sympathy for the other side. 'I mean, I think some of them are genuinely trying to help. They just don't know how much damage it can do.'

Mary looked bemused. The suit said nothing.

'It must be overwhelming too,' I said, wanting to show my support for Sophie, who was in a difficult position – being young and religious and involved in student politics, with a sincere concern for the lives of women. I used Mary's example as support. 'To be so far from your family and networks, in an uncertain visa situation, looking at deportation ... and discover you're pregnant.'

After the conference, I found Sophie again in the Right to Life newsletter, with an account of the Australian Catholic Youth Festival. She summarised a talk she'd found very persuasive, 'Choosing Life'. The speaker, Sophie wrote, 'placed euthanasia and abortion in the context of many other issues that threaten human dignity' throughout our lives – 'eugenics, cosmetic surgery, euthanasia, IVF and abortion'. Issues that interfered with God's image or plan. 'In the past I have felt at

loss when thinking of a way to defend the unborn,' Sophie wrote, but "“being pro-life means being concerned about all issues from bullying to genocide”'.<sup>109</sup>

Of course, not all Christians are conservative, and not all churches align themselves with the Australian Christian Lobby.

One Anglican bishop I spoke with, Kathleen, had been part of an all-women working group that made a submission in support of abortion legalisation to Victorian Law Reform Commission on behalf of the Melbourne Anglican Church. About a third of the priests within the Anglican Church are women.

When the submission was made public, some Anglicans were unhappy. One blog called committee members Worshippers of Moloch. 'That's a pagan god of the Israelites who required child sacrifice,' Kathleen gave a tight smile. 'A pretty major insult if you're Biblically literate.'

Which she clearly recognised I was not.

Kathleen didn't believe abortion should be illegal, that that was counterproductive. 'I was 17 when the Menhennitt ruling was passed. You have to be in your late 50s or older to know what it was like in Victoria.' She remembered wealthy girls at her private school having abortions, even as she read stories in the newspaper about poor women who'd died of botched backyard operations.

'When abortion is illegal, there's not fewer, there's just a higher percentage done illegally. Women with money can always obtain abortions – they find doctors with loopholes in the law or pay somebody a big bribe. But poor women resort to dangerous means.'

Class and race are common factors in the mortality rate of women living in countries where abortion is criminalised. In her history of Planned Parenthood, Jill Lepore cites a 1965 report that claimed that 94 per cent of the women who died from illegal abortion in New York City – at least the deaths that were reported as following such a shunned operation – were black or Puerto Rican.<sup>110</sup>

For Kathleen, more Christians needed to understand the differences between morality and the law and what the implications were for both.

'My own position is that it's a very unfortunate thing to happen, but sometimes it's the morally right decision.' Not only when someone's health was at stake, she said, but also because of personal hardship or foetal abnormalities. It was

her pastoral experiences that helped her see abortion could be necessary, and that whatever the circumstance, it was always a difficult decision for the women involved.

‘It tends to be a stereotype on the part of men that if we allow abortion freely, then people will just do it with as about as little thought as having a filling in their tooth or something. That just isn’t the case.’

Why did she think abortion made people so uncomfortable?

Because of its complexities, she replied. ‘People don’t like to say, maybe I think this or maybe I don’t. Often, they can’t cope with the complexity of issues where public policy meets private moral decisions. People are angry about the messiness of it.’

That’s where groups like Right to Life had such sway, she said. ‘They speak the most loudly on this and people look for certainties, perhaps now more than ever.’

Interestingly, other, non-Christian faiths seemed less invested in being involved in the public question of abortion in Australia. I never managed to get a representative from the Board of Imams to speak with me, and other followers of Islam or Judaism I approached simply replied that they took a secular approach to the issue.

On the final conference day, during tea break, a retired engineer and Right to Life organiser introduced me to a speaker I’d missed.

Naomi was in her mid 50s, with a long blonde ponytail. I’d noticed a line of people following her around throughout the day, waiting for another moment of her time.

Her tale was sad: she’d been raised by her grandparents, had no relationship with her mother, suffered depression for most of her adolescence, felt unloved and unworthy, been suicidal and institutionalised.

One day during meditation, she remembered her mother had tried to abort her.

At first, her mother denied the accusation. But after Naomi had tracked down her father, her mother confessed: she’d tried to end the pregnancy at six weeks. She didn’t realise until much later that she was still pregnant, that Naomi had survived.

‘As most abortions happen in the first trimester I believe I represent the silent majority – the tiny, defenceless ones whose voices will never be heard,’ Naomi said.

I calculated: pregnant in 1959, her mother most likely went to a backyard

abortionist. Even if done by someone skilled in the operation, it's difficult to end a pregnancy at six weeks, because the foetus is about the size of a fingernail.

'I didn't use to be pro-life,' she confided. It was an admission of fate. When she'd discovered her life's story, how could she not join the cause?

Naomi handed me a printed copy of her talk, covered in her handwritten amendments, and a USB stick she said I needed to comprehend her meaning. It was her conclusion, and contained photos of her children and grandchildren – those who would never have existed if the abortion had been successful.

After the meditation, she wrote, 'a great weight lifted'. It sounded a lot like a religious experience.

The scenario took me back to a period when I'd been part of a holistic meditation group. The people in that particular group had been desperate for answers and willing to put their faith in something unseen, something beyond the material world but that still answered to the laws of cause and effect, or even something divine that had been doing the steering for them. The experience had left me cynical – I now felt that those seeking connections and meaning, reasons for why we are the way we are, are bound to have revelations that confirm pre-existing notions.

Naomi cited the work of Dr Philip Ney, a psychiatrist who specialises in child abuse and 'abortion aftermath'. Post-abortion survivors, Ney explains in an article co-written with his wife, 'are all those individuals who could have been aborted, but mere chance or the fact that they were wanted saved them from termination'. This included families where 'a sibling had been aborted', parents who told children they wished they'd aborted them, or those born in a country where there are more abortions than births.<sup>111</sup>

Presumably, he was thinking of China, where the abortion rate is 13 million annually, a figure that doesn't include medical abortions or unlicensed clinics, and a recorded birth rate of around 18.5 million (which, again, is unlikely to be accurate in rural areas).<sup>112</sup>

The term 'post-abortion survivor', Ney argues, 'applies to at least 50 percent of the people born since the 1970s'.<sup>113</sup> Like many of the pro-life faithful, he believes that women who've had abortions are less likely to bond with other or future children 'and therefore these children are more likely to be abused and neglected'. The inverse applies, too: the women most likely to have abortions were, according to Ney, abused or neglected as children.<sup>114</sup>

It was a neat, convenient explanation that offered a map on which they could build a combating strategy, and provided a root for mental illness as well.

Logic and my growing anti-abortionist prejudice aside, could I really resent Naomi for the peace she had found?

Just before the conference's close, a woman leaned across the row and whispered, 'How long have you been a member of Right to Life?'

Her long hair fell limply around her shoulders, her glasses large and clunky.

'Oh, I'm not. I'm just interested in the subject.'

'I did not expect you to say that,' she replied, cautious.

'How about you?' I asked.

'A couple of years.'

'How did you first get involved?'

She was 42 but had known she was pro-life since she was 12, when she learned 'abortion was a *thing*'. She hadn't been vocal about it earlier because the circles she moved in supported abortion rights, so she hadn't felt comfortable expressing her reservations.

Was she religious?

'Not at all. I'm an atheist. I wasn't raised religiously either.'

She was the first atheist pro-life person I'd encountered.

'I know Right to Life used to be seen as a religious organisation, but like someone was saying earlier, if we want to make a difference in the pro-life movement, we have to work together, have a unified front. Religion's not really an issue, not like it used to be.'

She spoke like an activist.

'Are there other issues you feel as strongly about?'

'Refugees and asylum seekers,' she replied. 'I think everyone has the right to seek asylum, wherever they need to. I actually volunteer with asylum seekers during the week.'

I wanted to speak with her more, to find out about what had happened when she was young, how she'd learned abortion was a thing, but she disappeared moments later, just before the prayer service began.

After that, one of the conveners stood to advocate leafletting for the upcoming

election. Right to Life had campaigned in nine electorates last election, and they felt it'd been a success, with one 'pro-abortion independent' blaming the group for his 'demise'.<sup>115</sup>

As Marion Maddox argues, politicians are cautious, often leaning to the right of public opinion. But over the past 20 years, abortion has become a bipartisan issue. One of the federal politicians most vocal in support for access to RU486 was former federal minister for immigration Amanda Vanstone, a Liberal. Previous Victorian premier Ted Baillieu, another Liberal, was also pro-choice, which was rumoured to have had something to do with his loss of leadership, and a number of positions in the replacement cabinet were filled with pro-life politicians – Denis Napthine, Heidi Victoria (who was given the portfolio of women's affairs), Matthew Guy, Christine Fyffe.

I walked back to my car, bemused. Despite their political connections, Right to Life was segregated and small, a Republican satellite, waiting for the Australian tide to turn. But it seemed doubtful it would; after all, 85 per cent of Australians supported abortion on demand. There also seemed to be an attitudinal change: of the four younger people who attended the convention, half wanted to avoid demonising their political opposition.

Several months after the conference, Right to Life announced their intention to campaign in Frankston, to ensure the re-election of once-Liberal, now-independent MP Geoff Shaw. 'He is one of the only politicians who has the guts to do something about abortion,' a member of the group told the *Age*.<sup>116</sup> The group didn't address the long-standing allegations of corruption against Shaw.

Despite the sway the Australian Christian Lobby plainly has over politicians, and the pro-life campaigning on Geoff Shaw's behalf, he was defeated in the 2014 state election, polling just 13 per cent of the vote. Almost certainly this was because Shaw and his supporters had made abortion an election issue.

I had to wonder, was I witnessing the last exhalations of the pro-life movement?

## Chapter Six: The Deep North

‘If there’s nothing wrong with abortion, if it doesn’t actually take the life of a child,’ another pro-life interviewee asked me, thinking she’d caught me in the ultimate ethical paradox, ‘then why does everyone talk about the need to reduce the abortion rate? Why *should* it be rare?’

I mulled over that question while sitting in a conference on unplanned pregnancy in Brisbane, along with about 150 health professionals from the field (nurses, clinic workers, counsellors, social workers), listening to the dismal facts of women’s reproductive lives in the Sunshine State.

Almost half of the pregnancies in Australia each year are unplanned, and despite the omnipresent internet, conception myths still abound: you can’t get pregnant if it’s your first time; you can’t get pregnant if you use a Coca-Cola douche, jump up and down seven times, or sneeze in quick succession; you can’t get pregnant during your period. Such myths are at least partly rooted in logic: if you’ve never had sex before you’re more than likely too young to have to take care of a child; Coca-Cola can kill anything; the sperm won’t take hold if you’re tensing your abdomen while moving vigorously; and women don’t usually ovulate during the menstrual phase (though it can sometimes happen).

Queensland is a state where abortion is still a crime, unless it’s performed because of ‘genuine concern’ for a woman’s physical or mental health. Such concern could take the form of suicidal potential, or physical complications that could endanger the woman’s life if she carried the pregnancy to full term. Even though police rarely intervene, doctors are never certain if or when the procedure will test the inertia of the law, and women seeking abortion can find it hard to procure one. Hospitals perform around just 1 per cent of Queensland’s 15,000 annual abortions. Officially, hospitals are supposed to offer the option to terminate in cases of foetal abnormality or rape. The consensus at the conference was that they rarely do, and there were stories of women turned away from hospitals, returning weeks later, more pregnant and in extremely distressed states.

Abortion is expensive even in metropolitan Brisbane, where only 45 per cent of the state’s population resides. If poor and on a Health Care Card, women pay around \$450 for a surgical abortion; \$400 if they are lucky enough to get the \$50

assistance offered by Children by Choice, the group running the conference and the sole financial-aid organisation for women facing an unplanned pregnancy. (Other aid organisations, most of which have religious roots, will not help women fund an abortion.<sup>117</sup>)

‘It was a culture shock moving from Melbourne to Brisbane,’ announced Dr Darren Russell, one of three men at the conference. ‘A big part of that was the attitude to abortion. Well, that and the attitudes to sex, fluoride and daylight savings!’ He grinned and the audience guffawed.

Russell runs a sexual health service in Cairns – the only one in Australia to also perform medical abortion, which means that the staff tries to meet the needs of HIV patients while satisfying the constant demand for early termination.

Russell was at the conference to talk about abortion access in Queensland. One of his slides compared accessing abortion in Melbourne, where it is legal and generally affordable, to accessing abortion in Mount Isa, a rural Queensland town where no clinics or hospitals perform terminations. The nearest abortion provider is in Townsville, a ten-hour drive. But getting an abortion is more complicated than that, because Townsville doesn’t provide that many publicly funded procedures. The patient can instead opt for one of Townsville’s private clinics: if the pregnancy is before 12 weeks and relatively uncomplicated, the procedure will cost around \$750.

Cairns is a small city without a dedicated abortion clinic. Even early in a pregnancy, surgical abortions there cost about \$950. Patients are only eligible for a \$250 Medicare rebate, and they have to pay cash on the day. Under its proposed addition to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), medical abortion, like that provided by Russell’s centre, would cost something more like \$72.20 – but for the abortifacients only (that is, drugs that bring on a miscarriage); the additional costs of consultations, ultrasounds and follow-ups would bring the price back up to \$300–\$600 for many women.

Medical abortion has its weaknesses, though. Mifepristone (more commonly known as RU486) can only be used in the first nine weeks of pregnancy; under the PBS, its window is reduced to 49 days (seven weeks). While most women learn they’re pregnant within 12 weeks, women living in rural areas – the majority of Queensland’s women – tend to seek help later in the pregnancy, when abortion is more costly and more complex. Another catch is the length of time the procedure takes: women undergoing medical abortion need supervision for the duration of the

drug's cycle (around 24 hours), a level of care that most clinics can't afford to provide. Then there is the physical pain that researchers haven't yet been able to eliminate, a side effect that, for now, women simply have to tolerate.

Abortion access isn't only a problem in Queensland. In the ACT – where the sole legal restriction on abortion is that a medical professional must perform it in a medical facility – there is only one private clinic. In Western Australia, abortion is legal before 20 weeks, but is only available at one hospital and three private clinics. In the Northern Territory, the procedure is only available until 14 weeks and only due to reasons of 'foetal disability' or 'maternal health' (if a doctor believes it will be more dangerous for a woman to continue a pregnancy). In the NT, abortions must be performed in hospitals; currently there is only one public and one private hospital where they can occur, and a handful of O&G specialists occasionally performing them.<sup>118</sup>

Until recently, terminations in Tasmania were only lawful after approval by two doctors and a bout of compulsory counselling. Late in 2012, a Bill made its way through parliament that decriminalised abortion up until 16 weeks, after which time abortion could still be possible, with the approval of two doctors who deemed it 'medically, psychologically or socio-economically justified'. Tasmania added an addendum to the law, too, which makes it illegal to protest within 150 metres of an abortion clinic.

In other words, Queensland has some of the most repressive abortion laws in Australia. It also has the second-highest rate of teenage pregnancy, after the Northern Territory. And even though young people glean about 93 per cent of their sexual knowledge from school, sex education isn't mandatory in Queensland.

Queensland has another distinction: it's the only state that has charged a woman with supplying a substance to aid her own abortion. In 2010, Tegan Leach was tried under a 112-year-old law for importing and ingesting abortifacients. Tegan Leach was the first woman tried under the law in 50 years, and the media coverage was callous. Leach and her boyfriend's names were published alongside their address – they were threatened with violence, their car was vandalised and their house firebombed.<sup>119</sup>

That was a couple of years ago, but the reverberations were still being felt at the unplanned-pregnancy conference. 'I sat in court for two weeks listening to them talk about this young woman's periods and her intimate sexual history, all these

grown men,’ said one woman in the campaign strategies workshop. ‘I felt like I was in some other time and place.’ Her observation echoed that of historian Rickie Solinger on the abortion trials of the 1940s and 50s. Frequently, back then, women were on trial in cases presided over entirely by men; ‘titillating’ was how she described the courtroom dissection of women’s bodies and practices.<sup>120</sup>

Stirred by the energy of the conference, I bought a couple of t-shirts from the Children by Choice fundraising table. ‘Feminism: back by popular demand,’ one read. The other was a Rebecca West quote: ‘I myself have never been able to find out precisely what a feminist is – I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.’ I tried to overlook West’s rabid anti-communism for the good of the cause.

My taxi driver sighed loudly again. It was a hot Brisbane afternoon and we were south of the CBD. He was young, olive-skinned, antsy.

‘Is everything okay?’ I asked.

‘We’re only doing 30 ks per hour!’

I nodded sympathetically. ‘This is a lot of traffic?’

‘No, probably just an old man. Maybe Chinese ...’ I felt my face sour. ‘Or maybe not,’ he finished.

I was on my way to meet Graham Preston, a pro-life activist who’d just been released from eight months in prison. It’s rare for people to so disagree with a law that they would surrender their freedom and leave their family, including seven children, behind. I wanted to meet him.

We slid to a stop outside a lazing Queenslander: high, squat and wide, a row of open windows and a garden of shrubs. A large church sat on the other side of the road.

Graham met me at the top of the steps. Tall and lean, with glasses and a scattering of whiskers, he had tidy silver hair that was parted on the left. Preston ran the Queensland chapter of Right to Life.

After that day, I would next see Graham a year later, on the nightly news in my hotel room in Albury. Graham would be the first person arrested and tried under Tasmania’s bubble-zone legislation, a law he travelled to the state to test.

But on that hot Brisbane day, he led me through a breezy, open house, past

beckoning green velvet chairs and into a homey kitchen with a small fish tank on the kitchen bench, and a small girl of about eight at the sink, forearms plunged in the water.

‘So that wasn’t so hard, was it?’ Graham asked her.

Graham and I continued down some stairs at the rear of the house to his office. Long and narrow, it contained two desks, a fan, a filing cabinet and three bookshelves filled with texts on philosophy, religion, history and abortion – *Debating Calvinism*, *The Grace of God*, *The Great Debate*. It was the office of a writer.

Graham had been released from prison a fortnight before.

‘It was a very long time.’ He sounded shell-shocked, like it was hard to reconcile the Graham speaking to me with the one who had lived in a cell.

Graham and his wife, Liz, joined the pro-life movement in 1986. They started the Queensland branch of Right to Life in 1990 because they didn’t think there was adequate opposition to abortion in Brisbane at the time. Then, in 1998, they started a non-violent direct action group, Protect Life, because they felt compelled to try and stop the abortions happening at clinics daily. The group is totally unique in Australia because of its direct action techniques, such as blockading the doorways and entrances of clinics.

‘We simply sit in front of the doors and refuse to move,’ Graham offered.

‘How do staff and doctors react?’ I asked.

‘Some of them have tried to run us over with their cars – a little bit aggressive in that respect.’ Graham chuckled. ‘Mostly they just call the police.’

They had 400 people on their mailing list, but some online forums suggested the founding members were the only regular members.

Graham stressed that he didn’t take breaking the law lightly: he and Liz, along with another couple, Anne and Jim, had spent 12 years discussing strategies and tactics for physically preventing an abortion before they took action. Furthermore, they were completely committed to nonviolence. ‘But we believe it’s completely appropriate to put ourselves between the abortionists and the intended victims – the unborn child.’

Graham had in fact never been charged with any acts of violence. He went to jail because, after a number of years of simply moving them on, police started charging those involved in the Protect Life clinic blockades with trespass, a weightier offence. Some of the fines Graham had accrued over that time were dismissed; \$8000

was not. He refused to pay the sum on principle and a magistrate sentenced him to serve most of his eight months on a prison farm, where prisoners were allowed to work (unlike in high-security facilities).

‘If you’re saying that abortion takes the life of a child,’ he said, his voice earnest and soft, ‘to simply just say that and not act in a way that reflects the seriousness of that, it’s no surprise that people don’t take you seriously. We always liken it to a local primary school: if you took the lives of 350 children, and then it happened again the next day and the next day, well, people would not simply say, “This is wrong, it’s got to stop.” They would actively intervene if they knew what was going to happen.’

Strangely, the comment reminded me of something Susie Allanson had said – that if she genuinely believed children were being murdered inside a clinic every day, she’d do her utmost to prevent it from happening also.

Graham had been to prison six times before, with 18 months in total as a ‘prisoner of conscience’. He’d known that a longer jail sentence was inevitable this last time. ‘We’d probably had 60 sit-ins over the past ten years. So I knew they wouldn’t continue to just let us do this.’

Prison wasn’t a desirable place to be, Graham said. Conditions were difficult, the atmosphere was unpredictable and boredom was constant. ‘The men have not much to do that’s productive.’

Wind from the fan blew leaflets off the bookshelf behind me, and the bright yellow slips fluttered to the ground at my feet. Glancing down, I saw a picture of a hand-drawn foetus below bold accusatory lettering – the kind of leaflet that picketers passed out at clinics.

Graham leaned over and picked up the papers.

I felt jumpy. I was hundreds of kilometres from home, alone, in the backyard of some very involved, very active anti-abortionists – the sort of people I’d organised a protest against just recently – and the heat was making my legs stick to the vinyl seat.

Graham’s wife, Liz, entered the room, and the moment passed. In her late 40s, she was blonde, sensibly dressed and nervous. She took a seat.

Like Dan Flynn from the Australian Christian Lobby, Graham felt that the decision to abort largely came down to the woman’s psychological state at the time – if she was unhappy about the pregnancy, she would choose to abort. He had a

problem with a potential life relying on what he deemed a fickle equation.

‘Whenever somebody is happily pregnant, everyone congratulates them and is excited to see the ultrasounds and talk about the baby – not “the foetus” or “the product of conception” – and it’s only when there’s a problem that all of a sudden we dehumanise the baby.’ He kicked off his sandals and leaned back in his office swivel chair, crossing his legs. ‘The value of something doesn’t change because people want something or not.’

But isn’t that precisely what decides value? Suspecting the question would put them off side, I saved it for later. Instead, I asked Liz, who was training to be a post-abortion counsellor, if there was ever a time abortion was okay.

She had been expecting the question. ‘In cases of rape, or cases where there’s an abnormality, something wrong that’s incompatible with life, in those cases I would say that we provide all the support we need for women with more complicated circumstances. So I can’t see how an abortion helps a woman cope. There’s an assumption that not having a baby is one less thing they have to worry about.’

Surely, though, they could understand why someone may find that pregnancy as a result of a forced sexual encounter is too much to cope with?

‘I know it’s a very emotional situation – no-one’s saying it easy – but does abortion help her? Or help her to victimise the child?’

It was trickier when a woman’s life was endangered by the pregnancy, said Liz, ‘but we would look at the intention of the intervention. So if someone had cancer that needed treatment and as a result of that the baby died, well we wouldn’t really see that as abortion. It would be an unintended side effect of looking after the woman that the baby died.’

She was speaking in the past tense, and I realised that Liz was looking at the issue as whether or not the woman had committed a sin.

Graham and Liz told me that they had seriously reflected on the abortion laws in Queensland, and concluded that making abortion illegal was not the solution.

‘Because you think abortions would occur anyway?’ I asked.

‘Well, yes and no,’ Graham answered. ‘One, I don’t think there is any political will in Australia for any political party to do it. And two, even if there should be an attempt to do so, I think abortion has become such an accepted part of our culture that there would be a very strong backlash against it.’

I agreed. Take the statistic of how abortion in *any* circumstance is accepted in

modern Australia – it’s around 50 per cent, compared to only 17 per cent 40 years ago.

Graham and Liz would prefer to see a change in the discourse and the national conscience.

‘Just as you wouldn’t have anybody advocating slavery, at least in western countries, even though it still exists. We believe we’ve got to get to the point where everybody agrees that you don’t end a child’s life in the womb voluntarily. You might have a law against it, but wouldn’t need to because everybody agrees, “No, you don’t kill children”.’

Settled in his chair, fingers steepled, Graham looked the part of the pensive philosopher.

‘Each citizen has to ask themselves: what is the nature of this being the woman carries? Is it of equal moral value to the rest of us or not? And it’s only when everyone says, “Well, yes it is” that we’ll see change.’

Did he feel different from the other prisoners, who were presumably in there for very different reasons?

‘Everyone in there always talks about why they’re in there and the crimes. Nobody talks about anything else hardly,’ Graham said. ‘So as soon as they find out someone else is in for something different ... They couldn’t believe why I was in jail.’

He smiled, tickled by a memory. ‘It was very, very interesting how many guys wanted to tell me stories about their abortions. A number of guys had wives or girlfriends who had abortions without telling them. They only found out afterward, and were pretty upset. And the others were guys who had helped or compelled their girlfriends to have abortions, and often they said how much they’d regretted they’d done that.’

It was easy to see why other inmates would have confided in him: it wasn’t that common to find people with his depth of religious conviction.

‘So on the outside, I go and picket abortion clinics and I get a lot of comment, both positive and negative, from the people driving by, and these people scream and yell and carry on and I think, I wouldn’t want to meet up with *them* in jail. But I’ve been in jail 18 months now, and only on two occasions has anybody really been upset by the reason I’m there.’

Conceivably, prison life – that condensed, concentrated, rationed existence –

exacerbates things: characteristics, criminality, hurts. I could see that it had made Graham even more committed to his cause.

‘It just surprises me that ... jail guys are more pro-life than the wider community. But basically they all agreed with me and said, “Good on you, this is good.”’ He was pleased.

‘What about the two prisoners who were upset?’ I asked.

‘One guy didn’t really explain himself, but another said his sister had had an abortion and somebody had called her a murderer. So even though that’s not language we ever use, he was going to get me because he was coming to the defence of his sister.’

I found it hard to imagine that members of Right to Life – a notoriously antagonistic group – had never used such language, but I let it pass.

‘How did you resolve that?’

‘Well ...’ he laughed uncomfortably, ‘I’ve never told Liz about this.’

‘No,’ Liz answered, her tone icily polite. ‘This is news to me, but you did hint about something like this the other day.’

I sat in the middle between them.

‘They moved me into another unit because it was quite evident that he was going to get me ... He was pretty wild.’

He was choosing his words with care. ‘But you know, once in 18 months, out of hundreds of men I met. In one particular case – because every unit has their tough guys that everybody stays out of the way of, and they’d keep much to themselves but everybody knew not to cross them – one of them was a Northern Irishman. I remember sitting at this table one time and he came up behind me, and said, “Are you the one trying to stop abortions?” And I thought, uh-oh, here we go. And he said, “I just want to shake your hand.”’

‘I’m not really surprised by pro-life attitudes among male prisoners,’ I replied. ‘I imagine a lot of people who end up in prison often feel quite disempowered. It makes sense to me that perhaps they felt excluded from those decisions in their lives ...’

Neither Liz nor Graham reacted. I trailed off.

I returned to the crimes Graham had been charged with: did he recognise the law and did he agree that he broke it?

In response, Graham cited Martin Luther King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail

– that an unjust law is no law at all. ‘It’s only in matters of extreme danger – life and death – that we’re warranted to break a law. I would see a parallel to what we’re doing and the Jews and the Holocaust. People were breaking the law – helping the Jews – and there’s very few people who would think that people who did that, or who helped runaway slaves, were not doing the right thing, even if they were breaking the law of their day.’

I was really tiring of these golden analogies to freeing slaves and helping Jews to live peacefully. They may have been crafted to elicit heroic actions for noble causes, but I found them mawkish and unpersuasive.

If someone really believed in the rule of law, why would they not support a law against something heinous? If I knew there was a charnel house at the end of my street where people were being murdered, I’d want a law to stop that. The logic behind not arguing for the state to intervene and stop the practice of abortion – the fear of a backlash – seemed self-serving. It allowed him to be a public martyr for fringe Christians while having very little influence over the number of abortions performed.

What Graham and Protect Life did was not the same as saving lives, because said lives were not in existence. Even if left to nature, they may never exist. No, physically preventing a woman from having an operation was closer to refusing to acknowledge an antidiscrimination law – a piece of legislation that attempted to make women more equal by allowing them to decide how their bodies would be used.

Liz had to leave and I called my taxi. While we waited, Graham showed me various clippings on partial-birth abortion (the term is disputed, because of its incendiary nature, but refers to an abortion process that uses a dilation and extraction method). He recounted an episode of *60 Minutes*, where a doctor wouldn’t go into detail about what happened with the procedure.

‘He said the public didn’t need to know because the procedure wasn’t open for debate!’ Graham now seemed more the evangelical preacher than the philosopher.

But the doctor’s response made sense: why should the actual steps involved in a medical procedure be up for debate among non-practitioners? After all, ophthalmologists don’t usually discuss the best procedure for removing cataracts – the most common elective surgical procedure – with the general, non-expert public. Yet, the emotional and political nature of the abortion debate seemed to create a sense that everyone was entitled to an opinion on how the operation was done.

Soon after, I caught the train to Petrie, a town I'd never heard of before, almost 30 kilometres north of Brisbane, to meet Anne Rampa, the other half of Protect Life. When I got off, I was blinded by the white pavement catching the sun. Waiting passengers stood still and quiet out front, like baking statues, while the vehicles in the car park slumbered.

Anne had told me to look out for a blue van. 'It really stands out,' she had promised in an unhurried Queensland drawl. She had insisted a taxi would be too expensive. 'It's fine. We can have lunch!'

'Great,' I'd replied, imagining myself stuck in searing country Queensland with two antiwar, pro-life activists, and my finicky, no-onion veganism. It could be a long trip back into town.

Anne Rampa was Graham Preston's Protect Life partner and often codefendant. It was a group that even other pro-life factions considered mad. Or madly ambitious. Perhaps both. When I mentioned their strategy to someone from the Australian Christian Lobby, his eyes lit up. 'That's not legal! Is it?' No, I rushed to assure him, feeling guilty about supplying such groups with new tactics.

A lumbering electric-blue van turned into the car park, looking as though it'd been sticky-taped together to make one last trip.

'Hi!' I said, in a bright tone intended to convey that I appreciated her collecting me and that I wasn't at all nervous about disappearing into the outback with someone even other pro-lifers thought dangerous.

'Hi!' Anne replied warmly. She had freckles and long curly grey-streaked hair. A smile filled her face.

'I see what you mean about distinctive,' I said and climbed inside. The air was hot and the van had no air-conditioning.

Anne laughed. 'It runs on recycled chip oil!'

Anne and her husband, Jim, had also recently converted to their own gas; other than their phones, they were living off the grid. The family grew fruit and vegetables, and kept bees (Jim had a honey business and a soap-making business, the products of which he sold to boutique stores in Melbourne). But it was hard to produce enough food for seven children, most of them teenagers.

Anne and Jim weren't only trying to live within the means of the land around

them; they had also taken vows of poverty and simple living.

Anne and Jim had been involved in pro-life politics for 23 years, and antiwar politics for longer. They were anarchists, heavily influenced by the Catholic Worker Movement, a social justice campaign founded by the writer and radical Dorothy Day, also an anarchist, and Peter Maurin. It was a pacifist movement that grew out of the war-ravaged world of the Depression, and that went on to build Houses of Hospitality where the poor could find refuge, and then farming communes that aspired to provide residents with employment and the fruits of their labour. Heavily shaped by the work of the Quakers, the Catholic Workers grew in influence during the antiwar movements of the 60s and 70s when the Catholic left was part of nonviolent direct action more generally.

‘We think we’re all responsible for the actions that we take,’ Anne told me as she drove. ‘We don’t think “It’s my job” is a good excuse to do something that is the wrong thing to do. I don’t believe that anyone has a right to decide that someone is going to die, whether they’re your enemy or somebody dangerous. So I don’t believe in the death penalty. I don’t believe in waging war. I think we have to work out ways to solve our human problems without the use of violence.’

Jesus was the original advocate of nonviolence, Anne went on: ‘Jesus said, “Love your enemies.”’

He also turned over the moneychangers’ tables, I was tempted to add, but perhaps that was more like property damage than violence.

At their house, they had no TV. One of the kitchen walls was decorated with a large cross, constructed from postcards of saints.

‘So you’re a friend of Simon’s?’ Jim asked when he walked into the kitchen. His short, wiry grey hair matched his beard.

I squirmed. Jim was referring to a minister I knew vaguely from the Occupy movement, a peace activist who’d suggested I might want to speak with Anne and Jim about their activism.

‘Smell that?’ Anne tossed whole herbs into the chai concoction she was brewing.

‘Do you know Sarah?’ Jim asked. ‘From Simon’s church?’

I shook my head, hoping Jim would lose interest in this line of questioning. I didn’t want them to think I’d infiltrated their home under false pretences.

‘Jim never wears shoes,’ Anne confided later. I hadn’t noticed, but I’d only

seen him around his own house. ‘To weddings, to court – nothing.’ She laughed, but I detected the exhaustion of an ancient domestic disagreement. ‘He says, “I don’t care about your family’s bourgeois morals.” He walks with the poor.’

It seemed a curious way to show solidarity.

But then, most of Anne and Jim’s activism seemed ideologically anomalous in the modern world, where their audacious antiwar actions might have won them allies on the left if not for their equally bold pro-life demonstrations. Jim was one of a group of five peace activists who broke into the Pine Gap military base in the Northern Territory in 2005, in a campaign I’d always admired.

‘We called ourselves Christians Against All Terrorism and said we wanted to do an inspection of the base. [We] actually wrote to the minister and said we suspected there might be some terrorist action there – because they’re involved in the bombing of civilians around the world. I rang the Terrorist Hotline 10, 12 times, telling them about this place.’

Jim sat opposite me in a blue singlet. His spindly arms gestured at a leisurely pace.

‘Anyhow, we sort of snuck in there one night. We cut through two fences and climbed on the building and took photos, which we smuggled out.’

He flashed a grin.

It’s illegal to photograph military bases in Australia, and so they were charged under the *Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952*. It was a serious breach, one that could have resulted in seven years’ imprisonment for trespass and three for the photographs. The trials and appeals following the action consumed three years of Anne and Jim’s lives. In the end, Jim went to jail for eight days and received a fine of \$1350, which he didn’t pay.

‘I tend to do more pro-life actions. Jim does the antiwar actions,’ Anne clarified. ‘I don’t risk arrest if he’s got court cases pending. We don’t want to end up in jail at the same time.’

They described how their personalist philosophy meant they went straight to ‘places of death’, to those who could immediately stop acts of violence from happening, rather than fighting institutions.

‘I believe in the human family,’ Anne said meditatively. ‘So we can lie down and look at the stars at night and feel a bit small, but actually what we’re looking at is balls of gas and dust and ice. And *you*,’ she reached out, as if to hold my hand, ‘are

more miraculous than that.’

It was an unnerving technique. I cleared my throat, touched by her comparison between me and dying stars. ‘So how did your pro-life actions begin?’

‘When our daughter was nine weeks old,’ Anne said, ‘Jim and I went into an abortion clinic and tried to talk to people in the waiting room about the process of abortion and what would happen if they went through with it.’

I was a bit shocked that they took their baby with them. It must have seemed a deliberate provocation to any ambivalent waiting patients.

Perhaps Anne was a mind reader. ‘We had our baby with us because I didn’t know what to do. She was breastfeeding. I didn’t know how long I’d be there, so I just felt I had to bring her.’

‘The whole experience must have been confronting?’ I prodded.

‘Um, it was a hard thing to do. But I didn’t find people unwilling to talk – and argue with us.’ Anne smiled at the memory of their imprudence, their compulsion to do *something*.

Anne thought that women who aborted were fractured even before that decision, that they were already broken or damaged, typically by sexual abuse earlier on. That was why they resented their child, she said, or felt incapable of loving it. Anne explained that the decision to abort couldn’t simply be taken from the ‘crisis moment’ – when the choice to abort presented itself – but should be seen holistically, as part of a long, downward spiral that led them to that point. Post-abortion counselling was the reason Anne had started a master’s degree in creative arts therapy.

It sounded dangerous to me, first to separate the fact that somebody had fallen pregnant from their material circumstances, and then to move them from a position of emotional uncertainty about their pregnancy into a space of extreme emotional vulnerability.

Anne also thought abortion should be illegal – an odd position for an anarchist.

She justified herself by describing the law as a moral compass. ‘In a way, I believe that homicide is against the law and that’s good, because it conscientises people. I do think abortion should be against the law. I don’t think it should be easy. Women are mistreated by making it easy. It completely undermines the feminist position, which is so often nonviolent – until it comes to abortion.’

As she continued, she became more insistent: ‘I do think we’re doing women a disservice. You wouldn’t say to a woman who’s struggling with a baby – we all understand how hard that is – and she’s feeling like she needs to go somewhere and have someone throw it off the bridge ... we wouldn’t think making it easy for her is the right thing to do.’

It felt rehearsed – a learned response from years of pleading with women to alter their course. And yet, with seven kids, I believed Anne knew how hard motherhood can be. In many ways, she reminded me of a 1970s feminist, with her flock of children and her house falling apart. Anne had in fact started the Queensland branch of Feminists for Life, an American organisation founded in 1972 (during the hearing of *Roe v Wade*) that argued that any act of violence – most notably that of killing of a child in the womb – contravened feminism’s creed. While the American wing was thriving, even going so far as to trademark the phrases ‘Refuse to choose’ and ‘Women deserve better’, the Queensland branch appeared inactive.

‘I’ve got a lot of friends who’ve had abortions and I think there’s shock and shame involved, especially when it’s been so easy to do. I don’t mean emotionally – it’s physically easy. [Clinics will] just streamline you in. Take your money.’ She wipes her hands, imitating a transaction wrapping up.

Anne asked if I’d heard of Abby Johnson.

I had. I’d even read her book, *Unplanned: The Dramatic True Story of a Former Planned Parenthood Leader’s Eye-Opening Journey across the Life Line*. Johnson became pro-life after accidentally witnessing an ultrasound abortion. One of Abby Johnson’s more surprising claims is that Planned Parenthood regularly provides abortions to women who aren’t even pregnant, thereby insinuating that these clinics are for profit rather than for women.

As Abby Johnson was a lifelong Christian, it seemed obvious to me that she had no longer been able to reconcile her religious beliefs with what she did for money. Johnson now runs an organisation called And Then There Were None, which helps Planned Parenthood employees exit the industry, because stopping abortion ‘starts with the workers’, states the organisation. They train sidewalk counsellors to specifically reach out to clinic workers rather than patients.

‘Abortion is only 3 per cent of what Planned Parenthood clinics do,’ I pointed out. ‘Here, too. A lot of the work at the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic is in contraception and contraceptive education.’

Anne nodded. ‘That’s what Abby Johnson was happier doing too,’ she said, ‘but that wasn’t where the money was, and the pressure was on to get the abortions happening. The contraceptive mentality—’

‘Every corner doctor,’ Jim stepped in, ‘supplies contraception.’

Not in Queensland, I was tempted to say, but I knew I didn’t have the stats on hand to corroborate that. How would you even get them? Such encounters typically filter back sporadically through clinics that hear secondhand how a doctor wouldn’t prescribe contraception or give a termination referral.

‘But also the contraceptive mentality has increased abortions,’ continued Anne. ‘People kind of went, “Okay, contraception, because that might cut down on the abortions.” But actually, it’s created more of an abortion mentality, because people can be more promiscuous. Contraception is never 100 per cent accurate, so the baby is even more unplanned, because you feel like you should have had more control, and so you are *more likely* to have an abortion! The abortion rate’s increased with contraception.’

Which was completely the opposite to what Jo Wainer’s research or the Royal Commission into Human Relationships had found – that is, there had been no discernible increase in abortions.

Still, it felt like we were nearing the heart of the issue. ‘How should people be thinking about sex then?’ I asked.

Anne sat still and quiet. ‘I think it’s a form of communication – your body’s vehicle for communication. Sex is communicating that you are one. You belong together, you fit together. It’s a very, very intimate act. And it’s also the vehicle through which all human life is created. So it’s got a sacredness around that as well, because human life is a wonderful and miraculous thing.’

It was a familiar argument for the devoutly religious. ‘Monogamy, not chemicals or latex, is the main line of defense against unwanted pregnancies,’ was how one *New York Times* columnist summarised it.<sup>121</sup> The problem with that argument was, he said, that it didn’t match the reality in which most of us lived. A ‘chastity-centric culture’ would depend, he added, ‘on a level of social cohesion, religious intensity and shared values’, which are, of course, increasingly rare in an age of market-driven globalisation, modernisation and individualism.

Anne, who seemed to live in an altogether different age and time, spoke a lot about friendship. She was a people person, yet her activism was isolating. Her friends

often felt they had to defend her to other people.

‘It’s quite a difficult thing, obviously, because only two of us in Australia [the main members of Protect Life] are prepared to go that far, even though we all say, “A baby dies in an abortion.”’

Anne had lost count of how many times she’d been to court for her work at Protect Life, but estimated she’d been arrested at clinics at least 30 times.

Like Graham Preston, Anne had been to jail for her anti-abortion activism: the longest period was three weeks.

‘It’s a pretty intense environment,’ she said quietly.

As we were getting ready for lunch, Jim said, ‘I think there’s a lot of collective guilt around the whole abortion issue, and that’s why people don’t want to bring it up. Peter Bayliss ran the abortion clinic in Brisbane for a long time and was famous for being a misogynist. A lot of women said that.’

Bayliss was also the co-founder of the Fertility Control Clinic in East Melbourne. He and Bertram Wainer, visionaries that they were, had never struck me as feminists – well, in anything other than in their understanding of how a womb can also be a jail sentence when a woman is forced to stay pregnant.

I pointed out that the Catholic Church wasn’t really known for its respect for women, either. Anne and Jim agreed.

‘We’ve copped a lot of hatred from the left over the years,’ Jim said.

Anne nodded. ‘More so than the right.’

‘But they’ve got used to us now and they don’t hate us so much anymore.’ Jim looked out at the tall trees behind his house that reached toward the sky. ‘Some people are contemptuous, but it’s not the same level of hatred we have experienced before. Every year we go hold placards at the May Day rally, mainly because we’ve got a captive audience. You know, 10,000 to 30,000 people marching by.’

‘A lot of whom we know,’ Anne added.

‘A lot of whom we know,’ Jim repeated. ‘A lot of hardcore lefties, socialists or whatever, used to scream abuse at us, year after year. Now it’s only the odd person who screams obscenities. But I’m sure there are still a lot on the left who are infuriated to see us there.’

‘It’s a bit lonely,’ Anne said.

What was it about Queensland that attracted people like Anne and Jim? Protect Life simultaneously embodied both the fringe (anarchist, antiwar) and mainstream (with the Right to Life connection) pro-life ideology. Intellectually, it was hard to even picture them among the Melbourne pro-life population, where their politics would be alien, contradicting nearly all I had heard at the Right to Life convention.

Undoubtedly, the state has a Joh Bjelke-Petersen hangover, which is logical: he was premier for 19 years and hammered the state into his image. In Queensland, the National Party to which Bjelke-Petersen belonged subsumed various conservative factions, including the decimated Democratic Labor Party and its traditionalist ruralism (a life dedicated to the land and family). This only served to make the party pious and hidebound.

Policies of the era were pro-state market, reactionary, crooked, and fearful of collective action, particularly when related to Indigenous rights, women's rights, workers' rights or anti-apartheid activism. Such policies still haunt the population and overshadow successive governments, most notably the previous Liberal Newman government, the state's most conservative since 1987.

In the 1970s and 80s, there was talk of the 'Queensland difference': that the state was inherently more conservative because so much of its population lived outside of its cities (more so than in any other region of Australia); because fewer of its citizens had tertiary degrees; because more of its citizens were Catholic (70.9 per cent identified as Christian in the 2006 census, though frequently the category is a catch-all), and the church held a disproportionate sway over policy there; and because its major industries were mining, farming and sugar production.

Historically, the National Party encouraged the view of Queensland as a pariah; that it was Bjelke-Petersen representing the Queensland people against predictable party politics and machinations. In other words, the two major parties, Labor and Liberal, didn't care for or understand rural lives, yet were happy to take the state's resources and use it to fund 'big' Australia ventures and ideals – federal projects, for instance, or federal policies that weren't in the interests of rural conservatives or miners.

The state's history means that an organisation like Children by Choice, which began as a network of grassroots activists helping women access abortion when it was clearly illegal, has become a permanent institution. Since the government is under little pressure to make legislative changes, Children by Choice must continue to help

Queensland women deal with their unplanned pregnancies. Why risk provoking conservatives by updating the law if women are managing to obtain abortions anyway?

In the past 40 years in Australia, there have been seismic shifts in the way the general public views the morality surrounding abortion. One poll taken in 1972 found that only 19 per cent of Australians believed in abortion on demand. A similar poll in 1996 raised the number to 50 per cent, with 89 per cent approving of abortion in certain circumstances. According to a 2009 Auspoll, 79 per cent of Queensland's population agreed with decriminalising abortion in the state. Polling also revealed that there was not a marked difference in positions on abortion between those who lived in metropolitan Brisbane and those who lived in rural areas. What such polling did suggest was that, like the rest of Australia, the politicians Queenslanders elected were noticeably more conservative than their voters.

In many ways, abortion suits contemporary neoliberalism: it allows women to be active economic participants, who help create and sustain market economies as workers and consumers, without necessitating a permanent end to the nuclear family. To put it crudely, to those who believe in the free market, abortion and same-sex marriage, don't pose the same threat they once did.

I visited the Children by Choice office to get a sense of how the organisation worked.

They asked what I'd been doing in Brisbane. I told them about my lunch with Anne and Jim, the antiwar pro-lifers.

The response was met with a heavy silence.

'Is it only human life they believe in protecting?' asked one counsellor.

'No, actually, they're vegetarians.'

'Catholic?' another asked.

I nodded. 'They talked a lot about social justice and the Catholic Worker Movement. Another went to jail for eight months last year ...'

'Oh, Graham!' one said. 'He's been at it for years.'

'I kind of admire that ... commitment,' said a counsellor in a faded 'I Love Choice' t-shirt.

Someone snickered.

'No, I do,' she insisted. 'To keep at it for so long.'

The counsellor had worked there for two years. She found it hard at times. ‘Particularly the financial assistance stuff and having to ask all these personal questions to see whether they qualify for \$50 or \$100.’

Women in country areas tend to present later, she explained. Often after 11 weeks, at which time abortion becomes incredibly expensive, but they usually don’t realise that. Then they call Children by Choice to help figure out their options.

I didn’t envy staff the task of having to help these women budget; to figure out if they could go without groceries for the week, or which family friend they could hit up for a loan.

‘Are many of the people that you see from low socio-economic backgrounds?’ I supposed that wealthier people discussed such matters with their doctors or gynaecologists.

‘No,’ the counsellor answered. ‘We certainly have a number of them over the phone, but a lot of well-to-do people come in for face-to-face sessions. We always make them pay a donation though.’ If that sum were \$100, it would merely pay for one, maybe two lots of financial aid.

Children by Choice went unfunded for years before receiving a substantial grant from the International Planned Parenthood Federation, who reached out to two regions where they deemed women’s services were dangerously ignored: Ireland and Queensland. Children by Choice then received state funding in 1992, was defunded by the National Party in 1996, and then refunded again in 1999. Under the Campbell Newman government, the organisation was shunted from the Department of Health to the Department of Community Services. No-one was sure what this meant for the future, but if their work was no longer *technically* a health service, it ostensibly made cutting their funds easier: the organisation would be competing with everything from child safety to multicultural affairs.

The notion was disquieting. Queensland women had not only come to count on Children by Choice helping them through unplanned pregnancy choices, but also to help them arrange funds if they did decide to terminate.

‘Helping women access funds is now a central part of what we do,’ the manager confided, ‘but the truth is, there are many women living in poverty, the cost of termination is high and the \$50 we offer no longer helps that much.’

‘Have you considered some kind of public appeal?’ I said. ‘Something like, I don’t know, Kickstarter?’ I regretted the suggestion instantly.

She smiled kindly. ‘We need \$400,000 a year, so Kickstarter won’t really cut it.’

In the afternoon, I sat in on one half of a phone counselling session. A shoeless counsellor was perched in front of her computer wearing a head mic, a pregnancy dial in one hand and a pen to write on the checklist in the other.

‘We take the first day of your last period, so it usually ends up being two weeks on top of what those tests tell you.’

She listened, slowly turning the dial. ‘November, which puts ... Oh, sick feelings since December? Wasn’t that memorable, hey?’

She laughed gently. Comradeship cemented.

‘Have you made a decision in regards to the pregnancy?’ She listened. It was so strange, eavesdropping on such a private conversation, that I was relieved I couldn’t hear the responses. Though I could imagine them easily enough.

‘You’re in your 30s and have four children?’

All the while, the counsellor worked through the checklist, making notes of concerns, of revelations that would help form advice.

‘Was it a difficult decision to come to? What I’m asking is, are they tears of frustration, or is there some sense of sadness about it all?’ She nodded along to the voice I couldn’t hear.

‘You know, half of all pregnancies are unplanned,’ she reassured the caller. ‘And a lot of women think about their children when making their decision, about what it would be like for them with another child in the family. That’s normal.’

I watched the counsellor watching the ceiling as she listened.

Finally she asked, ‘How certain are you in relation to your decision?’

Once she’d confirmed what the caller wanted to do, the counsellor moved on to the specifics. The caller had had an abortion a decade earlier and wanted to return to the same clinic. One in six women in Australia will have more than one abortion; when I asked an abortion provider in Cairns who the women most likely to have abortions were, she replied, ‘Women who’ve had them before.’

Next came matters of finance – figuring out where the money would come from. An abortion at the clinic the woman wanted to go back to would cost \$450.

‘You’ve been supporting him? I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Have you received the school kids bonus yet? Four hundred dollars for each of them?’

‘Are you up to date with your rent?’

‘Any bills you’re behind in?’

‘What’s the rent there for you?’

The counsellor looked down at her form: the caller was only eligible for \$50, which meant she’d have to find another \$400, plus the money to travel to the clinic and back.

‘Sometimes,’ the counsellor said to the caller, ‘women have to hold off on the procedure until more money comes in.’

Later she told me that clients had to have extreme circumstances to qualify for more than \$50. ‘It’s not enough to be poor anymore.’

Before I left, I asked if there were many calls about post-abortion grief, for this was something Anne and Jim had talked about extensively.

‘Not many,’ she replied. ‘It’s something like 5 per cent, and even then that number is inflated, I think, because if we even speak about anything after the procedure, like her plans, then I tick the post-abortion box.’

She hesitated. ‘I think the kind of counselling they get before the operation really explains that. If they’ve been to one of the other services, the ones that tell them they’re going to go to hell or develop cancer or something, they can be quite traumatised and often ring here upset.’ She was referring to the pregnancy crisis services: religious fronts that don’t present abortion as an acceptable option. ‘But it’s all the women we don’t hear from that I worry about.’

Post-abortion guilt is a concept frequently cited in pro-life literature, and was popularised in Australia in Melinda Tankard Reist’s book, *Giving Sorrow Words*, a compilation of 12 stories by women who felt traumatised by abortion, in ways that left them permanently scarred.

In the Australian and New Zealand medical literature of the 1980s and 90s, post-abortion guilt was presumed to be ‘inevitable’. One study cited 70 articles published by psychiatrists and physicians during that period that suggested the aftermath of an abortion could be ‘serious and permanent’. Medical practitioners of the time seemingly embraced the idea that abortion produced a ‘crisis of conscience’; that women felt guilty afterwards, which was why they wouldn’t always admit having had an abortion to their doctor. If they didn’t feel guilt, one psychiatrist noted, they

were clearly repressed.<sup>122</sup>

As so many women cited contraceptive failure as the reason for an unplanned pregnancy, a number of doctors proposed that women who had abortions be subjected to ‘increased contraceptive scrutiny’. A couple of doctors even expressed concern about possible ‘abortion recidivism’, a word usually reserved for criminal activity.

On a woman seeking a second abortion in 1983, one author writes: ‘[S]uch women appear to constitute a relatively distinct subset of clinical categories, from the immature and inadequate personality, to the strong inadequate female who distrusts her own femininity through to the hysterical narcissistic personality, for whom pregnancy represents an intolerable disruption to body image.’<sup>123</sup>

These relatively recent views are objectively alarming. Medical professionals, who understand how a body functions and all the misfortunes of timing that can occur, were espousing these opinions at the midway point in the choice psyche of Australians – that leap from 17 per cent to half the population accepting that women had the right to choose abortion in *any* situation. Which suggests, perhaps, that the medical establishment is, like our politicians, more conservative than the wider public it serves.

Flying home, I thought back to the Children by Choice conference, and Darren Russell’s comments on Queensland’s complacency generally and clinician inertia specifically, which has seen years pass without legislative or material changes in women’s reproductive rights in the state. Queensland tolerates the policing of women’s bodies, Russell said, because that’s the way things have always been.

But of course, when abortion is kept in the shadows, as it is in Queensland, women don’t know if the operation is legal or where it’s available. For this reason alone, the services that Children by Choice offers are essential.

I thought back to that other question, too, that I’d heard from Graham and Liz, Anne and Jim, Dan Flynn – nearly every pro-life person I’d met, in fact: why should abortion be rare?

It’s a good question, with various and complicated answers.

From a purely medical point of view, any operation involving an anaesthetic is risky, which is why so many doctors prefer the idea of medical abortion (that is, drug-induced abortion, using, for example, RU486). Surgery is also costly, both in terms of health (risk of infection, recovery period, etc.) and money (with the staff required for a surgery to operate). Thus, most people are concerned about the risk of elective

surgery, and of a procedure many doctors may see as avoidable.

But the ‘rare’ clause is about more than potential health risks, obviously. People – pregnant women, pro-choice activists, doctors – can be conflicted about extinguishing a potential life, and about what that life could, if left to a healthy development, accomplish. Maybe the foetus would become that concert violinist.

‘Safe, legal and rare’ was an abortion-rights motto in the 1970s, introduced to the chagrin of more radical feminists: it was seen as a concession to a more moderate movement. In a recent column for the *Guardian*, Jessica Valenti notes that the slogan is making a comeback: Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, both pro-choice politicians, have publicly uttered the phrase. ‘It’s a “safe” pro-choice answer: to support abortion, but wish it wasn’t necessary,’ she writes.<sup>124</sup> One University of California academic posits that the word ‘rare’ suggests ‘that abortion is happening more than it should, and that there are some conditions for which abortions should and should not occur’. That is, a coded way of saying that some abortions are more right than others.

A key concern with abortion is that it’s impossible to separate the legal risks that follow from the medical risks – and abortion is never seen solely as a medical procedure, without a moral question or judgement attached.

If it were simply a question of medical risk and saving women’s lives, we may well say ‘pregnancy should be safe, legal and rare’, because five times more women die during pregnancy or childbirth than medically managed abortion. And yet, whether to have a baby is rarely seen as a moral decision. A decision of timing, wellbeing and finances, perhaps, but not morals (an obvious exception here is the overpopulation debate). Pregnancy is presented as an entirely natural process, in line with the purpose of being a woman. Hillary Clinton declaring that pregnancy needs to be safe, legal and rare would be met with outrage because it denies women their full human rights.

But abortion is not only about health or morality or safer sexual practice. It’s also about being able to choose how to make one’s life meaningful. Take teenage pregnancy as an example, as it’s an oft-cited and exaggerated phenomenon. Across the world, evidence shows that higher teenage pregnancy rates are not only the result of a lack of contraceptives; there are also many contributing socio-economic factors, such as lack of opportunities more generally (for instance, youth centres, internet access, computers, training, jobs, education). For those short on opportunities, having

a child may appear an easy way to make life meaningful.

When I think of those young mothers in rural Queensland excluded from, for example, university, I picture my mother. Granted, she never lived in Queensland, but she grew up in country Victoria and left school when she was very young. When I was little, she would tell me that she'd waited her whole life for me, a baby girl. To me, there was always a vicarious element to that longing. For instance, she gave me a ravenous appetite for books, even though she wasn't a reader herself: growing up, she would buy me several tomes a week and then get me to recount what happened in them. Even today, she still boasts about my (fairly ordinary) school reports to her work colleagues.

I think she would have loved university because she's astute and eternally bored, but it was never a possibility for her. It was something arcane and extravagant and, despite second-wave feminism, it would never have occurred to her that she could go.

When I returned from Queensland, my mum and I had lunch in Fitzroy. My not telling her my story was becoming absurd: I'd already confessed in my *Meanjin* essay and I wasn't after atonement – then again, a confession to an audience whose judgement has no personal consequence is not the same.

Though nearly empty, the restaurant we'd chosen was clattery and loud, and I stumbled over my tongue again and again. I realised as I sat opposite, listening to her recount the latest episode of her new favourite show, *Masters of Sex*, that I was really afraid of what her reaction to what had become an enduring secret.

Intellectually, I could appreciate that this was the stigma attached to abortion in society, but I was confused as to why when I went to tell my mother, it felt like I was pleading guilty to a crime.

I didn't find the words to tell her that day at lunch, or any time soon thereafter. Every time I tried to form the words, it occurred to me how many other secreted parts I'd have to reveal: the abusive relationship which I'd never actually admitted to, that I'd published an essay about this experience, which, she would feel, everybody but her had read. On top of all this I knew that my mother was an intensely private person. She'd hate to be fictionalised, let alone depicted.

I returned home, regretting every confessional moment I had let pass, yet I'd discovered that my mother was someone for whom the 'rare' clause applied. Day in and out, customers came to her for their contraceptive needs, and for the morning

after pill. She believed that if everyone was simply more responsible, abortion wouldn't be needed.

Yet I suspected the 'rare' question was a little more of a grey area for doctors. Nobody likes terminations, one doctor in Cairns had told me. 'We don't *like* being involved with them any more than anybody else does. It's not a nice area to work in.' She also thought society should make sure abortion occurred less frequently: abortion was an introduced risk, simply by being an elective medical intervention. It was also costly (presently) to conduct surgical and medical abortions. But she also believed the world would always need the option of abortion. Even if everyone in the world used the most reliable contraception (currently Mirena) every single time they had sex, she explained, there would still be contraceptive failures, and women would still want to end unplanned pregnancies. 'We just need to accept that abortion is part of the human right to control fertility,' this doctor said. 'I think it's one of the most important human rights we have, really.'

For doctors, particularly obstetricians, the natural process for a pregnancy is the continuous cycle from conception to giving birth. I supposed that obstetricians probably saw their job as being to mitigate risk during that process so that a woman and a baby came out of a pregnancy healthy. Regardless of what the doctor believed about personhood and when it begins, abortion endangered the life of at least one patient in a pregnancy. Was this the reason so few doctors provided abortion?

A few weeks later, I discovered I couldn't have been more wrong with this assumption.



## Chapter Seven: The Abortionists

‘I’ll describe very briefly the mechanics of a termination – it’s exactly the same technique as a curette for heavy periods, or for a miscarriage, except that we use a suction curette rather than a sharp curette.’

I was standing in the room of a gynaecological practice in Wodonga, Victoria, with Dr Pieter Mourik, a semi-retired obstetrician and gynaecologist (O&G) and member of the Order of Australia. We were at the end of a tour around the offices he’d founded. For 34 years, Pieter had treated women in the border town and the surrounding Hume region, from Mansfield to Jerilderie, from Wangaratta to Holbrook, from northern Victoria to southern New South Wales – a population of nearly 300,000.<sup>125</sup>

Over the past two days, Pieter had taken me on a whirlwind tour: the one-day-a-week abortion clinic in Englehardt Street (operated by East Melbourne’s Fertility Control Clinic), a state-of-the-art IVF laboratory (where I’d learned that all cells look the same whether human, bovine or aquatic), the training hospital, nearly every doctor in the area who worked with women’s uteruses, and a spur-of-the-moment visit to independent MP Cathy McGowan. Pieter knew everybody.

‘The whole procedure only takes about five minutes,’ he continued. ‘The patient can be done under a local [anaesthetic], many are, but I found it uncomfortable because of all the noises and discomfort and the emotional side. I much prefer women to have a five-minute anaesthetic.’

It was common in the United States for women to be awake when having early, uncomplicated terminations. Like Pieter, I’d always imagined it could be gruelling, for doctor and patient alike.

I’d been searching for a doctor like Pieter for a while, one who would help me navigate the medical corridors of abortion. After all the philosophical and ethical dimensions, I needed an operating-floor perspective.

But I also wanted to know more about how abortion was performed, and how those rare doctors who specialised in the field felt about their labour. In rural areas, many doctors providing abortion were obstetricians – that is, doctors who specialised in bringing children into the world. Among themselves, I imagined they didn’t think of the operation as ‘child destruction’, an antiquated legal term, but were these

doctors conflicted about their responsibilities? Did small-town abortions work differently? Were some performed in hospitals and the rest at the one-day-a-week clinic (run by Melbourne's Fertility Control Clinic) within earshot of Albury City Council? How did contemporaries evaluate their work – were abortion providers shunned at Australian Medical Association dinners?

Dame Margaret Sparrow, the New Zealand doctor in reproductive medicine and writer, observes that, even among physicians, abortion remains a taboo subject. At conferences, in medical journals, among researchers, in museums – in all these places, she writes, abortion is neglected. 'What message does this give to aspiring specialists?'<sup>126</sup>

At the Children by Choice conference on unplanned pregnancy, I'd caught glimpses of the politics and alliances in the field of reproductive medicine, but they were hard for a medical outsider to decode. Perhaps doctors were effortlessly discreet by profession or by nature, or perhaps there was a certain discomfort to do with the unsightliness of termination, but I'd found none who were willing to show me their world. Usually when I asked explicit questions about methods, the doctor in question would become guarded, as if I was attempting to sensationalise the procedure, or lure them into a theological snare.

Pieter, on the other hand, did not find my curiosity at all odd. He'd already filled me in on his early days in the region, when he had been the only O&G within 200 kilometres, and on call 24 hours a day. Since moving there in 1979, he had delivered thousands of babies, and trained countless doctors. He had performed abortions too, including the complicated, messy kind. His standard working week had been 100 hours.

Clearly, Pieter was obsessive, but at least he was never bored. Although retired, he still filled in for other practitioners – at the IVF clinic, in a GP locum program, occasionally for other obstetricians or gynaecologists.<sup>127</sup>

As we were finishing the tour of his old rooms, Pieter had unexpectedly confided that it wasn't uncommon for rural gynaecologists to perform early terminations on their regular patients. It was something all O&Gs knew how to do: it was the same procedure they used after a miscarriage, otherwise known as a 'failed' or 'spontaneous' abortion, terms still favoured by medical textbooks. I'm not sure when the term originated, but it's been in usage for a long time. It's tempting to think that this is the result of medical advocacy somewhere along the line – practitioners

attempting to depoliticise the operation, or perhaps to protect the privacy of patients from prying officialdom, although doctors also refer to elective abortion as a ‘termination’.

‘So let’s pretend the patient’s asleep,’ Pieter went on. ‘Their feet go in the stirrups.’

I watched the invisible patient on the gurney, the ultrasound machine beside her taupe and silent. Pieter sat near the stirrups, pulling out trays of forceps and clamps and indifferent silver instruments lined in a row, from petite to bulky. None looked as though they were made for something as delicate as flesh.

‘We then put in an operating speculum. Put a local in because that reduces the post-op pain. You hold the cervix with a tenaculum – some people use a slightly bigger one, like that.’

Pieter seemed thrilled to have an audience so green. He waved a pair of elegant, long thin scissors near my nose; the ends weren’t sharp points but two sets of little flat teeth pointing inward to meet each other, like snake’s fangs.

‘After you’ve emptied the bladder, you can do a manual examination and feel if the uterus is the size of an egg – six weeks; the size of an orange – eight weeks; the size of a grapefruit – 12 weeks. That’s the limit of most day-clinic terminations.’

Pieter was comfortable leading me through the surgical steps. His style, precise and pared back, stripped pregnancy of emotion. Why the pregnancy was ending wasn’t his concern; he had moved on to the process, the machinery and its parts.

‘Normally, the sound will go to 12 centimetres.’

The ‘sound’ Pieter held out was long and made of stainless steel – a thin knitting needle ending in a slightly curved tip, with notches indicating depth along its length.

‘Now some people say you should never use a sound on a pregnant uterus. I always use one, because it confirms the depth of the uterus, and the size of the pregnancy – and it’s a soft instrument so it’s not going to damage the bowel, which sits on the uterus. If it’s a very early pregnancy, I only have to dilate six millimetres – if it’s eight, go to eight, and so on.’

Pieter displayed some slim plastic tubes: ‘Once I’ve dilated the cervix to the number I want, there’s a range of cannulas.’ They looked like elongated eye-droppers. ‘We gently pass that in,’ he made a sucking sound effect, ‘and you see the fluid,

which is surrounding the foetus.’

Pieter’s tone was tranquillising. Not long after collecting me the day before, Pieter mentioned that he was president of the local Toastmasters. ‘You do a presentation, then everybody assesses you.’ He recommended it to me for personal and professional development.

‘You, for instance,’ Pieter had ploughed on, ‘they would tell you that you speak too quickly! You don’t pause between words and you use too many *ahhhs* and *umms*.’

‘Oh,’ I’d replied. What he said wasn’t untrue: I dread public speaking. I even hate people listening to me in ordinary conversation. But still, we’d only just met.

Everyone gets better, he assured me. Toastmasters was the answer.

Back at his office, his soothing tone described what happened after the tubing was inserted.

‘Usually, you don’t see foetal parts in early pregnancy, but you’d see the placenta, which would be pink and fluffy. And you know it’s placenta, but you have to identify the placenta to know you’ve done the right operation – that you haven’t made a false passage or that they weren’t pregnant outside the uterus. These days, that should never happen.’

But Pieter had been practising for decades, long before ultrasound was introduced to rural Australia, and remembered such incidents.

He rifled through the drawers, clanging instruments. He sat up holding another long steel implement, this one with a thick handle, an elongated middle, and a tiny scoop at the end.

‘Then, we might use a small sharp spoon called a curette.’

Dilation and curette – D&C – was how many illegal and backyard abortions had been performed too, though usually with quasi- to non-sterilised equipment, and less-accomplished practitioners. All the doctors I spoke with in Albury, all of whom had performed terminations early and late, stressed that the best abortionists are those who routinely perform them: even though it’s a fast procedure and easy to learn, it’s also easy to make a mistake, or to introduce an infection.

The art of termination, another Albury doctor had explained the day before, was collecting all the placenta tissue and foetal parts without damaging the walls of the uterus. The further along a pregnancy was, the more demanding the task.

‘It’s a fine line, to collect everything and not damage anything,’ he’d said. ‘Sometimes you’ll leave stuff in there and it might pass with the next period – or it might become an infection.’

That happens to about one in 200 patients. Sometimes infection will develop, and sometimes a doctor will have to repeat the suction curette. Surgical terminations are safe and quick and complications rare. The uterus of one in 1000 patients will be perforated; one in 5000 patients will bleed heavily, requiring hospitalisation. Infection is about one in 200 and there is, of course, the danger inherent in using anaesthetics, but, as all the doctors reminded me, abortion in Australia is five times safer than carrying a pregnancy to full term.<sup>128</sup>

I was surprised at how uncomplicated the procedure Pieter demonstrated had been. If that was it, why couldn’t GPs offer terminations? That scenario was very appealing to me: patients would already have an established relationship with the doctor performing the abortion, it would be cheaper, and, importantly, beyond the reach of protesters – if any GP could perform an abortion, how would they know where to picket?

It was a matter of medical insurance, Pieter replied. ‘If you’re a GP, you pay \$3000 for indemnity. If you’re a procedural GP – doing procedures, anaesthetics, operations and whatever – it’s \$9000.’

Pieter was planning to hold a meeting of 200 or so GPs from the region to encourage them to provide medical abortions with RU486. The tablets could only be administered for pregnancies up until nine weeks, but most terminations occurred before or around then, and about 50 per cent of women indicated they’d opt for medical abortion if given the choice.<sup>129</sup>

That wasn’t simply because medical abortion was perceived as less invasive; besides, a counter-argument could be that medical abortion takes longer to end the pregnancy – between 24 and 48 hours. But in a place like Albury, abortion choices were limited: a woman could either go to Melbourne, Canberra or Sydney for the day, or they could visit the clinic, open on Thursdays only, and be subject to small-town scrutiny and ever-present anti-abortionists.

Pieter opened one of the drawers, looking for a pamphlet to give me and discovered some pills in a silver packet: misoprostol. ‘There is the abortion pill!’ he grinned. ‘We use that for people going in for a curette for a failed pregnancy. Two tablets in the vagina and the cervix. Some patients actually miscarry with two of

those. So that's what we used before we were allowed to use RU486.'

So doctors were practising medical abortion before the RU486 controversy? I sensed another legally grey area.

Pieter nodded. 'Yes. It's used for indigestion, but it's used off-licence for termination. But until we got RU486 last year, that was the only way we could treat someone with an unwanted, mid-trimester pregnancy.'

On the shelf near the door, Pieter spied the local 2014 phonebook, which he graced the cover of. He swept off his hat and I snapped a photo of him grinning, holding the phone book on which he also stood, bald and grinning.

As we were leaving, he picked up a round disc up off the desk, a kind of plastic petri dish that contained pink tubing in the shape of a Y: Mirena, the most effective contraception on the market. 'It works for five years – you can't forget to take it!' Pieter effused. 'Most women think it's wonderful: their periods go from five days down to three to five hours, or nothing. We do around 400 a year – we're the Mirena capital of Australia.'

It sounded easy, but I'd heard it was expensive.

'For five years of contraception?' countered Pieter.

One discount pharmaceutical store I visited was selling Mirena for \$267.99, or \$37.70 for those with a Health Care Card. The patient would still have to visit a gynaecologist to have it inserted, so they'd be looking at spending between \$350 and \$400. As with the cost of an abortion, it was a significant sum for women on low incomes to find.

'It reduced the hysterectomy rate from 100 to 30,' Pieter marvelled. 'Probably half of the hysterectomies we did 20 years ago were for heavy periods. We said if you were done, we might as well take it out. With Mirena, we say, your choice.'

Pieter Mourik was fond of pronouncements: 'I don't believe in home birth' or 'I am against the obesity epidemic' or 'Mirena is the best advance in women's health since the pill'. That was how he framed all his arguments: rationalism and unwavering evidence.

After our tour, Pieter shouted me lunch at the local bakery. He caught up with the woman who served us – he had delivered her children. I ordered the vegetarian focaccia. It came with bacon on top. I pulled off the top half and hoped neither of them was offended.

Discussions about meat, and who grew it, felt mandatory here. All the doctors Pieter introduced me to owned farms, or planned to in the future. Farming was how these physicians spent their spare time and their retirement.

Vegetarianism confounded them, and, if my attempts at eating out were anything to go by, it confounded the rest of Albury, too. It's been said that living in farming communities does change our relationships to food and to land, but was I detecting more than that? In Albury, and presumably regional Queensland, there was a culture of subsisting on locally farmed products or meat.

Another tradition that follows from that connection is, of course, family: a means of continuing those ties with the land. And maybe I'd just never noticed it in the city before, but there seemed to be an emphasis on IVF and obstetric health in Albury and its surrounding areas, almost a kind of pregnancy industry.

To some extent, perhaps it was that impulse to nurture that explained how abortion had become such a disruptive issue in Albury. For around a decade, pro-life protesters had been holding vigils and pickets outside the pretty weatherboard on Englehardt Street that performed 700 abortions a year.

Over the past couple of years, Pieter and some other residents had formed a loose collective, Right to Privacy Albury, that objected to the invasion of medical privacy, as well as political interference in the rest of the city, which prevented the clinic from being moved to somewhere less conspicuous, such as the Gardens Medical Centre, a large multi-level centre that housed various health services. Access to abortion was an argument that played out in the local papers most weeks, among the articles and the letters to the editor.

Now, most Thursdays, the sole day the clinic was open, members from both sides would visit the residential street: one hoping to thwart patients, the other hoping to thwart the protesters, or at the very least chaperone patients from the street to inside.

One neighbour of the clinic felt defeated by the constant pro-life activity. She had become reclusive, embarrassed to have people over, and sick at the sight of the antics in the street. 'Ten years we've been asking the council to do something about it,' she said.

That day, in fact, the council had voted down another appeal from the street's residents, this time to have the protesters moved.

The neighbour was thinking about moving, but that was possibly unrealistic, given the growing notoriety of the street.

How did she feel about the clinic? Was it unnerving to live next door?

‘I feel nothing about the clinic,’ she replied, flat. ‘It’s a medical centre.’

That afternoon, the mayor returned my call.

‘It’s hard for me,’ he explained. ‘I have friends on both sides.’

Things got heated when I pointed out that it was no doubt harder for the women trying to access the clinic. I tried to steer the conversation back to the neighbours and the clinic itself.

‘When I was there today—’ I began.

‘You were there today?’ he said. ‘And were you harassed?’

‘No,’ I admitted. ‘But—’

‘Well, there you go,’ he replied.

But I hadn’t behaved like a patient, I had been going to say. The entrance to the Albury clinic was less than ideal – there was no choice but to pull up in the street and pass the protesters to enter through the front door.

From inside, I watched an average couple in their mid 20s with a small child approach the clinic. She walked in front, head high, refusing to look at the leaflets proffered by the protesters. He was more contrite, taking one and stuffing it in his pocket.

When I exited a few minutes later, my eyes first went to the gory foetus placards at the bottom of the verandah steps, and then to Anna von Marburg, one of the group’s organisers. She smiled smugly.

‘You ought to be ashamed,’ I found myself saying, effectively ruining any chance of an interview.

Her smile widened.

I was instantly regretful – but in that moment, I had wanted her to conform to my view of the world, one that saw women as capable of making decisions for themselves. I wanted her to feel ashamed of her attitudes toward women and for the treatment she was subjecting them to.

I hadn’t been to Albury since my aunt had driven me from Barooga to see the Flying Fruit Fly Circus when I was 11.

This time, I had stepped off the train two minutes too early, on the Wodonga side of the river. Geographically, the two towns were very close; could there be a psyche peculiar to a border town, some effect of that dual nature? Citizens were subject to different laws and legislation on either side of a boundary, which, in this case, was the ancient, earth-coloured Murray.

Australia's longest stretch of water, the Murray River runs along the entire border between the two states and into South Australia for 2508 kilometres.<sup>130</sup> Water borders change, of course, with tides and earth shifts and droughts and floods.

This duality expressed itself in myriad and curious ways. Residents often lived in one city and worked in another, for instance. Albury's mayor, who by definition of the role had to be a resident, simultaneously worked as a police officer across the state border, in Wodonga, Victoria.

The city of Albury had around 50,250 residents, only 39 per cent of whom had finished high school. The major employers were in manufacturing, retail and construction, then health and social work.<sup>131</sup>

Unemployment hovered at 8 per cent, 3 per cent higher than the state norm, and the average wage was around \$40,000 a year, indicating a lot of minimum- and low-wage work. Most residents – 86.5 per cent – were born in Australia, but the Indigenous population only numbered 700. (At my motel, I noticed that everyone working in reception was white, but all the cleaning staff were brown.) On the last census, almost 30 per cent of residents identified as Catholic, more than the national average, and 30 per cent as other Christian denominations, also more than the national average.<sup>132</sup>

If I hadn't caught the train and walked through the town by myself, I would've had the sense that, as with the snapshots of Albury that Pieter showed me, everyone who lived there was wealthy, that they all owned farms and could afford IVF treatments at private clinics. The doctors' lack of class concern made me think of a Melbourne GP who'd told me that working at a dedicated abortion clinic had exposed her to different patients, people she didn't usually treat in her practice in an affluent suburb. 'Some doctors think everybody has two holiday houses,' she explained.

It's not a criticism, exactly, but money and the desire for it seemed natural to the various physicians I encountered, particularly the specialists working in obstetrics and gynaecology. The doctors I met were dedicated. They had studied hard, specialised and honed their skills for more than 12 years, and they were all activists,

too, in their own ways, arguing for safer, timelier and less burdensome health care options for their patients. But they earned good money from these careers, and unless they had been exposed to a range of patients, they didn't always understand that the \$400 for a termination or for contraception could be around half a month's rent.

Besides, if reproductive freedom was about equality for women and the ability to choose to have or not have children, then why wasn't abortion, or even IVF, always covered by Medicare?

On the New South Wales side of the border, abortion wasn't exactly legal either, though it was lawful if the doctor was concerned about a woman's mental or physical wellbeing. Unusually, the law also allowed for factors both economic and social.<sup>133</sup> This meant that the legislation on abortion and when it should be performed was open to very liberal interpretation.

Most of the doctors I spoke with in Albury saw abortion as a fundamental right and health service, but not one that should be necessarily publicly funded.

'You know what's cheap?' Pieter asked me when I pointed out that an abortion in Albury cost a minimum of \$400, more than in Melbourne. 'Contraception.'

Pieter explained that to set up a practice, it would cost a doctor \$35,000 for one ultrasound machine, \$40,000 in other various machines, plus general equipment, medication, rent, and support and admin staff. He estimated that in the first year, the expenditure would be about \$500,000.

But in 2014, the maximum fortnightly Newstart payment, which a single mother with children over eight might be on, was \$552.40.<sup>134</sup> Almost half of a monthly payment could be spent on ensuring they didn't have another child.

I didn't object to doctors making money from terminations *if* women could afford it. But Albury wasn't exactly crowded with affluent women and families. Many women lived on the outskirts of the city or in the satellite towns beyond.

Outsiders didn't understand the rural context, Susie Reid told me. Susie was one of those Albury residents who worked across the border. She ran a large women's health organisation in northern Victoria, which focussed on gender-based issues, like family violence, sexual and reproductive health, and financial independence.

Really, it came down to how you defined isolation and poverty, Susie explained. 'In most of those towns, you cannot get into Albury unless you catch the

bus service once a week. There is no train, no public transport. You might have a doctor that comes once or twice a week – but there'll be no bulk billing.<sup>'135</sup>

Susie Reid was a friend of Pieter's and one of the main activists in Albury Choice. It was early in the morning but she already sounded tired.

'If you are low socio-economic, you might have a couple of kids, but haven't got a car. You're living in a place like Tallangatta because rent's cheap and it helps you survive, but it's 40 minutes away, so how do you actually organise a termination?'

You couldn't, Susie said, without involving other people, turning to them for help, which was something many women wanting to end a pregnancy were reluctant to do. Cars: so ordinary, so crucial.

'Timing's an issue too, because the clinic only runs one day a week. We have a real issue here in winter when the fog comes in and the doctor can't fly in. All those appointments get cancelled and put off until the following week.'

These were some of the issues that less well-resourced women in regional areas faced, she explained, before you even got to the lump sum needed for an abortion.

Susie thought obtaining contraception in the region could be difficult too. 'To get a bus from Thurgoona into Albury and back again is not easy,' she said. 'Or say you're in Tallangatta and you run out of the pill or condoms. You've only got one supermarket. You go in wanting condoms: how do you feel if it's your best friend's mother, or your aunt or uncle on the checkout? I'm 60 and I'd still be uncomfortable.'

Part of the mythology of rural living is the notion that people residing there are more connected to the land and to each other, by the inability to remain anonymous in a small population. But one of the things Susie found most distressing was how the protesters preyed on refugee and migrant women new to the area, who often walked to the clinic from wherever they were dropped off, by car or bus. 'They will walk there with this piece of paper and they're a beacon [to the protesters]. The new arrivals don't understand. They think they're getting help [from the clinic]. You'll understand, if you know anything about working with refugees in Australia – they get very little help, particularly financial or medical.'<sup>136</sup>

That was something I'd witnessed at the East Melbourne clinic, too.

Albury's pro-life contingent had also started *Abortion Hurts Albury*, a website promoting the cons of abortion. After I returned to Melbourne, they ran a post about

Susie Reid, ‘head of a largely taxpayer funded “women’s health” organisation’.

Earlier that week, the site reported, Susie had ‘gestured to unzip her pants and pelvic thrust in front of the open for business abortion clinic. The door was open and you could hear the staff and her friends on the verandah of this abortion house laughing. Women were in the waiting room awaiting their abortions while babies were being aborted. This, from a woman who claims to be such a champion against violence towards women.’<sup>137</sup>

The scenario seemed dubious, but it had happened, Susie told me, though not quite like it had been written up. It was more an end of the day up-yours, she said. Albury Choicers were tired of pro-lifers filming patients and staff entering and exiting the clinic, a practice that had spread to the East Melbourne clinic also.

Protesters claimed it was necessary for their safety. Surprisingly, that’s what the mayor had told me, too: pro-lifers were attempting to record their own actions to demonstrate they weren’t a threat; any women they captured on film were incidental. To me, it seemed a naïve perspective for a police officer.

The thing is, it isn’t actually illegal to photograph or film people in public spaces in New South Wales or Victoria, though it is illegal to take audio recordings without an individual’s permission.

Albury Choice had taken to protesting with a large blue bedsheet, on which they’d scrawled ‘Privacy is a right’. They used it to obscure the view of the offending video camera, a tactic employed after one HoGPI member commented that they could still film who was entering and leaving the clinic, they simply had to wait until pro-choice protesters tired and relaxed shielding placards or umbrellas.<sup>138</sup>

‘He’s not an island.’

I was sharing a meal with Elizabeth, Pieter’s wife; she was sharing her concerns about his visibility in Albury’s abortion rights struggle. I was trying to process the fact that two of the doctors I’d met that day had received death threats.

Pieter’s had started when an anonymous man had turned up at his practice – hat, upturned collar, glasses – and handed the secretary a handwritten letter saying the man was a messenger of God. That he believed life was precious and that he was going to kill Pieter for the abortions he’d performed.<sup>139</sup>

Through some sleuthing of his own, Pieter tracked down the man and went to his house. ‘Do we have a problem?’ he’d asked.

Elizabeth laughed about it now. ‘When he fronted up, I thought, how brave is that? People are usually so different when they have to speak to you face to face.’

That particular man was lost for words.

At times, though, she was still afraid for their safety, that the campaign made them exposed. ‘They know where we live, our phone numbers, that sort of thing. He’s not an island. He’s part of a group – there’s me, there’s the children, the in-laws, the grandchildren.’

The *Abortion Hurts Albury* site was fixated on Pieter Mourik. They often referred to him as The Creepy Abortionist and ran a series called ‘Educating Pieter’, where they listed spurious evidence of the disproven link between abortion and breast cancer. At one time, Pieter said, they had a map titled, ‘How to find Dr Mourik’s house’.

‘Have a look at these letters to the newspaper,’ Pieter said, and pushed a blue manila folder toward me, thick with photocopied and original documents. Some were coffee-stained letters; others were official documentation. There were two letters from the health board, stamped just a fortnight before, explaining that the board had investigated a complaint against Pieter but he had since been cleared. The complainants had tried to get him deregistered after he’d published a letter in the *Border Mail* championing the availability of RU486.

The next day, Pieter dropped me off at Veritas Central, the Catholic store between St Patrick’s Church and St Patrick’s Parish School in the centre of Albury. The store was owned and managed by Anna von Marburg, the protester I’d admonished at the clinic, and the most prolific contributor to *Abortion Hurts Albury*.<sup>140</sup>

The first thing one noticed about the store was the gigantic window full of foetuses. Pixellated photo-like images of the embryonic stages hung in the backdrop, a textured constellation of a baby developing in the womb. On the floor of the window display, there was a row of charts outlining foetal growth. The overall effect was that of a weird foetal mobile, nauseating and lurid all at once, colours and translucent body parts swimming together.

Combined with the simmering tensions in the town, it was a provocative statement.

‘Go in and ask two questions,’ Pieter had instructed. ‘One: what do you suggest in cases of rape, when a woman is severely traumatised and can’t possibly have a baby? And two: what would you want your daughter to do, if she was pregnant and needed to have an abortion? Where would she go?’

Much to Pieter’s disappointment, I didn’t find the questions cunning. I’d already heard the pro-life views on rape, which basically amounted to a baby being the one positive outcome of rape. ‘And I think she would just say she wouldn’t want her daughter to have an abortion,’ I fumbled.

‘Well, see what she says,’ Pieter said again. ‘I’ll drive around and meet you here.’

I climbed down out of the truck, with no intention of lobbing those questions at Anna von Marburg.

Inside, the shop radiated faith, all gleaming satin and white light. Years ago, in South America, I’d visited some of the small stalls crammed full of religious memorabilia and prayer accoutrements that sat beneath the churches, but this Catholic shop was unlike those.

Veritas Central whispered money, partly because it was laid out like a New Age shop where self-improvement and hope were sold in the form of crystals and Buddhas. Here it was rosaries, Mary and Jesus statues, hymnbooks, communion gowns and other products related to Catholicism. Soulful hymns reverberated up from the floor, while the soft-focus bulbs made everything in the store glow beseechingly.

‘Can I help you?’ asked a woman of about 25. She wore loose blue jeans and a t-shirt. A diagonal scar cut through the middle of her face.

I was visiting the town and had noticed the very striking window, I told her. Life begins at conception, she said, and it was good to be reminded of that. Her hands scrunched and crunched the bottom of her t-shirt.

Did she protest at the abortion clinic on Thursdays?

‘We don’t protest there,’ she replied quickly. ‘It’s not protest, it’s prayer.’

I nodded, to indicate I heard her distinction.

‘But I don’t go there. I work at a counselling service. I’m not into protest, that’s just not me.’

I didn’t point out the slip-up. ‘Too confrontational?’

‘No. It’s too ...’ Her eyes roamed around as she searched for the right word. ‘I can’t be that close to where it’s taking place. It’s too upsetting.’

It was not the answer I had expected.

I asked about the Women’s Life Centre, a ‘pregnancy support centre’ that offered free pregnancy testing, counselling, financial assistance and family planning education, where she volunteered. Pieter planned to take me there next.

‘We help women with whatever they need: nappies, clothes. So they know they’ve got somewhere to go. So they feel supported.’

Back in Queensland, Anne and Liz had both mentioned their work at similar crisis centres. Such organisations placed huge significance on helping even small numbers of people. Even if only one or two women came to them for help or changed their mind about the abortion, that was multiple souls saved. Even an atheist could appreciate how saving even a single soul would seem important work. Yet, the examples they offered of material help were slight – secondhand cots and blankets, some tinned food, that kind of thing. Recent figures show that, in Australia, raising a child is expensive. For low-income families, the cost of caring for a child until they leave home is around \$474,000.<sup>141</sup>

Naturally, there is also the matter of which pro-life activists would take on the burden of another family, or a woman and child, if asked. I believed that Anne and Jim and Liz and Graham probably would, because that was the kind of communal Christianity they practised. For the majority of people, religious or not, it would be too arduous a task.

A ten-minute drive from Albury, the Women’s Life Centre was located between Shalom Hair Care and Skydee’s Men’s Wear (‘larger clothes for larger men’) on Urana Road, the main strip in Lavington.

A pink and grey sign above the storefront promised ‘Free Pregnancy Help’ to passing traffic. Another ploy borrowed from the US pro-life set.

‘They are small offices staffed by volunteers, and they offer free pregnancy testing, glossy photos of dead fetuses, and movies,’ Sally Tisdale, a nurse at an American abortion clinic, wrote in *Harper’s* in the mid 1980s, when these centres were first emerging. ‘I had a client recently whose mother is active in the anti-abortion movement. The young woman went to the local crisis centre and was told

that the doctor would make her touch her dismembered baby, that the pain would be the most horrible she could imagine, and that she might, after an abortion, never be able to have children.’

In the United States in 2010, there were 4000 pregnancy crisis centres, and only 816 clinics providing abortion.<sup>142</sup>

Outside, the Lavington store was painted an alluring red, and topped by the centre’s logo: a headless woman holding her distended belly protectively. The figure had flowing, feminine locks and a flower motif grew up around her.

There was glass on the windows and the door was frosted, making it impossible to detect what was going on inside, but I noted an absence of health credentials, the kind you’d usually find on a medical centre. There was a list of services, however: free pregnancy testing, caring and confidential help, post-abortion care, help with medical appointments, financial assistance options and family planning education.

The two counsellors were in their early 20s. Both were blonde and blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked. They told me that the majority of their clients came from passing traffic.

What made them come inside? I asked.

Their eyes flicked to each other. Probably the free pregnancy tests, they said.

What was the next step, after the test?

The staff would discuss their clients’ options, one said. Acknowledge that pregnancy can seem overwhelming at first but that it’s easier with support. ‘We don’t offer abortion here,’ the same young woman said, gesturing to the yellow form in my lap, which they gave to women to fill out.

‘Abortion’s on this list,’ I pointed to the line.

‘If someone ticked that, we’d tell them the service wasn’t offered here,’ the counsellor seated on the cream and black couch said.

‘Where would you tell them to go?’

They watched me, expressionless. I encountered this same sense of guardedness whenever I spoke with pro-lifers – they were used to being on the unpopular end of the argument, to starting on the back foot.

The centre had that same New Age vibe, calling to mind massages and aromatherapy sessions. There was even an oil burner on the shelf above the couch. The room was inviting, with floral cushions and soothing hymns playing softly in the

background. Glass shelves held flowers and glass sculptures; frames with babies and children lined the far wall. From the cover of a coffee-table book, *In the Womb*, shone a contented foetus. Happy families were everywhere.

They had one trained counsellor, they told me, but she was only needed for emergencies. The rest were volunteers, though they'd done some in-house training and they were all very certain about why they were there – to help women. That was all that was really required.

'I'm just reading this pamphlet about men, and how men feel about abortion because that's something we hardly ever hear about,' the counsellor on the couch said. 'Here, you take it.' She handed me the pamphlet.

Titled 'Abortion and Men', the pamphlet explained that framing abortion as a women's issue meant that men were ignored, even though they were as equally attached to the unborn child. After an abortion, the pamphlet warned, men might feel 'empty, powerless, defeated, helpless, confused and without purpose' because their role as father wasn't realised. Joining a support group, finding purpose in your life again, forgiving the other people involved, and giving the aborted child a name and a place in the home, even in the form of a memorial, were essential steps for moving on.

'Even though your child was never born,' it concluded, 'you will always be a father.'

The emphasis was all on conception rather than the responsibilities of fathering, from the nappy-changing to the feeding or sheltering or hugging or homework or listening. It raised a lot of questions about roles and rights and what being a parent actually meant in pro-life communities.

As I sat there in the pregnancy crisis centre, it occurred to me that obfuscation could be the pro-life movement's greatest weapon. Pregnancy centres eliminated abortion as an option. In Victoria, pro-lifers concentrated their energies on changing the law so doctors didn't have to acknowledge abortion and few doctors trained in the procedure anyway. A culture of shame made it difficult for women to talk about their abortions or even attend a clinic to undergo one – as the case was in Albury. Those opposed to reproductive choice portrayed abortion as unthinkable.

The pregnancy centre counsellors told me they were low on staff, and they had to divide their time between the centre and the clinic on Englehardt Street.

'I noticed they were closed last week,' the counsellor at the desk said.

They were on holidays, I explained.

She smirked at me in an *if you say so* way.

Did anyone work there who wasn't a Christian?

'We're not a religious organisation,' she replied. 'We're not associated with any one church or anything.'

I told them I'd found that most pro-life people had strong religious conviction.

They shrugged.

What kind of threat did the persistent vigils outside the Englehardt Street clinic pose to women's health in Albury and the surrounding towns? Women were still visiting the clinic, and among the citizens I met, support for the pro-life presence was thin, while pro-choice attitudes were being cemented. People were tired of the situation, a journalist at the *Albury Wodonga News Weekly* who'd been covering the story told me. They were also angry – people they knew attended that clinic.

Not long after, Pieter emailed that he'd come across a new Facebook group, Right to Privacy, which appeared to have borrowed from the book of Jo Wainer. While the anonymous group wasn't publishing the addresses of those involved in the vigils, they were documenting them, publishing both photos and names of protesters, as well as contentions about their conduct outside the clinic and in the town. It was ironic that in counteracting pro-life protest, people often seemed to borrow the same tactics, namely public shaming.

Pieter's group was already in trouble: his nemesis, Roland von Marburg, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist) and husband of one of the town's chief pro-life organisers, was suing Facebook, Pieter and the group's administrator for defamation. As well as objecting to allegations published about his professional integrity, he complained that he had been called 'a pest', 'disgusting' and 'a horrible man'.<sup>143</sup> The comments had since been deleted, but von Marburg wanted compensation for court costs and 'hurt to his feelings'.

Every week, I received a new update from Pieter about that week's plan to push Albury into a situation where residents had to make a choice: did they support women in the area, or did they support bigots? The man was inexhaustible, clearly used to his 100-hour weeks. He was also quite the networker, even managing to recruit the local Anglican priest to the fight for regional women's rights.

I could sympathise with Pieter's frustrations and his desire to force a crisis point so that something momentous happened, something that resulted in actual change outside the clinic. At times, I too felt like I'd had enough of the pro-lifers – I didn't know how much more patience for their philosophies I had left – though I left Albury feeling hopeful.

On my way home I stopped in a town not far from Albury to meet Clara, the youngest doctor I spoke with. Clara was 33 and hadn't been in the area long. She had specialised in obstetrics at the Catholic Mercy Hospital for Women in Melbourne.

She said that doctors who went to Catholic universities and trained at Catholic hospitals often didn't have experience with terminations, or even contraception. The Mercy didn't provide contraception, or not officially, though some found ways around that, and absolutely under no circumstances did the hospital allow abortions, even for foetal abnormality.

Instead, doctors would send women who needed late-term terminations to the Women's Hospital. 'But for normal, run-of-the-mill terminations, there's a family planning clinic that runs out of the Austin. The two hospitals are right next door, and share multiple corridors. The registrars from the Mercy who didn't have a problem with termination, who didn't conscientiously object, would go through to the Austin, put the patient into the clinic and then use their facilities to do a termination.' Clara smiled. 'That's how we got around not being able to provide an essential service.' But you had to be interested in the field to bridge those gaps.

This revelation was surprising. On their mission page, the hospital writes, 'We believe in the sacredness and dignity of each person at every stage of life.' The affiliated Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics publishes a quarterly bulletin on ethical issues in health in which the practice of abortion (and euthanasia) is frequently condemned. And yet, staff had found a very simple way to reconcile their beliefs and the health needs of women, while simultaneously circumventing religious strictures.

Clara was a big believer in affordable abortion. She planned to establish a termination service at the local hospital so women wouldn't have to travel all the way to Melbourne or Albury, but was looking for other O&Gs to share the patient load. She was concerned that abortion would take up all her practice hours if she let it – that's how much of a demand there was, – and it didn't provide the income obstetrics usually did, either.

In a debate on abortion in London in 2008, UK abortion provider Ann Furedi stressed that the issue wasn't whether or not a foetus was a form of life. 'The point is not when does human life begin,' she said, 'but when does it really begin to matter?' It is that idea – that a baby has the potential to exist but that the individual pregnant woman decides that her life and wellbeing is more important – that pro-lifers cannot accept.

A major bone of contention that still remains among both doctors and pro-choice activists is the issue of late-term abortion. Lawfully, 'late-term' applies to abortions after 24 weeks, the limits of Victorian law. Terminations at that stage of the pregnancy, in the third trimester, are usually only permitted because of exceptionally serious health concerns, such as foetal abnormality or acute psychological distress. The process for these terminations involves a tortuous and circuitous route. Cases are assessed by hospital 'termination review panels', with experts deciding on a case-by-case basis. Patients have no contact with these panels, and no right of appeal. The decision is based on the indicators in their files and medical prognosis.<sup>144</sup>

Hospitals will not perform late-term abortions for psycho-social reasons. If a woman is refused a termination post-24 weeks, her only option would be to deliver the baby or go overseas, most likely to America.<sup>145</sup>

In truth, the phrase 'late-term' should apply to abortions after 16 weeks of pregnancy. By that stage, abortions are very hard to obtain, even in Victoria, and they are expensive. Terminations after 16 weeks are contentious because it's a situation many can't imagine themselves in: ending a pregnancy when you're noticeably pregnant, your body having changed in preparation to nurture another being into existence – and because most people do have an opinion about when life begins. Or, to put it another way, a date after which they couldn't contemplate ending a termination for reasons other than extremely serious health concerns.

Again, I wanted to know how the doctors who performed these operations felt about their work. Later-stage abortions rely on different techniques, and doctors can and will see foetal body parts that are recognisably human. Like Leslie Cannold and her colleagues at Reproductive Choice Australia, I supported a woman's right to choose to not be pregnant at any stage of a pregnancy – but actually stopping that foetal heart was not a job I thought I could do.

‘We do abortions here; that is all we do,’ wrote Sally Tisdale in her *Harper’s* essay. Her clinic regularly performed 100 abortions a week, many late-term. ‘[W]hen I look in the basin, among the curdlike blood clots, I see an elfin thorax, attenuated, its pencilline ribs all in parallel rows with tiny knobs of spine rounding upwards. A translucent arm and hand swim beside.’ It’s macabre imagery, and revelatory: this is what those operating the surgery witness.

In Victoria, the Croydon Day Surgery is one of the only clinics to offer late-term abortions in the gap between 16 and 24 weeks. A series of tragedies have befallen the clinic over the past few years: a post-operative death in 2011, a hepatitis C outbreak that infected 55 patients of the clinic, and, most recently, the suspension of the former owner’s medical licence.<sup>146</sup>

Dr Mark Schulberg sold the clinic to Marie Stopes in 2011, but was still working at the centre until July 2013 when his medical licence was suspended, not for anything termination-related, but for prescribing a number of former drug addicts with Xanax and Valium.<sup>147</sup>

I’d been back from Albury a few weeks when I met Mark in Toorak. He was dressed casually, in shorts and thongs and with a friendship bracelet on one wrist, but his face was that of a man plagued. Deep lines ran down his cheeks and across his forehead; he looked tired, maybe even defeated.

For a quarter of a century he’d provided complex abortions, but the first thing he told me was that he had retired. Immediately, I felt sorry for Mark Schulberg. Doctors associated his name with the hepatitis outbreak at the clinic, mistaking him for the culprit rather than the owner of the clinic where it happened.

Mark had been disenchanted with the medical profession in his early years and so went to Brisbane to re-train with a friend who was an abortionist. He opened the Croydon clinic in the late 1990s, focussing on late-term abortion because no other clinic was offering it.

I noted that there was a lot of resistance to late-term abortion, even by people who were pro-choice.

He nodded. ‘They can’t get their heads around this: it’s the same reasons that underpin abortion at any gestation. Just because a person may have got to 20 weeks, [it] doesn’t mean they knew what to do any earlier. Some things aren’t apparent until later in the pregnancy.’

Did he think that was because of medical advances, that people objected to

ending a life that could possibly survive outside the womb?

If so, it was a misconception, Mark said. '[Such measures are] fraught with problems – and the cost of keeping those foetuses alive is huge. The reality is that under 24 weeks, foetuses can't live outside the mother. They're unlikely to be born without assistance, can't be kept alive without intensive care and may well be retarded in some way.'

While there are other doctors in Victoria who can perform abortions up until 20 weeks, such as the young O&G I spoke with in Albury, Mark was one of only three doctors capable of performing them after that stage. Overseas, there weren't that many more.

Not many doctors wanted to do it, he explained. 'It's tainted with a definite hysteria and media hype. We had a couple of complications that got blown out of the water, whereas, if that'd happened in general medical practice, it wouldn't raise an eyebrow. The number of doctors who have stuffed up doing other procedures don't get a mention, just manage to keep it under the radar.'

He meant the patient death, I assumed, because an anaesthetist infecting so many patients with hepatitis C would have been a major scandal wherever it happened.

Mark agreed. 'That could've put an enormous dampener on the whole area of abortion service provision. I think that happened, at least in part, because of the difficulty of finding people to work in that area. We ended up having to take someone who had [a] history that we weren't aware of, but obviously had problems.'

The doctor in question, James Latham Peters, was now serving a 14-year sentence.

'You don't want to be doing anything that is substandard or putting your patients at risk. I personally feel very badly about that – but it's the way it's then *used*. It has been used by the anti-choice lobby to blacken the whole abortion industry as dangerous, unsafe and something to steer away from.'

Which is what Mark suspected a lot of bureaucrats and politicians wanted. Even if women could legally get an abortion, they would make actual access difficult, vanquishing abortion by stealth.

Weren't doctors concerned about that lack of access? I asked.

'Most of them couldn't care less. Any difficult areas, most doctors will steer away from – drug and alcohol dependency, for instance. They'll just carefully

manipulate it to only practise what they want to do. The too-hard ones, they just don't get involved with. Many doctors don't care why the person is in that situation: they've either gotten pregnant, or they've taken the drugs and it's their choice, their decision, their mistake.'

I found that surprising, considering how easy it was for women to fall pregnant.

It was ridiculous, he said. 'Why should people have to pay for the rest of their life for a mistake? I mean, if you commit murder, you don't pay for the rest of your life. But once you've got a child, that's it for life.'

Once again, I was struck by the rhetoric of the abortion debate, so steeped in concepts of life and death, murder and salvation. But in a way I thought he was right. Continuing a pregnancy is more than just carrying a child to term; following that stage are the many and long-lasting social burdens placed on the mother (or parents) that she (or they) alone will be responsible for.

Late-term abortions consisted of some typical cases, Mark said. The young girl who is too scared to tell anybody; sometimes she doesn't even realise she's pregnant or is in denial. Women who are raped who are in the same position. Women from overseas, whose visas will be rescinded if they continue a pregnancy. Foetal abnormalities. Addicts. Sex workers. Ironically, Mark said, a lot of people just didn't realise they were pregnant.

'Sometimes they're even misdiagnosed,' he added. 'They present with abdominal pain and are given a bum steer by their doctor. That's what those involved with the anti-abortion industry are like. They purposefully delay, make up things.'

That was a story I'd heard many times now. Women in rural areas in particular were at risk from fanatical doctors because they often didn't have a choice about where else they could turn. One doctor I'd met in Queensland had been outraged by the underhanded tactic. 'I don't think doctors have a right to moralise over their patients,' she'd told me. 'I don't like some of my patients either: they smell, they're rude to me. But it's my job to afford them respect and care. If I can't do that, I can't be their doctor.'

Sometimes – again – it was money that caused the delay, Mark said. A lot of the women were young, and a 20-week termination would cost more than \$2000.

It sounded like difficult work, I said, thinking of Sally Tisdale's essay.

He agreed. ‘There was a case in Texas where a late-term abortionist was caught out by one of his nurses who talked about how gory it was, how bloody. His technique didn’t allow him to ensure the demise of the foetus before it was delivered.’

At later stages of pregnancy, a doctor had to try and prevent a foetus from being born alive.

‘Here, I would inject the foetus before the procedure to try and ensure non-viability,’ Mark said. ‘But in this Texas case, the doctor was delivering them live and killing them after. That’s murder, just by definition, even though it’s the same thing.’

Non-viability. Such a clinical term for such a grim task. I thought I understood what he meant, though – in the abortion debate, the womb acted like a veil between worlds. Inside the womb, for the majority of the population, it was the mother’s choice; outside the womb, it was criminal.

More than that, Mark was saying that these weren’t medical questions. For him, ending a foetal life late-term was a simple procedure. Rather, he perceived questions like whether the foetus is a life inside or outside the womb, or whether having a child can be a life sentence, as social questions.

Throughout history, there have been many late-term abortion horror stories. The most recent was Kermit Gosnell, an abortionist convicted of murder and gross medical malpractice in 2013. Papers covering the story frequently called his practice the ‘House of Horrors’, and the doctor was referred to as ‘the monster pro-choice built’. Pro-life filmmakers have since raised \$500,000 to make a film that argues Gosnell was ‘the biggest serial killer in history’.<sup>148</sup> The Gosnell case was obscene: his house was full of foetal parts in jars and a foetus in the freezer, rubbish and faecal matter. A patient had died, which was how the details of his methods came to light.

Still, if late-term abortionists were hired to end the pregnancy, and the procedure hadn’t been successful in the womb, what were doctors to do once the foetus was delivered alive? Wait for it to die unaided?

That was why doctors had to ensure foetuses weren’t born alive.

Being an altruist, Mark worried about the future of Victorian abortion law. He thought the laws impermanent, subject to political whims and agendas. ‘It’s already happening, with Tony Abbott trying to bring back easy adoption, making it more amenable for women to carry their foetuses to the end then handball the issue to someone else.’

But 85 per cent of Victorians were pro-choice, I argued.

‘At the moment. That’s why the present government knows to keep their mouths shut. But over time, the way they’ll do it will be underhanded, and they’ll do trade-offs and they’ll make deals that will basically mean things will change.’

I hoped he was wrong.

Before Mark left, I wanted to tell him that his work mattered. Nervously, I cleared my throat. ‘For the record,’ I said, ‘I think that the work you do is quite heroic.’

He nodded his thanks. ‘For the most part, I felt like I did a good job. Only occasionally, we had a problem.’ He paused. ‘I would like to have a spotless record.’

Where would all the women in need of an abortion after 16 or 20 weeks turn now they could no longer turn to him? Maybe that wasn’t his concern any longer, but it wasn’t as though there was an eager queue of doctors following in his footsteps.

## Chapter Eight: Women's Business

‘My boyfriend really wanted me to have the baby.’

My friend Kim and I were in one of Melbourne's Mediterranean bars in the middle of the day. In her 50s, Kim had soft skin and fine bones and an air of innocence: she never expected people to behave badly, even though, in her own life, many had.

A few years earlier, after I'd published my essay about my abortion, Kim had rung my house. I was living in a mansion in Footscray at the time and the phone was down two flights of stairs, in a gigantic living space with thick carpet and towering bay windows that flooded the room with light, whatever the time of day.

‘I've just read your essay,’ she said. ‘And I wanted you to know, that wasn't my experience at all.’

We had been friends for a few years. I knew many intimate details about Kim's life, including her harrowing years, but this was the first time she had mentioned an abortion.

I sat in the window seat and dragged my toes back and forth through the carpet, feeling lukewarm about the conversation: back then, on a post-confessional high, I imagined my abortion story was pretty much like everyone else's.

‘What was it like for you?’

‘Sad,’ she'd replied. ‘Very sad. I'll tell you about it someday. Not now.’

Four years later, we'd decided this was the time to talk about what it had been like for her.

‘It was my first boyfriend. I was in first or second year uni, about 18 or 19. It was when Monash had some really good subjects, like Comparative Economic Systems, Working Democracy in Yugoslavia, communism here, socialism there. Another subject, called Population in History, looked at the sort of things that were happening in India then (in the 70s) and Britain during the Industrial Revolution – infanticide and that sort of thing.’

Kim finished her thought: ‘That people do those things when in dire circumstances.’

The weather was sticky. Kim shrugged out of her denim jacket. She had a sleeveless linen top underneath, and strings of beads and peach nail polish – despite

the 1980s chic, there remained a mysterious element in her makeup, something that made her a bit glamorous.

‘I started vomiting every night before dinner, when I was in the shower. And my breasts were getting big and I hadn’t had a period for a while. I was very young and naïve and thought this couldn’t be happening to me. I kept thinking that I should go to the doctor, but would then put it off.’

She sipped her white wine.

‘So what did you do when you definitely knew?’ I asked.

‘There wasn’t anyone I could talk to. My mother died when I was 11. My stepmother was sort of nuts and hated me. A friend I went to uni with was just ... It was a time in the early 70s when it was very much *women’s rights* and *my body, my right* and that sort of thing. Looking back on it, I think I was ignoring how I felt and there wasn’t anyone I could talk to about that.’

Kim’s mother had died of breast cancer accelerated by pregnancy, a pregnancy that she and her husband had wanted to stop, at a time when abortion was illegal, costly and often perilous. Her parents had even travelled to South Australia after hearing that abortion was an option for residents there, only to learn that they would have to live in the state for three months to qualify for the operation.

‘What kinds of things do you wish people had said?’

‘Nowadays, people would consider both options. But in those days, these rights were new and so that’s just what you did, you seized it. I could’ve had the baby, but at the time I didn’t feel like it was possible.’

Kim had an abortion at the East Melbourne clinic, where Susie Allanson now worked. It was the only time she was ever pregnant.

‘It was the saddest thing, actually. My boyfriend came with me and there were all these depressed women sitting in the waiting room.

‘They said to me, “When you come out, you will be in a lot of pain, but try not to scream because it upsets the other patients.” And I said okay. So when I did come out of it, it was excruciating, and I just started screaming and they’re going *shush, shush, shush!*’

Her laughter had a melancholy hue.

‘I went to the recovery room and they gave me tea and biscuits and when I came out, my boyfriend was sitting there with this half-dead bunch of flowers he’d got at the service station or something. It was *so depressing* when I look back on it.’

Kim slowly moved her head from side to side, as if it were leaden from wading through memories.

‘He must have been very upset because he didn’t want to do it. I think it must have been quite heartbreaking for him.’

‘Did you ever talk about it after that day?’

Kim shook her head. ‘And we never really got on well afterwards. We stayed together for another six years but we tortured each other, basically.’

Then, about 15 years ago, Kim started experiencing surges of intense sorrow, feelings she traced back to that decision.

‘Since then, I’ve had a lot of periods like that, where I’ve just felt this overwhelming grief and remorse and hated myself and felt like a murderer. Whenever it comes up it sort of hits me and it’s so overwhelmingly heartbreaking: I really feel like I stopped this person having a life because I wasn’t thinking.’

Kim began to openly sob. Despite being uncertain it was the right thing to do, that maybe it would draw the attention of other tables to our conversation, I walked over and rubbed her back.

‘It still upsets me a lot but I’ve been coming to a different sort of understanding of it, which is trying to remember who I was at that age. And I’ve sort of come to the point of having compassion for that naïve 19-year-old.’

‘It would have been hard for you to have a baby then,’ I offered. ‘How would you have survived? You would have had to give up uni and all those classes you loved.’

‘All those practical considerations were certainly there at the time, but I think what’s come through since then is that I really wanted to have that baby.’

Kim drained her glass.

‘People have babies all the time when it’s not practical – you adjust,’ she said. ‘The uni thing wouldn’t have mattered – I never did anything with it.’

‘It makes you a really great conversationalist,’ I pointed out.

Kim let loose a real laugh, free and wild. ‘But it doesn’t bear up to a human life. And even now I know it’s not acceptable to speak about it in those terms but that’s how I feel. And I’ve never tried to judge anybody else. I would never! I just always hope that people get a safe place to explore their feelings and options, because it can be torturous if you don’t.’

Awkwardly, I sat back down.

‘Some friends have said to me, “Oh, it’s because you never had another child.” But it’s not about that,’ Kim insisted. ‘It’s about *that* child, *that* foetus, *that* person – who could have been a person but I stopped.’

She looked at me and paused. ‘I’ve spoken with many of the people I know who’ve had abortions and about half of them have felt the same way as me.’

This was confronting for me to hear, and a revelation. Apart from the case studies in Melinda Tankard Reist’s book, Kim was only the second person I’d spoken with who had shared such feelings of grief with me.

In the days that followed, I tested my own memories of abortion, and wondered whether my unshakeable belief in a woman’s right to decide if and when she would have children, a conviction that had only become stronger over the course of this book, was a dam against any unresolved feelings I might have about that pregnancy, that potential child.

For confirmation, I could return to that essay I’d published that had spurred my research and the conversation with Kim – though many of my memories of that time and the person I was then were fading, replaced by a me I was happier being.

I sifted through my memories, searching for clear recollections leading up to my decision and the day of the procedure.

I unearthed scenes of real bohemian poverty: sleeping in a tumbledown bungalow, subsisting on tins of baked beans and the generosity of the various restaurants in which I worked.

A destructive relationship and a dangerous lover, I remembered well. One arresting recollection: my frenzied boyfriend waving a knife, threatening to stab his father who lived next door. When I tried to call his sister for help, he strangled me with the phone cord. Acute flashes: the knife at my neck, falling down the stairs, him looming, threatening.

By then, I loathed that life as much as I’d once been fascinated by the mania that can come with certain artists. I had dropped out of uni. I had ostracised my friends and family. My mother was, understandably, heartbroken at being cut off from my life. It was one of only two rocky periods in our relationship (the other was when I was 17 and desperately lonely).

And by then, a mutual good friend, a painter, had committed suicide. I didn’t want to find myself at that point, too.

My abortion, I decided, was impossible to separate from my life circumstances

of the time – circumstances I was happy to be far from.

I thought it took me longer to grow up than most people, to realise what I wanted wasn't something dangerous. Perhaps my decision to have an abortion marked the starting point of adulthood.

Could the matter of abortion grief be that simple: did it come down to whether you wanted a baby (and perhaps this was knowledge that would come with hindsight and weighing up that relationship and that moment against all others that would follow) or you didn't (perhaps because pregnancy forced you to weigh up the cold reality of the future)?

Obviously, it wasn't that simple; the procedure itself could be, conceivably, traumatising. Mine wasn't, but Kim's was, which is why she remembered pain, and the collective grief of the waiting and recovery rooms. I didn't recall pain but I did throw up in the toilet afterward, while I waited in recovery, alone. Even now, I still have that reaction to an anaesthetic.

Ann, who ran a retreat in Hobart, was the other person who spoke to me about the grief in the years that followed her abortion. I met her, and a counsellor from the retreat, Josephine, in Hobart, not far from where they run a satellite site of Rachel's Vineyard. Founded by Pennsylvanian psychologist Dr Theresa Burke a couple of decades earlier, the international retreat promises to 'heal the pain of abortion – one weekend at a time'. It spread to Australia in the early 2000s, first in Sydney, then to the other states, and then regionally, to New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. Nowadays there are more than 500 Rachel's Vineyard retreats worldwide.

Like other Christians I'd spent time with, Ann and Josephine were hospitable and generous, first offering to pick me up from the airport, and when I politely declined, offering me directions to my hotel instead.

Ann brought Rachel's Vineyard to Tasmania after she attended a 2004 retreat, following years spent struggling with the grief of a teenage abortion. She was now in her 50s.

'I just needed that safe space, where you can say and share what you want,' Ann explained from across the table. 'And even though it's a Catholic-based retreat, you are able to say anything. You can be angry with God, you can be angry with

anyone you need to be angry with.’ Her voice was patient, inviting: the kind that put the listener at ease.

Nonetheless, I was feeling naked, for Ann and Josephine had just spent 15 minutes lamenting ‘the violent pro-abortion protest’ in Melbourne the week before.

‘Yes, I saw that,’ I said ambiguously. Did they know I was one of the protest organisers and expected me now to confess? I had written an article in the *Guardian* encouraging people to attend, which could have been found by a simple Google search.

Josephine in particular was aggrieved for Bernie Finn, organiser of the March for the Babies. ‘He does so much good work,’ she said.

Flicking through my notes, I spied a line I’d jotted down from Exodus: ‘Suffer not a witch to live.’

‘If you wish to call it by its terminology, it is homicide.’ Josephine wagged her finger close to my nose. ‘Our basis of society in Australia is that it’s a Judeo-Christian society and we are taught from a very young age, no matter what religion a person is raised in, even if it’s atheist or agnostic – somehow, in the psyche of man, we always try to save a person. If a person’s drowning we want to save them. If a person’s in a car accident—’

‘If in a burning house,’ murmured Ann in agreement.

‘We want to save them!’ Josephine finished. ‘It’s a natural response for fellow human beings to try and save others – otherwise, why do we have so many charities that are out there trying to save other people?’

I could see why Ann had brought Josephine along: their dispositions were naturally suited to a good cop, bad cop scenario. Ann was mild, vulnerable, occasionally admitting that the jury was still out on some subjects.

Josephine was all sharp lines and neatness. She was a former nurse, now in her 60s and mostly retired, and her voice and gaze were penetrating, as though she were suspicious of the rest of the world’s thoughts. She kept her lips pursed throughout our conversation.

How was a typical weekend retreat run? What techniques were used to help people interrogate their emotions?

‘Readings, meditation, ritual,’ Josephine enunciated. ‘It starts on a Friday evening usually, then goes through Saturday and Sunday. The only way I can describe

it, is that it's so beautifully designed by Theresa Burke, that each one of the readings or meditations is designed that we start to become in tune with going inwards.'

Continued Ann, 'It helps the person go deeper into their story, into their own being.' I wasn't sure if they had the habit of finishing each other's sentences because they were so in sync, or because the Vineyard rhetoric was so rehearsed.

'Saturday morning is dedicated to sharing stories,' Ann explained. 'Because so many people don't feel they're worthy of God's forgiveness or their own forgiveness, they have a slump. When they arrive on the Friday, a lot of women who have got long hair, for instance, their hair's over their eyes, and we can't really see their face. And on the Sunday, after they've told their story, a totally different look: their hair's brushed back, makeup on their face, total transformation.'

Josephine finished the point. 'If I went to a psychologist, there's never quite that same totality of experience. Going to someone and talking for 60 minutes and maybe going away and doing an exercise – it can never match that completeness you get from a Rachel's Vineyard weekend.'

Josephine's words echoed the pledge on the Vineyard website: 'Peace is found. Lives are restored. A sense of hope and meaning for the future is finally re-discovered.'

It also made me think of mind control – isolating an individual and peeling away their masks and veneers. I had a friend who went to a Landmark Forum weekend. It started on the Friday after work, continued until 1am in the morning, began again early Saturday, continued throughout the entire day and night until everyone was finished with their baggage, and they repeated it again on the Sunday.

I appreciated that there was a sadness that could overcome a person when they felt they'd made a wrong decision, especially one that could not be undone, but I was dubious about abortion grief as a concept. The name suggested it was a side effect of the procedure, and there seemed to be little discussion of it before the 1980s, when the Catholic Church started to fund 'abortion recovery' counselling.<sup>149</sup>

A *New York Times* article from 2007, 'Is There a Post-Abortion Syndrome?', traces the development of abortion grief, focussing on a prominent counsellor who'd had an abortion when she was 19. 'I remember having evil thoughts, about hurting children,' she said, as an example of one of the ways abortion had affected her.

To me, such a side effect said far more about the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the individual than the operation, and was nothing remotely like the

experiences Kim or Ann had shared.

Often, these days, grief and mourning are depicted as temporary – a short phase the bereaved move through. But earlier thought, shaped by Freud and psychoanalysis more generally, imagined mourning as a long stage, a time full of memories compared to the present, with loss felt acutely because a particular person or possibility no longer existed. Memories and the present and the future-that-would-not-be existed concurrently and rapidly in that kind of mourning space.

Thirty-odd years on, Kim still inhabited that space periodically. Perhaps the recurrence of such mourning is because we have no language for the loss of motherhood before a baby is actually born, as Helen Keane argues in her essay about pregnancy loss. Grief of that kind is minimised or ignored because it seems unreal, like an unseen ailment, and because miscarriages and stillbirths are ‘shameful and isolating’, not unlike abortion. Whether active or passive, these events are all glaring examples of failed motherhood, of women being unable to fulfil their inherent purpose.<sup>150</sup>

In addition, Keane notes, there’s a feminist reluctance to acknowledge these losses. Pregnant women identifying as mothers or mourning ‘a real baby’ lost before birth raises uncomfortable questions for pro-choice activists: can a woman be a mother even if her baby was never born – if so, what does that mean for the one-third of women who’ve had an abortion? Will many of these women go on to miss their unborn babies, just as Kim misses hers, even after all these years? Is a foetus only a foetus until a woman decides she wants to be pregnant, at which point the foetus becomes a baby?

Possibly, argue some of the theorists favoured by Keane. In a feminist reproductive model, ‘personhood’ wouldn’t be necessarily absolute or universal.

‘Abortion is not so much “active killing” as a decision not to complete the social process of producing a body/person,’ explains Keane. ‘But an embryo in a highly desired and long awaited pregnancy may already be constituted as a person by its parents and extended family.’<sup>151</sup>

Yet, the understanding of the baby as a real person is limited, too – there is only so much that can be known of a baby, who has not yet developed into a sentient person with a character and behaviours. Capitalism has much to answer for here, Keane writes, because medical technologies and early pregnancy products encourage women to think of unborn babies as already-existing people.

Certainly, there is more sympathy for grief following miscarriage than abortion. Unlike abortion, an active decision, miscarriage is something done to women, a wrong that wasn't their fault – most of the time. Sadly, there is no space in the media, or in miscarriage narratives, for women who added to the 'risk of pregnancy loss', and, equally, no space – outside of religious opportunism – for stories of abortion grief like Kim's.

While struggling to integrate these ideas into my own understanding of reproductive politics, which, I was beginning to realise, had never allowed for the existence of abortion grief that wasn't religious in origin, an article appeared in my Twitter feed by an Australian writer, Anna, about the abortion she had when she was in her mid 20s and already a mother. Women are really only permitted to speak about abortion in two ways, writes Anna: as 'insurmountable regret' or a 'complete lack of doubt'. It had taken her six years, but Anna could admit that she felt sad about her abortion. 'I don't think I was powerful and in control. But I don't regret it either,' she writes.<sup>152</sup>

Maybe she was tapping into the experiences of many women.

'There is a grief process associated with abortion,' she closes. 'For most people, there is a period of sadness and relief together. For some, there is just relief. For others, there is regret, or remorse. Sometimes it's short, and sometimes it isn't.' In other words, the experience is different for all women, because abortion experiences, like any other life experience, depends on an individual's circumstances and the life they've lived up until that point.

Miriam's abortion, for example, was grief free. Miriam emailed me to arrange a meeting after reading an essay I wrote on Anne and Jim, the pro-life antiwar activists; she wanted to correct some of their claims.

Miriam's abortion took place a couple of years prior, when she had returned to Hobart after two years in London. The partner was a down-and-out Englishman with a dubious record, both with the law and in relationships. Not at all father material, Miriam summed up. He didn't sound like relationship material either, but given my own history, who was I to judge?

Booking the abortion was relatively straightforward – Miriam hadn't even been aware of the need for two doctors to sign off on the procedure. The procedure itself was uncomplicated, too.

But Miriam wanted to discuss the reasons she imagined women commonly

chose abortion. Anne and Jim's comments on the subject had erased her story, and that irked her.

'My life as I knew it would have ended, it would have all been about the next one – putting all your life and energy into raising a child.' Miriam's dark bob nodded along as she spoke. 'I realise how hard that is and how much sacrifice you have to make. My parents, I was living on their property – what would they have had to give up?'

Apparent upon meeting Miriam was that she was a sensible person. She carried extra layers and an umbrella for the way the morning sun might later turn. She liked to repeat every idea in multiple anecdotes in an attempt to guarantee comprehension.

'It was not a selfish decision – it was the effect it would have on so many people, particularly my family. I'd also want the child to know its father's family, too. It didn't seem that what I would want for that child would be possible.'

Miriam's conclusion was considered, and made in full view of her family, who listened to her deliberations, but insisted she arrive at a decision herself.

'Anne and Jim – their opinion seemed to be that women are ashamed, that they've done something wrong and that they're damaged by it. And that really stood out because I totally disagree. I consider myself relatively normal. I don't feel guilty about it and I remember the day, and kind of mark it with cake and champagne.' A ritual to remember something that might have been, had circumstances been different.

Theory was one thing, Miriam said, but whenever someone had to put that theory into practice, it inevitably changed their understanding of the problem. Anne and Jim had never had to face such a choice, and because of their beliefs, never would.

'Women have to make the choice, but based on what people expect and what the man wants,' Miriam finished. It was the strongest statement she made on abortion's gender inequality.

Publicly, I claimed to not feel grief or guilt about my abortion, but privately, my judgement wasn't as clear. Not having yet managed to confide the experience to my mother – a step I suspected was crucial in accepting abortion – I was uneasy.

I planned to go to Sydney for five days for research and invited my mum to come along. I convinced myself that it would be easier to tell her there, in a city neither of us called home, immersed in that world of abortion stories, with so many other examples to deflect attention away from my story seeming unique or devastating or shameful.

When we arrived, Sydney was in meltdown from the heat, from a collapsed building that had rerouted traffic around the CBD, and from preparations for Mardi Gras, which was happening the evening we were flying out.

‘Perhaps we should have stayed for that?’ I was sorry I hadn’t thought of it earlier.

The first time I went to a gay club was with my mum and her friends when I was 17. It was an eye-opening night for a prudish girl.

Menopausal and irritable, my mother simply grunted. Her hot flushes – another reward for reproductive services rendered – would become the bane of our trip, causing tension and limiting activity.

Still, we managed the Sydney Opera House, and lunch in the old quarters nearby. We visited the Susannah Place Museum and learned some of the history of public housing near the bay. We went shopping, my mum’s favourite pastime. We walked the streets of Redfern.

Yet none of it met her expectations. What entertained her were the easy-to-love things we passed in the street – she stopped to talk with every dog, cat or cute child we met. I hadn’t recalled that being one of her quirks.

Rainbow flags flapped in Sydney’s streets. The parallels with abortion were obvious. Not only in the religious wrath that the two acts attracted, but also in their acceptability in contemporary Australia. Sure, there remained opposition to both: fringe opinion perceived they were destroying the family unit and traditional gender roles, but overwhelmingly, people supported both as life choices, with the majority of Australians supporting a woman’s right to choose in any circumstance (81 per cent)<sup>153</sup> and same-sex marriage (72 per cent)<sup>154</sup>. Gay relations were perhaps more visible – and more defiant in that visibility – but both were widely practiced and widely accepted.

In other words, both are fights that progressives and radicals have won. That doesn’t mean that groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby don’t pose a threat – anyone with that much money and the ear of the prime minister does, of course,

because their interests aren't necessarily collective interests for the good of community. Nor does it mean that protesters picketing clinics aren't a threat – nobody should have to work under those conditions, and women shouldn't be surveilled while attending a health clinic. Crucially, the movement attracts zealots who believe they are performing the earthly work of a higher being. Peter Knight was not the only anti-abortionist to take his opposition beyond street protest. Most likely, he won't be the last.

But what these statistics reveal is that abortion and same-sex relations have been recognised by the wider society as legitimate life choices that belong to the private sphere, and, really, don't affect anyone beyond those intimately involved in those decisions.

I stopped by O-Week at the University of Sydney. There'd been a concentrated pro-life push in Sydney universities over the past couple of years. LifeChoice, an allegedly secular group, had emerged from that and was now an affiliated student organisation, meaning it was receiving student union funding.

Techno music was being pumped into the open courtyard teeming with stalls for assorted groups and societies, from the Period Drama Society to the Network for Investing and Trading to the Greens. In the centre of the orientation fair sat a speed-dating chain: two long lines of young people faced one another. Tentative wooers spent much of the time trying to ignore the two would-be comedians on stage behind them.

'Fuck you!' one comedian yelled at the speed daters.

Near the back of the fair, I found the pro-life stall.

Two women with flowing manes, one blonde, the other brunette, and nose piercings stood behind the counter.

'It's about human rights: we think everybody needs them,' the blonde explained.

'How many talks did you have last year?' I was trying to pass myself off as an interested but busy postgrad.

'Oh, a few. We had a debate toward the end of the year, organised by the student union, some of whom debated against us.' She laughed.

'I'm not Christian,' I said. My radar told me they were. They had that

alternative Christian style: a concession to youthful rebellion – usually tidy dreadlocks or delicate piercings – combined with a genial, instructive manner.

‘That’s okay,’ replied the brunette. ‘We’ll probably just talk about football.’

A few years back, they wouldn’t have been welcome on campus at all, I told my friend Jane when I met her a couple of hours later. We were in Freda’s, a dusky bar slightly below street level. ‘But today I didn’t see a single feminist group among those stalls!’

Jane, a postgrad at UNSW, said she hadn’t noticed an increase in pro-life groups on campus but promised to investigate further.

Jane was another one of my friends who had had an abortion. She’d had three, in fact. All clear-cut and qualm-free.

‘I’d probably consider it as another last-minute form of birth control,’ she laughed. Then she conceded, ‘I may not be so glib about it were I to advise a teenage daughter. I might say today it’s not as straightforward as that.’

She’d never had a bad abortion experience. It had been the opposite. ‘It’s like a world of the most amazing, supportive, understanding people.’ Her tone was wholehearted. ‘Of course they interrogate you quite intently about your commitment to do it, but I never felt anyone was trying to dissuade me or judge me. Clinics are a bastion of womanly care.’

Jane’s three abortions were over the space of 15 years. At university and in the years after that, she hadn’t imagined she was the type to ever have children or get married, but she did get pregnant easily.

A few years later, she had a series of miscarriages, including losing twins at 16 weeks.

‘I thought, oh no, I’ve fucked up my reproductive cycles, they only know how to carry foetuses until eight weeks, nine weeks. And it was then I knew I did want children.’

Her last abortion was after she was a mother.

‘I only wanted two children,’ she confided. ‘Sounds like a horrible lifestyle choice, but I had things to do and just couldn’t have another baby.’

My mum liked *Underbelly* and old houses and I liked walking and old houses, so we took a walking tour I’d downloaded off the internet of Kate Leigh’s old razor-gang

neighbourhood in Surry Hills.

Walking along Devonshire Street, we were stopped by two men holding bloody-foetus placards outside an obviously pro-life pregnancy counselling service.

Mum tensed up, anticipating a confrontation.

‘I just want to tell you what God—’ the younger man started.

‘I don’t want to hear it,’ I answered.

‘You don’t want to get her started,’ my mum added.

‘It’s wrong to kill children,’ he said. ‘God wants you to know.’

‘I don’t believe in God,’ I replied.

‘I’ll pray for you,’ he said to our backs, getting in the last word.

See, I said to my mum. You can’t even walk down the street without being accosted. Imagine if you were trying to go to a clinic, or if you were pregnant!

Mum nodded noncommittally.

That night, our final evening in Sydney, my mum and I ate pizza on the foldout bed in our motel room. Mum was relaying a book she’d read about a woman’s account of her life in a Magdalene Laundry in Ireland. I recounted what I’d found at the Jessie Street National Women’s Library on the Parramatta Girls Home, a story breaking that week, as former inmates were giving testimony at the royal commission into child sex abuse. Girls had been sent to the reformatory for being rebellious adolescents or sexually active or difficult to control or pregnant or Indigenous – many of the same reasons women were sent to the Magdalene Laundries.

My mum had found the memoir very upsetting. She had such sympathy for women in those extreme circumstances, forced to make difficult decisions, fighting for life and death.

My abortion experience was nothing like that. Listening to Mum that night, I was glad I hadn’t told her about it during our five days in Sydney – though I’d had ample time, and there’d been so many moments when I could have. She’d think, I suspected, that because my situation wasn’t so dire, there was no reason I should have had that abortion. Occasionally, she still mentioned that in this world of bountiful contraceptives, there was no need for abortion.

True, I didn’t want to disappoint her. Yet, I also believed she wouldn’t understand, and that it could break something fragile between us – a perception she had of me and the life she had worked hard to allow.

Throughout the trajectory of writing this book, I imagined my research would

end, that I'd arrive at the answer as to what prevented women from speaking about abortion, from recognising its daily existence, when I spoke to my mum. That I'd be liberated when I discovered that final key, whatever it was.

That never happened. On that final night, I knew I couldn't tell her. That perhaps I never would.

I learned that I could believe that abortion was an essential, vital right and that women needed it to be able to control their lives, and that it was important to be vocal about the practice and the right, even as I accepted that abortion remained a complicated subject that evoked complicated feelings in people, whether or not they were religious, whether or not they were a feminist, and whether or not they'd ever needed one.

For all those reasons, I couldn't tell my mother. Perhaps some things are unspeakable when two people have different values.

Did it matter that I couldn't tell her, I asked myself as we sat in the back of the taxi on the way to the airport, my mum, the driver and I loudly singing along to 'Escape (The Pina Colada Song)' on the radio.

What did I think about my abortion after this long journey? It might have been my starting point for caring about the subject, but I still felt as passionately about abortion rights, regardless of whether I'd ever need another one. That tiny event in my life was of no consequence to the whole of women's history; it was nothing more than an echo of millions of other similar (and far more grim) life experiences that showed it was hard to be in possession of a womb. It involved potential responsibility for multiple lives and would always set the genders apart.

The weird thing about reproduction is that we haven't yet found a way to relieve women of the burden. Even after all our revolutions and our evolutions and our liberation movements, we know that reproduction of the species falls to women. It always will. We can fight for women's rights to have children only when they want, and for women's equal representation and remuneration in the workplace, but this quandary is irresolvable: many women will spend at least nine months pregnant, and a great deal of time thereafter parenting.

This was Shulamith Firestone's main dispute with Engels and Marx – it was all very well, she wrote, to recognise the sheer pervasiveness of economic exploitation brought on by only some benefitting from the labour of workers, but this economic model of the world overlooked the fundamental oppression of women that

would always remain for as long as they were forced to be the sole reproducers of children.

‘To make women and children totally independent would be to eliminate not just the patriarchal nuclear family, but the biological family itself.’

Perhaps that was the saddest realisation for me: that those radical reimaginings of the family, communities and women’s lives were a relic of yesterday’s feminism.

## Chapter Nine: In The End

Not long after I got back to Melbourne, Colleen Hartland, the Greens MP who had spoken publicly about her own abortion during the 2008 Victorian abortion debate, phoned and asked me to come to a meeting at Parliament House. Rumours abounded that Geoff Shaw, the bellicose member for Frankston, was drafting a Bill, with the help of the premier's office, to amend section 8 of the Abortion Law Reform Act; the section states that doctors have to provide information on abortion provision or refer the patient to another doctor who will. In principle, the Liberal Party had supported such an amendment at their state assembly.

The development was a uniting incident: the many representatives from the diverse groups involved in the fight for abortion reform were furious.

I'd never been inside Parliament House before. Colleen collected me from the security station and led me up a winding, narrow staircase, through a warren of chambers, up a lift and, finally, into the spacious office of the Greens. Some MPs' offices were on the bottom floor – dungeon-like cells without windows, Colleen explained, but because the Greens were (at the time) three members of the one small party, they got to share a larger office.

Seated at the wooden board table in the Greens' chambers were Leslie Cannold, three Labor MPs, a senior member of Liberty Victoria, a representative from Trades Hall, and one from the National Union of Students. All had been instrumental in changing Victoria's abortion laws.

I oscillated between the feeling that I was in a war-room tactical meeting and the feeling that they were a powerful coven conjuring resistance from all over the land; either way, my invite must have been accidental.

Everyone around the table listed their credentials. When it got to me, I cleared my throat. 'Er, I'm here on behalf of Melbourne Feminist Action. We're a small collective that's been organising around this issue.'

'They do really important work,' Colleen said to the room.

Which wasn't technically true: the MFA collective had already imploded, and in quite a disappointing fashion. Steph and I had managed to organise a snap action the previous week at the Liberal Party's state office on the edge of Melbourne's CBD. Despite being called only the day before, 150 ralliers arrived to find numerous police

and the party headquarters shuttered. Certain the Liberals could still hear what was happening on the street below, as could the surrounding businesses and banks, we held the speakout anyway, the sole megaphone reverberating stories of uteruses and corruption across the crowd. One group of older women in their 70s and 80s came to tell their stories of what abortion was like when it was illegal. They'd been involved in the abortion struggle for decades.

The action worked, combined with the murmurings of a backlash against the Liberals at the state election, and the rumours of an organised campaign. Denis Napthine made a video that was played on the evening news and became available on YouTube the following day, in which he stated that he unreservedly supported a woman's right to choose, and that his party had no intention of changing Victorian laws on the matter.

But in order to hold that speakout, we'd already broken the cardinal rule of a collective: we'd simply organised it ourselves, bypassing the other members and the by-committee process.

The one thing I learned in Parliament House that night was how politicians effected change: tactical efforts were directed at which MPs could be counted on to vote against amendments to the existing laws, who could possibly be convinced, and who would be better to just stay home the day the Bill was tabled so they wouldn't vote against the interests of Victorian women.

Meanwhile, Melbourne Feminist Action was rapidly disintegrating.

Chris Johnson, of the Sex Party, ran in the 2013 federal election for the seat of Wannon, on the border of Victoria and South Australia, so he wasn't as active during that period. Other members seized the opportunity to push him out of the collective because, despite the energy and numbers he brought to the abortion demonstrations, he had been barely tolerated because of his party's ties to the porn industry, and the suspicion of sex-positive feminism (such as SlutWalk) more generally. Clearly, political disagreements outweighed the collective's united front. And though they never said it out loud, I think they resented a man caring so much about a woman's issue.

Chris wasn't the only one who had lost his standing in the group. The collective had always struggled to juggle the objectives of the diverse groups

involved. Debbie Brennan's group Radical Women, for instance, had countless demands for every action, press release and meeting. Perhaps it was a method of hijacking meetings so they had more control, or perhaps they honestly believed that a representative of every marginalised group needed to be represented at every rally and on every leaflet, but it felt a lot like time-wasting and added to the long list of speakers and duration of activities, which everybody but Radical Women resented. Eventually, the bickering strangled the enthusiasm and unity that came from our early responsive actions.

A number of members had stopped attending regular meetings because they felt there wasn't much point – activity was sporadic, depending on political events at the time. We'd envisioned that the group would act like an umbrella group, materialising when a feminist issue needed to be at the fore, but that was a hard model to commit to. Besides, the group took time and effort, was unglamorous, and real change would be a long time coming.

In the hundreds of email exchanges leading up to our second-last action, I suggested we invite Pieter Mourik to speak: medical points of view were sorely lacking from public abortion discussions. This was an issue doctors cared about, I told the group passionately.

A midwife from Radical Women strenuously objected. She despised Pieter because of his opposition to home birth.

Goaded into a response by a combination of fatigue and attrition, I replied, 'Yeah, sure, whatever,' knowing it was a rookie mistake, but there was nothing like being part of a tiny collective to turn someone off the democratic process. At that point, activism felt like a ravenous cycle that used people up, then spat them out, deflated and bruised.

The final straw came with the midwife's reply a few minutes after 2am. 'Jacinda, when you are ready, I'll meet you at the intersection,' she wrote. 'There's room for everybody who recognises their own oppression and/or privilege, and the part that plays in the oppression of others.'

Who was I oppressing in this scenario: Radical Women, because I disagreed with their muddying tactics, or midwives?

It was the straw that broke the activist's back.

Nevertheless, Pieter, who was in Melbourne for the weekend, attended the rally, though only as an attendee. 'I've never been to a protest before!' he grinned.

Clearly, he was a quick study. Not long after, Right to Privacy Albury held their own demonstration, as well as a series of community forums. The last, held at the start of 2015, attracted 300 locals, including local priests, doctors and New South Wales MPs, who spoke about the need to move abortion out of the state's Criminal Code, and include clinic bubble zones in the legislation. Known pro-lifers were forbidden entry to the meeting. The purpose of the forum was to find a solution, Pieter explained.<sup>155</sup>

When my research began, many abortion books focussed on the time before legalisation, when women's voices on the subject were rarely heard. Several years on, the atmosphere has changed: airing abortion stories is now actively encouraged, so much so that Emily Letts, an abortion counsellor in the United States, filmed her own abortion. Letts wanted people to see that the operation wasn't scary, and she wanted to deny space for the guilt usually projected onto women. 'Our society breeds this guilt. We inhale it from all directions,' she writes in *Cosmo*. 'Even women who come to the clinic completely solid in their decision to have an abortion say they feel guilty for not feeling guilty.'<sup>156</sup>

Typically, in popular depictions, abortion is still presented as a moral issue, thus much of the discourse surrounding abortion suggests that groups are equally divided between their concern for the future of individual foetuses and protecting the future of women in general, even though the research shows that there's far more support for women's bodily autonomy than the media or politicians allow. Abortion is much like climate change in that way; 98.4 per cent of climate scientists believe that climate change is real and caused by human beings.<sup>157</sup> Nonetheless, in public debate, climate change is still shown as having sizeable and legitimate opposition.

I never heard from Anne and Jim again, though I thought of them and their largely reclusive life often, especially when I saw the Bonhoeffer Peace Collective actions on Australian Defence Force bases.

Conversely, Graham Preston appeared in the news frequently after his tests of Tasmania's bubble-zone legislation. He was initially charged, but the case was dropped in late 2014.<sup>158</sup> Graham thought the clause was unconstitutional, and was

trying to provoke police into charging him again so a lawyer from Adelaide, who had offered to take the case pro bono, could test the law. They believed bubble zones infringed on the right to protest. Evidence of Tasmania's 'creeping authoritarianism', Graham said.<sup>159</sup>

Possibly the most unexpected trajectory of all the characters I met along the way was Leslie Cannold's. At that Parliament House meeting, she mentioned that she would no longer be the public face of Reproductive Choice Australia, that she was moving on to other things. At first, 'other things' seemed to be politics, a realm that suited her – she was well connected, smart, comfortable in front of a crowd. The surprise was when she ran for the WikiLeaks Party instead of a more mainstream party. Perhaps the appeal was that she would be the party's face in Victoria, given that Julian Assange was unable to leave the Ecuadorian Embassy in London without facing Swedish extradition charges.

While the party fit with Leslie's concern for civil liberties, they were also smeared with the rape and sexual assault allegations pending against Assange, which made the party a surprising choice for a feminist. Moreover, the party had a focus on civil and electronic disobedience, as well as grassroots activism – tactics Cannold had not previously embraced. She spoke on behalf of the party at a refugee rights rally of thousands, encouraging attendees to continue to protest until we saw legislative change, which seemed to contradict her earlier support for polite dissent. It was the first and last time I saw her speak on the plight of refugees.

Just a few weeks later, Leslie spectacularly resigned from the party and the Senate ticket after it emerged that the WikiLeaks Party had preferenced far-right parties, including Family First, Shooters and Fishers, Australia First and the Christian Right. Many of these groups were also anti-abortionists.

It took one more abortion-rights rally for me to realise that I could no longer stomach being around pro-lifers.

That day, I arrived at Parliament House at 7.30am with the last few MFA members and those attendees we picked up from social media. Eleven in total. The aim had been for a pro-choice contingent to remind MPs entering the car park that 85 per cent of Victorians supported a woman's right to choose, a message we thought might have been diluted by the pro-life congregation that held the space each sitting

day.

A woman with a video camera arrived and started filming up and down our contingent.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, noticing the camera lingering on our faces.

‘Nothing,’ she replied, shrugging. She had a cold smile.

A few minutes later, I overheard her talking to the milling police officers. ‘Jacinda W-o-o-d-h-e-a-d,’ she said, as the officer made notes.

I was outraged, ridiculously so. ‘Sorry? What is this about?’ The mystery woman wasn’t at all familiar and it bothered me that she knew my name, and felt comfortable passing it on to the police.

‘Jacinda—’ the officer began.

‘This is ridiculous,’ I snapped. ‘That woman was over there filming us before. It’s creepy and an attempt at intimidation. How can that be legal?’

‘Look, this is just a peaceful protest—’ he began.

‘It’s not peaceful,’ I barked, digging a grave.

His jaw clenched. ‘Oh, it’s not? Is that what you’re telling me?’

‘How can it be peaceful?’ Aware I was ranting, I couldn’t stop. ‘They’re at the clinic everyday, filming women, harassing women – they’ve taken footage of us, and now they know our names!’

‘We get filmed all the time,’ the officer said glibly.

Having been to countless protests, I knew the police also did their fair share of filming.

‘It really depends on what they’re using it for,’ he went on. ‘You can come and make a complaint, but you have to prove criminal intent. Look, I understand your frustration and your concerns – I really do.’

I wasn’t falling for it. He had kind brown eyes, but a firm jaw, and I had a rule against being friendly with members of the constabulary.

Later, my protest composure disintegrated utterly. When pro-lifers lined up on either side of our small rally, with banners reading ‘Victorian law forces doctors to kill little, female babies’, I yelled out, ‘That is absurd and patently untrue!’

My lowest point came after I heard that same woman mention my name to her fellow protester. When she extended her hand as though we might be friends, I retorted, ‘No. You’re being weird and stalkerish.’

Only then did I realise that I had whatever the opposite to Stockholm

Syndrome is. These people I had spent so much time courting and listening to had nothing more to offer me. I loathed their beliefs, their regressive ideas about gender, their disproportionate influence over policies, and their whole sanctimonious, uncharitable, fear-driven meddling in other people's lives.

I never wanted to have another conversation from their point of view – I just couldn't abide it.

Here's what I think: reproduction is complicated, as are sex and human emotions.

Canadian abortion-rights activist Joyce Arthur puts it well, noting how a 'happily pregnant woman may feel love for her foetus as a special and unique human being, a welcome and highly anticipated member of her family'. This woman may treat the foetus like it's a living being with a name, identity and home. An unhappily pregnant woman, on the other hand, may think of the foetus as an 'unwelcome invader' and so feel 'tremendous relief' when she ends the pregnancy. 'Both of these reactions to a foetus, and all reactions in between, are perfectly valid and natural,' writes Arthur. 'Both may even occur in the same woman, years apart.'<sup>160</sup>

A fundamental foundation of the anti-abortion movement is that foetuses are objectively the same as a human being, but it's a claim dismantled by Arthur: 'Biology, medicine, law, philosophy, and theology have no consensus on the issue, and neither does society as a whole.' Moreover, she argues, the 'subjective and unscientific nature of the claim' means that consensus will never be reached, 'so we must give the benefit of the doubt to women, who are indisputable human beings with rights'.

Hear, hear.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Details on the day of the murder, and the life and psychology of Peter Knight from the following sources: Berry, J. & Munro, I., 2002. 'Remorseless' Recluse Gets Life. *Age*. 19 November 2002.

Available at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/11/19/1037697662403.html> [Accessed 14 November 2014]; *R v Knight* (2002) VSC 498; *R v Knight* (2004) VSCA 48; Allanson, S., 2006. *Murder on His Mind: The Untold Story of Australia's Abortion Clinic Murder*. Melbourne: Wilkinson Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid (Allanson).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a doctor at the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic, 10 January 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Petrie, A., 2009. The Dropout Who Came Back to Kill: Melbourne's Abortion Clinic Murderer. In Brown, M., 2009. *Mad, Bad and Mysterious*. Sydney: Pan MacMillan.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, P., 2014. Deluded Pro-Life Crusader Peter James Knight Kills Guard, but Wanted More Dead after He Brought His Gun and Hatred to an Abortion Clinic in Melbourne. *Herald Sun*. 11 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/deluded-prolife-crusader-peter-james-knight-kills-guard-but-wanted-more-dead-after-he-brought-his-gun-and-hatred-to-an-abortion-clinic-in-melbourne/story-fni0ffnk-1226850504649> [Accessed 20 November 2014].

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# Exegesis: *The Abortion Game*: Writing a Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction Work

## Introduction

In this creative-writing doctoral research entitled ‘*The Abortion Game*: Writing a Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction Work’, I set out to create an original manuscript that investigates the contemporary politics surrounding abortion, and fits the mould of ‘consciously political narrative nonfiction’, a key subgenre I define in this exegesis.

In the 70,000-word nonfiction manuscript I, as both writer and narrator, consider the factors, tiers and personalities involved with abortion in Australia, using techniques commonly associated with fiction writing, such as narrative arc, characterisation, dialogue and scenes. The creative component is accompanied by this exegesis, which analyses the production and lineage of *consciously political* narrative nonfiction.

Over the 20th century, narrative nonfiction evolved into a form that employs a narrative structure, accuracy, immersion and fleshed-out characters or subjects (Sims & Kramer 1995). Characteristically, the writer is involved, but only insofar as they filter experiences, observations and interpretation (Gutkind 1997). It is a form, as practitioner Robin Hemley noted, ‘in which the narrative is as much forward-looking as backward, and in which the writer is part of a story being told’ (2012, introduction, sec. 2, para. 3). Other times, the writer-narrator acts as a vehicle for the reader or, occasionally, drives the narrative, which is frequently the case in works of infiltration or investigation, and certainly in those that blur the line between narrative nonfiction and memoir (Hemley 2012). Here, ‘memoir’ refers to the writing of ‘a particular period and place in the writer’s life’ (Zissner in Baker & Zissner 1998, p. 3), and indicates the slipperiness of the narrative nonfiction writer’s authorial position, which can be participatory and subjective.

At this point, it is crucial to define certain parameters of this exegesis. The research documented here is not analysing or applying narrative theory or examining what is or what is not narrative. Across the world, there are hundreds of libraries devoted to narrative in fiction and literary theory more generally, but examining those concepts in relation to narrative nonfiction is not within the scope of this research.

Fundamentally, in relation to this research, ‘narrative’ describes the ‘thematic and causal progression’ (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou 2013, p. 3) of a story.

Narrative nonfiction is a relatively new field that relies on a fairly conventional set of tropes to construct and relate a story. In the seminal work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal defined a basic narrative text, regardless of whether the narrative deals in fact or the imagination, as one in which ‘an agent relates (“tells”) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings or a combination thereof’ (1985, p. 5). In a similar vein, Rimmon-Kenan characterised ‘narration’ as the ‘act or process of production’, with ‘the author ... the agent responsible for the production of the narrative and its communication’ (1983, pp. 3–5). Thus, when I refer to ‘narrative’, I am relying on these three basic definitions, albeit with further refinement of the role narrative serves.

‘To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself’, wrote theorist Hayden White in *The Content of the Form* (1987). While these structures are worthy of serious interrogation, these questions are not part of the scope of this research. White’s theories are only related to my research insofar as they help distinguish why narrative is important to a form for which the main purpose, as Hartsock has argued, is ‘to engage in an “exchange of subjectivities”, or at the least to engage in a narrowing of the distance between subject and object’ (2009, p. 120). Narrative helps ‘us’ – that is, people in general but the reader specifically – to make meaning out of the world and from a sequence of events. At a rudimentary level, story or narrative moves a mere list or chronology into a ‘structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole’ (White 1987, chap. 1, para. 21). That is to say, narrative encourages the reader to see a bigger picture.

For the context of this research, *consciously political* narrative nonfiction refers to works that aim to make deliberate political interventions, even as their approach to crafting relies on techniques that, according to theorist-practitioners Norman Sims and Matthew Ricketson, actually ‘belong to storytelling’ itself (Ricketson 2010a; Sims 2007, p. 19). Practitioners of this form, I argue, are very aware of the political and social landscapes in which they are writing, and it is their intent to challenge the perceived stability of these landscapes.

There exists already much literature and debate on the difficulties of deciding on one term for the taxonomy of a writing that describes where journalism and literature meet. Popular terms include ‘creative nonfiction’, ‘literary journalism’, ‘narrative nonfiction’ and ‘narrative journalism’. Ricketson has argued that contemporary writers and theorists have failed to decide on a term that encompasses the modern practice of narrative nonfiction, which is often long-form and journalistic in its origin and methodological approach, and typically relies on interviewing, observational reporting, and working with various documents to offer depth or context to events, and to corroborate or verify accounts (2014, chap. 1; 2010a, pp. 1–4). Sociologists would refer to such approaches as ‘qualitative methods’, because they ‘open a window on lived experience, on the meanings embedded in everyday life, on motives and emotions’ (Lichterman 2002, p. 121) and, importantly, are not conventionally measurable scientific approaches.

I am reluctant, however, to adopt Ricketson’s preferred terms of ‘book-length narrative non-fiction’ or ‘book-length journalism’ throughout this exegesis, as some of the works cited, for example John Sack’s ‘M’ (1966), are not book-length, and I posit that, on the whole, the attributes of consciously political narrative nonfiction could also apply to works shorter than a book.

American practitioner and academic Ben Yagoda referred to ‘literary journalism’, the most common designation for the form in the United States, as a ‘profoundly fuzzy term’, and one that usually described ‘lauded nonfiction’ (1997, p. 13). To qualify as part of the ‘literary journalism’ genre that Yagoda and his co-editor attempted to define in *The Art of Fact* (1997), the writing had to contain ‘active fact-gathering’ or reporting, ‘a commitment to the truth’ or facts, and ‘currency’, to prevent the work from slipping into ‘history’ (1997, pp. 13–15).

Theorists and scholars over the past century have shown ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ to be slippery, contestable terms and spaces. When it comes to consciously political narrative nonfiction, I interpret ‘a commitment to truth’ to mean that the work must consist of a series of events that happened and were witnessed or statements that were made and heard, and that these are certain, and, for the most part, verifiable. (I offer this caveat because an author may refer to, for example, a personal insight or a private conversation that may not always be verifiable in the way that a person-in-custody dying in a police cell may be.)

After the author has these ‘facts’, of course, the narrativising begins, through the structuring or arranging of events that happened and things that were said in order to imply meaning or form conclusions. In fiction, narrative progression tends to be teleological; that is, the narrative implies a causal relationship that makes events purposeful and meaningful. This is a much more difficult task in nonfiction, where the author does not create characters, subjects and events. As White argued, ‘Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give real events the form of a story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativisation is so difficult’ (1987, chap. 1, para. 6). Authors of nonfiction cannot simply invent such details, as this would betray a fundamental pact with the reader, who is expecting a certain level of verifiable ‘truth’ from nonfictional works.

In Yagoda’s definition, the adjective ‘literary’ denoted that the work was ‘thoughtfully, artfully and valuably innovative’ (1997, p. 14). To further complicate the definition, Hartsock contended that the issue with deciding on one term was largely due to the politics in the academy where English met journalism, and that there was reluctance from either field to adopt one term (2000, p. 6). Moreover, John S Bak noted, the distinctions regularly made between creative or narrative nonfiction and literary journalism mattered most to the ‘Anglo-American’ tradition, largely because ‘many nations have not enjoyed a journalistic heritage that contains side-by-side examples of literary reportage, narrative journalism, creative nonfiction and New Journalism, or the various media in which to publish them’ (2011, pp. 8–9).

As this exegesis is not focussed on further refining the definition of this particular form, at times I will also refer to literary journalism, to emphasise the history of the form as well as the practice itself. For the most part, however, I will simply refer to ‘narrative nonfiction’, acknowledging the modern Australian description of the form.

Using the two terms ‘narrative nonfiction’ and ‘literary journalism’ interchangeably, as I do in this exegesis, to describe the point where literature and journalism intersect may be considered contentious by some writers and theorists (Gutkind 1997; Hersey 1980; Joseph 2010; Ricketson 2010b; Wolfe 1973); however, I choose to follow the lead of practitioner and educator Mark Kramer, who theorised almost two decades ago that ‘literary journalism’ is the preferred term to describe narrative or literary nonfiction. Although not a perfect label, Kramer deemed it ‘roughly accurate’, noting that the ‘paired words cancel each other’s vices and

describe the sort of nonfiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what's happening – the essence of journalism' (1995, p.1). 'Literary reportage' or the Literary Reporters, when used in this exegesis, refers to a specific writing movement (Hartsock 2009).

At this point, it is worth mentioning that in the construction of *The Abortion Game*, I applied techniques and methods observed in the study of narrative nonfiction and literary journalism, including immersion, field research and interviewing. These are methods that have been used throughout the various stages of the journalistic tradition, from the Literary Reporters of the 1930s (Hartsock 2009), the New Journalists of the 1960s and 1970s (Hartsock 2000; Ricketson 2014; Wolfe 1973), and more recent nonfiction writers in Australia and the US, such as Jeff Sparrow and Barbara Ehrenreich.

I would contend that neither 'narrative nonfiction' nor 'literary journalism' perfectly encapsulates the current practice, largely because of the baggage of history associated with both terms. There remains a perception more generally among readers that 'nonfiction' may refer to histories of events past or people now dead, whereas journalism frequently indicates that the work focuses on the experiences and observations of contemporary characters, even when it includes the personal observations of the writer, and the surrounding present, such as in the case of the daily news cycle. On the other hand, the use of 'journalism' can often suggest a gap between the text and the practitioner, an attempt at objective distancing that is not as common in these long-form projects, where the narrator or practitioner often plays an important if not active role, commonly acting as a vehicle for the readers themselves. This idea will be explored further in chapter two of this exegesis, when I explore my own role as writer-narrator in my nonfiction manuscript, *The Abortion Game*.

Clearly, another term that is vital here, as the title of this research indicates, is 'consciously political narrative nonfiction', a term I am using to signify the evolution of my methodology throughout this research. Even in the early days of this research, I had suspected such a shift in subject position was possible. Two of my original research questions were: 'Is abortion the quintessential subject where the personal becomes political, making journalistic objectivity unrealistic? If so, how does a lack of objectivity affect participant-observer and immersion research?' These questions have taken up much of my thinking in the past two years and have helped me arrive at the term 'consciously political narrative nonfiction', which refers to the

unconventional narrative position the research and writing drew me into, and is closely examined and theorised in chapters three and four of this exegesis.

Note, this kind of nonfiction is markedly different to ‘advocacy journalism’, where the practitioner begins a project acting as an ‘active interpreter’, speaking on behalf of individuals or groups who are under- or misrepresented in the media (Waisbord 2009, p. 371). In a similar way, that is what also distinguishes the project from ‘action research’, which uses collaborative problem-solving to effect social change (Greenwood & Levin 2007, p. 6). In my creative work, I did not set out to advocate a specific point of view to the detriment of another. Instead, the activism I became involved with was born of the research and practice. That is to say, it was a result of actually participating in the world of my subject (abortion).

Originally, the three main aims of my research were to:

- produce an exegesis about nonfiction techniques used in politically conscious narrative nonfiction
- apply those techniques in development of the creative-writing text on the politics of the abortion divide in Australia
- briefly analyse the usefulness of these techniques in the exegesis.

The fundamental question driving my nonfiction manuscript was, ‘Why is abortion largely invisible in Australia?’ This research takes as its starting point the fact that abortion is the second-most common elective surgical procedure in Australia (Gleeson 2011, p. 15), yet the history, the politics and the actuality of abortion remain hidden from view. Abortion, as a consideration, choice or practice, is often perceived as shameful; when abortion is hidden and illicit, it becomes more so. As a ‘hidden’ practice, one that is not encountered within Australia unless it is through personal experience or public controversy, abortion is a practice that society can largely pretend does not exist. This invisibility allows us to avoid grappling with and confronting the complex issues abortion raises, complexities that I believe my narrative nonfiction manuscript explores. For example, the narrative arc in my manuscript involves immersing me, as author-narrator, in this ‘hidden’ world, with the focus shifting from my personal experience of abortion to a larger-scale view of the politics involved in abortion, and again returning to the experiences of people who have had abortions and how it changed their lives.

Furthermore, my narrative nonfiction manuscript has used a number of the ‘storytelling’ techniques advocated by established practitioners and teachers of

contemporary narrative nonfiction in the shaping of the text, something that is analysed further in chapter one of this exegesis.

This 25,000-word exegesis reviews theories of ethics, objectivity and narrative within a form that is fundamentally journalism, yet can never be encompassed by this narrow definition as it is primarily about mapping the cultural other (Sanderson 2004, p. 1), a laborious task that journalists rarely have the time or space for. For the purposes of this exegesis, ‘mapping’ and ‘cultural other’ have specific, limited definitions related to their purpose in general narrative nonfiction. By ‘mapping’, I mean how writers of consciously political narrative nonfiction venture into unfamiliar terrain to chart the territory of their chosen subject, often emphasising complexity, detail or nuance. ‘Cultural other’ refers to the subject, which, most often, lives a way of life that is unusual and typically unfamiliar to the reader. My own narrative nonfiction manuscript, *The Abortion Game*, aimed for a similar kind of ‘mapping’ of ‘cultural others’ by giving shape and contours to the occurrences and actors involved in the world of abortion.

In addition, this exegesis also scrutinises the usefulness and complexity of immersion as a research methodology.

This exegesis comprises an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one examines the tradition of consciously political narrative nonfiction, beginning with a literature review of seminal political narrative nonfiction works about power relations within society. Within it I ask, ‘Why is an exchange of subjectivities necessary to narrative nonfiction?’ I also look at the roles of narrative and other elements of craft within the form, and why an exploration of difficult subject matter is common to this subgenre.

In chapter two, I explore the ethics of objectivity and truth within consciously political narrative nonfiction. I will posit, like many theorists before me have, that ‘objectivity’ is a construct, albeit one still popular in the journalistic field; this means ethical spaces in narrative nonfiction are ambiguous and require frequent negotiation, particularly when depicting unsympathetic subjects, or subjects whose opinions the practitioner may find offensive.

Chapter three looks at the subjectivity of the practitioner when employing immersion and participation methodologies in the creation of a political narrative nonfiction work, using my research experiences as a means of illustrating the various difficulties involved in such a study.

Lastly, chapter four asks, ‘Should I publish this book?’ In it, I consider the potential exploitation of subjects and interviewees in my manuscript. All nonfiction is contrived to a certain extent, I will posit, but in narrative nonfiction, when the practitioner tries to enter the world of the subject at various intimate levels, endeavouring to capture them in everyday situations, with the aim of both humanising and understanding the subject (Ricketson 2014), these contrivances are even more apparent. What is the social worth of publishing this nonfiction manuscript I have created, I ask, and does it outweigh the potential consequences outside the text on the lives of the various real-world characters?

This research, as a whole, fills a gap in the existing literature of abortion narrative nonfiction texts, and is also a reflection on its construction.

The canon of abortion texts includes Gideon Haigh’s history of the illegal abortion trade in Victoria between 1967 and 1970 during the lead-up to the Menhennitt ruling, which radically changed abortion legislation in Australia. While it is a fascinating and methodically researched account of the three-year period it covers and the levels of corruption at the time, *The Racket* (2008) makes for very conventional nonfiction reading. Although Haigh’s reportage is forensic, teeming with dates, names and legislation, and the reader does come to appreciate the extent of the brutality of illegal abortion, as well as the underlying assumptions about women’s sexualities, the reader fails to exchange subjectivities with Haigh’s characters, largely because they are a historical cast, flickering in and out like names on a microfiche.

Ethicist Leslie Cannold’s *The Abortion Myth* (1998) is also worthy of note, but more for what the book reveals about the psychology of pro- and anti-choice positions, than for the narrative or structure of the text. Cannold’s research revealed that the women she interviewed who identified as anti-choice all conceded that there were times a termination of pregnancy was acceptable, namely in cases of rape and incest. Cannold concluded that rather than being opposed to abortion, women with anti-choice beliefs view those who abort as poor parents. Following from this is the idea that when a woman is pregnant, she is seen by conservative groups and legislators as a potential infanticidal threat, with her safety and agency becoming secondary to that of the foetus.

Other noteworthy texts include Susan Wicklund’s *This Common Secret: My Journey as an Abortion Doctor* (2007), a memoir of an abortion doctor’s decades of practising as one of the few abortion providers in the Midwest of America, such as in

North Dakota, where abortion is very difficult to access. In Australia, there is also the anthology *Lost: Illegal Abortion Stories* (2006), edited by Jo Wainer, with a foreword by Helen Garner. The book was a long time in the making; the abortion law reformers Bertram and Jo Wainer first placed an advertisement in 1985 asking people with personal experiences of illegal abortion to come forward with their stories. ‘The next generation must know what it was like for women’, they wrote at the time. The collection is a series of oral histories, raw and confronting first-person accounts, mostly from women, mostly before second-wave feminism, and in a time before contraception was readily available. Neither of these books, however, considers modern abortion laws and practice, or asks why so many individuals are so obsessively dedicated to abortion politics at this point in time, despite the fact that access to abortion is easier than it ever has been before.

In summary, I saw a significant gap in Australian published texts on abortion and a need within the existing abortion texts for a work of consciously political narrative nonfiction: one that rigorously questions the invisibility of abortion and aims to change the landscape of shame and distortion surrounding it, but also takes the time to understand why it’s an issue that moves people so passionately.

Moreover, the thesis as a whole contributes to the abortion literature by analysing the role of a writer practising consciously political narrative nonfiction; that is, the kind of nonfiction that allows for the practitioner’s politics and reactions to situations to help shape the text, and the consequences beyond.

## Chapter One: The Tradition of Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction

As outlined in the introduction, there exists a great deal of literature, as well as ongoing debate, about the term most appropriate to describe narrative nonfiction works (Ricketson 2014, 2010b; Yagoda 1997). For the purposes of this exegesis, to meet the criteria of narrative nonfiction or literary journalism, the work must strive to take the ‘emotional temperature of [a] situation’ (Weingarten 2005, p. 148), and have a ‘greater degree of engagement with its subjects’ (Joseph 2010, p. 83) than daily newspaper journalism.

Further, according to Hartsock, ‘the purpose of literary journalism is to engage in an “exchange of subjectivities”, or at the least to engage in a narrowing of the distance between subject and object’ (2009, p. 120), that is, from the nonfiction subject to the text’s reader. At the very least, I would contend, narrative nonfiction allows the recognition of *other* subjectivities. This recognition or exchange of subjectivities can then result in empathy in readers, or the requisite ‘insight and contemplation’ (Sims 2007, p. xi) typically associated with the form.

Even as they allow for the possibility of Hartsock’s ‘exchange of subjectivities’, these texts must also use some or all of the following methods, defined by Norman Sims and Lee Gutkind, two leaders in the field in the United States: immersion in the world of the subject; characterisation; literary prose techniques including metaphor, point of view (that may *shift* or be ‘inner’ [Gutkind 2008, p. 120]), voice, description, plot and story; dialogue; scenes; narrative and narrative arc; and accuracy (Gutkind 2008, pp. 17–33; Sims 2007, pp. 6–7).

Furthermore, to qualify as a text belonging to the subgenre of *consciously political narrative nonfiction*, a work must make a deliberate political intervention, most often into a subject that has previously received little public attention or scrutiny, and is thus a world or subject that remains hidden or *other*, and, ultimately, unknown to the reading public in general. The kinds of texts I cite here are works that examine power relations within society, or marginalised experiences that are commonly overlooked or excluded from traditional media or narratives. These are works that are often discomfiting because of their intent to disrupt the status quo.

‘Consciously political’ may also refer to works that reveal that which has been kept hidden or deliberately forgotten, that which has been silenced for political

reasons. Anna Funder's *Stasiland* (2003), for example, fits the criteria for a consciously political narrative nonfiction text: it documents that which has been erased or misrepresented and, in the process, uncovers the exacting toll of surveillance states on human lives long after those states have collapsed.

Hartsock contended that when approaching such narrative nonfiction works, writers don't objectify the world as something different or alien from the viewing subject; rather, they are aiming to allow space for an exchange of subjectivities that *potentially* elicits empathy from the reader (2009, p. 120). Anderson described this approach and objective in narrative nonfiction as an attempt to 'persuade' readers' 'attitudes, interpretations, opinions, even actions' (1987, p. 2).

Hartsock drew on Alan Trachtenberg's and Walter Benjamin's claims about the introduction of 'objectivity' within reporting, arguing this 'created an epistemological gulf for readers between personal experience and information about experience' (1998, p. 62). Moreover, Hartsock wrote, the mainstream news usually 'denies' the reader the opportunity to question (2000, p. 56). Consciously political narrative nonfiction seeks to bridge this gap and afford the reader the opportunity to walk across and learn what's on the other side.

Why is a kind of nonfiction that often reads like fiction (because it uses similar literary techniques) considered more able to achieve this effect than the novel? Largely, this is perhaps due to the awareness that the story has consequences beyond the text and in the broader world of the reader. In fiction, John Hersey wrote in his 1980 essay about the differences between literary invention and nonfiction, 'as Auden wrote is the case in poetry ... "all facts and beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities." But when we read an ambitious journalistic work, we are asked to believe, and to carry belief away with the book' (pp. 21–22). This echoes Ricketson and others on the subject: readers understand that the characters being read about in a narrative nonfiction text, as well as their decisions, are on some level real (Gardner 1983; Ricketson 2014).

Many Australian writers have produced extended works of journalism that rely on narrative. Matthew Ricketson referred to these works as examples of 'book-length journalism', a genre label that incorporates literary journalism, narrative journalism, literary nonfiction *and* creative nonfiction, and accentuates the increasing likelihood of encountering this strand of journalism outside the newspaper or magazine. Ricketson's extensive research has illustrated that these works are often

semi-immersive in nature, and employ techniques more generally associated with fiction writing. Although, Ricketson warned, the assumption that these techniques belong to the realm of fiction can confuse readers, as can the terms ‘narrative nonfiction’ or ‘literary journalism’, for they imply that these techniques belong to one field or the other; rather, he argued, they are a part of storytelling, which is fundamental to both forms, fiction and nonfiction (2010a).

Frequently, narrative nonfiction explores landscapes of injustice or complexity. Kramer, concluding his introduction to the anthology *Literary Journalism*, went so far as to suggest that the form is ‘intrinsically political – and strongly democratic’ (in Sims & Kramer 1995, p. 34), because it is so focused on personal experience and narratives, because it does not accept a neatly bound version of events, and because it can investigate and accept multiple accounts or versions simultaneously. This kind of nonfiction ‘cuts through the obfuscating generalities of creeds, countries, companies, bureaucracies, and experts. And narratives of the felt lives of everyday people test idealisations against actualities’ (ibid., p. 35). That is to say, one of the motivations behind taking a narrative nonfiction approach is to challenge perceptions the reader may have had before reading the narrative nonfiction text.

Consciously political narrative nonfiction takes this championing of injustice or political causes further, I argue, because the writers are cognisant of their text’s place in the political and/or social landscape, and the writing of the text is in fact a form of intervention that aims to change that landscape.

There are three additional characteristics common to the works of political narrative nonfiction I will be examining. The first is intimate reporting. When stressing the importance of scene-setting, Gutkind posited a definition of ‘intimate’ as ‘recording and noting detail that the reader might not know or even imagine without your particular inside insight’ (1996). I am applying this definition to the reporting of the subject in general, making it similar to what Wolfe called ‘saturation reporting’ (1973, p. 66), which allows a fuller, more humanising picture of the subject.

The second is ‘a focus on ordinary people’ (Sims 2007, p. 6), a characteristic American practitioner and writer extraordinaire Gay Talese emphasised in his essay, ‘Origins of a Nonfiction Writer’ (1996). Talese wrote, ‘[...] private figures, unknown individuals ... I could write about them today, or tomorrow, or next year and it will make no difference in the sense of their topicality. These people are dateless’. I

maintain that it is the very ordinariness of these subjects within this field of nonfiction that elicits reader empathy. Due to its exploratory nature, consciously political narrative nonfiction does not impose a grand narrative, with ‘its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal’ (Lyotard 1993, p. 72). Instead, this subgenre constructs itself in contrast to ‘hegemonic’ (Gramsci 1971) or ‘master narratives’ (Douglas 2002, p. 173) about great men, or of the conception of history as something built by exceptional individuals, such as Caesar or Napoleon, rather than masses of ordinary people and the various social forces that shape their lives. This approach also highlights the importance of the intimate reporting technique cited earlier: such reportage allows readers a view of lives rarely depicted in more mainstream news journalism and to study people and events within their context. This attempt to depict history as less hierarchical and more inclusive and far-reaching, filled with everyday people and the way the world and its politics impact upon them, is not isolated to consciously political narrative nonfiction. History, sociology and other fields in the humanities often argue that such research can lead to interesting narratives and meaning (Squire 2005) that would not be found in a top-down historical biography; for example, why Napoleon decided to invade Russia and how he felt about the decision.

Lastly, I look at the emphasis on the subject and *their* experience(s). Mark Kramer advised writers to ‘pinpoint your subjects’ emotional experience, not your own’ (Sims 2007, p. 7). This is because works of consciously political narrative nonfiction are about immersion in and observation from the world of the subject, rather than solely the author’s perspective of the subject. Hemley argued, however, that it was a combination of the subjects’ and author’s perspectives that resulted in compelling narrative nonfiction. ‘Immersion writing engages the writer in the here and now in a journalistic sense,’ Hemley wrote, ‘shaping and creating a story happening in the present while unabashedly lugging along all that baggage that makes up the writer’s personality: his or her memories, culture and opinions’ (2012, introduction, sec. 2, para. 2).

It follows that because narrative nonfiction is striving to build a bridge between the experience of and information about subjects, the form regularly blurs the line between the objective and subjective. As Ricketson observed, ‘implicit in using the words “fictional techniques” is a reaction against the way people and events are usually presented in the print media, especially newspapers’ (2010a). A typical

example was printed in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper following the coronial inquest into the case that formed the premise for Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island*: 'Palm Island man Mulrunji Doomadgee died after being bashed by a Queensland policeman' (Nguyen 2006). It's a statement that provides key facts but tells us nothing about how many lives Doomadgee's death touched or if this case was emblematic.

Before the rise of this kind of 'objective' journalism, Ricketson noted, reporting was far more narrative in style and detail. Indeed, narrative nonfiction has a long history, as detailed by a number of books over the past twenty years, such as Norman Sims and Mark Kramer's *Literary Journalism* (1995), John Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (2000) and the collection edited by John Bak and Bill Reynolds, *Literary Journalism across the Globe* (2011). Even though this exegesis looks at some European writers, such as Egon Kisch and George Orwell, and some recent Australian writers, my research has mainly focussed on the American narrative nonfiction tradition. It is important to note here the long history of using narrative nonfiction to make political interventions or cases for social reform (Aucoin 2007), especially in the United States. For example, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (2001) depicted, in exacting detail, the lives and poverty of tenant farm workers during the 1936 'Dust Bowl' drought in America's south. Accompanied by photographs, the documentary-like text recorded the lives of marginalised workers whose situation had been unimproved by the New Deal programs of the period. *Famous Men* was also a critique of journalism, which Agee saw as hungering for such stories of stark misery, even though media attention only lasted as long as the story sold copies. In *Black like Me* (2003), white American writer John Howard Griffin went to some lengths to make himself appear black (including a medical skin-tinting process) and travelled through the segregated South to illustrate the peril African-Americans faced in late-1950s America and the dehumanising effects of state-legislated racism. In *Salvador* (2006), originally commissioned for the *New York Review of Books*, Joan Didion travelled to El Salvador to report on a country at civil war and wrote an account of a people living in fear of torture and being disappeared by death squads, an account that also exposed America's involvement. All of these texts resulted in mass public scrutiny of these subjects.

Journalistic ambitions to expose gross wrongdoings or ameliorate the lives of overlooked communities is part of the ‘muckraking’ tradition in the United States, which ‘downplayed the individual story and emphasised the larger social issue’ (Aucoin 2007, p. 562), in a way that’s similar to consciously political narrative nonfiction texts. In the 20th century, this was also known as ‘expose journalism’ or ‘investigative journalism’ (Feldstein 2006), with the emphasis on exposing injustice, corruption or wrongdoing. Nellie Bly’s reporting immediately comes to mind, as does Barbara Ehrenreich’s narrative nonfiction.

Muckraking was a genre spurred by ‘social upheaval caused by industrialisation and efforts to regulate it’ (Aucoin 2005, p. 33), hence the focus on abuses of power that harmed the ordinary citizen. The term ‘muckraker’ has been besmirched in the public memory, something Feldstein traced back to Theodore Roosevelt (2006, p. 105). Today, particularly in Australia, the term continues to have negative connotations, conjuring images of crumpled, camera-clutching reporters sifting through garbage bins in the dark. For the purposes of this exegesis, however, I am using the term in its accepted academic context: to describe a kind of journalism that relies on the ‘use of fact gathering to challenge authority and oppose the abuse of power – political, governmental, corporate, or religious – on behalf of ordinary citizens’ (ibid., p. 106).

Some Australian examples that could arguably fit the ‘muckraking’ label include David Marr and Marian Wilkinson’s *Dark Victory* (2003) and Elisabeth Wynhausen’s *Dirt Cheap* (2005). The first exposed gross mistreatment of asylum seekers and a government cover-up, while the second examined a class of worker largely forgotten in the public discourse of workers’ rights.

Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (2008), on the other hand, fits more comfortably into the definition of a consciously political narrative nonfiction text. Hooper has been quoted as saying that she set out to write *Tall Man*, her investigation into the death of Cameron Doomadgee on the floor of a police cell, as a ‘page-turner’ because she’d noticed that ‘the words “[black] deaths in custody” tended to make Australians’ eyes glaze over’ (Eisenhuth 2010, p. 205). The Australian public didn’t ‘want to know’, but Hooper thought they should. Part of Hooper’s motivation with *Tall Man* may have been reformist: she may have thought, for example, that Chris Hurley should be charged with the murder of Cameron Doomadgee, and may have hoped the book would result in a reopening of the

investigation into the death-in-custody. More fundamentally, though, the text is an examination of Australia's conspicuous racial divide, the value placed on a white Australian life as compared to an Indigenous Australian life, and the fact that black deaths-in-custody continue to be a regular occurrence in Australia. Hooper never suggested in the book that legal reform was the solution to these systemic issues; indeed, Australia already has laws against racial discrimination, using excessive force against citizens in custody, and wrongful arrest.

Another aspect that sets narrative nonfiction apart from other nonfiction or journalism is the writer's involvement in the narrative: the literary journalist is more 'active' and visible, their subjectivity more on display, rather than hidden, as is conventionally the case in objective reporting (Hartsock 1998, p. 63). To put it another way, 'the writer is not making claims of objectivity, but sees his or her subjectivity as a kind of advantage. The *I* becomes a stand-in for the reader, an anchoring consciousness who develops a rapport with the reader and in effect stakes claims of reliability and authenticity: this is what I saw. This is what I did and observed. Trust me that I'm being as accurate as possible, but draw your own conclusions' (Hemley 2012, introduction, sec. 2, para. 4). Writers such as Gay Talese, or works such as John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (2009), and, more recently, Adrian LeBlanc's *Random Family* (2003) and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), where the writer's presence in the events depicted and their hand in the production of the text are invisible, are increasingly atypical in narrative nonfiction. This can partly be explained by the difficulty in creating a narrative when the writer is outside the events or has an outsider perspective on the subject, but is looking for a means of guiding the reader through the story they are trying to tell. It is far easier to mine one's own experiences and reactions as a stand-in for the reader and to help mould the story, particularly when such an approach provides the writer with much more control of the trajectory of the narrative and the shape of the text.

To some extent, consciously political narrative nonfiction is about examining the cultural other. This term is not used in the postcolonial sense, where it traditionally refers to non-western *otherness*. In the context of this research, the cultural otherness of nonfiction describes mapping the world of a subject that is unfamiliar to the assumed reader. Once the nonfiction text is read, 'no longer can we think of "strangers and the strange" as dislocated entities that are peripheral to our own lives' (Sanderson 2004, p. 1), because we, the reader, have spied commonalities

shared with this other, or have gained some insight as to how they reached a particular point or made a certain choice. Such connections are deliberate crafting decisions made by the author, used to bridge cultural or experiential divides.

The subject being different to the lived experience of the reader is not sufficient for the text to be considered an example of consciously political narrative nonfiction, however. Take, for example, Elif Batuman's *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (2010). While it is a book of nonfiction that maps the cultural other, from historical and modern Russia to surviving as a student in Uzbekistan, from the political struggles and lives of long-dead writers to tips on organising and surviving academic conferences, it does not ostensibly have a political objective beyond relaying the experiences of an impassioned postgraduate student. Instead, consciously political narrative nonfiction must make the nonfiction work a political intervention.

Contrast, for example, Batuman's *The Possessed* with Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* (2001). *Nickel and Dimed* investigated how the working poor were surviving in America in the late 1990s following various welfare reforms, a contemporary echo of Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (2001). The investigation involved months of deep immersion, including subsisting on a limited budget, sleeping in a motel and visiting home infrequently. In addition, Ehrenreich also concealed her academic and employment history, and the reason she was working those various jobs (admittedly, no-one asked why she was working there either, possibly because they had no reason to suspect she wasn't genuinely trying to earn a wage). Ehrenreich had few qualms about making herself the proxy for a group she saw as disenfranchised or downtrodden in 'a personal narrative that made her point much more eloquently and entertainingly than any number of statistics and news articles on unemployment and underemployment in America' (Hemley 2012, chap. 2, para. 14). With roots in Agee's preoccupation with class and itinerant or casualised workers, in Studs Terkel's investigation into the value and ideas people attached to their employment in *Working* (2011), and in Orwell's study of working poverty (2001), Ehrenreich has described herself as 'sort of a myth buster by trade' (1989).

*Nickel and Dimed* influenced several other similarly investigative immersive works, with the writer-as-protagonist experiencing life from a previously unknown perspective to explore ongoing socio-economic or political issues. Examples include

Norah Vincent's *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Year Disguised as a Man* (2006); the Australian *Dirt Cheap*, by Elisabeth Wynhausen (2005), which adapted Ehrenreich's study for a local context; and Ehrenreich's struggle to replicate the project herself in *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2006). The 'futile' in the title partly alludes to the fact that the premise for *Bait and Switch* was much less successful than *Nickel and Dimed* – Ehrenreich didn't actually get a white-collar job, despite the months spent applying, resume-building, networking and training – but also alludes to that fact that the American Dream is nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

By investigating a situation she suspected particularly dire for a certain class of people, Ehrenreich (and the likes of Orwell and Griffin before her) was using the journalistic methodology commonly known as 'immersion'. Similar to the anthropological 'participant observation', the technique encourages writers to spend time within the world of their subject for an extended period (Cramer & McDevitt 2004, pp. 139). With an immersion project, 'the writer includes the self in order to write about the world' (Hemley 2012, introduction, sec. 2, para. 4). As Ted Conover, who spent a year undercover as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison for *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000), described in the foreword to *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, participant observation 'was like what journalists do, only you stayed longer, got in deeper, and didn't have to chase breaking news. There seemed to be more space for – and possibility of – insight and contemplation' (Sims 2007, p. xi).

Immersion is a technique that heavily relies on what Tom Wolfe, the figurehead of the New Journalism movement, called 'saturation reporting', which he defined as 'the kind of comprehensive reporting that enables one to portray scenes, extensive dialogue, status life and emotional life, in addition to the usual data of essay-narrative' (1973, p. 66).

This kind of immersion provides space for detailed journalistic observation about the subject and their experience(s), as well as interviewing and recording the day-to-day behaviours and interactions of the subject(s) in the belief that characters will reveal themselves, rather than simply the persona created for interview purposes. Ideally, argued Kramer, periods of immersion should result in writers comprehending 'subjects at a level Henry James termed "felt life" – the frank, unidealised level that includes individual difference, frailty, tenderness, nastiness, vanity, generosity, pomposity, humility, all in proper proportion' (1995, p. 2).

Evidence of the kind of rich, textured work that results from these extended periods in the lives of subjects can be found in Anna Funder's *Stasiland*.

It was the only time she ever thought she would die. The bath was filled with cold water. One guard held her feet, the other her hair. They pushed her head under for a long time, then dragged her up by the hair, screaming at her. They held her down again. She could do nothing, and she could not breathe. And up: 'You piece of filth. You little upstart. You stupid traitor, you little bitch.' And under. When she came up the insults were what she breathed. She thought they would kill her.

Miriam is upset. Her voice is stretched and I can't look at her. Perhaps they beat something out of her she didn't get back. (Funder 2003, p. 31)

It's an interesting passage for a number of reasons. Miriam's story is a major narrative thread in *Stasiland*, and also a thread that Funder has qualms about using throughout the book. Self-consciously, in full view of the reader, Funder worries that prodding Miriam to share the story of the death of her husband and the other trials of her life in East Germany – where she was imprisoned, considered a traitor and, as such, unemployable – was re-traumatising.

Another reason this passage is striking is the technique Funder uses of narrator-and-writer experiencing the interviews. That is, rather than Funder eliminating her authorial presence or shifting point of view to allow the interviewee to be the narrator in these moments (Ricketson 2014, chap. 8, para. 16), Funder remains a strong character in these scenes, reacting not just as a writer and investigator but also as a human being. More generally, the passage shows the benefits of spending extended periods in the world of a subject, without which Funder is unlikely to have had access to such stories or the cooperation of their owners, or to have understood the context of what life was like in East Germany, particularly the paranoia the state cultivated, or the baggage and grief people still carry from that period.

What fascinated Funder about these people, these characters, she wrote, is the 'courage they had to respond to their conscience despite the prevailing orthodoxy, wisdom or political necessity, and frequently at their own considerable cost'. She had

observed that ‘[i]n fiction the good guys tend to win, and the endings are happy, or at least resolved. I was interested in what happens in real life, in a situation in which the goodies and baddies are about as clearly defined as you will ever find them. Do those with the courage to resist inhumanity win out in the long run?’ (Funder 2003, p. 64)

Another contemporary example of Australian narrative nonfiction is Anna Krien’s *Into the Woods* (2010), in which the author immersed herself in Tasmanian environmental politics and the logging industry. Krien, also a poet, writes evocatively and exquisitely, as do Funder and Hooper. Yet, despite the landscape she chose to examine, Krien’s book sits outside my definition of ‘consciously political’.

Throughout the text, Krien remained detached from her investigation, and reluctant to take a side on the question of who was right or wrong. Ultimately, the narrative takes primacy over the construction of a political intervention, making the Tasmanian logging situation appear a clash between a few corrupt individuals, some over-zealous environmentalists and hardworking loggers, rather than the systemic consequences of neoliberalism.

Importantly, too, it is unclear in the text as to whose story Krien is telling; often, it appears to be the story of an objective journalist in the wild, who gives all perspectives due consideration. In consciously political narrative nonfiction, the writer is not expected to present all sides of a story as equal. Instead, writers making these deliberate interventions recognise that everyone is a political agent and, accordingly, give agency to voices that have commonly been erased or ignored.

In this way, contemporary consciously political narrative nonfiction writers resemble the Literary Reporters, as described by Hartsock (2009). From the outset, these writers had a political purpose to their writing; the reportage was to elicit a sense of solidarity between subject and reader. These literary reporters mistrusted objective journalism, which they deemed a ‘bourgeois’ notion (ibid., p. 119); it was something they had to agitate against, thus they developed a style that worked in opposition to objectivity, but *for* subjectivity. It was a subgenre that ranged from polemical to narra-descriptive (Bak 2011, p. 8).

Louise Bryant, one such practitioner, described her writerly role in the wake of the Russian Revolution, documented in *Six Red Months in Russia* (1918), as ‘a messenger who lays his notes before you, attempting to give you a picture of what I saw and what you would have seen if you had been with me’ (p. ix), thereby distancing her political sympathies from her interpretation of events and people. Yet,

the claim was not entirely disingenuous: if the reader had been with her, they would have most likely have been eager to witness a revolution, too, just as many of the writers of the era she associated with were.

Like the works of the communist documentary writers or even the practitioners of New Journalism, these texts appealed to their readers precisely because the practitioners refused to adhere to the perception that writers were separate from the world they were reporting on.

Indeed, Frazier has posited that one of the most famous of the Literary Reporters, John Reed, author of the famed account of the Russian Revolution *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1960), was one of the first of the gonzo journalists. Frazier described Reed's earlier book on the Mexican Revolution, *Insurgent Mexico* (2009), as 'an exciting first-person account, vague on political context but strong on atmosphere. Cavalry patrols ride in silhouette against the desert sunset, bullets zip by in flocks, shot-up adobe walls go Thud!' (Frazier 2002, p. 31). Such thrilling and experiential writing is reminiscent of the work of, for example, Hunter S Thompson.

For Egon Kisch, another of the Literary Reporters, political engagement was a more conscious necessity, as was also the case with Reed's later work. Kisch was an outspoken and active communist and journalist, originally from Prague. He wrote reportage covering his journeys to Russia, the US, China and Australia, where he attended the 1934 Australian Anti-War Congress, an adventure documented in *Australian Landfall* (1969). Like George Orwell, Kisch 'saw himself writing against the grain of official history'; his purpose to fill 'the silences in authorised versions of events' (Williams 1990, p. 94).

What was happening in American literary journalism at the time? A decade or so later, after James Agee and Walker Evans's documentary account of life for sharecropping families, which aimed to 'recognise the stature of a portion of unimagined existence' (Agee 2001, p. xiv), came John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (2009). Originally published in the *New Yorker* as one extended essay (Hartsock 2000) just after the one-year anniversary of the ending of the Second World War, the book documents the experiences of six people who survived the bombing of Hiroshima. The narratives are all third-person accounts, told solely from the point of view of the six survivors; nowhere does Hersey appear in the original text. This detached narrative style, perhaps trying for an objective style, has led to accusations of 'sensationalism', 'moral deficiency' and of failing to transform the cultural other into

a subject (Hartsock 2000, pp. 185–186). Hartsock disputes the extent of these claims, citing textual examples that acknowledge Hersey’s ‘own subjective limitations’ and the literary techniques Hersey employed throughout, such as ‘metaphoric hyperbole’ (ibid., pp. 186–187). Hersey, perhaps inadvertently, addressed these criticisms in a 1980 essay on the work of Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer and the differences between fiction and nonfiction; namely, invention. ‘In fiction, the writer’s voice matters’, he wrote. ‘In reporting, the writer’s authority matters’ (p. 20).

*Hiroshima* is a text that has never been out of print since its first publication, and has been described as puncturing ‘postwar moral complacency’ (Gates 1993). Hersey had been in Hiroshima following the bombing and witnessed the desolation of the city and the rapacious ferocity of atomic weaponry, something few other outsiders witnessed, and certainly none with access to the pages of one of the world’s most well known magazines. There were many horrors to bear witness to at the end of the war, but few writers wanted to confront the horrors the Allies were responsible for. *Hiroshima* is a remarkable journalistic feat. Due to its claustrophobic point of view, density of dreadful detail and the bewilderment of its narrators, people who had been living their lives in a city far from Los Alamos, home of the Manhattan Project, *Hiroshima* is a work simultaneously compelling and distressing. Importantly, it is also a work of consciously political narrative nonfiction, precisely because of the intent to represent an unimaginable set of experiences to readers physically untouched by the bombing, and to portray the characters, who were also actual people outside the text, as human beings, too.

The New Journalists, according to Tom Wolfe (who wrote the belated manifesto for the movement), railed against starting with a political goal. In ‘Like a Novel’, which traces the evolution of the form, Wolfe insisted that New Journalism must be fully immersive and rely on the writer’s observations (1973, pp. 56–58); for that reason, writers could not go in with the intent of controlling the story, though they could start with a political premise, which many did.

Zinke has hypothesised that New Journalism can perhaps best be understood as ‘a cultural movement’ (2007, pp. 102–103), rather than a writing form with shared aesthetic or political ambitions. Such a definition could certainly explain why Wolfe’s manifesto (1973) claimed works and writers published years earlier as epitomising the movement – for example, John Sack’s ‘M’ (1966), the first anti-Vietnam War story to run in a US mainstream publication; sections of Norman Mailer’s 1968 *The Armies of*

*the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (the subtitle of which caused Hersey a great deal of consternation in his 1980 essay cited above); or essays by Gay Talese (1961), Terry Southern (1955–1967) and George Plimpton (1964–1966).

Obviously, tracing the antecedents of a literary style or movement is important, but trying to mould such works to fit a model or ideal after their inception suggests that many of these shared qualities were only identifiable in hindsight. Which is not to say that the writers that came to be categorised as the New Journalists weren't influencing one another and responding to each other via the various publishing channels available at the time (Didion 2009; Hersey 1980; Wolfe 1973), but it does imply that, in stark contrast to the Literary Reporters, they didn't necessarily believe their writing could change the political landscape.

I agree with Marc Weingarten's contention in *From Hipsters to Gonzo: How New Journalism Re-wrote the World* (2005) that the New Journalists stripped American journalism of its conventions and complacency, humanising cultural otherness that the New Journalists' contemporaries often avoided. Yet, Bak notes that the emphasis on New Journalism is part of narrative nonfiction's definitional problems: emphasising a small subgenre of an American tradition overlooks the European and Transnational traditions and styles before, during and after this period (2011, pp. 2–5).

As much as I admire the work of many of the New Journalists, most notably Gay Talese and Michael Herr, Joan Didion is the writer who best captures the chaos and injustice of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and whose writing engages with the multi-tiered nature of an issue, from the personal to the political to the social, in a way I hoped to do in my own nonfiction research. Take, for example, her long essay 'The White Album', first published in 1979, in which she set her own psychological breakdown against the backdrop of a heatwave and fire season, and used her 'experience as emblematic of a particular moment' (Pybus 1999) – the incendiary period of the late 60s in the United States, when race, class, gender, drugs, music, Hollywood, murder and war were all kindling in a countercultural firestorm. 'By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968', Didion observed in the essay, following an excerpt of a psychological assessment detailing her physical symptoms during the period (2009, p. 15).

Didion is clearly a masterful writer, but it is also her intimate knowledge of the period in which ‘The White Album’ is set, the fact that she had been immersed in those times, as well as her questing for connections between apparently unrelated events and her depiction of an America at war with itself, paranoid and restless and self-obsessed, that make this essay on a search for narrative and meaning an important example of a consciously political work. As Anderson said about the nonfiction work of Joan Didion, ‘The rhetoric of her prose is the rhetoric of concreteness and implication, symbol and gap, process and struggle’ (1987, p. 134), all of which allows space for the reader to draw their own conclusion, a characteristic that both Ricketson and Hartsock state is essential to the form.

Of all Didion’s consciously political nonfiction work, it is *Salvador* (2006) that I find the most affecting. Another extended essay, sections of which were originally published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1982, the book describes Didion’s two-week stay in El Salvador, a time she called ‘the most terrifying in her life’ (Harred 1998, p. 1).

There is a rawness to this text, possibly because Didion was uncertain of the exact story to be told, or how to interpret the things she witnessed. The veneer between the writer-as-narrator and the audience is not as polished as in her other works, and many of her responses read like intimate emotional reactions. Perhaps this is explained by the central narrative of a stranger in a strange, hostile land of life and death, but there is an undercurrent of fear and horror throughout.

The essay is powerful, a story that needed to be told of El Salvador’s civil war, of the United States’ involvement, and of what happened to citizens in that country as a result, ‘the Procrustean bed we made ourselves’ (Didion 2006, p. 95). Through the eyes of an obvious outsider, it is again a situation, an era, from which one struggles to make meaning:

the naked corpse of a man about thirty with a clean bullet hole drilled between his eyes. He could have been stripped by whoever killed him or, since this was a country in which clothes were too valuable to leave on the dead, by someone who happened past [...] but all anyone in Gotera seemed to know was that there had been another body at precisely that place the morning before, and five

others before that. [...] It was agreed that someone was trying to make a point. The point was unclear. (ibid., p. 46)

What Didion excels at, Anderson maintained, is making readers ‘feel the scene as something that happened at a particular place and time to particular living people’ (1987, p. 170).

Which brings me back to my own narrative nonfiction manuscript, and my undertaking to research and write a consciously political narrative nonfiction work.

Despite the common practice of abortion, the history, the politics and the actuality of abortion remain hidden from view. For those Australians who are not pregnant, active in the politics of termination or working in the industry, the world of contemporary abortion is one that is virtually invisible, hence the notion of abortion as a ‘mystery’. Thus, despite the legality of abortion in most states and territories of Australia, it retains the air of illegality. Abortion, as a consideration, choice or practice, is often perceived as shameful; when abortion is hidden and illicit, it becomes more so.

In her book *The Abortion Myth* (1998), Leslie Cannold discussed the moral dilemmas involved with abortion through the prism of a study she conducted with 45 women. Cannold concluded that for those women with pro-life beliefs, they viewed abortion as a selfish decision, and a choice that indicated women who aborted would make poor parents. Moreover, Cannold posited, ‘abortion can be supported or opposed without resorting to rights-talk or zeroing in on the status of the foetus. Every time the pro-choice supporters accept these terms and make a case for abortion choice from within this framework, they concede an important victory to the foes of reproductive freedom’ (1998, p. 6). When such debate focuses on the foetus, Cannold argued, the pregnant woman will always be seen as potentially infanticidal, and thus her agency and needs will become secondary.

Similarly, in my narrative nonfiction manuscript, I go to some lengths to demonstrate that invisibility and magnified shame work in favour of pro-life advocacy, and, consequently, lawmakers. As a ‘hidden’ practice, one that is not encountered within Australia unless it is through personal experience or public controversy, abortion is a practice that society can largely pretend does not exist. This invisibility allows us to avoid grappling with and confronting the complex issues abortion raises.

As Jeannie Ludlow stated in her essay on witnessing ‘the traumatising of abortion’ in the clinic at which she worked, the acceptable abortion narratives are stories of rape, incest and forced pregnancies. The other stories are ‘the things we [abortion workers] cannot say’, because they are not considered helpful to pro-choice politics: ‘narratives of multiple abortions; of failure or refusal to use contraceptives (correctly, consistently, or at all); of grief after abortion; and of the economics of abortion provision’ (2008, pp. 29–30).

Yet, as many of the people I interviewed for my narrative nonfiction manuscript attest, these are the everyday realities of abortion.

At other times, when abortion is written about, it is of its abject nature, its uncanniness, its horror, so much so that these have become the abortion narratives readers expect to hear. One such example is the essay ‘We Do Abortions Here’ (1989) by American writer and former nurse Sally Tisdale. With its use of description and harrowing, first-person narrative, it certainly qualifies as a piece of literary journalism on the topic of abortion. The essay has a disquieting effect. Tisdale employs graphic imagery and detailed sensory descriptions to convey her experiences of working day in, day out as an abortion provider:

The doctor seats himself between the woman’s thighs and reaches into the dilated opening of a five-month pregnant uterus. Quickly he grabs and crushes the foetus in several places, and the room is filled with a low clatter and snap of forceps, the click of the tanaculum, and a pulling, sucking sound. (Tisdale 1989)

Tisdale’s essay paints a picture of abortion as unrelenting, violent, and, ultimately, despairing; it may be a right she and other feminists fought for, but the daily reality of abortion is, for Tisdale, a significant burden to bear. In spite of Tisdale’s obvious pro-choice politics, the essay is commonly found on pro-life websites as an illustration of why reproductive choices need to be limited. One doctor I interviewed during the course of my research pointed out that the clinic Tisdale worked at provided second-term abortions; he too would find that ‘wearying’, he pointed out, anyone would.

In summary, I saw a significant gap and a need within the existing abortion texts for a work of consciously political narrative nonfiction; one that rigorously

questions the invisibility of abortion and aims to change the landscape of shame and distortion surrounding it. I aim not to avoid the sometimes-gruesome nature of abortion, but instead try to provide a deeper context as to why abortion is so complex and why so many people refuse to accept the abortion status quo (that is, that one in three women in Australia will have an abortion, and that the procedure is considered one of several standard outcomes for an unplanned pregnancy).

In this way, I hope my narrative nonfiction manuscript can make an intervention into the political and social landscape surrounding abortion, in the tradition of consciously political narrative nonfiction works that have gone before it.

## Chapter Two: Ethics and Objectivity within Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction

Now that I've identified the kinds of texts that belong to the consciously political narrative nonfiction subgenre, I want to focus on the sorts of ethical issues an individual writer may encounter when approaching the making of such a work and, more specifically, how depictions of and the interplay between reality, objectivity and authorial participation can help and hinder such nonfiction texts.

Here, 'ethics' does not refer to 'meta-ethics' or 'truth values', nor am I addressing the continuing complex debates in the many institutions and fields examining how to operate ethically with other sentient beings in a modern world, such as medicine, business, anthropology and bioethics. Put simply, in this narrative nonfiction research, 'ethics' is closely aligned to a kind of moral code that guides the writer-researcher's behaviour in dealings with other people. For this exploration, then, ethics implies what is right, wrong and fair when it comes to, for example, portraying events the writer participated in, or fleshing out impressionistic details of an interview so it becomes, in the text, a scene with dialogue. Here, 'ethics' refers to the behaviour and approach of the writer-researcher in set situations, such as interviews, and the recognition that human behaviour 'has consequences for the welfare of others'. A researcher's actions have the potential to 'enhance the well-being of others' and also 'harm or diminish the well-being of others' (Paul & Elder 2006, p. 4).

In part, this code was one helped shaped by the rigorous ethics approval process I went through at the university before engaging with human subjects. The process took more than nine months and involved three lengthy drafts describing the methodologies I would use in my research and how the data would be analysed. *The Abortion Game* was research that didn't fit comfortably with the VU Human Research Ethics Committee, as other nonfiction writers within universities have found before me (Carey 2008; Carlin 2009; McDonald 2010). 'You do realise there are religious people on this committee?' a representative asked me in one phone conversation. 'I don't understand why anyone would want to talk about abortion,' said another in a different conversation. Even though the research had been framed as an experiment in writing a consciously political narrative nonfiction text, one draft was returned with the query 'How will you use these interviews objectively and verbatim?'; yet, it was

never my intention to write a book that depicted all of the conversations and points of view of subjects as equally valid. Indeed, my book set out to challenge the very notion, regularly promulgated in the media, that abortion was a contentious issue that equally divided communities.

In addition, nonfiction research is an uneasy fit within the current science-based ethics model at universities because the scope and nature of such research tends to develop over time, subjects don't fully understand what they're agreeing to despite informed consent paperwork, and guaranteed anonymity can be difficult to provide (Carey 2008). In particular, the ethics committee worried about how I would establish contact with subjects I wanted to include in my manuscript. This was an obviously valid concern, as no university wants their researchers to be harassing community members about potentially confronting or upsetting subjects. Nevertheless, this question is much easier to apply to a scientific study on a new drug meant to alleviate morning sickness during pregnancy, with pregnant women invited to participate through leaflets at an obstetrician's clinic or a callout on a website; in other words, where the onus is on the potential participant to express interest and establish contact. Conversely, I had proposed connecting to subjects through the course of the research, via protests or, as is common in journalistic research, sending an email proposing an interview after reading or hearing about an interesting or controversial subject. While it is worth noting that the scientific study would be more physically invasive with the potential to cause bodily harm, it must be pointed out that nonfiction research and writing also has the potential to be invasive and cause harm.

Such risks are heightened in consciously political narrative nonfiction research such as *The Abortion Game*, where I made contact with people I'd flagged as potential 'characters'; that is to say, in the manuscript they would become textual depictions of people I interviewed or interacted with along my narrative journey. Many of these people I had not met before the research began, and many of them had very different political beliefs from my own. I then solicited their beliefs and experiences, even as they were not privy to my internal thought processes, readings of situations, or how I intended to craft the text and its narrative structure.

Nonfiction writer and academic David Carlin raised similar concerns in his essay on invention and ethics in memoir writing and the questions his university ethics process had left him with. 'When does such processing begin?' he asked. 'Surely during the interviews itself, when even as the interviewee is testifying as to

their memories and impressions the writer cannot help but be supplying mental images to accompany the stories heard' (2009). Further, in a consciously political narrative nonfiction work, the writer is likely to encounter opinions and subjects they doubt or disagree with; at times, it will be inappropriate to raise such differences during an interview, because it may make participants tense or hostile, but also because the writer's judgement may be irrelevant in that moment when the focus is on other perceptions and experiences beyond the writer's. Consequently, the writer's dissenting views may only emerge during the analytical stage: in the writing of the text itself. Carlin concluded that for the writer working with real people, there was no clearly defined ethical path to follow, but that the writer's responsibility was 'to represent [subjects] truthfully – that is, not to misrepresent them' (ibid.).

At the writing stage, however, even in consciously political narrative nonfiction, the writer's perception becomes the most critical. 'Writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*', wrote Joan Didion in her 1976 essay, 'Why I Write'. It's a claim that implies more than the mere challenges of representation; for instance, that nonfiction writing is always a depiction of reality rather than a verifiable reality itself (Aucoin 2001; Bird & Dardenne 1988, p. 82; Bloom 2003). In fact, Didion's claim moves the question of what we do when we write, in particular when we write nonfiction, into the muddy territory of accuracy and embellishment, collaboration and manipulation, and Didion's 'implacable I' (2008a): the concept that nobody other than the author could tell this story because this particular story didn't happen to anyone else. As writers, Didion argued, we can feign interest in others, but it is always how we interpret or experience the events that remains most interesting to the writer (and, if you're Joan Didion, the audience).

As described in the previous chapter, a subjective authorial voice is often one of the defining characteristics of narrative nonfiction, but Didion's 'I' can be a difficult position to embrace because it means conceding that the writer has something unique to offer, a perspective or an argument that has not been expressed before. How much of the author should appear on the page and in the story? What happens when this authorial voice or character moves from guiding the reader through the narrative waters to steering the ship?

Emergence of the objective position in news 'was based in part on the belief that the world could be reported factually, a result of the prevailing positivist belief

that science could cure society's ills' (Hartsock 2000, p. 125) and that rationality could explain behaviour and events. However, that has always been 'an ideological position', Hartsock argued (ibid.). Objectivity is often presented as a unique state bestowed by journalistic vocation, a state detached from the realm of politics or religion or corporate interests, or from the bias that motivates or moves people in their everyday lives, and in which facts unadorned tell a story.

Stephen Ward, a journalism academic who founded the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, noted that journalism ethics have moved through four major chapters. The first was the guarantee that audiences were reading 'the facts', coinciding with the invention of the printing press in the 1600s. This was followed by a move toward protecting the liberties of the people by holding those in power to account. Then came the aspiration to a 'free and independent press', uncontrolled by political parties or persuasions. Most recently, the focus has been objectivity, and Ward suggested this was a backlash against journalism's earlier ages. 'Objectivism sought to use adherence to fact and impartiality towards political party to restrain a free press that was increasingly sensational (or "yellow") and dominated by business interests', he observed (2009, p. 297).

As cited in the previous chapter, the interrogation or rejection of objectivity in reporting is not a recent phenomenon. Objectivity was a writing style that the Literary Reporters, such as Egon Kisch, John Reed, Larissa Reissner, Ilya Ehrenburg and Anna Louise Strong, deliberately wrote against. Instead, their writing delved into subjectivity, with an intent to highlight commonalities between the reader and the subject, much like narrative nonfiction has aspired to do since. This was in contrast to 'paralysing the imagination' of the reader; a result, Walter Benjamin said, of objective reporting, which purposefully 'isolates' the news story from the reader and their life experience (Hartsock 2000, p. 56). That the objective position is a journalistic construct, a reporting style a writer chooses to adopt, is generally an uncontroversial view among theorists these days, even if objectivity as an ideal is still championed among more traditional media, often as a result of economic interests (Aucoin 2007). Yet, 'a single uncontested objective truth about the human past', as Carlin has argued, 'is in itself a fantasy, produced socially to support specific practices of power' (2009). It is these specific practices of power, the accepted and uncontested versions, that works such as Hooper's *Tall Man* and Funder's *Stasiland* bring into question.

Of course, authorial interpretations are extremely subjective, too. ‘A scene, like a story itself, is the result of the interplay between events and those observing them’, Ricketson stated. ‘Two practitioners might observe the same set of events and write different accounts; one of them might even think there is nothing of note to write up’ (2014, chap. 9, para. 3). Perhaps in a contemporary context, it’s an obvious contention: people experience life differently, their construals shaped by the injustices they perceive or overlook, situations they find relatable, circumstances they find oppressing. Hemley has also noted that ‘as most of us know in this postmodern age, there’s no such thing as objectivity’; everyone has blind spots and biases, he warned. ‘In anthropology, it’s known as *confirmation bias*, the tendency to notice those things that confirm your beliefs and ignore those that don’t, and everyone is susceptible to it’ (2012, introduction, para. 24).

Nevertheless, the kind of work that can result from an author’s subjectivity and their biases being embraced is worth examining. Take, as an example, two texts written about the death of Cameron Doomadgee in 2004 on Palm Island, both of which were published in 2008. ‘[I]nsightful and intensely personal’ was how one reviewer described Hooper’s *The Tall Man*; ‘an argumentative political analysis’, the same reviewer said of Jeff Waters’ *Gone for a Song: A Death in Custody on Palm Island* (Trigger 2008, p. 8).

Waters, an ABC journalist, used ‘Mulrunji’ throughout his book to refer to the deceased Doomadgee, a term the media understood was used to refer to a deceased Indigenous person; however, that wasn’t the term Palm Islanders used. Hooper argued in her book that the community didn’t use the term, the family couldn’t even spell the word, and that ‘the family and witnesses continued to call the dead man Cameron’ (Hooper 2008, p. 16); as a consequence, so did she. That Hooper embraced and used Cameron Doomadgee’s name from the outset humanised a man who could have been written off as a number – yet another black-death-in-custody. Waters, on the other hand, established himself as an outsider, that is, a journalist present to report events that he was angry about, but that didn’t personally affect his life circumstances or narrative.

Hooper’s book was ‘remarkable’, wrote one academic, ‘because it told the “death and life” story of Mulrunji Doomadgee as if it were the bigger, untold story of white Australia’ (Little 2010, p. 49), but it also told the story of how Hooper herself learned about whiteness and blackness in Australia. For example, Hooper deliberately

started the book with her, the author, studying the cave drawings of the Tall Man spirits. These spirits became a literary device used throughout the book, a metaphor for Chris Hurley, the police officer charged over Doomadgee's death, and the police and white figures of power more generally, thereby planting seeds in readers' minds about who was to blame in the story. That Hooper was shown these ancient drawings by an Indigenous guide emphasised that a predominantly white audience were being invited into the story. Waters never gained the family or community trust that Hooper had, and his book is rarely spoken of with the same praise.

A crucial distinction between the two texts was this distance from which the story was related. Hooper embraced her subjective outsider status, using it to delve into the many uncertainties she found, while Waters approached the same topic as a series of facts that once assembled in the right order could convince the reader to *change their mind* about Indigenous Australia. Hooper's subject position remained unobtrusive, at least in the text, but Hooper-as-outsider remained central in sifting the data and navigating the terrain; she sought out people who would make her and the reader think differently. Those she was unable to connect with, such as Chris Hurley and other police officers, appeared remote and untouchable, which added to their sense of culpability. It wasn't that Hooper dispensed with her investigation or that she stopped asking difficult questions, but more that her sympathy to certain people involved in her narrative, most notably the Doomadgee family, was an evolution she transparently acknowledged in the narrative.

Generally, discussion of journalistic ethics are often focussed on conventions of accuracy, fairness of depictions, providing anonymity only when necessary, not plagiarising, disclosing conflicts of interest, and not obviously exploiting or deceiving interviewees and subjects (MEAA 2013; SPJ 2014). For journalists, it's all about the verifiable facts. 'The minute a writer offers nine hundred ninety-nine out of one thousand facts, the worm of bias has begun to wriggle', John Hersey once declared (1980, p. 2). The writers of *The Elements of Journalism*, with a model that owed a lot to Hersey, suggested five guidelines for creating scenes that keep facts at the fore: 'never add anything that wasn't there; second, never deceive the audience; third, be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives; fourth, rely on your own original reporting; and fifth, exercise humility' (Ricketson 2014, chap. 9, para. 3). These guidelines don't completely resolve the potential ethical issues listed by journalism bodies such as the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, however.

There remain questions around where the information is coming from, who is scrutinising data, and how the journalist in turn is determining whether something is accurate or if a source is entitled to anonymity. As both Ricketson (2014) and Aucoin (2007) reminded us, one journalist's facts may be another journalist's distorted interpretation. Moreover, what does Hersey's rule mean for a nonfiction writer working on a lengthy immersion project, where there's 100,000 'facts': is the writer supposed to include them all? How does the writer determine what constitutes a fact: is it the how, where, what, why the interviewee volunteers, or is it the writer's understanding of the how, where, what, why after spending two weeks with the subject?

The problem is that nonfiction advocates usually 'conflate ethics with evading legal issues', English professor Lynn Bloom convincingly argued in 'The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction'. Even model nonfiction practitioners like Kramer and Gutkind were preoccupied with the appearance of truth; Bloom pointed out how they strove to 'avoid lawsuits – a matter of prudence and jurisprudence, but not strictly an ethical issue' (2003, p. 278). It's true that there are many ethical considerations for nonfiction writers that exist beyond legal concerns. A writer revealing the personal lives of their family or friends in their work may not be a legal issue, but it is an ethical issue, because it could interfere with the wellbeing of those people closest to the writer. In a similar vein, relying on information from a whistleblower may well be illegal, but a nonfiction writer may still have an ethical and moral duty to use that material. For political narrative nonfiction writers, whose motivation is to disrupt the status quo of a certain landscape, which material is used and how can have legal and ethical implications. Indeed, as Helen Garner implied in her collected essays, the ethical implications are unavoidable: 'People will always tell you more than you need to know – and more than they want you to know. This is not only because you are alert to their body language as well as their speech. I think it's because most ordinary people can't really believe that anyone else is interested in them' (2004, pp. 8–9).

When immersion is employed as a research method, renderings are less a matter of accuracy – for instance, whether the subject made that comment about how the fact that her husband never wears shoes still embarrasses her after all these years (Woodhead 2015, p. 123) – and more a question of the necessity for that inclusion, and its relationship to the wider context and narrative. This is the ethically muddy

territory that Didion and Janet Malcolm love to wade in, both in the details they choose to include in their work, and then the reflexive way they muse on that inclusion.

‘Do the same conventions of civility, courtesy, familial obligations’ apply in writing, Bloom asked, or ‘is there a double standard – one for art, one for life?’ (2003, p. 279). It is an important question: narrative nonfiction writers allow observations and summaries that reduce whole lives or complications to a sentence to creep into their texts, comments they would not reveal in ordinary conversation as it would be considered impolite or unnecessary or perhaps plain wrong. The irresolvable issue for consciously political narrative nonfiction writers – and also writers more generally – is the power imbalance in the author–subject relationship: the writer has all of it, as they will ultimately decide what goes into the text and what story it tells. ‘On reading the article or book in question,’ wrote Janet Malcolm in her searing, seminal text on journalism ethics, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, ‘[the subject] has to face the fact that the journalist – who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things – never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own’ (2004, p. 3).

Some writers, such as Hersey, but also other writers I’ve spoken with in passing, believe narrative nonfiction practitioners can choose to share just ‘the facts’. This is a difficult concept for me to grasp, let alone put into practice. For example, one person who became a character in my narrative nonfiction manuscript always dressed the same way: in long cowboy boots and a thigh-length skirt. This was a fact I observed on numerous occasions, yet what would commenting on this observation in the text convey to the reader? Possibly that the person had a limited wardrobe, but more than likely the reader would read my interpretation of this observation: that this symbolised something noteworthy about this character’s sexuality and feminist identity. Given society’s obsession with the way women present themselves publicly, I had to question the weight of this observation and what purpose it served in the text. Certainly, it bestowed personality, but also, perhaps, a symbolism that spoke louder than intended. Furthermore, it potentially undermined what that character went on to say, or what they contributed to the narrative, as well as the world beyond.

This is a concern that some nonfiction writers may dismiss for the sake of the narrative. Biographer Cassandra Pybus noted that while ethical responsibility is

complex, ultimately her ‘uppermost concern is not the moral responsibility for the tale, rather it is the integrity of the sentences; the way the words are placed on the page’ (1999). Perhaps this is one of the major differences between a consciously political narrative nonfiction book and a market-driven or self-interested book, where the author manipulates the text for greatest dramatic effect or broadest commercial appeal. For consciously political writers, there’s an allegiance to the story, but that works in concert with the political impetus of the text. While salacious details might move books, if the details are not important to the political argument being made, a consciously political writer would be moving into questionable ethical territory by their inclusion.

For many writers, then, it would seem that ethics in narrative nonfiction can be reduced to three equations: the likelihood the writer will be sued; the risk of real-world consequences versus a well-told sentence; or the third category, to which those writers like Helen Garner belong – a well-told tale, rather than whether said events actually occurred. For me, Garner epitomises the selfish writer: her nonfiction, from *The First Stone* (1995), to *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* (2004), to her most recent book, *This House of Grief* (2014), are first and foremost works about Helen Garner’s experiences of the world. In *The First Stone*, for example, Garner wrote about *her* relationship to the complainants, *her* version of ‘truth’, *her* quest for contemporary feminism, *her* letters of support to the accused (written at the beginning of *her* investigation). Ultimately, the book is Garner’s quest to reconcile her former feminist self with contemporary feminism, and along the way she upset many people, including one interviewee she presented as six different characters; Garner claimed this was to avoid litigation, but it left the reader with the impression that university campuses were overrun with feminist academics. Novelist Marion Halligan described *The First Stone* as ‘a novel whose main character is Garner, acting out the role of journalist, following in fact the classical form of the whodunit and that’s okay if it is how it is read but I suspect it is seen as a simple factual account, telling the truth that the situation holds. You only have to consider how different the book might have been had the two girls talked to her to see that, if the book does tell the truth, it is only one of many’ (Halligan 1998). Ricketson has commented many times on the writing of two main subjects who Garner never actually interviewed: ‘It is not simply the fact that Garner was unable to interview the women that weakens her book, but the way she treats them thereafter’ (2014, chap. 7, para. 34).

In some ways, it's refreshing to have an author so embrace their subjectivity and unapologetically write from their own point of view, but overpowering that are the biases that Garner, as a researcher and narrator, never appears to feel the need to interrogate. In point of fact, it was Garner's letter of sympathy to the master of Ormond College who had been accused of sexual harassment that was *The First Stone*'s inciting incident. As the famed *New Yorker* reporter Lillian Ross wrote, the nonfiction writer or journalist cannot 'pretend to be invisible, let alone a fly; he or she is seen or heard and responded to by the people he or she is writing about; a reporter is always chemically involved in a story' (2002b, pp. 5–6). It is rare, however, that the reporter is the catalyst for a story. This raises the question, would this book have existed without Garner's personal involvement, as opposed to her narration?

I myself have often wondered if *The First Stone* was a cynical manoeuvre on Garner's behalf. The book spun in the direction of conservative debate at the time, and indeed today: that feminism has gone too far, and that political correctness has driven the world mad (Duncanson 1998). Ricketson has speculated that Garner's 'highly personal approach leaves itself open to the charge that she believes her subjective response is more important than the events she is writing about' – a serious charge for a narrative nonfiction writer – or 'that she is preying on other people's misfortunes for her own edification' (2014, chap. 7, para. 35). Further, as academic Brigid Rooney noted, 'controversy over the book caused bitter rifts among feminist, academic and media circles, but also ensured significant expansion of Garner's readership' (2005, p. 160). Unexpectedly, the book became a bestseller.

In many ways, *The First Stone* is the opposite of Chloe Hooper's *Tall Man*. Hooper also did not have contact with Chris Hurley, one of the main figures in her book, which meant the reader never heard his side of the story. The difference here, though, was that Hurley's version of events already existed in the public sphere. Indeed, it remains the official version of how Cameron Doomadgee died, and it bears a striking resemblance to the version dragged out every time there's a black death-in-custody.

Consciously political nonfiction writers write about the wider world, and for change, whereas Garner repeatedly focuses on 'arcane robes and rituals [that] mystify even as they legitimate' (Rooney 2005, p. 159).

This is not to suggest the dilemmas around depicting subjects and the writer's personal relationship to them are easy to resolve. I continue to have unresolved

feelings about the portrayal of people in my manuscript, which is explored in depth in chapter four of this exegesis. Since publication of Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*, 'the veiled adversarial relationship that exists between journalist and subject' (Friendly 1990) has haunted the nonfiction writer. 'Do you mind if I lay bare your secrets?' Carlin asked in that same essay on ethics (2009). 'But what if you do mind? Will that stop me?'

For an undertaking like *The Abortion Game*, which includes a whole cast of characters, writers only have a line or two, sometimes less, to describe an actual person. Again and again, I found myself facing quandaries equivalent to the cowboy boots: of wanting to provide textured and nuanced renderings of the people involved in abortion politics, but wary of reducing them to simple stereotypes or colouring them through my judgemental gaze. I am not the first or last writer to feel so uncomfortable with this role. As Didion has remarked, 'however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable "I"' (2008, pp. 134–136).

Yet, if objectivity is the opposite of the writing and reading state that consciously political narrative nonfiction aspires to, how does one conduct themselves ethically when researching and writing a work of political intervention, particularly when they identify with a specific political position, or overtly empathise with some subjects involved in a story more than others?

Indeed, such empathy or interest is not uncommon to long narrative projects: it is generally agreed that the seed of most narrative nonfiction is an obsession the writer has (Didion 2009; Hemley 2012; Kramer 1995).

Still, how to position a writer, in research or immersion conduct and in text, seems especially critical to the making of consciously political narrative nonfiction that aims to change the political or social landscape surrounding a subject. Given that objectivity is perceived as a journalistic norm, a writer who declares their political allegiance at the beginning of a text can seem overly earnest, putting readers off by making them think of the text as edifying or moralistic, which would be a failure to even engage the reader in the narrative, and never provide for that possible exchange of subjectivities. Who wants to read a book that pretends to be about the world and the people in it, but simply draws out the author's opinion for 300-odd pages? Worse to readers, perhaps, is the narrative nonfiction writer who sets out to intentionally deceive subjects or interviewees. *Black like Me*, for instance, is a study that is

politically and socially unimaginable today. Not simply because John Howard Griffin donned blackface in an attempt to feel what being a black man in America was like, but also because of the sophistication of modern understanding of experience and discrimination: no white writer today would think to tint their skin so they could pass as a person of colour for a couple of weeks and then presume to have walked in the shoes of an individual who has lived with racial discrimination their whole life. Even Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* has received similar criticism, despite being a much more recent work: how can a celebrated academic, author and critic presume to know what a life of underemployed poverty is actually like long-term?

As such, it's important to think strategically about the information a nonfiction writer can reveal about themselves to the interviewees, subjects and other individuals they interact with during periods of immersion. For instance, I always declared I was working on a narrative nonfiction manuscript about attitudes to abortion when approaching people about interviews, or even if I struck up conversations during fieldwork. I did not, however, always declare my own opinions about abortion, and I never revealed the fact that I had had an abortion to a single pro-life person I spoke with during the research, *even though* it was often the first thing I volunteered when speaking with someone pro-choice. It is hard to admit, because I recognise that making that distinction is manipulative, but I did so in order to access less guarded opinions from both sides, and to be able to spend time with individuals who became characters along the way. 'Even the act of flattering someone to get a story', Seow Ting Lee observed, 'is a shade of deception' (2004, pp. 98–99); not coming clean about my own abortion as the starting point of an interaction (and the starting point of my research) felt a little like insincere flattery.

Biographers Cassandra Pybus and Ian Hamilton have cited the cracks a writer is looking for when they reexamine a person's life or scrutinise an event, the 'necessary element of sleaze ... wounds reopened, emotions guessed at or played with, so I could tell my tale' (Pybus 1999); this willingness to exploit the narrative gems the writer discovers is much more pronounced in an immersive nonfiction project that deals in human traffic.

Of course, I could have approached this differently depending on the narrative structure of the work. Instead of waiting to be asked if I'd ever had an abortion, I could have declared the fact as an introduction, making for a more combative text. That would, however, have also changed the nature of the intervention. Rather than

asking why abortion matters to so many people, the narrative nonfiction manuscript would have been filled with depictions of how people react when provoked.

Indeed, reflecting back, the abortion question was always unlikely to be asked – given the mysterious nature of abortion, why would people assume I'd had an abortion? Moreover, for this very reason, I didn't feel that I was able to discuss it openly anyway. At the same time, this logic was how I justified withholding information that likely would have changed my subjects' relationships and attitudes to me, perhaps dramatically.

Naturally, the nonfiction writer's approach can veer to the other extreme. '*Do not over-identify with the people you are studying*', warned anthropologist Faye Ginsburg in *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*. 'It is entirely possible for you to do what activists in the group under study are doing, and believe sincerely in the cause, without implying that you are therefore no different from any other member' (1998, pp. 126–127). This is an idea I'll revisit in the next chapter, but suffice to say that as a feminist with an activist background who'd had an abortion, I never sought to present the many sides of this issue as equally valid. Furthermore, as mentioned previously in this exegesis, no consciously political narrative nonfiction text aspires to present all sides as equal.

For these reasons and more, the tone, position and boundaries of the political narrative nonfiction writer are critical. Starting the text with one's own position or beliefs, for example, shifts the focus of the reader to the writer, and the text can start to move into the uncertain space between nonfiction writer as narrator or participant and into memoir. Such nonfiction territory is always thorny when the writer is involved in the narrative itself, because the work can closely border autobiography or memoir; that is, the writing overly emphasises a period, obsession or time in the writer's life, at the expense of the greater nonfiction project being investigated.

I would contend that the central difference is that memoir is about one's own experiences of the world, while consciously political narrative nonfiction is about rendering the world of a cultural other, and eliciting an empathetic response from the reader. Therefore, it could be argued that the writer's 'self' in consciously political narrative nonfiction is only significant insofar as it draws the reader in, then guides them through unfamiliar terrain, and yet helps them reach the same conclusion as the writer.

Yet, this doesn't provide any firm guidelines for the ethical behaviour of political narrative nonfiction writers. According to Hersey, the matter can be reduced to the 'simple truth that every journalist knows the difference between the distortion that comes from subtracting observed data and the distortion that comes from adding invented data' (1980, p. 2). Such a claim, however, tells the writer nothing about how they should interact with subjects, or where they should draw the line if they are immersed in a subculture or group. Hersey's guideline is particularly unhelpful when applied to my character with the skirt and cowboy boots. According to him, I would include this fact and all other observed data, regardless of how mundane or potentially harmful to people's real lives, even when such facts were unrelated to the story or purpose of the text, or even if they undermined characters' contributions.

Hersey's hypothesis is inadequate for another key reason: that is, as soon as a writer becomes a character or narrator or participant, invention creeps in. For example, the writer seeks out opportunities with narrative appeal, or finds themselves performing in a certain way to establish tension or keeps the most shocking, revelatory quote from an interview and discards the other 30 minutes' worth of conversation. Nonfiction writers do this because print space and reader attention are limited, but also because those storytelling techniques help keep the reader in the world of the text, and because that text is a depiction of reality and so characters, dialogue and scenes become condensed and crystallised, symbols of something larger than simply those pages of text. This is something consciously political narrative nonfiction texts try to resist, through the use of 'mapping' as opposed to reportage, by venturing into unfamiliar terrain to chart the territory of their chosen subject in more detail. Some sacrifice is inevitable, however, due to the competing forces of literary narrative and intellectual control, which is why writers so rarely run manuscripts past their subjects prior to publication.

Equally, subjects must be treated with as much healthy scepticism as a writer treats herself. Hersey's rule places a great deal of trust in the subject, almost as though they also aren't susceptible to embellishment or outright fabrication, flattery or ulterior motives and uncertain memories.

Perhaps the best guideline to writing ethical consciously political narrative nonfiction comes from Bloom, with a nod to Didion:

Writers of creative nonfiction live-and-die-by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in ‘On Keeping a Notebook,’ ‘how it felt to me’ (134), their understanding of both the literal and the larger Truth. That standard, and that alone, is the writer’s ethic of creative nonfiction. In contrast to the official story, creative nonfiction presents the unauthorized version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus of the authority of the sanctioned tellers. Although one might ask, ‘Is it ethical to do so?’ the only viable answer is, as it has always been for all writers, ‘It would be unethical not to do so.’ Because writers of creative nonfiction are dealing with versions of the truth, they – perhaps more consistently than writers in fictive genres – have a perennial ethical obligation to question authority, to look deep beneath the surface, and an aesthetic obligation to render their versions of reality with sufficient power to compel readers’ belief. (Bloom 2003, p. 278)

Both Didion and Ricketson cited the work of Bob Woodward, originally of Watergate fame, as an example of unethical journalism that championed the status quo and the powerful; ‘political pornography’, Didion called it (2001, pp. 192). Woodward, explained Ricketson, ‘relentlessly accumulates quotidian details – what people eat, what they wear – but refuses to question the meaning of events or discuss the issues he is reporting’ (2014, chap. 3, para. 36).

Perhaps, then, this willingness to challenge the perception of writer, subject and reader is also critical to a consciously political narrative nonfiction text and the writer’s attempt to understand some larger truth. If there is no evolution of thought or perspective on behalf of the writer, or a sense that the topic under study has been weighed and interrogated, if there has been no journey, then how can the reader be expected to arrive at a conclusion other than where they started?

‘If you aren’t learning intimate details about your ordinary subjects that you believe are too personal for print, you’re probably doing a poor job of reporting’ (Walt Harrington, cited in Ricketson 2014, chap. 8, para. 1). Perhaps this sounds trite, but as I got closer to the completion of my manuscript, I began to worry about the representation of all the people I’d interviewed or rendered; nearly all details began to take on an intimate gleam, possibly because my discomfort at the power imbalance

involved in closely observing another individual for narrative purposes only grew as the research developed, despite this being raised as a possible issue early on, during the ethics approval process.

As countless practitioners and theorists remind us writers, most subjects and interviewees aren't actually aware of what they're consenting to, even when they're seasoned practitioners themselves. 'The story of subject and writer is the Scheherazade story with a bad ending, in almost no case does the subject [...] manage to save himself' (Malcolm 2004, p. 20). I read Malcolm's words and hear Garner's and Ricketson's and Didion's: subjects are happy to have the personal attention of a writer who is looking for the subject's unique perspective, experience, hobby, *something*, but everything from body language to a keenness to talk to alluding to secrets are their undoing. On top of this is the pressure for the writer to create narrative tension in order to keep the reader engaged. Even when consciously political narrative nonfiction writers avoid sensationalising, they're still partially motivated by the need to tell a compelling story.

In some circumstances, those involved aren't even aware that a particular event or situation could later be depicted as a scene in your manuscript. This unawareness is a characteristic common to immersion, where it's often only afterward, when sifting through one's notes and observations, that a scene starts to emerge. Added to this, most writers know that they, not their subjects, will have the final word: subjects usually exert little influence over their ultimate rendering.

Kramer described the dilemma thus:

During the months a writer stays around subjects, even a forthright relationship (that has commenced with full discussion of intentions, signing of releases, and display of part articles and books) is likely to develop into something that feels to both parties a lot like a lot like partnership or friendship, if not quite like marriage. The ticklish questions the writer comes up against are these: Does the subject see himself revealing information to a friend, at the same moment the writer sees himself hearing information from a source? And, how responsible is the writer for the consequences of such perceptions? (1995, p. 26)

For research like mine, there are further ethical implications and questions about interviewing and depicting *other*, sometimes unsympathetic subjects. Undoubtedly, many narrative nonfiction writers have found themselves in a situation where they disagree with a subject, but few, I would venture, found themselves impelled into radical activity because of the strength with which they opposed the views they routinely encountered, and the interactions they witnessed during their fieldwork. Should I have been more vocal about my political opposition along the way? Such an approach could possibly have resulted in a more exciting narrative, but would it have allowed space for an exchange of subjectivities in my manuscript? I suspect not. If I had no insight into the views or motivations of my pro-life subjects, what could I possibly expect the reader to understand?

A narrative nonfiction writer cannot remain objective about their subjects, I would argue; that is an option open only to the distanced observer. More importantly, a consciously political narrative nonfiction writer must not remain objective or impartial. If the writer wants readers to care about the others she's rendering, even acting as a narrative vehicle for the reader, how can she not become involved in the lives of her subjects?

In my own nonfiction manuscript, the proposed narrative arc involved immersing myself in the 'hidden' world of abortion politics and practice. I planned for the focus to shift from my personal experience of abortion to a larger-scale view of the politics involved, how the divisive topic of abortion operates on a day-to-day level, and back to ordinary experiences of abortion.

However, as I discovered in the early stages of the research, the world of abortion can be impenetrable. In many ways, it exists on the fringes of society; abortion appears in hushed conversations and occurs in camouflaged buildings, further reinforcing its illicitness. In the first few weeks of my field research, I was lucky if I found one or two elderly pro-life protesters outside the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic, none of whom were willing to speak with me.

Despite having received ethics approval to work with human subjects and spend one day a week for three months as a participant-observer in a family planning clinic and one day a week for three months as a participant-observer in one of the more mainstream pro-life organisations, such as Right to Life or the Australian Christian Lobby, I never managed to immerse myself in this way. Initially, the delay was because the immersion was difficult to organise; it required me to gain the trust

of contacts at both organisations, which proved particularly difficult for the pro-life organisations, who were often extremely cautious. For the pro-choice organisations, the more I gained insight into their daily routines, the more the observation felt like it would be a waste of their valuable time. As the research progressed, I became less enthusiastic about pursuing this methodology. While I had thought it would help me develop a deeper critical understanding of abortion practice and politics, I became concerned about what my reaction would be to daily exposure to pro-life politics, as my civility to people with radically opposing views was becoming more difficult to maintain.

From the outset, I had understood that the immersion methodology raised a number of potential ethical dilemmas, both for my subjects and me, such as exposure to intimate, personal material, or reminding interview subjects of experiences that were possibly distressing or illegal, but it seemed necessary to my aim of considering all sides of the political divide. To some extent, it is a relief that these periods of concentrated immersion in these organisations did not occur, as they would have raised a number of complicated ethical dilemmas, such as witnessing women coming and going from an abortion procedure, at a time when they are exposed and vulnerable. Equally difficult would have been spending days at a time with a pro-life organisation even as I was organising counter-demonstrations to their protests. Luckily, I never had to face the reality of being a participant-observer in a pro-life organisation and what tasks that would have involved.

Another strand of abortion politics that eluded me throughout the evolution and research of my narrative nonfiction manuscript is the experience of women of colour, particularly Indigenous women. Women who sit outside the ‘imagined white maternal female subject’ (Baird 2006, p. 200) are not only excluded from the abortion debate, which Baird argued all pregnant women or women considering abortion are naturally excluded from anyway, but also the abortion-rights movement. Underlying this is the assumption that there is homogeneity to the understanding of and approach to abortion, a perception I had hoped to challenge in my manuscript.

Perhaps my outsider status was inevitable, given my own whiteness and my own city-existence, but it made gaining the trust of such organisations complex, and gaining an understanding of the difficulties of providing reproductive health care in these communities beyond the scope of my study. Given the history of forced sterilisation of Indigenous women in Australia and the Stolen Generations, such

research would have obviously presented new ethical issues. As one researcher observed, in Australia ‘[r]eproductive rights and childcare issues represent for Aboriginal women vivid memories of struggles to end forced sterilisation and a not too distant reminder of children being removed from mothers in an almost genocidal fervor’ (Andrews 1997, p. 930).

Obviously, entering that world, of which I knew so little, would have created more ethical predicaments for this research and its analysis and likely would have required further ethics approval from the university.

Could it be that, as Bruner argued, ‘narrative “truth” is judged by its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability’ (Aucoin 2001, p. 15)? Perhaps ethical dilemmas in consciously political narrative nonfiction, which are always going to be more blatant because of the divisive questions they’re often built upon, will be ultimately dismissed for the sake of that larger Truth that Bloom spoke of. One obvious example is George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The fundamental premise was a contrivance: Orwell was not impoverished and could have returned to his aunt’s house at any stage during the experiment, yet the text became an important contribution to the understanding of poverty and class, as did Barbara Ehrenreich’s book 68 years later. Both texts elicit the exchange of subjectivities Hartsock spoke of: they allow readers to experience, albeit to a limited extent, the kinds of differences class and money bestow, and the diverse lives people live depending on agency and circumstance.

The line between nonfiction and outright fictionalisation seems clear to most writers. In nonfiction, writers cannot simply fabricate a character or their dialogue like one would in historical fiction, because it betrays readers who are expecting a certain level of truth from nonfictional works. The order of events and the grey areas, who said what and when, which all build to a greater narrative truth are less clear. Consciously political narrative nonfiction writers in particular have to narrativise; that is to say, arrange the characters and events in order to make a statement about a greater truth.

### **Chapter Three: Subjectivity in Immersion and Participation Methodologies**

#### **When Making Political Narrative Nonfiction Works: A Fraught Space**

When this research began, it was never my intention to become a political activist involved in the world I was attempting to interrogate and document. Before the moment that transgression occurred, my research had been driven by a desire to use my experiences solely as a writer, observer and limited participant to build a more comprehensive portrait of the world of abortion today. Now, reflecting on this departure, I have begun to see links between my research and some of the literature surrounding the idea of ‘bearing witness’, which Sue Tait contended is a method used ‘to transform scepticism into belief’ for matters that ‘require some form of public response’ (2011, p. 1226). I discovered that it is possible for the writer of consciously political narrative nonfiction to be motivated to engage with the world of the subject in a serious and profound way that has an impact on the text, subject positions and narrative, even during the process of writing those events and characters.

As a term, ‘bearing witness’ started to appear after the liberation of the camps following the Second World War and in conjunction with the development of photography. It was, Tait argued, ‘a way for the press to atone for its silence regarding the [concentration] camps prior to their liberation’ (ibid., p. 1225). Crucially, it was also a method that allowed the audience a subject position other than ‘voyeurism’ (ibid., p. 1221).

Obviously, my experiences weren’t as gruesome as those of the war photographers and journalists, or writers in that post-war period. Despite the claims many of the pro-life interviewees and participants I spoke with made, I wasn’t exposed to a ‘site of death and suffering’ (ibid., p. 1225), primarily because I didn’t witness the physical evidence of an abortion. Even if I had been witness to the operation or the disposal of ‘foetal product’ (Woodhead 2015, p. 142), I doubt it would have affected me in the way my pro-life subjects imagined. In fact, even discussing the process and aftermath of abortion was not traumatising in the way that Carrie Rentschler described in her work on witnessing and journalism as affective labour (2008). Rather, I was ‘enraged’ by the treatment of women and medical staff I had witnessed over the course of my research, and my emotions exceeded ‘normative renderings of impartiality and detachment’ (Rentschler, cited in Tait 2011, p. 1222).

As a witness who felt they had agency in the situation, when compared with pregnant women trying to obtain an abortion or medical staff besieged at work, I wanted to declare my opposition to the political beliefs and tactics of my pro-life subjects. Despite the desire to give their beliefs some space within my narrative work, I needed a clear delineation between their beliefs and mine, and to refute the idea that their activity caused no harm, when so much of my research had clearly indicated the opposite. George Orwell famously cited ‘political purpose’ as one of the four main motivations for writers to write. Orwell stressed that he meant ‘political’ broadly, but what he was describing was the ‘[d]esire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society they should strive after’ (2004, p. 5). As I followed my research trajectory, I became more convinced that those outside the world of abortion had no idea of the casual oppression and control that was affecting women’s lives on a daily basis, and that if they did know, they would want to change it.

Tait argued that bearing witness is something some writers and photographers do in situations many people would feel confronted or challenged by, because it necessitates action outside the text, a desire to be responsible for what the reader has witnessed through the writer’s text. In my case, however, there was an urgency that arose from the feeling that the situation at the clinic shouldn’t be allowed to continue unchallenged, which meant that I couldn’t wait for the reader to act – and nor did I want to maintain an impartial distance. This was a creative intervention that involved me, the researcher-writer, having to take some responsibility for what I had witnessed, both firsthand, in the research stage, and again when it came to the manuscript’s production and crafting. Thus, perhaps it is similar to witnessing a ‘traumatic’ public event, where Barbie Zelizer observed that ‘the individual remains the lynchpin through which the upheaval and dislocation caused by trauma begin to be replaced by shared social meanings and a renewed sense of collective purpose’ (2002, p. 698).

This idea was encapsulated by an article Jeff Sparrow published in the *Guardian* about the history of war photography, in which he wrote:

Leftist critics of photography traditionally disdained emotions such as pity (and even compassion) as patronising and disabling. Pity, they said, implies condescension; solidarity motivates witnesses of

injustice to fight alongside (rather than on behalf of) its victims.  
(2014)

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag posited that ‘[t]he understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of [such] images’ (p. 19), taken by people who were conduits, who did bear witness and who were involved in the horror they were depicting, at least to a degree. These writers and photographers had to choose between their reactions as a person and their reactions as a documentarian or journalist.

George Orwell, for instance, went to the Spanish Civil War with ‘some notions of writing newspaper articles’ – and ended up fighting for the Republic. As I discussed in chapter one, it wasn’t unusual for writers to be politically affiliated or a communist or an activist at that time. Orwell himself followed in the steps of Czech writer and communist Egon Kisch, who declared that firsthand experiences of life were necessary to studying a milieu, as was a ‘logical imagination’, because facts alone weren’t sufficient to translate the world. ‘Nothing is more baffling than the simple truth,’ he wrote, ‘nothing is more exotic than our environment, nothing is more imaginative than objectivity. And there is nothing more sensational in the world than the time in which one lives’ (cited in Monteath 1989, p. 72).

While researching and immersing myself in the world of abortion, I often felt it was the most pressing of all the issues in this world, the most important right that needed defending. It was this sentiment, and the inability to remain neutral, to not intervene, that went on to shape the rest of my research.

Arguably, over-identification with a subject or, in the case of *The Abortion Game*, with one side is one of the dangers inherent to the participant-observation or immersion method, wherein the writer spends extended lengths of time with their subject(s). Such qualitative research strategies, combined with ‘reflective practice approaches, commonly place the researcher in the thick of the action, not only observing but also participating in the object of study, the practice, and the theory building that accompanies it’ (Haseman 2007). Aware of this danger from the beginning of the research, I had wanted to avoid the possibility that either of the two most obvious oppositional camps, pro-choice and pro-life, would exert more influence over the moulding of the text than I, the allegedly distant narrator. That is to

say, my plan was to listen to why the groups and individuals involved held specific beliefs or conducted themselves in a variety of ways, but that I would remain the vehicle for the reader in this ‘strange’ landscape, in control of the final story, in order to interrogate those perceptions and assumptions, actions and events, and weave that into a meaningful narrative for readers about the world today.

One of the beginning steps in making a politically conscious narrative nonfiction work is a conscious decision by the writer to pause and examine an official scenario or version of events. As often happens, this will be a situation skimmed or glossed over by more traditional media, often because of commercial interests and resource demands (Ricketson 2014, chap. 1, para. 11) or complicity between politicians and the media (Ruigrok 2010, p. 87). Traditional media can also give poor treatment to a situation by depicting it as having two equally weighted, legitimate sides (Waisbord 2009, p. 371) as is often the case in abortion (Woodhead 2015, pp. 12–14) or climate change coverage (The Consensus Project 2015), or where a gross injustice has occurred but has previously avoided scrutiny because the subject was too hard or morally distasteful, as in the case of both Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man* (2009) and Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* (2003).

In the preliminary writing of a consciously political narrative nonfiction work, I would argue similarly to Hartsock (2000): that the writer doesn’t objectify the subject of their world as something different or alien from the reader. Or when such strangeness is highlighted, it is typically as an entry point or hook into a world that shares similarities with the world of the reader, as well as the obvious differences. Often, it is the similarities, and the recognition of another complex human being where once there had been only a representation summed up in an adjective or two, that are surprising for the reader. It’s about showing ‘an imaginable life’, journalism academic Paul Frosh wrote. ‘This is the laudable, if limited, moral ambition of contemporary media witnessing. On a daily basis it extends and replenishes our ability to imagine what it might be like to be someone else – wherever they might be – and to care about them because we can care about anyone’ (2006, p. 282).

Over the years, there has been a lot of media coverage of what life was like in East Germany before the Berlin Wall fell, so it is entirely possible that before they even picked up the book, the majority of readers already knew who the villains in *Stasiland* were. It is just as possible that in the beginning of *The Tall Man*, readers would have been less certain who the villains were, because of a pervading history of

black deaths in custody, because we live in a country of ongoing dispossession and because Aboriginal Australia is something regularly objectified by the media, but rarely subjectified; that is, given *subjectivity*, whereby the subject has thoughts, feelings and other human experiences beyond mere descriptors.

In *A History of American Literary Journalism* (2000), John Hartsock quoted Sherwood Anderson, a writer famous for his character sketches, who claimed, ‘There must be a revolution in feeling before there can be a revolution in fact.’ It was the narrative nonfiction writer’s ‘sine qua non’, he claimed, and essential for their practice (pp. 179–180). *The facts* pertaining to any particular nonfiction story, Anderson suggested, only become meaningful after subjectivity has been established; that is, once the writer really sees the human subject before them, and recognises that the subject is a living, breathing person whose life is affected by this ‘story’. The writer must then lead the reader into a landscape ‘demarcated by Otherness’ (ibid., p. 180) and depict a more realised human existence, instead. For the ‘facts’ of the story to matter, the writer must explore the subject beyond, for instance, one particular legally or historically corroborated moment; that Cameron Doomadgee was drunk when he was arrested on the day that he died in a police cell is a fact (Hooper 2009; Nguyen 2006), but one that tells us nothing about why he died or why his death affected so many people.

Consciously political narrative nonfiction, then, relies on a chain of textual relations in order to succeed. First, the author needs to recognise that there exists a situation deserving of closer scrutiny. Then for the reader, there has to be a ‘revolution in feeling’, which requires the writer to depict a subject in such a way that it allows an ‘exchange of subjectivities’; that is, for the reader to imagine what it might be like to be the subject. All of these steps need to occur before ‘the facts’ or politics of a situation can begin to be addressed in the world beyond the text.

For instance, ‘the facts’ that frame the second chapter in my nonfiction manuscript, which examines the ongoing situation at the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic, would be as follows: 1. Abortion is a highly emotive issue. 2. Its practice has been known to elicit violent responses, such as the murder of a security guard at this particular clinic. 3. Staff are unhappy with ongoing protest presence at the clinic. 4. Legally, the protesters have a right to express dissenting opinions at the clinic.

Yet, the list tells us little about why the activists involved feel so passionately about abortion or this clinic in particular. Nor does it tell us, the reader, who is right in this situation, or more deserving of our sympathy, or from whose eyes these facts have been observed. What the list does convey is a basic inventory that's been copied many times before. It is possibly this familiarity that immunises writers and readers against the 'bearing witness' reaction, because this unnarrativised version eliminates the idea that there are genuine people with actual lives, fears and anxieties working at and visiting the clinic. The list-form version also begs the question, from whose eyes are we seeing – an automaton's, with no opinion on the happenings unfolding before them?

Unlike the 'muckrakers' of the past or the long history of writers using narrative nonfiction to make political interventions (Bly, Hersey, Ehrenreich et al.), modern journalists avoid declaring value judgements in their writing, Aucoin has argued (2007). Due to the prevailing, widespread commitment to 'objectivity' in the majority of nonfiction writing, journalists today generally remain 'detached from the public moral discourse about what is right and wrong in society'. Moreover, modern journalism often argued for a reclamation of 'traditional values' and an aim to 'return society to a state of normalcy' (pp. 559–560).

Historically, there have been nonfiction writers whose work aspired to more than a return to the status quo. There have been sweeping, detail-rich studies of the experiences of forgotten itinerant farm workers during the depression (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 2001); damning documentations of lives lived in danger on society's fringes, such as Ted Conover's book on people crossing the border illegally from Mexico to the United States in search of employment and hope (*Coyotes: A Journey through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens*, 1987); and accounts of war, such as John Hersey's recounting of the bombing of Japan during the Second World War, told from multiple perspectives of survivors (*Hiroshima*, 2009).

In order to create a work similar in scope or motivation to one of those listed above, however, a writer would not only have to commit a great deal of time to the story or investigation, but they would also have to form relationships with (potentially) multiple subjects or sources, conduct numerous interviews, as well as countless hours of observational and archival research and, as evidenced by all the works listed in this chapter so far, immerse themselves in the worlds of their subjects for a length of time.

The journalistic practice of ‘immersion’ is similar to the anthropological methodology of ‘participant observation’ (Cramer & McDevitt 2004, p. 140), that sees a researcher spending time within the world of the subject for an extended period. The technique is frequently practised in American narrative nonfiction (Sims 2007, pp. 6–7; Gutkind 2008, pp. 17–33).

The type of immersion common to consciously political narrative nonfiction is ‘ethnographic’ in style (Cramer & McDevitt 2004), another term more frequently seen in the fields of anthropology and sociology. In this context, the term is used to describe the ‘length and intensity of the research’ (Skeggs 1994, p. 73); that is, the text becomes a detailed mapping in an attempt to understand groups or subcultures, such as in Hunter S Thompson’s *Hell’s Angels* (1999) or Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* (2003), with texts constructed from extensive field notes, observation and interviews. The emphasis is ‘on immersion and its goal of telling a story as intimately as possible from the standpoint of the group being studied’ (Cramer & McDevitt 2004, p. 130). Anthropologist Beverley Skeggs noted that ethnography shares a number of similarities with literary research techniques, such as ‘narrative and constructive methods’, but also ‘defines topics, shifts from one locale to another, juxtaposes other perspectives and thus decides which context, at what level and from whose perspective the reader will see’ (1994, p. 86). Skeggs also argued that ethnography treats ‘participants as microcosms of wider structural processes’ and that ‘once we see how something exists by being embedded in a set of relationships we more easily understand it’ (ibid., p. 76).

As with ethnographies, consciously political narrative nonfiction works are, by their very definition, social or political works looking at systemic, structural or hegemonic issues. That is, they concern ‘the perspectives of groups that are otherwise invisible or stereotypically portrayed in the news’ (Cramer & McDevitt 2004, p. 130). In terms of my research, this describes precisely how pro-life activists, but also activists in general, are routinely depicted in the mainstream media.

Relevant here is Aucoin’s account of the historical legacy of muckraking, which ‘did not labor to create tales of innocent victims and vile villains like the modern mainstream investigative reporters did. By rejecting this strategy, muckrakers downplayed the individual story and emphasised the larger social issue’ (2007, p. 562).

My own narrative nonfiction methodology diverged from what I envisioned would be this ethnographical or immersive tradition after my observations during fieldwork. A couple of months into my research, having witnessed the ongoing harassment of clinic patients and staff, I found myself not just unsympathetic to the position and tactics of pro-life activists, but openly hostile to them, so much so that I was prompted into making a political intervention by organising a counter-rally, which grew into a feminist activism group, concentrated on abortion rights. Thus, I crossed the divide between observation and active participation; in retrospect, this was most likely motivated by the need to encourage a ‘public response’, as Tait described in her essay on bearing witness.

Allow me to offer a specific example of the seemingly innocuous behaviour that had very real consequences outside my interviews and my text, and which started to take a toll on my conscience.

After an interview with the Australian Christian Lobby, whose primary concerns are preventing euthanasia, same-sex marriage and abortion (Woodhead 2015, pp. 102–104), the representative asked whom else I was interviewing.

‘Some people in Queensland who practise direct action at abortion clinics,’ I replied. ‘They sit in and block doorways and refuse to leave until the police arrive.’

My interviewee’s eyes lit up. ‘Isn’t that illegal?’ he asked, among other questions about the strategy.

I felt as though I was giving ammunition to a well-funded, well-connected group campaigning against equality and basic human rights. It was these repeated interactions that led to a kind of radicalisation for me.

There are obvious dangers inherent to immersive research methods, other than becoming embroiled in the situation, a number of which I will explore in the next chapter in more detail.

The one I will mention here is perhaps not the most obvious, though it’s significant in my opinion, as I believe it to be partly responsible for drastically altering my subject position: the idea that the writer will act as a conduit, uncritically recording and repeating the beliefs and insights of the subject. This happened repeatedly with pro-life activists, who often assumed I was naïve or a means of reaching a wider public.

I attended pro-life conferences, pro-life protests, read pro-life newsletters and websites, spent time with pro-life activists – and I discovered that their concerted

efforts to live in a world where abortion isn't an option provoked me into action. While I felt I remained capable of transcribing and depicting their worlds, a seditious need grew to challenge the authority and worldview of these subjects outside the text, and to try to change the ritual I had repeatedly witnessed in several locations of people trying to enter a medical clinic and the attempts to publicly shame, dissuade or intimidate them.

Maybe, as writers, we are all shaped by our past phases and guises and roles. I had been an activist, and so it was hard for me not to think strategically about the issues involved or ways to combat the myriad forms of oppression I witnessed as I was drawn more and more into this world and the struggles it contained.

In *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Nonfiction*, Matthew Ricketson warned of the dangers of too much writerly subjectivity:

If issues arise when practitioners ignore or suppress their subjective response to people and events they write about, so at the other end of the spectrum problems arise when they fix on their subjective response at the expense of people and events they write about. When one kind of narrative style denies the people being written about their full humanity by an inability or unwillingness to engage with them, the other kind denies subjects their full humanity by treating them as less important than the writer's own subjectivity. (2014, chap. 7, para. 27)

While this may be true, I have endeavoured to treat the people I encountered throughout my research as real people inside and outside *The Abortion Game*. Although the book details some of my experiences in the world of abortion and some of my reactions to those experiences, it's not a book about an 'individual story' (Aucoin 2007, p. 562) and that individual's thoughts about the world. Rather, I would assert, it's about 'the larger social issue' that Aucoin argued the muckrakers aspired to (ibid.). Despite that framework, once I'd mapped the world of a subject that had once been unfamiliar to me, and started to write and read my nonfiction text, 'no longer [could I] think of "strangers and the strange" as dislocated entities' peripheral to my life (Sanderson 2004, p. 1). In fact, the actions and beliefs of these once strangers,

now characters *and* people I knew, became extremely important to me, and overwhelmed my life somewhat.

From the outset of my research, there was no-one involved with the research I viewed as a neutral player, not even the writer. I had already devoured the works of Janet Malcolm, Joan Didion and Helen Garner, and so instead imagined all of the participants – particularly in a divisive issue like abortion – as actors, with different objectives. Thus, I saw my writing development as dialectical, with a contest of actors to whom I was giving a share of the stage.

Further to this, there was nothing about my entrance into this world that acted as a catalyst for this story, unlike for example Helen Garner and *The First Stone*. Nor was I the main character: *The Abortion Game* is not about me as a person at the expense of broader societal questions. This story was already happening, and will continue to happen after my research has concluded: women will seek abortions, opponents will try to stop them, and pro-choice activists will try to prevent opponents having any effect. This certainty, after bearing witness, may have also contributed to my moving beyond the desire to trigger a ‘public response’ (Tait 2011, pp. 1221–1226): I was unable to accept that women were being harassed for attending a medical clinic so close to where I lived, and that this treatment would continue to happen.

Matthew Ricketson has noted also that ‘maintaining editorial independence while working closely with principal sources over an extended period’ is a problem inherent in book-length narrative nonfiction (2014, chap. 1, para. 19). Not only for how our sources influence us, I would add, but also how the very issue can.

If the research spans some time, as in the case of my research, which took three years, this authorial position can start to feel like a dishonest charade: I was concealing thoughts and reactions that would appear in my text and form part of the narrative. Other researchers working on lengthy immersive projects, such as Beverley Skeggs and her feminist ethnographic study of young working-class women, encountered comparable situations, where they felt unable to reveal certain details. ‘When I began asking the young women about personal matters, such as attitudes to partners,’ Skeggs wrote, ‘the confident ones forced me to disclose similar information. I was very honest with them. I think their responses may have been very different if they had known that I was not heterosexual’ (1994, p. 78) A fundamental difference between traditional anthropological or sociological ethnography and my research reveals some of the limitations of the technique for consciously political

narrative nonfiction: in ethnography, the subjects' opinions and experiences are of prime importance, and the researcher's opinions or voice can be seen as 'corrupting' the research (Cramer & McDevitt 2004, p. 129).

It is possible that, initially at least, not offering my own opinions to subjects was an attempt not to 'corrupt' my own research, or overly influence subject responses. Later, once I had started a feminist activist group that was organising demonstrations and counter-demonstrations in opposition to pro-life groups even as I was continuing my research, this concealment became burdensome, and I was conscious that I had waded into murky ethical territory. A writer's participation with their subjects sits on a spectrum, of course. All nonfiction writers and journalists participate at some level, whether simply the flattery and faux-friendship Janet Malcolm described (2004, p. 3) or a more complicated participation, such as Ted Conover (1987) creating a new identity as a Mexican migrant worker, twice crossing the border with groups of people for whom the journey meant freedom or the loss thereof.

Toward the end of my immersion and interviewing period, I spoke with two women who run a retreat for women suffering from abortion grief. I was genuinely interested to hear about their work and the people they'd met along the way, but I also realised the two had an agenda about 'abortion grief' and its prevalence, its inevitability. They opened the interview by complaining about the disgusting and aggressive behaviour of pro-abortion activists in Melbourne at a rally the week before – a rally I had helped organise. In the lead-up I had even written an article promoting it in the *Guardian*. I sat through the interview uncomfortably, thinking, *Don't these people use Google?*

It was in this moment I realised that I had crossed a line and complicated my research by organising protests against people I was interviewing. This concealment wasn't necessarily intentional: I was always pro-choice, and didn't downplay the significance of my own politics – but I also didn't volunteer them. At first this was because I didn't believe they mattered as much as the answers the people I was researching might give. While the answers of pro-life subjects had never made sense to me on a political or an intellectual level, I also started to appreciate the daily damage their unchallenged presence was having on real people, even at a very local level. The truth is, I found it impossible not to become involved in this topic. I didn't openly express my opinion, even when I spent extended periods of time with these

subjects, but it was also my experience that I was very rarely asked for my personal or political opinions. My omissions didn't only pertain to the rallies and organising: not once did I declare to a pro-life participant that I had had an abortion. Though, to be fair, I was never asked if I had had an abortion either.

Using these semi-immersive and participant-observation methodologies, I discovered that how much personal information the writer reveals to subjects has to be considered on a case-by-case, interview-by-interview basis. Such caution is strategically necessary, as 'honest responses' could negatively affect interview responses, or limit access to the world the writer seeks to portray. In some situations, revealing the thoughts of the writer or their personal experiences could stunt or alter the direction of the research altogether.

I don't mean to suggest that the writer has all the power either, because that wasn't my experience. However, it is hard to conceive of a non-hierarchical writer-subject relationship (Malcolm 2004; Skeggs 1994), not only for the reasons cited in chapter two but also because, fundamentally, writers have more insight into the process, the material and how it will be used to craft a nonfiction work.

I maintain that a subject position such as the one that evolved in my manuscript is not wrong or improper, yet it does need to be a conscious, reflective position. Self-conscious activity with the text and reflection, possibly within the narrative nonfiction text itself if appropriate, are essential. Both of these elements are key to creative writing practice (Haseman 2007) and ethnographic or immersive approaches (Skeggs 1994). At the very least, there should be a process in place for the writer to confirm what's driving the research and the narrative and why. Anthropologist Beverley Skeggs said that ethnographies 'are more than just narratives. They relate to a reality that exists before and after the research' (1994, p. 87). A similar philosophy should be applied to consciously political narrative nonfiction works, too, and even more so if the writer-researcher is active within the text.

This research shows that it is possible to take a position that differs from the advocacy journalism I spoke of in the introduction to this exegesis, where the practitioner begins a project to speak on behalf of individuals or groups underrepresented in the media (Waisbord 2009, p. 371). Partly, I would argue, the evidence for this lies in my original intent: I was not using this research to advocate a particular point of view, nor to publicly air or represent the views of pro-choice

activists, who I felt had been unfairly represented in the mainstream press. Rather, the activism was born from the writing process itself; it was a case of actually participating in the world of my subject, abortion, and recognising the potential to change what I came to perceive as an ongoing, egregious wrong.

My research doesn't completely fit in the 'muckraking' mould discussed in chapter one, with its emphasis on the wrongs of institutions, either (Aucoin 2007; Feldstein 2006). Muckrakers, according to Aucoin, 'constructed narratives that, taken alone, left no moral doubts, positioning themselves as moral arbiters of social justice' (2007, p. 569). I would argue, however, that as well as a serious political intervention into the abortion debate, my nonfiction manuscript contains a great deal of ambiguity and space for the reader to dissent.

In addition, this form also differs from ethnography in the social sciences sense, which usually involves spending greater lengths of time in the world of the subject, and the writing outcome is, typically, a comprehensive depiction of the subject's world. While I tried to document the subject of abortion as comprehensively as I could, I did not spend years or even months with the human subjects involved in this research; there are aspects of the operation, from its history to its practice to its politics, that have been omitted from *The Abortion Game*.

Nor does bearing witness satisfactorily describe this kind of nonfiction with this writer-researcher subject position, for I did not witness the extreme horror of the journalists who entered Dachau, or the devastation Hersey strove to document in *Hiroshima* (2009), or Philip Gourevitch's more recent book detailing the Rwandan genocide, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (1998), and yet I was still prompted to intervene.

Rather, consciously political narrative nonfiction is influenced by all of these methods and styles, and incorporates aspects of their practices, yet is also comfortable openly identifying the writer-researcher as a political subject with political agency who can be influenced by what they are reporting on. As Aucoin and others have argued, one of the great myths that contemporary journalism is built upon is the belief that a journalist or writer is able to remain neutral in any situation. Indeed, consciously political narrative nonfiction rejects this position, arguing that the role of the political writer is not to write from a detached perspective, but to allow room for their 'scepticism' to be transformed into 'belief' (Tait 2011, p. 1226), because they are also part of the world.

## Chapter Four: Beaten Up by Bikies in a Cave in Kenya, or How to Write an Ethical Ending

‘Be careful how you interpret the world; it *is* like that’, warned Erich Heller (cited in Nemerov 1991, p. 223). There are multiple possible readings of what Heller meant, but the interpretation that applies to this research, and indeed any writing project, is that the text becomes more than words on a page or a faded attempt to depict reality. Typically, nonfiction writing is the *re*-creation of a world, and sometimes, as is often the case with narrative nonfiction where the subject is frequently strange or unknown, the only encounter a reader will have (at least up until that point) with a particular subject.

Concepts such as contrivance, authorial influence and ethical encroachment weighed heavily on me as I neared the end point of the narrative. I felt pressure to tie all the threads into one alluring bundle, and wrap it in an impressive conclusion. For some time though, I had been uncertain about where my conclusion lay. The big finish I vaguely wrote toward in the early days of the research, where I’d reveal my own abortion story to my mother, had lost its sheen as I recognised what I’d have to sacrifice in order to execute it, but I will come back to this.

Publicly bonding with my mother wasn’t the only aspect of the narrative nonfiction manuscript I had grown to doubt. I also had reservations about my depictions more generally, both those transparently exchanged and those quietly observed. Furthermore, even though I had set out to write a text that challenged the ways contemporary society does or does not acknowledge abortion and what this does or does not mean for women’s rights, I had come to question how my own involvement in the Australian abortion rights movement (despite my researcher status) had come to shape the actions of the other subjects I had interviewed and observed.

Without a doubt, the ‘*emic*, or insider, point of view’ (Carey 2008) allows the writer access to areas or conversations that would be off-limits to a researcher who hadn’t immersed herself in a specific setting. For instance, when I was invited to an emergency strategy meeting at Parliament House of nine women involved in Victorian pro-choice politics, mostly parliamentarians and lobbyists, I attended not as a researcher but as a political participant.

There are disclosures and happenings that researchers immersed in certain subcultures or situations are privy to, which reward the narrative nonfiction researcher, even if there was no deliberate deception in order to achieve that privileged position. I can say with almost certainty that there was no deception involved in my trip to Parliament House. I temper the claim with ‘almost’ because I wasn’t upfront at the meeting about how I disagreed with the political direction of the proposed campaign; that was something I instead articulated in the manuscript, when I re-created the meeting.

Such narrative contrivance, that is, the delicate manipulation of actual events or restrained self-behaviour in order to create potential scenes or further the narrative, can seem slight when contrasted with the legend of how Hunter S Thompson found his ending to *Hell’s Angels*: ‘I pushed my luck a little too far and got badly stomped by four or five Angels who seemed to feel I was taking advantage of them’ (Thompson 1999, p. 270). Thompson had been separated from the club for more than six months and was struggling to finish his book when he tracked down the Angels again that night. As a result of an altercation he initiated, Thompson was savagely beaten, and ejected from the gang he’d been travelling with on and off for a couple of years.

The first blow was launched with no hint of warning and I thought for a moment that it was just one of those drunken accidents that a man has to live with in this league. But within seconds I was clubbed from behind by the Angel I’d been talking to just a moment earlier. Then I was swarmed in a general flail. (ibid., p. 272)

‘He needed that ending,’ remarked Jim Silberman, his publisher, ‘because he was really struggling with an ending for that book’ (Weingarten 2005, p. 170).

While every writer is in search of an ending, there is, according to Hartsock (2000), a ‘questing’ nature to literary journalism not dissimilar to the concept of Bakhtin’s ‘questing novel’: ‘the genre of an imperfect, incomplete world’, as opposed to ‘the epic’ or ‘canonical novel’, which Bakhtin deemed ‘cut off from the present’ (Clark & Holquist 1984, pp. 287–289). The ‘questing’ in both Bakhtin’s and Hartsock’s term refers to writing that grapples with a reality that is ‘inconclusive and

fluid'. Hartsock argued that while literary journalism is not the kind of literature Bahktin was describing, it echoed the same narrative ideal because it is a text that reflects 'the inconclusive present' (2000, p. 63).

While I never considered staging such a drastic plot incident for *The Abortion Game*, I could understand the temptation: writers are always in search of endings, particularly those that can finish off an eye-opening excursion into otherness. Take the end of Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone: A Terrifying True Story* (1995), a riveting account of the history of Ebola, Marburg and other related viruses. With the look and structure of an airport thriller, *The Hot Zone* always risked being anticlimactic in its ending: there was no virus outbreak in Virginia, none of the lead characters contracted Ebola, and nobody had discovered a cure. Instead, Preston travels to Kitum Cave in Kenya, where the virus is suspected of living, and walks through the cave in a hazmat suit, which he then has to destroy, following similar protocols to the scientists and military personnel throughout the book. It's a poetic ending that confronts a formidable virus in its natural environment, but it resolves little in the narrative or in the mind of the reader. Arguably, such resolution is not necessary to the narrative nonfiction plot because the journey matters as much as the ending; the book is not a novel and so an ending cannot be engineered, unless it's one the author instigates (viz. Hunter S Thompson); after literature met postmodernity, open-endedness is accepted as a reflection of reality. Possibly such endings seem anticlimactic because, in many ways, much narrative nonfiction follows a conventional narrative trajectory, one where the author searches for a larger truth; and yet, the conclusion cannot be neat or certain, because reality itself is rarely neat or certain.

As a narrative structure, 'the quest' fits with the subject position and experiences that I write about in *The Abortion Game*, but also with works of consciously political narrative nonfiction more broadly. Ideally, writers who seek to politically engage with the world in their texts will challenge their own assumptions, and those of their subjects and readers, because power relations in the text and in reality are continuously shifting. For instance, when I first spoke with pro-life activists Anne and Jim in Queensland, I hadn't yet started organising with Melbourne Feminist Action or taken an active role in the pro-choice campaign (Woodhead 2015, pp. 122–128). Consequently, during my time with them, rather than assuming the role of the antagonist, I felt something more akin to a comradesly affinity. This was despite our differences in views, and mostly due to their antiwar actions and their lifelong

dedication to their politics. Given that reality is inconclusive and this subgenre reflects that, textual encounters and/or exchange of subjectivities present a powerful political possibility: the text has the opportunity to possibly shift the terrain surrounding a certain issue, because the ending is not definite or pre-fixed. Worth noting, however, is that the book is often written from the already-shifted position.

The story arc of the quest requires the writer, hero or not, to leave their comfort zone, to go out into the world and engage with other people, always seeking, at some level, the truth to something they've long wondered about: Does killing change a person? Why did Cameron Doomadgee die? How do people survive on pitifully low incomes? Why does abortion divide people so? (Sparrow 2009; Hooper 2008; Ehrenreich 2001; Woodhead 2015)

While the writer has 'exegetical authority over the text' (Borland 1991, p. 65) she is forced to go out and ask other people what they think; indeed, this characteristic is fundamental to the quest structure, but it is also fundamental to politics, a communal public arena. Additionally, there's a journey, there are questions and impasses, and, finally, the questing writer struggles to arrange all of this data into meaning that has significance beyond the reader finishing the book – because what is the point of consciously political questing nonfiction if not to remind us that this is not always the way it's been, and there exists the possibility *to change*. It could be argued that consciously political narrative nonfiction is primarily based on hope about the future of the world.

Of course, it is also intrinsic to the nature of narrative nonfiction to use and reconstruct other people's stories, turning them into commodities (McDonald 2010; Malcolm 2004), and it was the potentially exploitative side to this that began to overshadow the writing of my manuscript as it progressively got closer to the eyes of readers. As Carey noted, 'the principles governing the treatment of research participants in universities – respecting their autonomy, seeking their informed consent, protecting their privacy' are not the only ethical concerns or complexities that arise in a writer's relationships with their subjects. Of greatest concern, Carey went on, is 'whose voice is allowed to speak in the final text?' (2008)

Kraus has posited that 'to write about people is always to disfigure them. It diminishes the writer as well as the subject. It's a presumption, rather like attempting to paint God' (2003, p. 286). Indeed, if every aspect of the narrative nonfiction manuscript is filtered through and crafted by the writer, is the writer not playing God?

The ‘cannibalism’ of our lives and acquaintances is only one aspect of writing, Kraus argued, and it is an act obviously necessary to writing nonfiction that involves people. Still, as my research developed, I found myself plagued by the idea that these living people didn’t actually consent to me treating them like characters – that is to say, moving them in and out of the narrative on a writerly whim, or allowing their statements to represent a certain section of the population. Most of the interviews I did include from my research were cut down to a few lines that helped show a perspective I hadn’t encountered earlier in the narrative – and if any of these narrative contrivances added to the manuscript’s dramatic tension, well, that was even better for me, the writer. During the drafting and editing process, I fretted about what Carey described as possible: that ‘participants may be shocked to find that what they have told the researcher has been interpreted in a way that is alien to their own conceptions about their identity and the meaning they attach to their experiences’ (2008).

For me, this fear started after I published an essay that summarised another writer’s argument in a couple of sentences; the section had been whittled down from a paragraph explaining her position to a couple of sentences through an external editing process. I thought not much more of it until after publication, when I received a lengthy email stating how wronged the author felt by my summary of her argument, going so far as to claim I’d misrepresented her. We corresponded for some time but reached no consensus or understanding.

This was how a working writer, with regular access to publications in which she could further outline her argument, reacted to a summary I deemed rough but accurate. What, then, would happen with those who felt this book was their moment to explain to an amorphous public (and one probably more limited than they realised) their reason for dedicating themselves to the fight for or against abortion rights? What if they thought I had misunderstood? Worse, what if they thought I was intentionally misleading or shaping public opinion about them for, say, the purposes of my narrative arc? ‘If people feel proprietorial about their words when they are quoted,’ cautioned Ricketson (2014), ‘they feel doubly so about their thoughts and feelings being represented’ or depicted.

Chloe Hooper had alluded to a related characteristic of narrative nonfiction crafting when I saw her at the Melbourne Writers Festival (2008). She recounted how she had recorded hundreds of hours of interviews for her book on Palm Island, and

spent more time transcribing them, only to reduce the entire interview down to a single quote, included primarily for the purposes of the story she was building.

Narrative nonfiction, of course, is not reality itself, but a representation of reality, sharpened and abridged for the reader, who is unlikely to choose to spend all their free time reading through a 10,000-page document listing the minutiae of detail and interactions of a writer's time spent in a tiny, fractious feminist collective. Much of it would be boring, but moreover I would argue, in a vein similar to Aucoin (2001) and White (1990), that it is the writer's job to sift through all this data and create meaning.

Like Kraus, Pybus agreed that writers are 'cannibals and voyeurs' but also stressed what writing and the study of subjects can do. The 'close examination of a life', she wrote – and of any subject, I would add – 'can illuminate much about the creative process, or social mores, or the mechanics of power' (1999).

Still, the inescapable question for me persisted: what if I the writer was wrong in the meaning I fashioned to build the narrative? That is, what if I interpreted body language incorrectly or used a quote that overemphasised something the interviewee didn't actually feel very strongly about, or misremembered a scene I'd participated in?

As my research progressed, I routinely found myself returning to this self-mistrust and weighing the consequences of turning my nonfiction manuscript into a book. What would be the social role and worth of an exploration of abortion politics versus the injustice some subjects may feel I enacted, not merely through depiction but also through provocation?

At this point, some perspective is required, because I don't wish to submit to paranoia. My level of participation in the worlds of my subjects and their politics was limited when compared to a writer like Ted Conover, who himself followed in the footsteps of writers like John Steinbeck. As Eric Skipper noted of Ted Conover's research methods and writing, when nonfiction is participatory it can be far more immersive than in my experience: 'Like Steinbeck, who traveled the European and North African Theater in covering one war and East Asia in covering another, Conover took his own risks in crossing the border illegally, dealing firsthand with coyotes, staying in a shack used for storing human cargo, and paddling across the Rio Grande in an inflatable raft' (2007, p. 34).

There exist also many examples of covert participation, both in nonfiction and sociology, which involved intentionally deceiving a community or subculture, such as Roger Homan's sociological study of a small Pentecostal congregation:

He adopted the appropriate postures of prayer, singing and listening; in singing he allowed his voice to be audible: in listening to addresses and announcements he interpolated the 'praise phrases' as appropriate. He carried a black leather bible with him to the assembly. He shook hands with other members of the assembly and exchanged sacred greetings, thereby presenting himself as 'saint' rather than 'sinner' and preempting the special attention (evangelism) given to outsiders. He took standard initiatives like interrupting a hymn and reciting the forthcoming verse: he occasionally requested choruses. (1980, p. 49)

There's flat-out journalistic deception, too, such as 'using hidden cameras and microphones; impersonation; nonidentification; recreation of news events (staging); fabrication; plagiarism; photo manipulation; quote tampering; lying to sources, including putting a positive spin on an interview topic; lying to protect a source; using false attributions; and flattering sources or showing insincere empathy' (Lee 2004, pp. 98–99).

The line between informed consent and outright concealment or fabrication of a new identity seems plain at first. Cramer & McDevitt noted that deception 'seems to be most common when an ethnographer embarks on research intended to expose corrupt practices or to advocate for reforms'. Then, they added, researchers 'disagree on where and when to draw this line' (2004, p. 132).

According to Julius Roth (1962), there exists no definite line between these approaches, secret or transparent. He argued that subjects never understand or conceive of the research in the same way as a researcher, that often when a study begins, the researcher isn't certain what they're looking for anyway, and that to tell subjects would change or influence behaviours.

Even as Homan began studying subjects covertly, he still held himself to a framework of guidelines he would not cross; for instance, he avoided overstepping the 'observer role', which for him meant avoiding becoming 'a normative factor in

assembly behavior' (1980, p. 50). Whether this was because for fear of the influence it may have on his subjects or because it may have affected or altered his research is unclear.

Did I betray my pro-life subjects or even change the extent or nature of their participation by having more knowledge than they about my dual role as researcher and activist/antagonist, as well as understanding how their data would be used in the narrative nonfiction manuscript itself?

Generally, people who are not writers do not comprehend how characters are drawn or scenes emerge; they do not detect the significance a writer might in a certain uttered phrase, nor do they appreciate being represented as a symbol of a wider societal opinion or an oddity.

Every time I spoke with my subjects, or participated in a rally, or didn't reveal that I was an organiser behind an event that caused them disgust, as happened in an interview in Tasmania (Woodhead 2015, pp. 169–172), I was viewing their words and actions as performance or dialogue, even as they were sharing their opinions and experiences in good faith, on the understanding their participation was aiding my research. 'Where in the interview I had been responsive to them, now I am using their lives in the service of something else, for my own purposes, to show something to others. I am guilty about being an intruder and then, to some extent, a betrayer' (Josselson 1996, pp. 69–70). Even as I was swept up in the act of setting up a rally, I was jotting notes and snatches of dialogue, or marking spaces that would make great scenes when I was in front of my computer later on. Perhaps it's a phenomenon many nonfiction writers would recognise. David Carlin observed that 'even as the interviewee is testifying as to their memories and impressions the writer cannot help but be supplying mental images to accompany the stories heard; cannot help but be considering, consciously or not, the affects that play out in the interviewee's face and body as they tell their story' (2009).

I agree with much of what Roth contended on the blurring of participatory lines, but I keep returning to the same conundrum: my participation wasn't to allow a certain level of voyeuristic access to the world of a subject. It was a direct response to their behaviours and their beliefs, and it wasn't calculated or planned. I found myself acting in their drama, and now that I'm in the analysis stage, I wonder how this affected their reactions, their plans.

To what degree my approach was deliberate manipulation or concealment is perhaps debatable, though ‘fact and fiction cannot be kept neatly quarantined where memories are concerned’ (Carlin 2009). To some extent, given my observational role, my sometimes participation, and my self-reflective writing and redrafting role throughout this research, these are also my memories now.

As my research was ultimately limited in its immersion, there was no adherence to a general ethnographic practice, or even to participant observation. As such, I didn’t feel beholden to individuals or their portraits as a researcher relying solely on those methods might: subjects’ putative intentions weren’t necessarily factored in before I re-created meaning from a confluence of events or mixed the story into the overarching narrative.

Do these concerns differ from the typical issues of representation that every nonfiction writer and journalist encounters? There is little doubt the writer is a privileged creator and that writers sometimes struggle with this power imbalance (Kraus 2003; Malcolm 2004), but the thing that set my research apart from more conventional narrative nonfiction was my overt political participation.

Yet, without deception, how much cooperation would I have had from my subjects, most notably those of a pro-life persuasion? What would interviewees and subjects have given me if they could foresee their depiction, or if they could witness a meeting of Melbourne Feminist Action, where I, as a participant and researcher, had insight into their thinking and strategies? I feel my manuscript is stuck in Schrodinger’s nonfiction box, wondering whether the participant-observer alters the outcome or not. If I’d said I was pro-choice from the outset, or admitted to my Tasmanian interviewees that I had organised the rally they were offended by, would the interviews have even occurred? It is difficult to be certain, of course, but I believe they would have gone ahead, though in a much more antagonistic tone; my presence and questions may simply have been met with hostility.

When I look with detachment rather than sentimentality at what I have taken from people, I realise I have not taken their right to respond. Many of my subjects are public figures: writers, spokespeople, activists, who are often intent on challenging or disputing the worldview of others. I have not silenced these people; in fact, I have given them space to breathe and exist in this patchwork on the state of abortion rights in this country. I have recognised their existence, their efforts and their impact. While it is true these potentially dissenting voices cannot respond in my one text, they can

respond in a multitude of other places: their own text, their own blog, an interview, an opinion site. Indeed, in some instances, I believe these actors will feel vindicated because their role has been recognised in a way that has not previously been documented.

The most contentious part of my manuscript – that is, the ethical question I ended up wrestling with the most – is also the content that pushes this research up against memoir and from which, it turns out, I can't escape.

When I chose to weave a narrative thread about my own life into my manuscript, and planted the seed, early on, of needing at some stage to reveal to my mother my personal experience of abortion, I must have been suffering from the 'myopia about the pain we may be about to inflict' that biographer Cassandra Pybus (1999) warned about.

In early drafts, the need to confess rang true, as my mother had been asking a lot of questions about my research and I'd been telling her more than I had in the past, because it was such a long investigation and I wanted her to appreciate its rigour, but also because, on some level, I wanted to be honest with her about why I thought abortion was such an important right, a right I myself had needed. Additionally, it made a good narrative hook – and a narrative nonfiction manuscript about abortion needs good hooks, otherwise it faces being dry, dull or overly confronting.

At first, I was uncomfortable with how closely these narrative inclusions, borrowed from my own life, ran to memoir. It wasn't until I started sending out a near-full draft of my manuscript to volunteer readers that the narrative thread about me and my mother, a relationship defined by reproductive relations, was the thing they wanted resolved. Early on in the manuscript, I phrased it this way: 'I knew two things then: 1) When I do finally confess to my mother, it's going to be a lengthy, possibly sorrowful conversation and 2) I will have to tell her before I finish my book' (Woodhead 2015, p. 14). Readers responded that they did not want more interviews or statistics, but to know what happened when I told my mother a secret I had kept for so long.

How had I got myself into this quandary, where the most important thing to readers was the impact my research had on my relationship with my mother?

The timeline is crucial here: it was only four months before the due date for submission of my research, and I still had not told my mother, even though there had been many times I'd wanted to, or had tried. Now I was facing a stage where time was

running out to tell her, when in fact it was only running out in terms of my narrative research and my submission deadline.

This realisation changed the entire ethical slant of this narrative thread for me. That is to say, I was considering confessing a long-held secret to my mother, in order to record her reaction in my narrative nonfiction manuscript. Going beyond the mere contrivance of the impetus for telling her and how shabbily such a conversation or revelation may read in the text itself, I was worried that it could damage my relationship with her, particularly if she ever learned that the only reason I told her was so I'd have a conclusion for my manuscript.

The more I imagined my mother's possible reactions, the more I was forced to acknowledge that any portrayal of her in a text is likely to be considered a betrayal of our relationship: she is a private person, who hadn't consented to being depicted in my manuscript, and, unlike some of my other subjects, there was no way to make her anonymous. Added to this was the fact that I'd kept a secret from her for more than a decade, which I'd been willing to share with a reading public many times before: through my essay in *Meanjin*, various panels and blog posts, my narrative nonfiction manuscript which had been seen by many a reader's eye, as well as the possibility that it could become a book at some stage in the future.

How did I resolve what I came to see as my major ethical dilemma? Not very satisfactorily, I admit. I tend to agree with McDonald (2010) and Carlin (2009), that these nonfiction works are our – that is, writers', especially memoirists' – stories too. Certainly my abortion was just that: mine, to share and hide.

Equally, I recognise that my mother's reaction to my abortion and how that makes her feel belongs to her in some way. As such, at this time, I have chosen not to tell her. I instead resolved that initial hook by threading the attempts I made to try and tell her throughout, before admitting that I realised that despite my public relationship with abortion, it still has its secretive corners.

Of course, this has not resolved the issue of my mother's presence in the book. In the current draft of the manuscript, she remains a character. Two factors heavily influenced my decision to keep her as such. The first was that I grew up as a single child with a single parent, and both my values and politics have been heavily shaped by that experience, so again, those are my stories too, even when she plays a part. The other is far more craven: she is unlikely to ever read my manuscript.

‘I believe the writer has an ethical responsibility to consider the human frailty of those who would be exposed and hurt by the secrets’, Pybus observed. ‘Yet at the same time my writerly integrity is bound up in the veracity of the tale I am able to construct out of the vagaries of memory and the treacherous detritus left behind. Since we can never know the truth, it is fundamentally important that what I write makes psychological and moral sense of the material available to me and that my story does say something meaningful about the human condition’ (1999).

Abortion can be ugly. Working at an abortion clinic does mean disposing of foetal parts day after day. Abortion is also a means of freeing oneself of biological chains. These things are simultaneously true.

As for ‘truthful’ depiction, or Carlin’s definition of not ‘misrepresenting’ these actors (2009), I feel I have not. For example, take the traditional media depiction of activists. ‘Objective journalism’ in particular paints activists as aberrant, with crazy or unfounded beliefs, whether said activists are from the left or the right. Yet, to use the Queensland example again, I depicted Graham Preston and Anne Rampa, the two main activists in Protect Life, as human beings. I gave context for their politics and explained why they believe certain actions are necessary. It is, I would argue, a much more political action to depict people as we see them, rather than paint them as crazy or weird because their views differ from our own, or worse, our notions of subjectivity.

I also recognise the majority of my subjects precisely as that: actors. Everyone in my book had an agenda they were and, often, still are selling: a hierarchy of political agency. When speaking with me or spending time with me, these subjects were conscious of that agenda, at least sufficiently enough to express where they sat on the spectrum of abortion politics. Moreover, subjects did occasionally mislead or misrepresent their opinions or actions, such as in the case of Dan Flynn, the representative of the Australian Christian Lobby, who was quick to mention his work with leading feminists. He also presented himself as a jovial, considerate fellow solely concerned with women’s welfare, even though the ACL is a notoriously agitational organisation, intolerant of same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, feminism, abortion and so on.

I cite this example to show that although my subjects could control the material they offered in structured interviews, they could not control my interpretation, or whether I created multi-layered renderings from background or

archival research, or conduct that I'd observed in other settings, sometimes unbeknownst to subjects. Some theorists in the fields of sociology and anthropology, such as Homan, note the right to observe communities. I'm not convinced such a right exists in recording and reporting people who are not public figures. It is, however, common human behaviour to observe other people and comment on what we notice there.

Such observations automatically position the writer as coloniser and subjects as the colonised, yet deny the influential nature of participant observation, or the fact that all writers participate in the worlds of their subjects to some degree.

As Wright observed, to further complicate the relationship, 'Knowledge is seductive; the reporter wants to know, and the more he [*sic*] knows, the more interesting he becomes to the source' (cited in Ricketson 2014, chap. 10, para. 1).

The truth is, I could easily have been one of my own subjects, at a different point in time or if somebody else had started this research. I could have been involved in the activism before the research. Similarly, it is not inconceivable that Barbara Ehrenreich could have been one of the underemployed women she documented in 2001. Women over 55 in the United States can end up in precarious financial and living situations, despite having had established careers. According to one figure from the 2004 US Census Bureau, 'the median income for women age 55 to 64 was \$20,810; for women age 65 and over, it was \$12,080' (United States Department of Labor 2005). In 2013, for example, Margaret Mary Vojtko, an 83-year-old adjunct academic, died in poverty, working 'at an Eat'n Park at night and then trying to catch some sleep during the day at her office at Duquesne', the university where she still worked as an academic (Kovalik 2013). Ehrenreich was 57 when she started *Nickel and Dimed*. Still, it is hardly surprising that writers are drawn to political subjects that resonate with them or their imaginable circumstances.

After much debate with myself over the course of writing my manuscript and exegesis, I have come to the conclusion that my central conundrum is key to consciously political narrative nonfiction. For such works, the writer has a political objective, and, in cases where multiple sides are represented, as in my manuscript, political differences from subjects. Part of politically engaging in writing and the world is embracing this political agency and drive, an act Deborah Levy described in *Things I Don't Want to Know*, a response of sorts to George Orwell's essay *Why I Write*. Throughout the essay, Levy revisited the periods of her life that shaped her

writing, such as her childhood in South Africa. ‘If a white man sets his dog on a black child and everyone says that’s okay, if the neighbours and police and judges and teachers say, “That’s fine by me,” is life worth living?’ she asked. ‘What about the people who don’t think it’s okay?’ (2014, p. 99) Moreover, how could a writer document life under apartheid or the fight against it and not become part of that struggle?

To engage politically with the world is to accept that there are things we think are unjust or wrong and to want to change them. Writers are not exempt from these positions, but for consciously political narrative nonfiction writers, neither are our subjects. In a way, my ethical dilemmas can be resolved by accepting that my manuscript has been shaped by my opinions and my political understandings; indeed, I have shaped the whole text. Even for a political writer wanting to make a serious political intervention, this is a hard thing to accept, and perhaps part of that difficulty is gendered. As Levy wrote in that same essay about struggling with the very notion of subjectivity:

When a female writer walks a female character into the centre of her literary enquiry (or a forest) and this character starts to project shadow and light all over the place, she will have to find a language that is in part to do with learning how to become a subject rather than a delusion, and in part to do with unknotting the ways in which she has been put together by the Societal System in the first place. She will have to be canny how she sets about doing this because she will have many delusions of her own. In fact it would be best if she were uncanny when she set about doing this. It’s exhausting to learn how to become a subject, it’s hard enough learning how to become a writer. (2013, p. 26)

## Conclusion

Looking back over this research, ‘*The Abortion Game: Writing a Consciously Political Narrative Nonfiction Work*’, I think the manuscript I have created is an effective illustration of the techniques used to make a work in this subgenre, while the exegesis successfully analyses some of the complexities involved in producing such a piece of writing. The manuscript still has some obvious flaws: it is hard to imagine it being published in its current form, for instance, because of the unresolved ethical quandary with my mother, but also because the reach and appeal of the manuscript is unclear. Ultimately, it is not as damning an indictment on Australian politics as, for example, Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man*, and therefore its potential subsequent effect on the political landscape or discourse is uncertain.

Despite that, the manuscript meets my initial objectives and criteria: it is an original and layered consciously political narrative nonfiction work that engages with the tiers of abortion decision, politics and practice, and that endeavours to expose why abortion is often hidden away. Due to the use of the ‘mapping’ technique, which describes the practice of venturing into unfamiliar terrain to chart a subject’s world in a detailed or nuanced way, and the emphasis on ‘cultural others’, by which I mean unusual subjects typically unfamiliar to the reader, in this case activists and abortion providers, I would argue that the manuscript is unlike any existing abortion texts. As a piece of politically conscious narrative nonfiction, the manuscript is not a complete success, however: being unable to tell my mother means that I have had to acknowledge that the shame surrounding abortion is hard to shed, even for someone like me, who’s spent years researching its many aspects and been an advocate for abortion rights in the public discourse.

Symbiotically, the exegesis focuses on the role of the writer in a consciously political narrative nonfiction work and examines how the practitioner’s politics and reactions to their research does not necessarily hinder, but rather can help shape the nonfiction text and the consequences beyond.

One of the central research questions initially driving this research was: ‘Is abortion the quintessential subject where the personal becomes political, making journalistic objectivity unrealistic?’ As the dissection of my research experiences throughout this exegesis show, the answer is an emphatic yes. I believe that abortion

politics, or witnessing attempts to stop women accessing a legal and safe medical procedure, is a situation that prompts people into action. For that reason, I was moved to start an organising group to symbolically defend patients and staff at the East Melbourne Fertility Control Clinic, and the right to access abortion more generally. That is also why, when promoting those actions, many people stopped to say that they were familiar with the situation at the clinic, as they had once lived nearby or caught the tram past there on their way to work, and that they had been outraged and had had to stop and confront the pro-life protesters.

Once confronted with the reality of what not being able to get into a clinic to have an abortion means to a woman who wants one, it is hard not to feel ‘enraged’ as described in some of the literature about bearing witness, or to set the problem aside as somebody else’s. That is to say, remaining impartial or detached becomes impossible (Tait 2011, p. 1222).

The compulsion to commit to abortion rights and access once exposed to that world is also evidenced by the medical practitioners I spoke with over the course of my research. Nearly everyone from the field I met had been involved in providing abortions for more than two decades, and the issue mattered to them. That was why they continued attending a workplace under siege, or didn’t resign when protesters turned up at their home address. It is also why the officially retired Dr Pieter Mourik, never before a political activist, has now devoted himself to the fight for abortion rights in Albury.

The second key research question was: ‘If abortion does make journalistic objectivity unrealistic, how does a lack of objectivity affect participant-observer and immersion research?’

As the writings I explored in chapter two show, ‘objectivity’ is a contested term (Aucoin 2007; Hartsock 2000; Ricketson 2014) and, according to Benjamin, a writing style that ‘paralys[es] the imagination’ (Hartsock 2000, p. 56). It’s a worldview shaped by notions of rationalism and driven by commercial interests (Aucoin 2007). By burying the author’s presence, biases and beliefs in the text, ‘objectivity’ hides ideology as ‘fact’, and denies that the text is always a depiction of reality rather than a verifiable reality itself (Aucoin 2001; Bird & Dardenne 1988, p. 82; Bloom 2003).

There is no yardstick that a narrative nonfiction writer can hold their depictions and interpretations of events up against to measure their impartiality,

because an impartial state does not exist. The writer always has an opinion, just like every other human being. Aiming for a neutral position means the writer has accepted the status quo, which the muckrakers, Literary Reporters and even the New Journalists spent their time writing against.

As argued in chapter two, most writers recognise the line between nonfiction and outright fictionalisation – fashioning characters or dialogue out of thin air, for example. Grey areas, however, are more problematic. It is undeniable, I think, that the narrative thrust in this subgenre creates periods of confusion, especially if the research involves an immersion methodology. When the writer has spent extended periods of time with various people whom they will go on to depict as characters, there is the danger that their depictions can become warped or overly sympathetic or hostile. They will also inevitably rely on memory to recall snippets of conversation and who said what or who was present at certain times. The sequence of events may also be a problem. For narrative nonfiction projects that exclude out-and-out fabrication, the question ‘Is it more important to be true or to ring true?’ (Kraus 2008, p. 247) is an ongoing negotiation.

Additionally, periods of immersion and participation will mean there is more pressure on the writer either to maintain a journalistic façade, or to embrace their subjectivity. Choosing the latter will also be a matter of negotiation and degree. For instance, when I attended the abortion rights meeting at Parliament House, I refrained from outwardly disagreeing with the tactics of other influential attendees, even though I was nominally there as a representative of an abortion activist group. Conversely, if this had been a meeting of the Melbourne Feminist Action group, I would have argued vigorously for the tactic I thought the most effective.

Another major factor influencing the behaviour of the writer-researcher and the manuscript itself is the need to narrativise. As Hayden White observed, reality doesn’t present as a story (1987, chap. 1, para. 6). To narrativise involves an arrangement of people and events for ‘meaning’ or, in the case of consciously political narrative nonfiction, a greater truth. This can result in a rearrangement of events that differs from what actually took place outside the text, or involve the writer seizing opportunities to insinuate themselves in the world of the subject, such as when I attended the dance to stop abortion shame, which I knew would make a good narrative scene.

In truth, recognising that objectivity in narrative nonfiction is a myth is liberating for consciously political narrative nonfiction writers, because it also indicates that the truth at the heart of the work – the injustice the writer is exploring – is real and matters. Embracing the position of the political writer also frees the writer of feeling that they must remain neutral, because they accept that there is no objective reality where things are equal. Fundamentally, society is unequal and knowing that allows a writer to make a meaningful intervention, such as in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee 2001) or ‘M’ (Sack 1966) or *Killing* (Sparrow 2009).

I do not mean to suggest these questions weren’t of serious concern throughout the research and process. However, I examined my biases and hierarchical position in the writer–subject relationship in chapter four at some length, which was first written when I had serious qualms about whether my manuscript should be published considering I had ‘disfigured’ my subjects, by even daring to write about them (Kraus 2003, p. 286). Ultimately, I concluded that the social worth of this research does outweigh the potential for people to be upset by the way they have been depicted. Moreover, in the manuscript, I strove to humanise all my subjects, something Ricketson has stressed should be a priority for the narrative nonfiction writer, and is necessary for Hartsock’s ‘exchange of subjectivities’, allowing the reader to experience the world of the subject. Obviously, I still face the ethical quandary with my mother, a bridge that would need to be crossed before seeking publication.

My contribution to the field of narrative nonfiction research, I would argue, is that being a politically conscious writer is necessary for a political nonfiction topic, because it allows the writer to actually capture the social forces at work in the world and the text. Writing a nonfiction book is a political act. Writers who don’t view themselves as activists or believe they are impartial observers are undeniably partial and active (to some extent), but they are simply unaware of that position, and will, therefore, fail to capture the consequences in their narrative. All nonfiction is unashamedly didactic: no matter how it’s dressed up in narrative or style, writers expect audiences to learn something from their book. Writers from Nellie Bly to the Literary Reporters to the New Journalists to Helen Garner may want it to be about the journey, too, but ultimately the expectation is that reading the book will change the reader and their relationship to the world. Whether or not the said reader accepts or

rejects the book's depiction of reality, there's an expectation that the reader will be changed by the experience.

If narrative is about seeing the bigger picture, and confronting it in all its glory and ignominy, then consciously political narrative nonfiction is about changing the bigger picture. That is, the minds of readers.

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