

The Mechanics of Blind

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is comprised of two complementary texts: Volume I, the novel, *The Mechanics of Blind* and Volume II, the accompanying exegesis. Both works are examinations of the treatment of blindness in literature. Both are concerned with the central question of how the ancient metaphor of blindness can function in a contemporary work of fiction; that is, how a contemporary writer can build a work that references the key signifiers of the trope developed in the 5th Century BC, and in doing so reflect present day life and issues.

Using elements of poetic language, *The Mechanics of Blind* tells the story of a contemporary woman who loses her sight when she is in her late thirties. The novel covers her changed circumstances and the altered relationships she experiences with family, friends, herself and her past as she confronts her fall from independence and confidence into a newer, more vulnerable state. The narrative is layered with the concepts that have characterised the ancient metaphor of ἄτη (blindness).

The exegesis is a critical, reflective work focussed on the writing of the novel. It explores the trope of blindness and reflects on the way story structures such as illness narratives, metaphor and recognisable mythological symbols have influenced the writing. It considers other fictional works that have explored blindness and situates *The Mechanics of Blind* in the context of these works; but its main concern is the means of writing this particular novel, which explored ways of writing about a non-visual world and how to include the mythic elements of the trope. The exegesis also explores the way in which the novel is the

reception of earlier Greek presentations of ἄτη, and considers how the process of re-working an ancient idea has affected the creative writing.

The novel is the heart of the thesis, and at the heart of the novel is the concept of ἄτη. The overall premise that guided the research has been those aspects of the metaphor that caused me to ask: Where did it come from? Why is it so strong? Why is blindness continually juxtaposed with insight? What meaning does the metaphor have today?

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my original work, except where otherwise cited, and has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other academic award. I confirm that this thesis does not exceed 100 000 words (excluding the bibliography).

Rosemary Fitzgerald
September 7, 2009

The Mechanics of Blind

Volume I: The Novel

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Part 1

Telling Friends

I tell family and friends that I will be stark raving blind in four to six months. Steven asks if he can have my TV.
And my books.

Everyone wants to know what will happen to Fido.
Steven asks about my ute. He promises to look after it with great care and love. He's offered to take me on regular drives. He is smiling half laughing, his new girlfriend is blushing embarrassed by his shameless bruising refusal to be socially acceptably nice.

They all want to know will I still be able to do my job. They want to know who will look after me. They ask about miracle cures and massive doses of herbs and faith healers.

Steven suggests I rip out all my shrubs and flowers and start sowing a carrot crop.

Or thirty.

Then he laughs and ruffles my hair, "She'll be right." And walks out of the room.

My girlfriends sign me up for meditation intensives and I am booked into therapy sessions before I can say degenerative ocular disease.

I keep up with my tai chi and see the homeopath, not for sight remedies, but comfort and equilibrium pills.

The doctor gives me a prescription for antidepressants, should I need them.
And sleeping pills, same.

The naturopath works on strengthening my kidneys.

I press tiny acupressure points on my ears.

The psychotherapist asks me what there is in my life that I don't want to see? And that we should talk about my childhood. And trauma management. And my coping skills.

It's all bullshit.

I go to the gym.

I stay healthy.

I eat my greens, my carrots, my antioxidants.

I keep my fluids up.

My parents don't say much when I tell them on Friday night after a long drive down after work, on a weekend at home on the farm. They don't say much at all, they ask surprisingly few questions and seem stunned. Then my mother cries and my father comforts her and they hug me and I tell them I am confident and okay, that I'm sure I'll get through it, that I'll manage, that there'll be a cure somewhere down the line. My mother says she'll ask the doctors in at work about it. Yes. Yes. She'll definitely do that. And get the dirt on my specialist while she's at it.

I say, "Yes, yes."

And,

"Thanks, Mum. That'll be a great help."

I've already told her that I've seen three specialists, all with the same diagnosis: Retinitis Pigmentosa. The end.

My father tells me I am tired after my long drive and I get sent up to bed early into my own room under the eaves: an attic with a dormer window and my aunt's old *Girls' Own Adventures* faded but jaunty, chock a block in the bookshelf. My parents sit up late. I hear the whistle of the kettle. I see the light from the lounge room as a faint glow outside my window. The fat silky cat, grey white black sleeps on my feet and the absence of city sounds takes a long time to fade and then reveal to me the presence of country ones. My

bedroom is familiar, tongue and groove floorboards lapped for years by feet and paws. My iron bed and tall shadowed wardrobe, the desk and soft curling-up-in chair show as indistinct shapes in all the right places in the dark. But lying there the night my room the world, feel suddenly scary. I have a presentiment of living in darkness and get up and put on the light on the staircase and fall asleep in dim luminescence.

Early the next morning, walking around the paddocks with my Dad, he takes me through the entire story again, from the first symptoms. I've already done it all with a saner Mum over a cup of tea in the kitchen, but I tell him too, carefully, everything I can. He asks endless questions, mostly questions that I have no answers for. I tell him about the lack of options available, I tell him about the freakish nature of this condition and the inevitability of the final outcome.

We discuss money and if I can work.

He says he can always sell some stock.

I tell him about courses I can do to teach me Braille and attachments I can access to make my computer work aurally; a printer that makes pages I can read with my fingers. I tell him that the Royal Blind Institute people are confident that I can still work, and surely they'd know? I tell him that, with Eyes Shut, I can make it to the shops and back with Fido and my cane. I can shower and dress myself. I can boil the kettle and make a cup of tea.

He tells me I can always live back on the farm.

He tells me I'll still be handy to have around.

He says he supposes Cameron will be moving back to Australia. To help me. To be around. Like a good boyfriend should.

I say that I'm not sure I suppose so but I don't really know yet.

He's shocked.

I say I've spoken to Cameron and that he's coming home in a few weeks and we'll talk about it then, but that I don't know.

"He'll need to be here," says Dad.

I tell him don't worry and we'll work it out and I've just got to get used to it all first.

Dad doesn't say anything more, but he's not happy about this. At all.

When we get back for breakfast Mum hugs me hard before she looks at Dad her face intent, neck and shoulders rigid, and then she tells me we'll talk again tonight after work. She'll speak to everyone at the hospital. She'll get some more information for us. She walks out to the car, Holden safety yellow and starts it backs out over red dirt packed down hard tyres black and dusty treads geometric, she waves once and drives away around the bend in the road.

I sit on the front veranda and look out at green paddocks and smell the fir trees and the chook pen. Later I peel potatoes for baking. Dirt coarse skin stripped back to reveal pristine wet ivory, which gets smudged from the peel as I slide the knife around and around in layers and curls of skin. Through the window I see the seams of colour in bantam hens' familiar plumage, brown to orange to yellow to gold. I cut the ends off a pile of carrots, moist orange limp green. The meat is on the draining board defrosting. The kitchen is where we mostly live and it is used and warm. So familiar that I stare without seeing the bubbled paint on the cupboards closest to the hearth, Wedgwood green and a trim the same shade as the cream Mum serves with afternoon tea scones and jam.

Dad is planting more trees on John's hill, along by the water that isn't a dam or a pond, and certainly was a swamp but now is not quite a lake. Fido prances beside me, free and clear far and away from his leash and loving it; as I walk, confident and easy striding through the long grass. I help Dad dig posts. My eyes tell my hands what to do next. I don't have to recall where I put the pliers. I don't have to feel around in the dirt beside me fearful of rusty wire and spiders, trying to locate the tape I only just put down. I don't have to rely on memory to tell me what I did just a minute ago. I don't even

have to concentrate at all. I do everything with my eyes leading the way without thinking about the ease of this. I don't want to think about the ease of this. But of course I do. I am conscious here, as I am nowhere else, that my eyes are my everything. A computer and a toaster I can work by touch, a farm I can't.

Dad says,

"Pliers...

Wire...

Stake...

Another one.

Hold it straight.

Tape.

Good.

Further down the base.

Knife."

And,

"Get that bloody piss-poor excuse for a dog out of it.

Mallet.

Thanks."

I say,

"Here.

This one?

Sorry, here it is."

And,

"Rack off, Fido."

And,

"You right, Dad?"

I can smell his perspiration and see the faded colours in his flannel shirt when he strips his jumper off, made hot on a wintry day from digging deep into rich dense moist earth. The dogs lie in the grass nearby. The farm dogs

are blue grey wiry fur, the colour of lavender bushes and crumbling Fitzroy terrace houses. Fido has a big smile on his panting face. His black curls are unruly and flecked with thistle down. He has feathers and muck on his haunches from rolling in filth. The clouds are low and bulky, they push down at us from above and the light is trapped in the green of trees and grass. My father's skin is golden and bright. The colours of the day are mixed with the scent of soil and dog and lake water. I wonder how I can live without seeing one of these lighted days again. They don't come around very often. For the first time I begin to doubt my ability, not to survive as a blind person, I've often doubted that, but to survive without seeing special things; this, I realise, is the real clincher. And I realise that without any visual reminder, I may not even know these days exist. I'll just forget. I won't have any sign posts to remind me to even remember them. I am filled with despair at this terrible loss. I am in the middle of a feeling of reverence for a day that may not come again for me, and I am desolate. I feel in my jeans pocket for a pen and write, cramped and awkward, on a supermarket docket a directive to recall all this in the notebook I am making to remind myself of visual things I want to remember. These notes are my lifelines. They link my current life to my future one. I hope pray bargain that it will be enough. But I strongly doubt it.

Dad moves onto the next spot for planting and I go with him, carrying a pile of stakes and the tape and the staple gun. By the end of the afternoon, we have planted two dozen trees and Dad says that's a job well done, so we go back to the house and listen to the last quarter of the football.

Ten Days

When I wake up on Sunday morning and stumble into the kitchen, bleary-eyed with my body still half curled in on itself from sleep, my parents have decided that Mum will swap one of her shifts with Girlie and she'll come back to Melbourne with me. We'll confirm my next specialist's appointment and then we'll all go there together. I tell Mum she doesn't have to come up that I'm okay, but she says she could do with a break; she'll get some shopping done catch up with friends see the dentist try and match the sofa fabric for curtains take Steven up some vegies from his parents go with me to a show at the Princess Theatre; the list goes on and on but doesn't include being worried sick about her daughter, at all.

We leave after lunch, after Dad has filled my car with petrol from the bowser down near the sheds. He checks the oil and water and makes sure the spare tyre is okay. He asks me,

“What's your time frame for all this? When are you going to lose it?”

I tell him again six months, give or take a week or two, that's how I've interpreted it anyway – the doctors have given me fuzzy times ranging from semi-definite to probable to reasonably likely. I've worked out that six months seems to be the median time. But nobody's definite. Nothing's definite. Except that my sight is going to be gone. For good.

Dad leans on the front passenger side corner of my ute and puts his weight into the front end. The ute rocks up and down.

“Shockers are still okay. We'll get you a few quid for this, at any rate.”

“How much?” I ask him.

Dad twists his mouth chin out thinking posture, runs his hand over the bonnet,

“You waxing it every month?”

“Yeah.”

“So long as there’s no rust hidden away I’d say, sixteen, maybe eighteen thousand.”

I’m impressed.

“That’ll pay for the carpenters. That’s great.”

“You don’t want to be driving in the traffic, better give your mother a hurry on.”

He says this as though he can’t yell out to her himself.

So I yell for him,

“MUM!”

“What do you want carpenters for?”

He’s checking the tyres now and testing the blinkers, leaning in through the driver’s side window to turn them on and then squinting into the daylight to catch the yellow flashing glow.

“I think I’ll have to modify my apartment.” I tell him, “Everything built-in. I won’t want furniture everywhere, stuff to fall over, stuff in my way, doors that can swing shut in a draft, walls to bang against.”

He nods his head but doesn’t say anything more, except,

“I’ll give Evan Moody a ring, his eldest boy’s working for a builder in the city, he’s a decent kid – he’s the one who helped me with the new yards.”

“Oh yes,” I know him. “Brian? Byron?”

“Geoff. He’s a good kid, he’ll do alright by you.” He’s buried his head under the bonnet now, and I turn to yell for Mum again, but see her coming through the door laden with cake tins and a thermos of something, bags of apples and cream home made soup in another flask Girlie’s Anzac biscuits two jars of jam and some beans and carrots.

“Got your address book?” Dad asks her, and when she says yes he tells her to book an appointment with their accountant for the week that we all go to see the specialist. He stows the food away and Mum’s travel bag, kisses her goodbye quickly and hugs me hard, tells me to drive carefully keep the lights on all the way safety first and ring him when we get to town. He stands by the shed, calm serious, listening to the sound of the engine most likely. This time, when he waves goodbye he doesn’t turn back to the farm

and the list of jobs to do, but stands there quite still and I watch him in the rear view mirror all the way down the drive and on up the gravel road to the brow of the hill, until we've driven on away around the bend and he's out of sight. Out of sight.

Cameron

Cameron comes home from the Philippines. It's an election year. He's flat chat but has wrangled some leave. Only a week, though.

We lie in my bed. White sheets white comforter white pillows; yellow mohair blanket and his skin is butter-coloured, not white at all. His arm is around me and I look at our bodies side to side entangled, skin smooth and soft skin freckled skin rough at elbows and knees skin pink on finger pads and yellowed toe nails, calluses thick and sharp. His hair chestnut pale parted on the side and floppy over his forehead. Lines on his face. The hair on his arms sun-lightened. I look at my body. Stretched lines on my thighs faint but there, scarred left knee strands of my dark hair unloosened from my plait and now wrapped across lighter skin than his, and I look long and hard at us together and I know I won't be seeing this picture again either. Rage. Colourless rage.

I lie there and fume with feelings of guilt and shame and hot violence.

He wants to know if he should leave his job and transfer to the Melbourne desk? I say I'll have enough trouble negotiating blindness, let alone having him suddenly hanging around all the time. After all this time.

He says the offer's open.

I know he's telling the truth. But I know he loves his job. He loves me. He loves the life he has. Me here. Work there.

He loves slaving away, totally concentrated in his exotic country, on the move on the go mixing it with the locals and the crew, happy to make the long trip home every three or four months. The long trip home to me.

And I like my life. Time for friends. Time that isn't swallowed up with catering full-time to a boyfriend's needs and preferences. Time without compromising always. Time to spread out and please myself to work late at

night to concentrate on my job my pursuits to go to the farm. Time to enjoy him when he's there and feel sad and lonesome when he's gone. Emails and love letters and presents in the post. Friends of his on a stop-over in Melbourne, dropping by and taking me to dinner and telling me how he's going. Listening to the stories he posts on the radio the television reading his articles in the newspapers. And me getting to visit him in his foreign country, once, maybe twice a year. Reunions at the airport getting shown around to all the secret spots getting into the life of the place through him, getting the best of both worlds really.

No. I don't want him here. Not full time. Not yet.

But I still want him in the picture. I don't want this to change.

"I don't want this to change."

"It'll change."

"I don't want it to."

"It'll be alright. It'll be alright."

He rubs my arm, my long hair my back. But I don't want change.

We get up and dress and walk down to the post office for me to buy some stamps and then to the delicatessen for cheese and bread. The leaves are on the turn still and Fido's just on an ordinary leash like an ordinary dog going for his walk. The sun comes out and Cameron is wearing a navy wool jumper like sailors used to wear and looks sun-kissed and healthy, but cold, he's always cold here now, he spends his life in the tropics and his blood has thinned. We stop at a pub on the way home and eat lunch, pasta yellow white sprinkled with tomatoes moist swollen and parsley making flecks and specks of green turned dark with cooking, scattered throughout. We go home and feed the animals: Cat, black and groomed bitter and twisted because lunch is late; Fido keen as mustard pleased as punch careless about his food, he'd swap a meal for a walk any day. We sit by the fire reading all the papers and drinking hot chocolate that I froth up myself with the plastic and metal frothing gadget I got for Christmas. I lie on the worn red rug I brought from the farm when I first came to the city, and I look at the flames

and lean my head on Cameron's leg. His socks are rough wool under my hand and he cups his palm against my cheek while he reads article after article about foreign news and worries about the state of the world and I worry about the state of my future. He tells me again, "Don't worry."

I tell him he shouldn't come home permanently, that I'll need to be on my own, otherwise if he were here, I'd get too dependent. He says he understands, but I'm to tell him if it gets too hard.

"I can be here," he says.

I believe him.

We go for a walk around by the water. We've driven through two suburbs to get there. Fido is beside himself, double walks and no harness. Fido chases gulls and I've always loved their grey black pure white feathers. So neat and tidy. With that blaze of orange beak and feet to match. The lake is still and cold. The trees are quiet today. The park is flat and grey. We walk quickly to warm up and then slow down as we get serious. After a while we don't speak any more, we just walk. Fido stops sniffing and chasing and trots by my side. Good dog.

We pass the point of no return at the top of Albert Park Lake and keep on going. Cameron says he thinks he'll make me a map of my suburb my area, in relief to scale with all my regular haunts marked on it as well as every traffic light road hump walking hazard and non-visual landmark. He says it will be made in papier mâché. It will show the bank the shops the library the post office the tram stops the path to the river the number of steps to get into the park.

"All white," I say. "No colours."

"No colours," he says.

We'll mount it on the wall, and I'll be able to check my route whenever I want to go somewhere.

I love this idea.

A white map on a white wall. My place. I won't have to keep it all in my head.

We turn into the wind and our heads go down for a time, my eyes squint and stream with tears, Fido hunches into his skin and ploughs on through adversity, then the path turns again and the trees shelter us. We can hear each other think now and we talk about the farm and my parents and his work. We talk about my work and politics and friends we have. We plan the week ahead.

When we get back home I am tired, my ears ache from the wind so I have a medicinal glass of wine which sparks me up again. Cameron gets busy going through the clothes on his side of the wardrobe and tosses some out, one of his rituals when he's home. I heat some of Mum's soup and toast crumpets to have by the fire. Our Cat condescends to eat a sardine or three before ambling over to take her place on the best chair. Cameron drinks his soup and eats his hot buttered crumpets. He rubs our cat's furry neck and he admires Fido in his harness as I dress him up for showing-off purposes. Later we sleep with the windows open and the stereo on. And when I sit up in bed in the dark, gnawing on shredded fingernails, he awakens and pulls me back under the covers and tells me to just enjoy this seeing time now.

"Don't waste it worrying," he says.

And he's right. My fear and worry are destroying these precious precious months. I lie back down and vow to grow my nails again and keep my eyes wide open and take all my vision into my memory, my mind. I breathe in his scent and lean into him and close my eyes and fall asleep in the dark.

Wedding Invitation

Ian and Susan want to get married. Susan wants me to be a bridesmaid. The wedding is scheduled for June next year. I will be forty years old by June next year. Susan wants me to be an old blind bridesmaid. Steven tells me I can't be a bridesmaid; he wants me to go to the wedding as his partner.

"What about your girlfriend?"

He says it will all be off by then, "Hell, it's on the rocks now."

"Well," I say, "What about Cameron?"

"He's never in the country for these things. Anyway, he's not a boyfriend, he's just a 10 year holiday romance."

"Cameron likes Susan and Ian. He'll probably come to the wedding."

"Unless there's a bombing or an election or a coup somewhere.

Tell you what, if he's not around you go with me, if he is, then the three of us will go together."

"Fair enough. Because there's no way I'm going to be a bridesmaid."

Stumbling around on the altar, lipstick smeared across my face, frock ripped in half from a face-first lurch into a candelabra. I'd probably set fire to the whole place. I'd be a public spectacle.

Blind burnt smeared and torn.

Beautiful.

"And God knows what the labrador would be dressed in."

"There won't be a labrador," I tell him. "I'm hanging on to Fido."

He shakes his head and pats my hand,

"You do like to make things hard for yourself, don't you, Jill?"

I tell Susan I will be blind in August next year. I will also be hitting forty. Who ever heard of a forty year old bridesmaid? Susan tells me she'll be forty-two, and who ever heard of a forty-two year old bride?

"Lots of people get married at forty-two," I tell her.

She looks at me in a pitying way,

“Not for the first time. And definitely not in white meringue.”

“You’re wearing the full kit?”

“I’m wearing the white stockings the satin-covered shoes the blue garter the biggest whitest puffiest dress I can find, the trailing veil the metres of petticoats the enormous bouquet and the highest teased-est hair I can manage. I’m doing the full Lady Di, with a hint of deb queen thrown in.”

“In that case, I may as well be in the show then. Besides, no one will notice me with all that going on.”

“Exactly.”

“Except, aren’t I supposed to be helping the bride? Fixing your frock arranging the veil checking for lippy on the teeth?”

“This is the advantage of being a forty-two year old bride. I can do all that myself.

You just need to stand around looking bored in off-the-shoulder pink tulle that clashes with your hair.”

We both laugh ourselves stupid over this.

I tell Steven I can’t be his partner, I am being a bridesmaid.

He says it’s a pity offer and I’d be better off back in the stalls with him and the rest of the gang, getting drunk and flirting with sozzled relatives.

Steven, of course, can say what he likes about all of them because we grew up together. We went to the same school, first riding our bikes five k’s up the road, then catching the bus into town and then later on when we moved to the city we went to the same university. He’s known Susan and Ian and Sarah and Ryan almost as long as I have. Susan’s his least favourite of our friends, he thinks she’s secretly a phoney, so he gives her a harder time than most.

“Besides,” he says. “Won’t the labrador, sorry, Fido, spoil the photos? And what if he starts sniffing someone’s arse, or cocks his leg on the altar?”

Steven decides it would be best for me to stay in the background where he can keep an eye on me, lead me around tricky spots and orchestrate conversations that don’t involve well-meaning curiosity about my affliction.

I tell him I am going along with it for now, but when Susan sees me in full flight with my cane my Fido on harness and my head-first falls down staircases, she'll be bound to cut me loose.

"Good thinking," he says. "Didn't think of that. Bound to happen. Well done. No need to put a spanner in the works when they're all dewy-eyed and keen as mustard and wanting to share the happiness around. Especially when they'll be wanting to include their little disabled friend. Do the right thing by her, that sort of thing."

Yeah.

"And the beauty of that plan is, that when you pull the plug later and they put up a token protest, boo hoo, then they'll have the consolation of knowing that they at least tried to include you. It's brilliant."

Yeah. Thanks. Nicely put.

"The food should be good," I say.

"Yeah ... you're not going to be a dribbler. Are you?"

Work

I love my job. And I'm dreading the meeting when I have to tell all. Steven and I have done a costing, if I can get through half the amount of work I'm doing now I should be able to pull in an income and afford to stay in the practice. I'll be living on a lot less, but I'll also be spending less. What the hell will I need to buy? Where will I go? Films? Sight-seeing holidays? Trashy magazines? None of the above. We think my living expenses will be low.

I get into work at seven or seven-thirty most days to make an early start. I love my job. I used to talk about it all the time, until Steven said I was a zealot.

"Nobody likes a zealot, Jill. Nobody."

Except,

that I love what I do and frankly, if Steven's constitutional rights were being abused or interfered with in any way, then he'd surely be the first person to scream bloody murder and he'd be kicking up a stink they'd hear up and down the eastern sea board.

He's so full of shit.

And he should know more about the law.

Everybody should.

I start on my emails first. There's one from Linus Curly, my friend in Canberra, we send each other work stuff all the time and are quite pally. I haven't told him the truth yet either.

There's nothing vital in my inbox from him, except that he's not sending me kindness or sympathy or concern or miracle cures, so I don't mind reading his notes. I don't get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when I see his name on the email tag, like I do with my Melbourne friends. I wish I'd never had to tell anyone. I hate their inspirational messages. I flinch

whenever I see there's a message from somebody in the know. But there's nothing today, although it is still early. Plenty of time for someone to cut and paste a smiley face onto some words of wisdom, to send me a creepy poem about friendship, or a proverb about suffering and how it'll make me stronger. Christ I hate that crap. I double check that my notes for the day are in their file and all in chronological order and then I make a start on my in-tray. The office is quiet and it's easy to work. I have lots of advisory matters that I am working on, all with varying deadlines. I don't mind working on different things at once. Steven says I'm an undiagnosed A.D.D., Sarah says I'm just highly competent. I love Sarah. She never sends me poems.

I start making detailed notes for Brian. I also write out directions so that he can get on with some of the research on his own. I'm trying to anticipate the future and clear my desk a bit and set up work for him to do when all this blows up in my face. He's not a bad paralegal, but he's not confident at all. I have to keep checking that he's doing the right thing. He doesn't have much initiative, he does what he's asked and works hard, but he's so timid. I don't understand it. I haven't told Brian yet about Retinitis Pigmentosa, I think he'd go into a flat panic. I did tell Vivienne, who's our receptionist and secretary. She's terribly efficient, totally focussed, never gossips and I know next to nothing about her outside life except that she has a husband and a son. The perfect level of information sharing. We both just do our jobs and there's no expectation of chit chat or shared drivel about our personal lives. She's already started researching what we'll need in the office to keep me going on the work front. I know I'll have to tell the others soon, I know I will. I just can't face it right now. I think when it's out in the work place, it will be real. I hate that.

I'm due to meet with the barrister at the end of the week so I've brought in my grey suit to drop off at the dry cleaners. I supply research and background for the barristers and I mostly just write up my part of the brief

and send it over, but sometimes we all have to sit down and go through it together. I'm organised for that though, it's another case where the deadline has changed and Brian and I are going to have to move like cut cats for the rest of the week.

Sunlight hits my desk.

I look up.

Light distracts me attracts me these days. I look up for the light.

From my office window I can see the soft golden limestone walls of the Treasury Building and beyond that, the trees in the Fitzroy gardens. If I climbed onto the roof here, I could probably see my apartment building. I can see the cars moving along Spring Street and I've watched the maple trees go through their changes season after season for eight years now. I catch the tram into work most days and the drivers and I nod at each other, because we're familiars now. At lunchtimes I mostly eat a sandwich or a salad at my desk, but once a week I take a longer break and walk down Collins Street and look at the shops, and I buy clothes and books and music and shoes and handbags and sometimes jewellery. I get my hair cut every six weeks at Clispins in Collins Place on a Friday after work. Some lunchtimes I walk around the corner to the Princess Theatre and I see what's coming up. I go out for coffee every fortnight with Steven or Ian or Susan who all work in the city too. I love it here.

I realise that the office noises are getting louder, people are arriving now. I feel my fists clenching because time is moving on. It's moving me closer to the end of all this. I force myself to unclench my hands and I shift my mind back to work. Work. Work is what I have to do. But instead of putting my head down and sorting out the details on the new brief, I look out the window for a little longer and I see the railway yards and the Melbourne Cricket Ground. I see the man delivering goods to one of the shops around the corner. He's an older man in work clothes blue hard wearing. His face is lined and his hair thin. He makes his living carrying boxes from van to store.

Store to van. His expression is weary from the drudgery of it all. I make myself stop looking at him. A middle aged man reduced to carrying boxes and cartons for a living. It's not right. He should be out in the paddocks somewhere, getting the harvester into gear and bringing in crops, or turning over the soil. I stop looking at him, doesn't matter, soon I won't be seeing the sad tragic things anymore than I'll see the good stuff. I hate that, too.

I stare into space for a while. Not really registering what is going on outside my window. I think again, as usual, about the things I will miss. I idly watch a tram barrelling down towards Spring Street, coming from Victoria Parade. It squeals as it halts at the lights. The tram doors open and nothing happens and then suddenly, out of the tram door flies a boy. My eyes fix on him. He flies in a smooth high arc from the top of the tram steps up up and out onto the road with a skateboard under his arm. He lands perfectly balanced and flips the board to the asphalt and he jumps again, onto the board this time, effortlessly, then he glides away smooth still so nonchalant. The tram doors close, the lights change to green and the tram takes off. There's a tap on my office door. That'll be Brian. Cautious. Tentative. Anxious. Knocking to see if I'm in. I don't know why he bothers. I'm always in.

I turn away from the boy and the window then, and breathe in deep and shift my attention to face this day here.

But I find that as I call out,

"Come in!"

As I turn back toward my desk and the six cartons of paper piled up on and around it,

I find that I am smiling

thinking of the boy

the freedom of his leap from the tram

the effortless bound that took him up and over.

The smile lingers in a corner of my mind for the whole of the morning. In the distance, from the second floor, I occasionally hear tram bells ring and I am reminded each time of that boy, that boy who was freedom and youthful strength and devil-may-care and confidence and exuberance and easy as they come. I really really like that boy, all morning, all day, I really really like him, flying from the tram door while I looked out the window of a second floor office in Spring Street.

Five Months and Two Weeks

I make up my bed with clean white sheets. I rip off the covers, my other fuzzy mohair blanket pale blue this one pure new wool; then the red white wool chequered blanket with a label that says Hibiscus Mutabilis Made in the People's Republic of China Size: 127 cms X 178 cms; and a yellow brocade bedspread raised stitching 1950's. The bedspread is marked and grubby so I lay it out on the floor. I walk into the kitchen and make-up a saucer of concentrated NapiSan. When I get back to the bedspread, Cat black is sitting on it.

Cat black brown, deep rich golden in sunlight, is the main offender in the stains department, but I don't have the heart to scold her these days. I begin rubbing NapiSan paste into the marks on yellow bright old brocade. And this is another thing I won't be doing for myself in the future. I won't even know the stains are there. Fido comes a-sniffing. I inspect his paws before he strolls across my bedspread. He smells of cut grass and earth dirt, but his paws are all clear. I rub NapiSan into scuffs and blood and ink stains. Cat black brown, watches.

Dog curls and grass smears, watches.

It is dusk, a great purple blue sky spreads across the world outside my window. Rain stops flowing down the glass. The house across the road glows rich red old bricks orange ochre roof tiles, green gloss leaves on nature-strip trees, Van Morrison sings an old song of yearning on the radio recorded in the days when he was still trying to make it as an artist. The voice soars and the backup singers harmonise. The melody takes the music up and up, the light in my apartment is glorious.

Sun set.

Cat dog.

Stains on bedspread.

I keep finding more.

I love the dusk, but hate the dark. I fantasise about living six months of the year in Greenland or Labrador, where it is light all night. Plus I'd like to live in a green land. Or on an island named for a dog. I like it when the names of things say what they mean. It's much better that way. I don't like it when things aren't what they say they are. I hate that. It infuriates me. It's slippery shifty cheating sly. Suburbs called *meadows* when there hasn't been a meadow there for a century, if there ever fucking was. I really hate that. It's so insulting. So manipulative. Such a bloody lie. I hate lies. I hate them all. My hands like claws are scrinching up the fabric. I unclench and turn tallons back into fingers again, but it takes a while. The cloth is all wrinkled, and that really shits me too. I breathe. I tell the pets I'm not really angry, because I'm not, I'm not an angry person. I'm not angry. I'm not.

I'm utterly furious.

I look up. The light is changing. The sky fades, night moves in and the radio starts playing a Phil Collins song. I turn it off because I hate that prick too. God I loathe him, with his tinny whining nasal voice his tiresome pat derivative lyrics his dumb-arse drumming his smug smirk his uselessness in the world. I hate him with a passion. I'd like to see him hog-tied with hay-bale twine and dragged down Bourke Street behind a galloping horse. The fabric in my hands is being twisted like wet washing in my grandmother's old wringer because I'd like to see him clamped into stocks in the city square, overlooked by that pretentious hotel's great cocktail bar where we could all gather in our lunch breaks or at elevenses, watching others throw rotten food at him. Or we could queue up behind him on the way home from work and take turns whipping him with a cat o'nine tails. Whipping him until he bleeds. Whipping him as a punishment for his pathetic contribution to music. Whipping him as a deterrent to other wannabe Phils who must learn that he and his type are a blight on civilisation. I'd like to see him whipped by the commuters until the skin of his back is laid open, until rivers of blood run clotting and streaming down his ragged designer clothes. Whipped above and beyond his cries for mercy. Whipped until his apology for the foul top

forty muzak he has thrust upon us for decades, is genuine and heartfelt. I'd like to see him whipped by city workers in stilettos and stylish suits until he dies the death of a rabid dog. I really do hate him. I hate him. I hate I hate. I hate hate hate. Him.

Breathe.

Uncurl fingers.

Release fabric.

Pick up Napisan cloth.

Do not cry.

Do not cry because it's pointless.

Just go on.

After a while, when I haven't done anything, just breathed and spot cleaned, the bedspread is finished. Black sky and dark surround me. All the windows are filled with the dark. Tomorrow I am meeting the woman who runs the cleaning company. We'll work out what my needs are to be. Then in a few days, the cleaner will come to my apartment and we'll say hello and how are you and I'll show them where everything is kept and then explain about never ever moving anything and I'll tell them how I don't like using chemical cleaning products and they'll probably roll their eyes behind my back, because we both know that will mean extra work and I'll have to assess whether this is a person I can trust not to be slack or dishonest. But they probably will be. Both. Both slack and dishonest.

I'll need to organise a checking system.

Even just keeping my very small world clean is going mean constant supervision and assistance. I want to do most of it myself, be independent, as they say in disabled-speak, but I'll need someone to make sure, to do the things I miss.

To double check the way I wipe a bench.

To get cat fur off the rugs. My cat's fur off my rugs.

Lipstick off the cups.

To monitor my bedspread for marks.

To sweep the floor and then be able to locate the pile of dust at the end of it all and actually brush it into the dust pan and I realise it's not just Phil Collins I hate, but that simpering bag Celine Dion too. I hate Celine, with her appalling song choices and even worse clothes, I hate Avril Lavigne and her stylised individuality, I hate "crews" of comedians on breakfast radio, I hate dry biscuits that break when you try to butter them and I despise two-bob celebrities who sell stories about their personal lives to magazines. I hate them all. I hate.

Fido, stretched out on the rug by the fireplace watches me, worried.

I go into the kitchen. I ring Steven on the wall phone in there. I tell him I feel anger and hatred.

"Oh good," he says. "Be right over."

I pace around my apartment. Cat black sleeps Fido watches me still. I'm wound up I pace until the buzzer rings and it's Steven at the gate. My jaw is set hard. I am grinding my teeth.

Steven is carrying a large cardboard box.

"What started all this?" He asks.

"Filth Collins," I say. "Celine Dion."

"You are in a bad way."

My jaw grinds on.

"I couldn't remember," he says. "Do you have a garage here?"

I do have a garage, it's at the back of the building, you drive in from the lane.

"Much room in there?" He asks.

I have no idea where this inane conversation is heading.

"No, there's not much room. Do you want to store your box or something?"

"No, I don't. Bring your car keys. Don't lock up," he tells me, as he

carries his box out the door and down the stairs.

Fido and I follow him, Cat, black all over in the electric light, opens one eye but doesn't get up. I shut the door and run downstairs and catch up with Steven and we go out through the garden to the door of my garage.

"Perfect," he says when we get inside with the light on, looking at blank brick walls and concrete floor.

"Take the ute out," he says. "And we're ready for business."

What business? But I do as he tells me and when I get back to the garage the box is open and I see it's filled with dinner plates bowls saucers side plates and a few ugly china mugs.

"I've been Op Shopping for you," he says. "I thought you might need to work off a bit of emotion. Wondered when it would hit you."

I don't say anything. It feels like it's been hitting me forever.

"Time to smash a bit of angst, good and hard. Walls, floor, whatever you want."

I look at the crockery, I look at Steven standing there pleased as punch, I look at the hard tough walls and floor of my garage. I breathe out aloud.

"It's a great idea, Steven, but I think I'd feel stupid with you watching me throw plates at the walls of my garage. I don't even think I'm in a rage anymore. Just pissed off now."

"Oh, I won't be watching," he says, picking up a dinner plate and three bowls. "You need to do this, Jill. You know what you're like." I don't get to answer this weirdness because he raises his hand with the china in it and throws the plates with a sudden crack smash at the wall in front of me. He throws them violently viciously; they break into pieces all over the floor.

"Nicole Kidman!" He screams, reaching for another plate and making me jump at the vitriol in his voice. "Truly awful actor! Horrendously phoney attention seeker! Take that!"

My mouth falls open as he picks up another armful of plates.

Smash

Slam

“And that ...”

Smash slam again ...

“That’s for her botoxed, simpering, mock-humility.”

Fido is whimpering.

Steven gets out a stack of soup bowls and hurls them one by one at the concrete floor in front of us.

“That’s for accepting the role of a brain surgeon when she was fifteen ... ”

Bang.

“That’s for her put-on, ‘I’m just an Aussie battler’ spiel she serves up for the fawning local rags!”

Bang again.

“That’s for the Oscar she never deserved.”

Bang bang.

“And that’s for her truly terrible dried-out blonde do. Die bitch, die!”

Bang smash, ricochet smash.

I am amazed. My wound up anger and hate is gone, Steven has channelled it all. He is sweating and breathing hard. He’s actually sweating.

“Your turn,”

I hardly know where to start.

“Oh come on,” he says. “There’s a million more like Our Nic. Get stuck into them. Jesus, I could go through another box of plates just on her alone. Come ON!”

I take a plate from the pile he is holding and I weigh it in my hand. The faces of a dozen celebrities, from local T.V. ‘stars’ to current affairs’ commentators run through my mind, loathsome, each and every one. It’s hard to choose where to start, as more and more faces pop into my mind, images of internationally famous types, legions of bad actors, boorish sportsmen, smug selfish politicians leap at me. I’m trying to decide who to go for first when I am suddenly blindsided by a single shocking image. Fido is standing by the open garage door, made timid by the breaking china, and I see him in the future, in his future: trapped in a harness for the rest of his days, leading me around. The responsibility of it all. Then that image is

replaced by a memory of the look on my parents' faces when I told them I was going blind. Then I remember further back no I don't; instead I grip the plate tighter to steady me. I remember Christmas, and realise I will never see my cousins' faces again, or their children's. Then I see Cameron. In my mind's eye he is playing tennis surfing laughing at someone's joke – smiling at me. I see my future and it is me blind and never again horse riding window shopping working on the farm. I see myself blind and unknowing, ignoring my animals when they need me sitting on a spider or eating a fly. I see myself missing out on Cameron growing older the farm again the animals the friends that bloody job of mine just reading the paper on a Sunday, travelling by myself flowers in a vase and blind for the rest of my days. I clench my hand around the first plate and hurl it across the garage and slam it into the wall. I throw another and another and another. I am shaking with anger and terror. I'm starting to lose control here. When I run out of plates Steven is there and handing me more. I throw more. As each handful is smashed to smithereens against the wall the floor the door, there's another and another waiting for me. I keep throwing and smashing throwing and smashing throwing and smashing until my shoulders ache and the floor is littered with broken china and the only thing left in the box is a china mug that won't break no matter how hard I throw it. This china mug infuriates me. It bounces defiantly around the garage, time after time. I pick it up throw it again, watch it hit and chip but not break. I retrieve it. I throw it harder. Still it bounces and cracks and chips more, but it won't break. I look around me, I am murderous, I spy the rake hanging on the wall and I grab it and start attacking the mug with more fury than I would have thought possible, except I'm not thinking now, I'm just a driven mass of destruction as I beat the stinking mug around the garage with the tines of the rake that's an old one of Dad's that I brought back from the farm that time when all the residents of my apartment block had a clean-up-the-garden weekend. And I realise that no matter what I do it won't break. The smiling mask of Lady Di on her wedding day looks up at me as I back the mug into a corner and pound at it in a futile attempt to destroy her doomed inbred

face. I need a mallet. I don't have one. Why don't I have a mallet? Dad's got six in various sizes in the big shed at home. I fling the rake away. It is useless. I stop then. There's no mallet to do the job properly. I breathe deep and any energy I had is suddenly overwhelmingly, gone.

I am exhausted. My nose is running and my face is red. Steven is watching me from the other side of the garage with his hands by his sides, when he sees me quiet and dull, the red wall of anger gone, frizzled out in the face of Lady Diana's perversity her stoicism her commitment to that ill-fated life; he comes over and puts his arms around me. I can feel him shaking trembling as he holds me until all I'm doing is snivelling and gulping for air, feeling boneless and drained.

"I went through three boxes of plates and an hour of bullets at the firing range when you told me you were going blind," he tells me.

He's a country boy too; he's always had his rifles.

But I never knew this, how my blindness had hit him.

I feel sad for him now, I feel sad for all my friends, having me and my mess thrust into their lives. I rub his back and smooth his hair. I fit my hand to his scalp and try to comfort him and me, us.

"This whole thing is a living breathing nightmare."

I say nothing, because I know that.

We clear up the broken china and pack it all back into the box. Fido comes over, sheepish and relieved. I lift him into my arms and kiss his ears which he doesn't like much, and hold him tight which he loves. We force the box of broken china pieces into the biggest garbage bin and I back my eighteen thousand dollar (re-sale value) twin cab ute into the garage, with Fido perched in the tray back for a special treat. I have trouble lining up the walls because he is standing on his hind legs bang in the middle of the back window, but I don't even yell at him because he is perfect. On my fourth attempt to get into the garage Steven intervenes and lifts Fido from the ute and out of my line of vision.

“You’re too indulgent with that dog,” he says as we lock up the car and the garage doors. I turn off the light and whistle and we head indoors.

“I can’t help it,” I say. “His life is going to get a whole lot worse, dragging me around for ever.”

“Are you stupid? It’s a dog’s dream. He gets to be with you twenty-four seven, he gets to go absolutely everywhere you go at all times and he gets to walk in front. That dog’s going to throw a party the day you go blind.”

I stop in my tracks. I look at Fido, pushing ahead of us up the stairs, and look at Steven following him, watching him, Steven has a disgusted expression on his face, I catch his eye and I have to laugh. I’m so relieved. I’m relieved because it’s true. Fido will love running the show.

We go back indoors and I make hot chocolate for me with froth, and percolated coffee for Steven, also with froth. I call it Frothacino and he rolls his eyes and sneers, but I know he secretly loves it. I show Steven around my newly renovated apartment, which doesn’t take long because there are now only three rooms and one closing door for me to walk into nose first, and a minimum of possessions – strictly the absolutely functional. I tell him about how the architect discovered in his plans that my apartment of five rooms was once a long elegant living room with a narrow conservatory attached. The internal walls had all been put in years ago, but it actually was originally similar to the way it is now, except I’ve got the bathroom and kitchen in the conservatory.

“No foundation walls in the middle of the room.” I tell him, but he doesn’t seem to care much, he’s just looking around, “It meant that I could do the renovations,” I tell him more clearly, “I couldn’t have done any of this if the dining and bedroom walls were solid ... ” But my explaining trails away, as I wonder how I will know what people are thinking, how will I know when I am boring them, if I they are silent and I can’t see their faces? I breathe out. I breathe in. But the show must go on, so I point out the features of my

long and narrow bathroom, with the serrated floor of the bath and guaranteed non-stick rubber mat by the tub. The mat has sticky stuff beneath it so it will never ever move, no matter how wet it gets. I show him the extra cupboard space. I show him the shelves devoid of rubbish, I show him the three year supply of toiletries, all labelled in Braille. I show him the galley-style kitchen with the electric hot plates – no naked flame in there – even though I much prefer cooking with gas. I show him the new saucepans, no loose handles no ill-fitting lids. I show him the sandwich-maker with the timer and bell the self-sharpening kitchen scissors and the new cutting knives safe in their sheath. I show him the microwave in its cupboard and the bags and bags of expensive complete dry-food meals for animals – cats on the right, dogs on the left. I show him my balcony without its old clutter of big and small and tiny cute pot plants. I show him all my plants living in harmony in three big pots only. I point out that most of the decorative flowers are gone, that I only have scented plants now. I show him the outdoor table that my father repaired and then permanently attached to the balcony floor so I can't knock it over. I show him around my all-in-together main room with the floor to ceiling cupboards only half filled with my new classic mix-and-match never-go-out-of-style clothes. I show him my bed with its embroidered Indian sari hangings hovering at the end of the room, the floating wall dividing the space and the simulated log fire that's really a safe-as-houses gas heater in the old and beautiful fireplace at the other end. I show him my long long wall of soon-to-be-useless books, and the empty spaces I have left there for Braille books and papers. I show him my desk all set up for the new printer and my computer all geared for audio everything. He inspects the stickers on the radio identifying which buttons are which and my CDs labelled in Braille. He takes down the Hly!Quin Resurrection! CD that was signed by the whole band the weekend we saw them at the Meredith Music Festival. I see him reading their signatures again and he sighs at that, so I stop the tour and we sit in two easy chairs by the fire. Our feet share a footstool. Our drinks are hot and frothy with chocolate

sprinkled on top of the froth. And I tell him how much I'm dreading my future.

"I'm dreading my future. I'm really dreading my future," I say.

"Shit, Jill, we're all really dreading your future."

"I'm scared I'm going to lose everything and everyone. I'm scared that I'll be the boring hanger-on disabled mate who is included in occasional events as a guilty afterthought. I'm afraid I'll be so busy concentrating on where I am and how I'm going to get around, that I'll forget to be myself, I won't ever get to be myself."

I drink more hot chocolate and eat a shortbread biscuit from a batch I made from Mum's Timboon and District CWA Recipe Book.

"It's the logistics of it all too, I just don't know if I will actually be able to function. Jesus, can you imagine using a public toilet when you're blind?"

Steven snorts into his Frothacino and says he refuses to use public toilets sighted and whole-bodied, let alone incapacitated in any way.

"Exactly."

We stare into my fake fire that looks pretty but has no sparks no scent no crackle.

"I'm going to be wearing daggy clothes and poorly-applied make-up, and I don't know if I'll be able to do my job without being a god-awful burden to everyone there."

"Oh, fuck them, if you can't do your job you just hang in there until the partners give you the flick and you either sue them for discrimination or you walk out with the practice sold for a small fortune. The job's the easy part."

Steven wastes no time worrying about the job.

"I don't know about easy, besides, I don't want to mess them about. And I can't be sacked. I'm a partner, not an employee. And they've been really good to me."

"Well, so they should. Why wouldn't they be good to you? Jesus Jill, they're adults, if they don't want to give this a go, then they'll say so. Let them do

their bit for their tragic work mate.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want to be the tragic work mate. I want to be the model workmate who helps out some other poor tragic one, someone else with a disability. I don’t want it to be me. I want to help some poor bastard who’s gone blind and be really really nice to them and then go home and be my old self at the end of the day. I want to keep coming home to this life.”

“No one wants to be the tragic,” he says. “But let’s face it, you’re going to be her, so you may as well get used to it. God knows, you’re entitled to a shit-load of self pity and being pissed off, but at the end of the day, you haven’t got a choice in this. And neither do we. And who knows? Maybe you’ll be so good at it you’ll be a pin-up girl for blind people everywhere.”

“They won’t be able to see my pin-up girl pose.”

“True. I’ll have to describe you to them.”

We drink our drinks and watch the sanitised fire and then Steven gets up and puts on the Quin’s latest CD, Hly!Hell and then he sits back down, humming under his breath before tells me he’s hungry for real food and why don’t I make a meal or something, so we trail into the kitchen and the animals follow us in and I give them a snack and turn on the oven and put in some rolls to warm and I boil water for cooking rice noodles. I make up a sauce with canned tomatoes, the imported ones I drive to Sydney Road for, onion and garlic and the basil I have growing on the balcony. I add capers and finely chopped chilli and grate parmesan cheese into a small blue bowl. We talk of the beach house trip planned for next weekend and Steven predicts that Susan will be up the duff before her wedding comes around next year. I don’t believe a word of it because Ian has said he doesn’t want children, and I cook the sauce while I put the noodles into boiling water and check the rolls in the oven and make curls and curls of butter with the butter curling gadget. The noodles cook quickly, the trick is not to let them sit too long and get gluggy. I get out forks and knives for us and two bowls and I turn off the hotplate because the sauce is ready. I drain and rinse the

noodles while Steven tells me about his work and I drizzle just a drop of oil over them before I find the bottle opener for him in the bottom drawer and we decide that the Philippines is as safe a place as any for Cameron at the moment. I hand him wine glasses and I get the rolls out of the oven and onto a plate, I put noodles into our bowls, lots for Steven, less for me. We argue about his current girlfriend, I tell him he's got impossible standards as I pour steaming hot sauce over the noodles and quickly place the bowls the forks the knives the rolls the butter and the cheese onto a large tray and carry it through to the all-in-one room. I put the tray onto the footstool and swap Steven's bowl of food for my glass of wine. I sit cross legged on the floor before the fire while Cat black gives herself a thorough wash sitting on my chair. We talk politics and music, friends and family, drought and crops while we eat noodles and butter the bread and reach across for sprinklings of cheese. Only a little while left of this, I'm thinking, during a lull in the conversation. My bowl is nearly empty of food. Steven tops up my wine and Cat black jumps off the chair and strolls over and climbs into my lap, purring loudly. The faux fire keeps on burning and after a bit our conversation goes on again.

Jay Walking

I move through the world with my eyes open all the time now. I see chocolate red russet brown in the sunlit fur of my black Cat.

I see the curl in Fido's tail. I see frowns of skin on my face and scattered strands of grey in my hair. I see red purple green black post office stamps on letters in the mail from far and away.

I see the lines and lines of print in pages and pages of books.

I go to the supermarket and the colours dazzle me. Language leaps at me from packaging, from windows and signs. Words tell me what to buy and how to buy it. Girls present beauty and fashion to me. People fascinate me now. The tilt of their heads, the curve of shoulders chins eyebrows eyes eyelashes. I look and look at their clothes faces gestures expressions. I read the messages they send with their glances their squints their lowered lids their crinkled crow's feet. Gestures and expressions, the sign language of a culture. Sneers and smiles worry and grief confusion anger secrets. Sly furtiveness open pleasure. Hidden looks and unconscious shapes to mouths and torsos that contradict words. I wonder again and again how I will ever be able to decipher what people are meaning, what they are really saying, if I can't read their faces and bodies.

I keep walking through the supermarket aisles, I queue at the register. I pay with coloured paper and collect my plastic-bagged food. I walk away from it all. I pass fossils sitting together in an awful arcade coffee shop. He's grey and wispy-haired, wearing a vest and a going-shopping suit. His body is flabby and loose, collapsed in on itself on the chair. He is gazing into space. I see the movement of his companion's hands as she speaks to him. I find myself avoiding the sight of her, afraid to see an haranguing resigned defeated exasperated face that doesn't even bother to look at him, except with contempt. I've seen a million of these couples – bored to tears, tired of each other, every line of their body showing there's nothing new under

the sun in their relationship. Her hands wave again, involuntarily I do look her way and her face is sweet! Her hair is dark and springing out of her bun, her cheeks are ruddy. She is leaning forward and her face is gentle, her expression interested, talking to him and then listening as he replies. They are having a conversation like two happy and contented people who like each other. I can breathe out again, properly this time, with real relief. They are sitting together in vinyl chairs, leaning across a phoney wood laminated table which is balanced on a single shiny pedestal with four pronged feet in a crowded café. The bain-marie behind them is stuffed with congealing chow mien roast beef and veg potato cakes eighty cents each chicken schnitzels four fifty tired pastries and production-line cinnamon muffins golden brown dry and pitted with fruit. The smell comes to me, frying and gravy, cabbage and thin coffee scorched milk and soy sauce. These places make a great fat-soaked salt and cholesterol toasted white bread samitch. Four ninety five.

Have here or take away.

I walk away from the supermarket arcade with my packaging and head towards the deli that doesn't stock my special tomatoes, but has other good stuff. I jay walk across the road two car lengths from the lights.

I jay walk all the time now.

Horns toot. People yell. Bikes skid to avoid me. Van drivers call me a stupid bitch, but I don't care. Nothing can scare me. I jay walk all the time now because in the very near future, I shall be law abiding for the rest of my life. I will never get another speeding ticket or parking fine. I will never be the designated driver. I will never run and jump the kerb. I will never run. I will only ever cross roads at the lights. I will, very soon, never swing across the road, skipping a bit as I near the other side, avoiding death with quick glances left right left.

I don't think I will ever run again.

Soon I will be like the elderly, scared of roads and cars and traffic. Anxious about the state of the footpath, complaining to the council about tree roots

and overhanging boughs. A bicycle left on the footpath will be an accident waiting to happen. To me. A loose brick in the kerb could be a broken leg, the latest car with the quietest engine my death trap.

So I jay walk for now and I see the sights.

And even though I'm not doing what Steven suggested, which was,
"Fuck off overseas for six months and see everything."

I'm trying my hardest to see everything here.

I examine my world in minute detail.

I read Cameron's cards and the letters that accompany the parcels and presents he sends me. I look at the text, the words and what he is saying, but I also look at the way the length of his fingers and strength in his hands and the patience or not of his primary school teacher have shaped the letters he forms when he presses a blue ball point pen into the soft cheap paper that has been gummed to the back of a mass-produced print of a photograph of the view from the beach of the town he is in far far away. I see the curls and loops in the tails of the letters G and Y. I get out my magnifying glass and look closely at the straight razor lines of Z, S, N, Mmm. I see his signature: large C and the sliding tail away at the end of the word. Mmm, N again. I like his words. I like the script. I like the picture. I like being able to look and read. Reading.

Book shops shut to me.

Newspapers closed.

Cartoons irrelevant unknowing lost.

Art gone.

Graffiti warning signs timetables directions maps Christmas cards and Out to Lunch Back in Five Mins signs all gone.

I've started behaving oddly, reading signs and words aloud to remind myself that I can see.

Give way go back wrong way do not enter one way one way only no parking no standing no standing any time exit exit only wrong way go back.

I leave the shop that smells like a bakery and a dairy and a vineyard and a butcher all at once and get into my car and drive home down Church St to Toorak Rd and I pick up the book I'd ordered in South Yarra and then I drive on around the shrine and down through Alexandra Gardens over the river and turn left then left again then right and left once more and I am home. Alert and home and Eyes Open checking the mail, No Advertising Material Please and in the letter box there's a card that says Darling Jill, and there are loops and curly tails on the letters Y and G and I'm immersed in the vision of the words and all they tell me (again).

Camping with Fido

The dark is getting closer now. It's weeks away, not months. I feel I'm in a state of barely controlled panic, everything is being prepared and organised, and I am doing last-times things. At my job they know that I'll be taking time off when Eyes Shut engulfs me, no one knows when that will be, so it's all fluid. I'll leave my job one day, sighted, and then return a few weeks later, blind. So I don't start anything new there now. I tidy loose ends and I just plug away and every day I answer at least one person's query about how I'm doing. I don't tell them I am just marking time until my sight runs out.

I gave myself a symbolic date when the doctor said,

"You've probably got about six months..."

And now it's only weeks till six months. But I'm not blind yet, and sometimes, on good days, I tell myself it just won't happen at all and I want everything to slow down. All the minutes in all the days ahead seem to be accounted for with tasks and plans and preparations, but I start to wonder if it will really happen, then, perversely, I find I want it to happen now immediately get it over with. I'm tired out from the anticipation, the planning, I just want it done and on bad days, I find I'm even losing my passion for the sight I have. I want blind, I don't. I believe it will happen, it won't. Then suddenly I wake up one morning energised alert visual; and I tell myself it's all been a stinking lie a fantasy a tacky television dream sequence. It's a Friday and I can't face another round of caring questions and deliberate seeing in the world and I realise I have barely taken a day off work in all this time that hasn't been laden with doctor's appointments and tests and house repairs and blind goings on, so I ring in and say I'm taking a mental health break,

"Tell Brian just to keep working through the Haydn brief."

I absent myself for Friday and Monday and then I ring the camping ground in Lorne and book a site for a person, her ute and a dog. I find the esky and

clean it out and toss some food and cooking stuff into it. I throw clothes into a bag and grab my swag and then I stow everything in the back of the ute under the tarp. I change into my old farm jeans and elastic sided boots and a jumper. I fill up the spaces in the back of the ute with apples and mandarins and bananas. I run back inside for salt. And again for a teaspoon. I run back again for porridge, a small bag of rice and some potatoes and carrots; I've been eating a dozen carrots a day for five months. Then I take the rice, the carrots and the potatoes inside again. This is a holiday, I tell myself, not boot camp. I fetch some Dubbin for my boots and give them a quick once over so the salt air doesn't get to them. Then I strap my surfboard onto the roof racks, organise cat food and Mrs James upstairs for feeding and nurturing while I am gone. I water the plants as Fido whimpers and wags in anticipation. I kiss my Cat black, turn everything off, run back and kiss her furry head again then pack Fido into the ute and we leave.

I drive along the Prince's Highway as far as Werribee and then I cut across the back way around the racecourse and onto Little River and Lara. When I hit Geelong at elevenses I buy more petrol and ice for the esky and metho for the little trangier stove and a Willie Nelson CD. Then we get back onto the Princess Highway, through Waurin Ponds with its limestone caves by the side of the road, the Barrabool hills and the dry paddocks around Winchelsea. I drive through green damp and empty Deans Marsh and into the Otway Ranges. The road is winding and smells of fern. The bush is grey brown green. Fido looks out the window and pants. We stop near the Barwon dam and stretch our legs. I saw a platypus there once. And an eagle by the side of the road right here. You can't smell the sea when you come in through the bush, the eucalypts and ferns smother the salt, but you know it when you get there.

There's a decent swell on when I catch sight of the ocean, so I can have a surf. I tell Fido this and turn up the volume on the CD player as we cruise on into town, Willie Nelson sings Ray Charles and Lorne is quiet and beautiful.

The sky is cloudy but there's not much wind. The surf is in the shape of a left hander coming in on the beach break, and there are only a few black man-shapes on surf boards bobbing in the ocean.

I reach the camping ground and see the No Dogs Allowed sign, square black capitals on white tin. But I've played the blind card over the phone and they've made an exception seeing how my life is a walking tragedy, "It's a bloody tragedy, Love, don't let him off the lead."

Fido's under strict orders to behave and I squeeze out some more of the story of my last five months, hand over the cash and we're in.

It's the off season so we can choose our own spot. I have the Trangier and a torch which means we don't need power, so we bump over soft grass to a stand of trees near the river.

I see how the leaves are waving and work out what the wind is doing, it's picked up down here and I park the ute so our camp will be in the lee.

I leave the esky in the tray back and unstrap my surfboard and lay it next to the ute. I unpack the Trangier and fill the kettle from a tap nearby. I fill the fuel container with metho and get out my mug and the hot chocolate tin and the teaspoon and my milk frothing gadget. I undress and put the clothes I am wearing into a basket with two towels and my shampoo and soap. I struggle into the wet suit, slather on sun block, even though it's not summer and I'll never see my skin again, and unclip the car key from all the others. I lock the keys and my clothes basket in the car and attach the car key to Fido's collar. I carry my surfboard and a small flag on a stick down to the beach, with Fido at my heels. I find a spot on the sand above the water line and I leave my thongs, and plant the red flag there.

Fido follows me down to the water and barks at the waves while I test the temperature of the ocean in springtime. The temperature of the Southern Ocean in springtime is frigid. My hands and feet are raw and howling with

the cold already, but the rest of me is warming up as the water gets trapped in layers of rubber wetsuit. Fido prances and barks behind me as I push out from the shore.

As I paddle out the waves are small at first, and when they get close I raise the top half of my body so the face of the wave runs between me and the board. Strands of hair get in my eyes and stick to my face, and I tuck my long plait into the tight collar of my wetsuit. The waves get bigger and my arms are tiring already, it's a long time since I've used them like this. I paddle out further, ducking under waves, struggling against their pull. The rip drags me to my right and I angle my board and try to paddle against it, but it takes me anyway. I get through the set and reach a patch of stillish water and I sit up on my board. The day is soft with low thick cloud cover. Blue grey sky and deep water. I look back at the land and the sand is rich, the colour hitting me, strong and relentless that line of real yellow. Fido is sitting up, next to my flag, being patted by a young girl.

I look back at the ocean and there are waves coming in, big ones up the back which I will avoid, because I'm not that good, and won't get any better now, and some smaller ones coming in too. I turn the board around, clumsy and out of practice, and as the wave races toward me, top curling and teetering and ready to fall in on itself, I kick out and paddle. The board is lifted under me by the swell and I kick harder and then I'm caught; I'm caught and I pick up speed and steer a course on an angle to the shore. I grip the sides of the board and get onto one knee and then up to my feet. I throw my weight to the left to steer the board again, pointing directly at the shore now, going faster and I stand up with my arms out to hold me there. It is exhilarating. My mind is empty of everything but my body on this surfboard, riding this wave. I bend my knees a little more to keep my centre of gravity low. I speed up and then when the wave begins to peter out and my balance starts to go I wobble and drop, fall to my knees and then onto my stomach. I steer the board into the shallows on an angle again so I don't

hit point on to the sand and I put my face down onto the board and just feel good for a moment.

After, I stand up in ankle deep water. I am smiling. I yell out. Fido leaves his girlfriend and races over to me. He bounds over cold water and into a pot hole that he hasn't seen coming and it sends him splashing, up to his neck in icy water, and when he reaches me he has a very surprised look on his face. He wags his wet tail and licks my hand and I lift him onto the board and give him a ride up and over some small waves. Fido tolerates the surfboard, but doesn't love it, which is why I've never trained him up for Gidget-style tricks or anything like that. I let him ride as I walk in the shallows until I'm level with my flag again. I am happy.

I scoot Fido off the board and he runs back to his flag while I turn around and head out again. I catch wave after wave. In between rides, I sit high and bobbing on my board and I let the up and overs go by as I rest and watch the horizon and the swell and look back at the town and the bush and the sands. This bobbing on my board, this ocean, is almost my favourite thing of all.

When I leave the water, my hands and feet and face are numb and raw. I grab the flag and my thongs as Fido races me up the sand and into the camping ground. I slide my board under the ute and with thick, cold, red inflexible fingers unclip the car key from Fido's collar. I grab the basket of my clothes from the front seat and I pour Fido a bowl of water. I light the Trangier and get water boiling for when I get back and then run to the shower block with wet hair and frozen burning feet. I stand under the hot water for five minutes before I start to strip off my wetsuit. My fingers don't work properly and my shoulders ache from the paddling. I rub feebly at my hair with shampooed fingers and when the hot water suddenly runs out, I duck my head under quickly to rinse and then get out of there. I dress slowly and when I get back to my camp the water is boiling. I put milk into a pot and heat that and then mix and froth myself up a large mug of hot

chocolate. I eat Scotch Finger biscuits and drink self-frothed hot chocolate and stretch out, leaning against the tree trunk and feel tired and salty. I sit like that for a long time. The sun comes out again and it is warm. I realise I have to think about food for dinner and maybe a newspaper and a glass of wine would go down well. I wonder about the pub and if I can bear people and noise and decide no, I'll get takeaway and have an early night. I pack the stove away and get my purse and check for keys and wack Fido on the lead and we walk up to the shops.

I am dog tired and we walk slowly.

Fido investigates everything.

We pass Erskine House and the Cora Lyn Guest House. Rudyard Kipling stayed there. He wrote a verse about it. I love that. We walk by old weatherboard homes and past the cinema. I see the swimming pool and changing huts down on the foreshore and I look for a butcher, but settle for the supermarket. I buy Fido some chops and get a hamburger and *The Age* and a crossword book for me. We walk back to the campsite. We pass school kids and a couple of dogs. We pass retirees and swish cars. I look in shop windows at the new fashions and see a handbag I'd like, but it doesn't have a long strap, so I'd have to waste an actual hand to carry it, and in a few weeks time I'll be busy with canes and leashes and outstretched questing fingers, so it's useless to me. It's pretty, though, frivolous and girly, not my department any more. I make myself forget about it. I'll be free of girly things soon. What will that mean, I wonder? Freedom? The ultimate liberation? Will I become asexual? What makes me female in this world, apart from my body? I wonder again about what I'll lose when I can't see anything.

We keep on walking and reach the gates into the campsite. My hamburger is still warm in its wrapping and the newspaper I've parcelled it up in. The grounds are quiet and peaceful. When we reach the ute I put on more water to boil because the Trangier takes forever, and I roll out my swag. I lie it

under the tree, so my feet will face the river. I give Fido his chops and then I sit cross legged on the rough canvas and unwrap and eat my hamburger. The meat is real and there is lettuce and onion and beetroot. It is an enormous hamburger and I eat every scrap. I lick the paper when I am finished, because there is juicy business left on it. And melted cheese. The trangier has finally boiled the water and I make black tea in the tiny metal teapot which is shaped to fit into the tiny metal saucepan which is just the right size to fit into the tiny metal case, and I check my watch for the time. Fido's teeth serrate themselves against the chop bone and when he catches me watching him he wags his tail and goes on fanging at the scrapings of meat clinging to the bone. It's a quarter to five but Manila time is 2.45pm. I get out my mobile phone and ring Cameron. He answers straight away, for once, and I tell him it's me and that I'm in Lorne. I say I'm camping and surfing and then my throat closes over and I can't speak. I bend over double, sitting on the swag that's laid on the grass under a blue gum by the river running through the camping ground in the off season at the seaside and I'm a long way away from anyone I know. I can't speak and fear is all over me. I lean over into myself even further until my forehead touches the ground in front of me and when I can speak without wrenching screams and dog-like howls, I whisper to Cameron, silent worried, on the other end of this tenuous connection over land and water.

I whisper,

"I don't think I can do this."

My voice is hoarse, barely there.

"I can't hear you," he says. "Tell me again."

"I can't do this," I say.

I say it louder.

I say it over and over again. I am gripping the phone so tightly and I yell at him with my head pushed hard into the dry dirt earth beside my swag, under the tree,

I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this. I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this,

I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this,
I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this,
I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this,
I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this.

Later that night, I lie in my sleeping bag and my swag keeps off the dew. Fido is curled up on my feet, wearing his dog jacket the red one fluffy warm fitted snugly over his own woolly winter coat, and I see stars lighting through the cloud cover. I think about Cameron, hot under a mosquito net, windows wide open traffic busy twelve floors below his apartment foreign voices calling through the night. The air there is soft and humid. I think about what will happen to him and me, when this whole sight business blows up. He's taking time off to come back. The plan was that I would go blind panic deal with it iron out the difficulties get my life in order and then have him here for a few weeks,

"For as long as you need me. Whatever you want."

The trouble is, I don't know what I'm going to want, what I'm going to be like. I might be a mess. I don't think I want him to see me like that.

Vulnerable tearful scared and messed up. Why would anyone want to be around a person like that? I want him to wait a bit before he comes over, so I can get myself in order, but I fear I might be out of order for a long long time.

The night travels quickly while I'm in a deep sleep. I wake up in the light and lie warm and safe in my swag. Fido has moved up in the night so his head is resting on my shoulder. Could this be more? A sleepy dog wearing a red jacket laying his head on my shoulder. I am lucky. I know it. I have a campsite by the river and the ocean, I have hot-chocolate-making facilities, I am warm and I have a dog who loves me lying by my side and Cameron who loves me fretting on an island far far away. I check my watch and set the alarm to call Manila at a civilised hour and tell him I'm alright.

Because I am alright.

I make a mental note to make a note about this new idea; this new idea that sometimes yowling and yelling and telling someone how bad it all is makes me feel better. That saying it out loud is good. Strange, a strange and un-me thing to do, but it seems to work.

And later, I don't need to ring Cameron and leave a message telling him I'm alright because he calls me first and asks,

"Are you alright?"

I tell him it's okay and that I'm sad about it all, flat and worried, but not desperate. He tells me to remember I'm not on my own, and I say,

"Yes."

And, "I know."

And "Thanks, thanks, Cameron."

And he's lovely to tell me that.

Except that he's wrong.

I am on my own.

Six Months and Eight Days

I pick up Susan and Janey at the crack of dawn and we drive through the horrors of Saturday morning traffic into the city. I pull into a flat matt concrete car park where there is nothing aesthetic to be seen but the tiny flecks of paint that have been shorn off the sides of cars that took the turns too tight. I steer us around and around and around in circles to get to the rooftop where we'll park, while Susan shoves a bottle of something called *No More Ironing* at me.

"I swear by it, Jill." She says, "You just squirt it on and hang up the clothes and you don't need to iron them at all. It's fabulous. It'll save your life." Yeah. Sure it will.

I negotiate the final turn and find us a spot high up on the top of the building. Susan and Janey leap out of the car and hit the stairs down to shopping heaven at a run, but I dawdle. I can see down into the city from here and look into nineteenth century rooftops mingled with sheer square blocks of office buildings. I see gargoyles and curlicues. I see ergonomic chairs sitting empty in beige rooms that stretch on and on. I see gabled rooves and pointed sacred windows. I see pigeons and tiny balconies festooned with plants. I see the trees of the gardens, the elegant parks. I see the strong sweep of the facade of parliament house and the perfect Victorian dome of the Exhibition Building. The river is sliding down towards the sea and there are cranes high in the air over near the docks. The spire of Saint Patrick's points to redemption faith hope, and it reminds me that I don't have enough of those things in my life right now. The car keys jingle as I put them into my bag and I leave the roof and climb down flights of hard concrete stairs to ground level where Susan is waiting, impatient for the spree to start.

Janey wants to stop in the Food Hall for some fortification and I wrap my fingers around a hot chocolate, made with a real frothing machine. The

froth goes on for miles, deep into my cardboard cup and the sprinkle of cocoa lies on the surface in perfect individual grains rich in colour textured minutely each and every one of them. I hesitate to start drinking. I know the tipping of the cup will disturb it all and mix the cocoa sprinklings through the creamy block of colour that is the froth and all the separate parts will be swirled together then.

Susan bumps my arm,

“You’re miles away. Let’s do it.”

And away we go. The froth swirls up and over the cocoa as I quick walk through the store, as I step up onto sharp-edged escalators, detour to the shoe displays and join the steady progression into the bridal section. I gulp down the chocolate and burn my lips, but there’s no food or drink allowed in this land of serious froth and bubble.

The frocks are displayed like confectionery around brocade walls in a sea of white and ivory and rich cream satin. Nylon net more froth and lace.

Pinches tucks and pleats fold fabric into exaggerated girl-shapes. Veils spill down from fitted shelves and posies of dried flowers: rose fern gypsum are on display for the brides to prance and practise with. Off to the side are the racks of colour, my *bête noir*: the bridesmaid dresses.

More satin more silk-look more long flowing lines of rich cloth. The colours are deep and strong, fortified by the expensive fabrics. The shades are light and airy, made misty and ethereal by the fine weave in the cloth. Shoes and hideous Bo Peep boots garter belts and saucy stockings, lingerie and big romantic hats all slotted into special sections devoted to frippery. I stand still and look and look and look. Susan is knee deep in a discussion with the Madam about weather considerations for next year and Janey is trying on a hair piece and admiring herself in the mirrors. Janey and I have only met once before. She is a precocious teenager who had to be included in the wedding party to appease the in-laws. She’s the only grandchild and the

apple of everyone's eye. Susan finds her horrible beyond belief but has to put on a brave front.

"Are you that blind one?" She asks me as Susan and the bridal woman chat like old friends.

"I drove here," I say. "What do you think?"

"Oh, yeah," she says, and laughs. "That's funny. "

We wander among the bridesmaid dresses, touching ruby red sapphire blue electric green.

"Do you have any preferences?" I ask her. Wondering what they'll choose that might suit a blind forty year old and a sighted teenager.

"We should go dark," she says. "Like that blood red, that would suit you and me, anything pale would be better for me, but you'd look washed out in those colours, and I can carry a darker shade, so I reckon we should go with something like that."

She's spot on. Her fairness and tan would look fantastic in the pastels, but I would be a dead loss.

"Besides," she says. "If I let you two win on the colours, then maybe I'll get a say in the style. I do not want to wear something from Susan's hey-day a hundred years ago."

I laugh despite myself and we're both surprised.

"Are you really going blind?" She asks.

So I tell her. I tell that the only reason we're shopping now, instead of in the January sales is because I won't be seeing the January sales. I tell her that I agreed to all this in a weak moment and that now I will be stumbling around in the wedding party and there's nothing I can do to get out of it.

She pulls out an almost see-through yellow gold sheath and grins at me,

"This ought to rev them up a bit!"

She puts it on the holding rack for Susan's consideration later, then goes back to rifling through the dresses, making selections, discarding others and all the time throwing questions and comments at me about blindness Fido how my family feels do I have a job do I have a boyfriend what does he do what will he do how do I feel about it all?

Susan is deep in strategy with the Madam – formidable in helmet hair and all-black armour – now with a notebook out and making hieroglyphic marks onto a blank white page.

I answer Janey's questions and make some dress choices of my own, some for colour options, a few for style. I know Susan wants us in full length dresses, but Janey and I have both decided that would be hideously inappropriate. Janey decides that Susan needs to be made aware that a blind woman would find it far too difficult to get around in long heavy skirts.

"And you would too," she tells me. "Stupid idea."

We continue on, hunting together now, through the racks and racks of dresses. Janey wants to know if I will just lose my sight suddenly, bang! Like a light going out into pitch black.

I tell her it won't happen like that. My vision will just gradually smudge out and fade away. The doctors have said it will probably happen over about a week or two bit by bit hour by hour day by day, until it's gone.

Susan comes over to us at the tail end of this recital.

"I thought it was going to be sudden," she says. "Bang! Like a light going out."

She rifles briskly through our selections rack.

I don't say anything. I have told her what will happen at least a dozen times already, she doesn't listen or she doesn't think it will happen or she's got other stuff on her mind. I just let it go.

Janey's arranging the dresses we have picked into colour groups. She asks me if I'm scared.

Before I can answer, before I can tell her the truth and say that I am terrified. That I don't sleep most nights now, because I am lying awake nauseated and anxious trembling and tearful, Susan answers for me,

"Of course she's not scared, not that scared anyway, not like we would be.

Jill's one of those tough farm girls," she says. "They can handle anything."

Janey rolls her eyes at me, but doesn't say a word and anyway, Susan's moved on already, changing the subject quickly onto what we came for: frocking up.

At the end of three hours Janey and I have got in and out of more than two dozen dresses, some of them several times each and Susan, who is harassed but resplendent in a bridal gown that bears a passing resemblance to the cut and colour of the one being stitched up for her by her mother's neighbour's girl Lillian, who is European and studying fashion design at college; is bearing down on us one more time to view the tableau we present in the huge gilt mirror on the back wall. I am wilting now and even Janey has lost that lip gloss sparkle but Susan is turning back to the indefatigable Madam with a questioning look ...

"For god's sake, Susan, not again."

"But I just want to see the ..."

"No! Rack off. We need food and drink and cigarettes and NO mention of weddings and dresses and what matches with what for at least thirty minutes."

Janey is fierce. She clearly won't be budged on this.

Susan is taken aback, she's not happy. An argument is forming on her face. She looks at me and back at Janey and then shrugs.

"Alright, alright. Let's eat. But you'll need to have a lot more stamina than this on the wedding day."

I know she doesn't want to get out of her bridal gown, she's loving the poncing and parading, she goes back into the change room with bad grace, but I don't care. I don't care that my old friend is becoming virtually unrecognisable in the metamorphosis from girlfriend to bride, instead I reach out and put my arm around Janey and give her a big sloppy hug.

“Thank god, thank god,” I whisper to her and to me. “Thank god you’re here.”

Afterwards, when we’ve been fed and watered and semi-appeased and then wound up tight again before being sent back to trawl through more fittings and frocks and then eventually sent staggering out of Myers and into the afternoon sunshine, when we’ve hiked up flight after flight of car park stairs and I’ve roared down the concrete ramps with reckless speed, and slotted the parking ticket into the machine and coughed up thirty five dollars and chauffeured the two of them home and then headed back to my apartment and tranquillity and dog and Cat and a decent cup of tea before a long soothing walk in my park; after that I have time to reflect on the strange alliance of me and Janey. Susan’s nemesis. The horrid child who is destined to be a thorn in Susan’s side for years on end, who Susan can’t stand, but who has ended up snickering and plotting with me to thwart the evil bride-queen, and who almost might succeed.

I feel, for the first time, that I might just survive the wedding.

The Lost World

I take a break from my desk and go out onto my balcony to watch for the storm that's coming, I do this with my eyes closed, to practise. All day I've heard the reports as the rhythm of the cricket up the road at the MCG plays on, the weather reports add an edge of anxiety and anticipation to the game. The day has been warm from dawn onwards, twenty six degrees and humid. Boiling clouds, low and thunderous hang over my suburb all day. When patches of sun come through, the heat is burning. But mostly it feels steamy and close. The storm will be wind and rain, fierce hail and flash flooding. Trees will come down when it hits. Roads will be awash, householders are instructed to be prepared.

The cricket rolls on over the ABC as lightening strikes in Apollo Bay, three and a half hours away on the west coast. I listen to overs bowled and runs taken, I hear a spectacular catch called excitedly as I move the cushions from my balcony chairs inside and Eyes Open to watch my clothes horse of washing thrash around. The shirts are still damp as the weather desk reports at five pm that the storm has hit Colac, inland and closer, and is moving in on Central Victoria. The cricket plays on and I leave my shirts swirling their arms around the spindly legs of the clothes horse. I keep sorting through my papers; photos and letters receipts and postcards, as Australia is going great guns with a middle order partnership of one hundred and twenty-four. By stumps the wind gusts are coming more frequently, but it is warm and balmy. Clouds fly across the sky and I drink my cup of tea watching the sky from the living room windows. My pot plants look brighter somehow, the green of the leaves and stalks richer, more vibrant. All those ionised particles buzzing through the air, giving everything an electric zap. The cricket re-hash has finished for the day and the radio programs settle into their old routine. I bring in my shirts, dry enough for hanging up and I watch a movie about a jewel thief. The air is still warm and my black Cat is found

sitting casually under the bed, grooming her paws. A bee flies around my house and I change into pyjamas and open the balcony door wider and sit in my cane chair and watch the light leaving the sky and then shut my eyes and listen to the storm as it hurls itself at the city. Spots of rain are thrown ahead of the real weather, but not enough to make anything wet, I listen to the leaves in the trees rubbing themselves against each other – millions of leaves in thousands of trees and bushes and plants in my suburb, all dark now, with the wind swish swishing them against each other. Leaves slap together like lips kissing swishing. I listen to branches throwing their arms around each other trunks swaying twigs crackling together and more leaves still kissy kissing in a delicate dance of near and far touch and part. I listen to it all. The wind flies around the buildings, up and down the street, across the roof tops. I have Eyes Shut the whole time and I can read that storm, its pace and strength. Then a roaring comes, from afar at first, but coming towards me so fast my eyes fly open to watch the storm front rushing for my small balcony, rushing to sweep me away; but it is only a car! The rushing whirl was only a car revving up in Brunton Avenue. I'd misunderstood. I'd been caught in the storm, caught in what I'd expected to hear and I got it wrong.

I go back inside then. Maybe the hail and brimstone attack has worn its strength out over the paddocks and low hills around the You Yangs. Maybe it is loitering around the edges of the city, waiting until we are tucked up in bed, before unleashing its violence on us all. Maybe it is a bad call from the weather bureau and a close and gusty afternoon and fluttering winds and stray drops of rain in the night is all we are going to get. Maybe it is all just a false alarm. Either way though, if I can't tell the difference between a storm and a car revving, then I'm buggered.

Six Months, Three Weeks

I sit at my desk, filling time, writing out my Christmas cards. One day in August Cameron and I had sat Fido and my black Cat in front of the fire, when it was a real one. Fido was wearing a Santa hat and his red red coat while my black Cat wore a collar made of Christmas baubles and tinsel. They sat together by the fire, with similarly sour expressions, while dirty grey sleet beat down upon the windows behind them. The perfect Christmas snaps. I had them printed into cards and now they were scrawled all over with my handwriting sending Xmas wishes and catch up news to friends around my world. I was sending Steven eight of them, to be posted at three day intervals. I knew the sight of my animals dressed for Christmas would irritate him beyond endurance. He's so ripe for stirring up.

And as I write my cards and paste on my stamps and check my address book and paste down envelopes, I notice that the day is clouding over. Another one, I tell myself. Two weekends of summer storms. Good. I hope it means decent rain. Before I've finished three quarters of the cards, I realise that I have completely lost track of time and that I'll have to start thinking about dinner soon. Dusk has been coming in while I've been writing cheery greetings and crossing names off my list and the pile of sealed envelopes has grown and the surly faces of Fido and my black Cat have been disappearing into the white and red and buff folds of heavy paper. Eventually I tell myself it is ridiculous to go on working in the half light and when I move to check my watch I find the dial is smudged. It does that sometimes if I've left it in the bathroom while I shower or by the sink when I'm washing up the dishes in hot hot water. The jeweller says a watch like mine should never be allowed to get damp, but sometimes I forget. I turn on the radio and listen to mundane talk about trivia until the pips go and the announcer tells me that it is three o'clock in the afternoon of a beautiful sunny day, not a cloud in the sky and I look up then and out of my gloomy windows and then I

carefully pack away my pens and the left-over envelopes. I put the stamps back into their little Australia Post folder and my address book back in the drawer of my desk. I stack up the remaining Fido and black Cat cards and I scrunch up the bits of paper and cellophane that litter my desk and brush them into the bin before I call to Fido and when he comes over I look hard at his curly face and pat his head; then I go to my black Cat curled up on the window seat and sit down beside her. I have a photo of Cameron and I at the farm, squinting into Dad's camera, and it is propped up beside us with another photo of Mum and Dad and John and I under the conifers at the edge of the orchard. I pull Fido up and into my arms and feel my black Cat's purring vibrate through us all as we look out at the blurred grey day and back at the photos and out at the day again, just waiting there, because it's coming on now, the grey smudge is not from the day itself, it's not an early twilight, but it's across my eyes, washing over us and around me, blurring and shadowing this whole life. It's here now, no going back.

Part II

Two Weeks Now

Two weeks now.

Cameron calls me every day.

And I've activated the cleaning company.

Fido's well and truly in harness.

I'm stalling Mum from taking her holidays just yet, and coming up to sort me out. She and Dad came up for two days in the first week and just an overnight stay last weekend. If Dad was coming too, Mum wouldn't be as feral. Besides, she's delivered three babies in the last ten days – and another's due this week. I tell her she can't be spared, and she can't, they only have two midwives up there; and I tell her I need time on my own to adjust, and I do, but I don't want her fussing around me and I don't want her taking over as though I'm an invalid. Invalid. I just saw that word in my mind's eye, I'd never thought of it before: in valid. In valid. How appalling. In-valid. It just goes to show what the healthy world really thinks of those who are ill or disabled. I really don't want to think about that anymore. And I wish I hadn't dismembered that word in the first place. Not valid. I don't like that. It's cruel. I won't think about it anymore.

The smudge across my eyes is not quite fully black, but seems to have settled, for the time being, into a thick fog through which I can see only light and dark. I know when it's daylight, I can see silhouettes of large objects, but no fine detail, no colour. I find it hard to judge distances and I can't tell speed well. The doctor thinks I have a good chance not to get any worse, that I'll keep my light and dark, my shadows and shapes. This is a blessing. I count my blessings every day. I make myself count blessings and this blurred smudge I see is one of those.

I can see the dark shape of Fido walking, the shadow that is my Cat when she is against the light walls of my apartment. I can see trees as they loom

up in the fog of my vision and the shapes of the houses in my street, but I can't make out the details. I like buildings that have arty Victorian signifiers around the rooves and windows and balconies. Up very close to my neighbour's modern house, I can dimly make out the door and the shrubs around the path. I can see the lighter squares of windows and the dark mat on the pale concrete step. But things in my world need to have angles and depth so that they stand out, colour alone doesn't really do it. I see no features in a face, no pattern in a dress. Things confuse me. I see telephone poles as people, shrubs as dogs. Print on pages envelopes street signs all are gone. They no longer communicate anything. Reading is over and done with now. This can't possibly be true.

I have people around me all the time. Non-fussing people. Sarah stays at my house at night. The cleaners come in every two days. My co-workers run a roster and take it in turns to pick me up in the morning and take me home on the days when I go into the office. When I am in there, I sit with Brian and Vivienne and direct their work. I'd set all this up weeks ago, so it's quite easy for me. I just get them to tell me what they're doing and I say yes or no or whatever. I don't even get impatient with them. I feel removed from my work, it's carrying on without me quite well, and everyone is sympathetic and nice and no-one is demanding or anxious about what has to be done so this week I've hardly gone in and I don't think I'll bother on Monday either. I'll just phone them to see how things are getting along. I think of it as holidays. One day I'll go back and pick up where I left off, but meanwhile, it's all sailing along without me.

I'm being looked after very well. I don't go anywhere alone. Steven calls by and takes me for walks most nights. Sarah often comes with us. Susan and Ian drop in with food and Susan does my laundry while she's here. The RBI woman visited me at work and we went through my computer programs all over again with Vivienne and Brian. She's re-checked the printer and the voice recognition program which I hate but we've road-tested the gadgets I

have attached to my desk. I've never actually stayed in there for a full day. I get tired, but I feel like my old self a lot of the time. Sarah cooks our dinner every night and we go shopping together. It's like the old share-house days. We buy silly, useless things and have a grand meal afterwards and tell each other secrets and laugh ourselves stupid at blind jokes. Every time the phone rings Sarah yells out,
"Don't answer the iron!"
It's a riot.

Sarah adjusts the shower temperature for me in the mornings and although I move very very cautiously, I do feel confident in there. When I manage to make us both a cup of tea we celebrate as though I have won lotto. It all feels a lot like a sort of jolly-hockey-sticks adventure. Lots of camaraderie, lots of patient helping, lots of bolstering my ego and prioritising me. Part of me knows it's going to end, of course it will. But not yet. And then there's that small secret part of me that is sort of enjoying, despite myself, the siege mentality that has put on hold all the ordinary petty trivia of our lives. Everyone is being so nice and upbeat and kind. It helps me enormously to also be nice and upbeat and kind.

Even at night, when I lie in bed while Sarah sleeps on the trundle near-by, I don't panic, alone in the dark. My Cat of fluff snuggles up at my side. Fido rests his head on my foot, and I know if I call, Sarah will be there, in an instant, by my side.

And then there's the other secret
even deeper down inside
nobody knows about it

but there's another quiet part of me that doesn't get expressed in words, though it infiltrates my attitude to everything I do ... this small hidden part of me that secretly suspects all of this really is like a holiday in another way

too, because when it's over it absolutely will be over and there won't be the harsh reality of being blind and on my own that we're all expecting, what will actually happen will be a sort of Tricked You! moment, and then we'll realise that this was just a test of some sort, it was a game all along, and the blindness is a jest that won't really last.

It's just a game of the gods, those pagan gods who love to test and deceive humans. And I know it's ridiculous, and I know it isn't right, but I furtively believe it, because this can't be happening to me. It just can't. And if Sarah and Susan and Steven and all the gang weren't helping me out then I couldn't, literally couldn't function with this condition. I couldn't. I can't actually cope with it on my own, so it's just not happening. It won't last. It can't.

I think this is the main reason why I'm so cheerful. I'm so cheerful that other people remark on it.

"God, you've got a great attitude, Jill," Ian says admiringly as I fall over, again, and then just laugh it off.

The receptionist in at the RBI tells me it's a pleasure to see my happy smiling face. But why wouldn't I smile? I'm surrounded by my friends and people are so kind and helpful and if it gets too frustrating and difficult in at the workshops, then I can just call someone and they'll come down and pick me up and take me home and make me cups of tea and we'll fuss over Fido and it'll be fine.

"You sure you're okay?" asks my Dad over the phone, "You sound different, Jill."

And I tell him I'm fine I'm doing well I'm coping okay, that Sarah's here and it's all fine. I don't even get too annoyed when Mum comes on the phone, again, and starts fussing fussing fussing about whether I'm seeing the therapist, about whether I've been doing my spatial exercises, about

whether I'm still doing the RBl cooking classes and am I practising doing household tasks on my own? I tell her I don't like the therapist, that the cooking classes are for morons who know nothing about food and the spatial awareness classes are going well, they're really relaxing. We talk about the farm and the dogs then, and she wants to have a word with Sarah before she hangs up so I hand over the phone and go into the bathroom and practise doing the household task of running myself a bath. And as I lie in there soaking, I tell myself that it is all actually going okay. If I can just survive this period, get through this to my recovery phase, then I'll be fine.

A Walk in the Park

The sun comes in through my windows and it warms me up. Susan has a day off and she is here having a coffee. I've given work the flick. I drink my chocolate milk slowly and listen to a re-telling of the fight she had to have with Sarah's cousin who is the florist doing the flowers for the wedding. *Was* the florist doing the flowers for the wedding. I've already heard the cousin's version of this same conversation from Sarah. Susan doesn't know it yet, but there's no way in hell that Sarah's cousin is ever speaking to Susan again, let alone doing the flowers for the wedding. But Susan rambles on and on about it, and I let her go; I am not getting in the middle of that particular shit-fight. When the drinks are finished, Susan and I are going to cook a meal together, with me doing most of the cooking and Susan watching, but not interfering, alert for trouble, but not alarmed. That's the plan anyway.

When finally the cups are empty, we head into the kitchen and I find my way to the dishwasher and I put the crockery in there. Then Susan goes into her hundredth exacting description of the precise combinations and arrangements for the flowers as they go up the aisle in the church; while I run my hands carefully and thoroughly over the benches to make sure there aren't any stray objects lurking to knock into later. Susan breaks off her description of just a hint of baby's breath to frame the Christmas lilies around the pulpit, to tell me I have missed the salt shaker to the left of the sink. Straight away I feel annoyed. Susan goes back to a detailed whine about the difficulty of getting the proper beeswax candles to fit in with the Christmas lilies and baby's breath - the candles can't be too obtrusive, but must be seen — and I can't understand how I could have missed the salt shaker. Did Susan put it there as a test? I didn't hear her moving around, but maybe she did. When did we last use the salt? I interrupt her lyrical account of the raptures the candle-making woman went into when Susan had explained to her the reason why she wanted thirty-two beeswax candles of

alternating sizes, and I ask if Susan had secretly placed the salt shaker beside the taps to trick me.

“Of course not. Don’t be stupid. You just missed it.”

Bugger. I hate that.

“Okay,” says Susan, “Let’s get you started.”

And away we go. I am introducing Part B of my plan to sustain the support of my friends, just until this stupid blind joke is over. Part B involves making it easy for my friends to be around me, and friend number one is Sarah. My plan is for me to have a hot meal waiting for her tonight. This way, being at my house will be cosy and fun and easy. She’ll love coming here. She might even want to stay for quite a long time.

It’s nothing complicated, this first meal that I’m making. It’s just crock-pot lamb and vegetables. But I will try and do everything without asking for any advice. All it involves is putting water in the crock-pot with the meat, and then washing and chopping up the vegetables. It is so unbelievably easy that even a child could do it.

Except that Susan does not stop talking the entire time. And I can’t concentrate while she’s yapping at me. So I forget if I have put two cups of water, or three in the pot. I forget this because as I’m counting in my head, Susan is counting out aloud, in twos and threes, the number of children each pair of relatives intends bringing to the wedding,

“Two from Ian’s Auntie Bess’s side, three each from Mum’s sister’s two daughters, three kids and the one in the wheelchair from Dad’s second cousin, Lisa’s two, Don and Marie’s two, three on Ian’s Mum’s side and the two from Queensland. That makes twenty-one kids!”

And so it goes on. When I count, she counts. When I put down the knife and tell myself to remember it is to the left of the crock pot, handle facing me, I get distracted by some tale of woe about the groomsmen and forget where the knife is. When I search in the crisper for the carrots I have already cut up, I am diverted because Susan needs my honest opinion on the lounge-

suits versus morning-suits debate. While I try not to sever my fingers hacking into broccoli, Susan entertains me with descriptions of the menu for the reception. As I weep into the onion, I am told their onions are going to be caramelised. When I finally think to fish around through the actual crock-pot on the off chance the carrots are in there, I get a lecture on the fabulous hygiene standards that their honeymoon spa place is renowned for. While I am doing the tricky mental arithmetic needed to set the timer for a hot meal at six, Susan decides to give me a run down on the costs incurred for a simple wedding in this day and age. While I sniff at the vegetables left in the fridge and discover I have included cauliflower and not broccoli at all (Sarah hates cauliflower) I decide it is time to give in gracefully, hand it all over to Susan to finish and to go and have a lie down. Fucking food. Fucking RBI classes. Fucking Susan.

I lie on my bed for a quarter of an hour, listening to her banging away in the kitchen. I can't tell what she is doing exactly, because she has the radio on and I can't wade through all the sounds to identify what is what.

"CUPPA TEA TIME!" She screams from the void beside my bed, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

"How bad is it?" I ask her.

"It's fine, Jill, you did well. I just had to re-chop the carrots, add the turnips – why do you have turnips of all things? – garlic, another couple of onions, fish out the cauliflower, put in the broccoli and re-do the timer. You'll get the hang of it."

I roll over on my bed, groaning. But Susan just laughs and grabs my hand and pulls me up and closes my fingers around a very hot mug of tea. I quickly switch hands and get hold of the handle and bit by bit move back until I am leaning against the iron railings at the head of my bed.

"It's so hard," I tell her.

"I know," she says, "I watched you. It is hard. But you've got the basics

right, and you're careful most of the time. Just go gently and don't expect too much too soon."

Yeah yeah.

"Thanks," I say.

"Don't mention it. You can't do everything at once."

No.

"Now," she says. "I know I was planning to stay here all day, but I've just had a call from Ian and he's got us an appointment to meet with the photographer we were chasing — you know, the one who did Mia's wedding, and took those gorgeous photos of Mia and Trey on the back of that ute? With the blue heelers sitting next to them? And the hay bales and stuff? Do you remember?"

God, yes.

"They were just the most wonderful photos, so romantic."

I do not open my mouth. I say nothing. Nothing.

"... so do you mind if I race off and catch Ian and we can go to Sambi's studio and meet him? It's just such a piece of luck that Ian got onto him, he's booked out solid for the next two years, but Ian said he's had a cancellation and if we get over there today, he might be able to get us in."

"Go," I tell her.

"It's fine," I say.

"I'm fine," I tell her, "The dinner's cooking, the animals are fed, go and twist Sambi's arm."

"Oh, bugger," says Susan, "The animals!"

"Never mind," I say, "I'll do it."

"Oh, you are a darling, I'll phone you later and ring if you need anything, anything at all, I'll leave my phone on and don't hesitate. Okay, bye beautiful!"

Shoes click.

Door shuts.

Gone.

Fido and I sit on the bed.
I sip my tea.
We keep on sitting.
The radio blares on. Annoying me.
I sip more tea.
I hear jabbering tinny voices and bad music.
More sipping.
More sitting.
Sip. Sit. Sit. Sip.

Later I get up and turn off the radio. I feel my way all over the bench tops, but Susan has cleared everything away. Cat dark shadow gets under my feet, hungry for her lunch, I snap at her. It's too dangerous, that winding and winding around my legs. I find their food sacks and dole out half a cup each of dried food – I can't face opening a tin right now. Cat shadow is surly. I try to buy my way back into her good books with lactose free milk in a saucer which I kick with my foot, but I can't feel a spill so one of us is happy. The phone rings but I know better than to race to answer it, by the time I get there the machine has picked up and I hear Brian's voice from work. He sounds anxious – even more so than usual; he wonders if I can come into the office tomorrow, he thinks there's a problem with the references for David O'Droscoll's brief. That makes me annoyed too. What problem? There isn't a problem with the brief, I'd virtually finished it all before I left. Bloody Brian and his feebleness. I can't be bothered ringing him back, Vivienne will work it out.

I decide to get out of the house. I find an oven mitt and lift the lid on the crock pot without burning my hand and I smell cooking. I get Fido's lead and my sensor stick and my backpack with the phone and handkerchiefs and water bottle and money and a spare rain jacket and I put on my walking boots and collect my keys from the hook behind the door and we leave.

We count corners and kerbs and fences until we get to the park. I only have to cross one road if I take the long way and walk all around the dead-end court that I live in. The road across from the park is quiet, not much traffic at this time of day, but I listen intently for a long time before I take us both across. When we get to the park I orient myself with the sun at my back. Steven has counted me along the paths here when we walk at night, I'm sure I can find my way. We turn left and I start counting, thirty-five to the cross point, twenty-five to the park bench. I get to twenty-five and stop and move over to the bench on the left to get my bearings. Fido is jumping around, anxious to be off the lead so I unclip him and concentrate on finding the bench. It's not there. I take a few steps back. It's still not there. I move right, maybe I didn't come far enough off the path. Still no bench. I move three steps forward. No bench. I decide to retrace my steps and go back to the path and walk forward a little further. No path. I stand still and refuse to panic. No sound. No path. No Fido. I whistle. No Fido. I call. I whistle again. Shit help damn. I whistle louder. I lift my face and turn slowly in a circle to feel the sun and there it is, warm on my skin. West. Home. I relax a bit then. I whistle again and call Fido loudly but there's nothing. I am an idiot, I should never have let him off the lead. I grope around with my hands outstretched, trying to find the bench but I can't locate it. Then I give up on that and think if I can find the path I can get home alright. Twenty five steps back and turn left and I'll be at the entrance. But what if I don't get to the entrance? I fight off panic. If I'm not at the entrance I'll just find the fence and then hold onto it and walk along until I find the gap. I yell again for Fido but there's nothing, nothing. I know it's my own stupid fault, but he's been trained. I trained him to come when he's called. I start to worry then that he's got into a fight or had a fall or cut his paw or eaten something poisonous or any number of things that could befall an innocent friendly dog. I can't find the path and I can't find the bench and Fido is lost. I try to stop my shallow breathing. I fumble in my backpack for my phone and I say,

“Susan. Susan.” Very loudly and clearly into the phone. Then I hear the tune as it dials up her number.

The phone rings and rings but there is no answer. I take a step towards the sun, no path. I whistle for Fido again, no dog. I feel for the buttons again and press send on the phone. I take another step as the phone rings. Then I feel the warmth on my face fading, I’m not facing the sun anymore! I quickly turn around, I bang into something, something metallic, like blood, but hard iron. I grope with my hands and it’s a tap, knee height. It hurts. My knee hurts, horrible typical pain. I don’t think about it. I never knew there was a tap here, but I can’t take notice because there’s no sun and now it’s distracted me, where was I? What was I facing? The sun, isn’t anywhere and I don’t know where I am because I don’t know where I was and I don’t remember

but I must have,

I

I turning

Sore knees, stop it,

forget that

I face the other side

there’s sun no there either.

I make a half turn, no sun, I make another half turn, no sun, and another, no sun.

Fuck, the sun’s behind

Behind

Behind

Cloud there’s no north, south, south, east, westerly anymore.

The phone rings out.

I Fido.

Again.

I still and yell at my lungs.

Press redial. I whistle dry mouth is dry,

I close the phone and open it again and

Say Steven. Steven.

The phone

It rings rings rings rings out out Bastard. He said he'd be there for me.

Call whenever

I'm only a phone call away

Call me any time

Lying bastard, laughed when I said I was going blind

Call me any time

I'm only a phone call away

I close and open the phone

Susan! Susan!

Ring ring, ring ring

then the phone stops

stops

stops ringing and Susan's voice is there,

"Yes? What?"

"It's Jill," I say, "Park I'm at. I've lost park path. I can't find the path."

"What are you doing going to the park by yourself?"

"I just ... Susan. Susan. Susan I can't find find Fido and ..."

"Have you tried calling him? ... Ian tell him we want the black and white studio portraits and we'd like an at-home series done for the weeks leading up to the wedding ... Jill? Jill are you still there?"

I breathe.

"I'm here."

"Look Jill, we're right in the middle of it all at the moment, and Sambi's flat chat, so I can't leave right away. Why don't you find a place to sit take a few deep breaths and just calm down and wait there — nothing can happen while you're just sitting in the park — it's afternoon, lots of people about. I'll call you as soon as we get out of here and we'll come and pick you up. No Ian, we want the colour shots for the waterfall portraits! Okay Jill? I'll call you back later."

She's gone. I hold onto the empty phone. Then I close the lid cover thing. I breathe again. She's a bitch, but she's given me a breather. Breath of normal life. I breathe more. I straighten up. I decide to wait until the sun comes out. When the sun comes out I will walk towards it until I hit either the path or the fence line. Then I'll turn and walk twenty-five steps and then feel my way to the entrance. I will not panic. I am within a stone's throw of my house. I will not panic. If all else fails, I will just sit myself down on the grass and wait for Susan to finish with the photographer and she can come and rescue me. I feel better now that I have a plan. Because I will not panic when I am no more than a block from my house, I will not panic, but without the panic my knee throbs with bruising from the tap; knees and panic ... but you can't give into any of that; and then I hear scampering, and paws come galloping over grass and leaves and it's Fido and I reach down to greet him, to hug him tight and growl at him for running away and to hold him close for coming back, but he's playing a game and he won't be hugged. Or caught. He bounds and jumps around me, he won't come close enough for me to get the lead on. I call him sternly to heel and he settles down then. He is at my side and I am rubbing his head and patting his sides and I clip the lead on and I say, "Home for dinner, Fido. Home now!" and he nudges my leg and moves forward and I let him lead me. The sun isn't on my face and I don't know where I'm going, but in a few steps I feel crunchy gravel under my feet and then the sun comes out. I feel it on the left side of my face and we are heading back down the path towards the entrance. I count my steps and at eighteen Fido turns again and we are facing the sun and walking on asphalt and my arm bangs into the fence post as we move through the entrance and I trip on a bump in the path and I go down on the tap knee, which hurts like anything but is better than a full-face smash, and then we are out in the street and Fido is sitting like a good dog at the kerb, waiting for me to cross him over the road and in minutes we have paused for the sound and swish of a car to pass us and made it over the kerb with toes working like fingers to feel the surface through the soles of light-weight shoes and then we're

moving again, along the street and around the cul de sac, through our front gate and upstairs and home for me to make my way to a chair with a high back and supporting arms and I let myself sit there and shake and tremble and gag. When it's over I don't move from the safety chair at all, but stay in my place nice and quiet waiting for Sarah while dinner smells fill the house.

Tough Love

Steven and I sit at an outdoor café. Steven reads me selected excerpts from the menu and when the waiter asks, I order the sandwich with only three fillings. I've learnt the hard way to keep public food simple – sauces that drip, vegetables that slide off forks, rice I can't pick up, fillings and toppings that escape their confines, pasta that defeats; I've done it all, and I refuse to provide the floor show ever again. I rarely order food I feel like eating, I order what I think I can eat. Today I've chosen eggplant, lettuce in leaves, not shreds, and Swiss cheese restrained by two slices of fashionable bread. There's nothing there that is likely to fall out when I start eating.

Steven and I sit in silence once we've ordered. I don't move much either now when I'm out. It's too easy to knock things over bang my elbows hit people and furniture; as well, everything and everyone else seems to be moving at great speed, all the time. I do everything slowly. Everyone else does everything fast. So now I sit still, listening and monitoring the world around me.

I hear conversations and music. I hear arguments and jokes, secrets and complaints. I hear newspapers rustling cars swooping by wheels belonging to prams or scooters or trolleys rolling along the footpath chairs shuffling and scraping cups rattling in saucers. When the food arrives I find my way to the plate on the table and I carefully reposition it at exactly six o'clock, two finger widths in from the table edge. Steven places my glass and the water at two p.m. and five past two. I slide my hand along the cloth until I find them and cautiously pour myself a drink. I use the knife at three o'clock to feel where the food is on my plate. I ask Steven to check whether any other food has been added – I've been caught out before by surprise salads and unexpected relishes that just confuse the issue – but this one's all clear. I cut my sandwich into small squares for easy eating. I like ordering

sandwiches, because once I've cut them into their pieces, I can eat with my hands and it doesn't look odd, and it's so much much easier. My fingers with their sensitivity their control their ability to read what they're touching are the perfect cutlery. I'm not comfortable eating in public. I try to minimise the mess and mistakes. Socially acceptable finger food is the best of all possible worlds, in a world where I feel as though people are watching me all the time. At least I think they are. But then, how would I know?

Steven asks about my plans for the coming week. I tell him that Sarah and I are going to the Concert Hall on Monday evening to hear the MSO, then to a talk at the Braille Library on Wednesday and dinner with Susan and Ian on Thursday.

"Leigh going too?" He asks.

Who? I don't know what he's talking about. "Who's he?"

"She. Leigh. Sarah's girlfriend. Or wanna-be girlfriend."

"Her what?"

"Her girlfriend."

Girlfriend? I thought they were just friends. "Oh, that Leigh. Aren't they just friends? I thought they were just friends."

"No. No I think it's turning out to be more than that. I think it's serious."

"Why didn't she tell me?"

Steven says nothing. Then he says, "I've just shrugged my shoulders. Did you feel it?"

"No. I didn't."

"You're going to have to start picking up stuff like that, Jill. You know that."

"How can I pick up a shrug? Jesus, Steven, I'm not bloody psychic. What about Sarah? Are you sure it's serious? Why didn't she tell me?"

"She probably thought you had enough on your plate."

"We should invite Leigh over to our place." I hardly know her. Maybe she's nice.

"Our place?"

“Mine. I meant mine. You know I meant my place.”

“That’s a great idea,” he says, “Leigh could come over to *your place* and they could have sex on the trundle bed while you and the animals cheer them on from two feet away.”

I don’t know what to say. Of course they can’t have sex at the apartment. I have no rooms. Or doors. Or proper visitor’s beds.

“They could go to Leigh’s house. For privacy.”

“Great idea! And then Sarah could get dressed at the end of every date and come rushing home to hold your hand.”

“Steven.” He’s a pig sometimes. “Sarah isn’t ‘holding my hand’, she’s helping me. I’m blind. I can’t do things for myself.”

“Well if that’s true, then why did you rearrange your apartment so that it was set up exclusively for a blind woman? A single-living blind woman? Why didn’t you organise things so that you were living in proper shared accommodation? Or turn the dining room into a bedroom, so someone else could live there permanently? Do you plan to have Sarah sleeping on a camp bed for the rest of her days?”

“No, I don’t.” Christ. I can’t lose Sarah. I can’t.

“Well, you can’t keep her there forever.”

But I don’t want her to go. I need her. I really really need her.

“So let her go. You know what you’re in for. You can always call for help. We’ll all drop in and out.”

I make myself look towards his blurred face, “Like that day in the park? When you didn’t answer your phone? When you didn’t leave message bank on for me?”

Silence.

Jesus. I actually shut him up. Imagine that. Bastard.

“Jill. I told you what happened. I’m really sorry. I thought you had Susan with you all day. That was the plan. But ... ”

“This is the thing, Steven. I’m blind. All the time. There is no *plan*.”

“I know. I know that. “

He catches my hands and holds onto them. Big deal.

“But that’s the guts of it Jill, that’s what it’s all about. You can’t plan for every contingency. And I am sorry. I know I did the wrong thing. But it’s going to be like this, all the time, because it’s *always* been like this. Bad stuff happens anyway. Blind or sighted.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” I sound like a bitch.

“I know. I know that. I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I know. I should have been. I’m really sorry, Jill.”

“No.” God I’m tired. “No don’t worry about it. It’s not your job to be on twenty-four hour call. It isn’t Susan’s job either. Or Sarah’s. I know. It isn’t anybody’s job.”

We say nothing. There’s a breeze up again. It’s gusty. The tree on the edge of the footpath rustles and creaks. Leaves touch. Trees are noisy things. I think of Sarah. I think of me. Alone. And it’s me just running down that hill, with nothing and no-one to stop my fall.

“I don’t think I’m ready to do it all on my own.” I’m pulling myself together. I’m shaking off the thoughts in my head. I imagine I’m smiling in a civilised way at him – but I may have lettuce pasted to my front teeth. I shut my mouth quickly. I smile with lips only. “I’m not ready, I don’t think I can do it all on my own at this point.”

“You’ve got to do it some time.”

“Not now. Not yet.”

“You’re going to have to. You know that.”

Not if I can help it. Because I can’t.

We say nothing. I listen to his cutlery clatter against his plate. I hear him chew swallow drink. I feel the breeze on the left side of my face. I feel the sun on the back of my neck. I am facing the south east and there is a northerly wind coming up.

“How long do you reckon Leigh will wait for her?” He asks me, in a bland, innocent voice.

Ah, emotional blackmail. Nice one.

“Poor Sarah,” he says making stirring swirly sounds with a tea spoon and a thick china cup and I make myself tune that sound out and I stop chewing myself, so that I can hear him speak from amongst the white noise clutter, “She puts her life on hold to help you out, and she misses out on the first decent woman to come into her life in what? Five years? Six?”

“How do we know Leigh is decent?” I ask him. I’m so annoyed. “She might be another drop kick. She might break Sarah’s heart. Sarah might be having a lucky break not getting involved.”

I push my plate to four o’clock. I don’t want to eat the rest of my small sandwiches.

“Yeah, yeah. And if Leigh really likes her, she’ll wait for her, of course, that’s the way it’s meant to go. No, no. You’re right. You just keep clinging like a vine to Sarah, keep laying the guilt trip on her, carry on sucking her dry, that’s the spirit.”

“I am not sucking her dry.” You asshole. He is a bastard. A cruel, nasty bastard.

“Of course you’re not. And of course when Sarah said she’d help, she meant she would be happy to sleep on a shit bed in a corner of your living room for, what is it now, five weeks? Six? Seven?”

“Shut up, Steven. It’s not that long.”

Is it?

“And of course being on call night and day was always part of the bargain she made with you, kissing good-bye to a potentially great partner, putting her life on the back burner indefinitely, of course that was the deal for her.”

“What about my life on hold?”

“What about it, Jill? Oh, that’s right. Sarah should be made to suffer for

that too. After all, someone's got to pay. And why not poor, kind, sympathetic Sarah."

"I am not making Sarah pay."

"Then let her go home and have a life again."

That breeze is getting stronger.

"I'm too scared. I thought I'd be okay, but it's bigger than I thought." My voice sounds feeble, low and small. This is what I have become. I'm almost begging. I'm a beggar now. I breathe hard. I feel my mouth purse as I breathe. I suck the air into my nostrils. It makes an ocean sound, like the waves, but going one way only. I cast my mind about. How the fuck do I get out of this? I find the secret thought, the one where I'll wake up and it'll all be over. It's a stupid weak begging-person's secret thought. It isn't even real. Christ I have dumb secrets. I make that sea-side noise through my nose again but it's not really like the sea, there's no reply. The sea is call and answer. I'm just call. Fuck fuck fuck. Isn't it over yet? And I know I've thought that same useless call before.

No answer.

Just call.

There's been a dull droning in my ears. But I've been ignoring it. Oh, yeah, it's Steven. Still drivelling on. I tune out the one-handed sea sounds and tune back into the voice of my conscience ...

"... then ring Cameron and tell him that you need him and you want him to come home."

What? Fuck, he's mad, "No!"

No. God, no.

"Okay then."

Jesus.

"Alright. Okay. Settle down."

"I am settled down. Just no."

“Okay. No. Got it.”

Steven is quiet for a minute. I can truly hear him thinking.

“Why not?” He asks.

Bloody hell. “It’s too soon. I’m not ready.”

“Fair enough.”

He’s quiet again.

Then, “Why not?”

“Will you order me a hot chocolate?” I ask.

“Order it yourself. I’ll tell you when the waiter’s nearby, although you should be able to tell on your own.”

He is such an asshole.

“Why aren’t you ready for Cameron?”

Shithead. Prick. Know-all no-nothing bastard of a man. “Cameron wouldn’t be much good with this early days stuff.” There’s no way I’m telling Steven the truth. Bastard.

“He’s got to come home some time,” says Steven.

“I know, I know. But I want it to be when I’m more in control.”

“All the more reason to give Sarah her marching orders and start doing it on your own.”

Shit shit shit. I don’t say anything. I don’t think. I don’t even listen on high alert to the world around me. “It scares me,” I tell him.

“Of course it does, Jill. That’s because it is scary. I imagine it’s utterly terrifying most of the time.”

“You know how I got lost in the park?”

“Yeah, you did. But you also got out of it too; you’ve got to remember that. And Jill, don’t you see, getting lost, not being ready for Cameron, having Sarah around all the time ... if you want any semblance of your life back, you absolutely have to start doing it on your own. I’ll just be a phone call away ...”

I breathe in like the sea again.

“Jill, I know. I won’t be there, every time, but my phone will always be on, and I’ll visit every day, if you want. Sarah will still drop by, Ryan’s just up the road in Wellington Street. You can phone us when you need us, but you have to start building your life again. You have to trust that you can get out of trouble. Hell, Jill, we all have to trust in that.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. Except about the part where he’s just a phone call away. Liar. Liar and bastard. I hate being me.

I hear footsteps. Steven moves in his chair.

“That’s the waiter.”

The footsteps pass.

“You just missed him.”

Double bastard.

“Are you going to miss out on hot chocolates for the rest of your life because you’re waiting for someone to notice? You’ve got to learn how to do this stuff for yourself, Jill.”

“I need more time.”

“No you don’t, you need your sight back. But it’s not going to happen, so you need to grab the waiter, order your hot chocolate and cut Sarah loose. Now.”

“It’s so hard, though.”

“So’s turning your best friend into a slave.”

“You’re not my slave,” I say, “You are definitely not my slave. You’re more like some horrible cruel pig-headed moralising holier-than-thou shithead than a slave.”

There’s a pause, and then he says, “I meant Sarah.”

Oh.

Home Truths

On my third Sarah-less day, I come home, exhausted, from another session at the RBI sheltered workshop. I've been upping my Braille skills going through the household attachments learning more functioning tricks practising with the sensor stick received basic first aid when I fell down yet another set of steps torn knees again; and been told, again, that relying on Fido as a guide dog is unrealistic dangerous and basically stupid. I'm not in the queue yet for a trained labrador – I don't even like labradors, great boofheaded things, always thinking of their stomachs. I don't say anything when the RBI bloke tells me off about Fido, we've had this discussion before and he hasn't much patience for my point of view, so I just let him ramble. Later in the day I have a session with the counsellor. I don't like her much either. I want to like her, and I know I need her, but she just isn't my cup of tea. I tell her what they said about Fido; she tells me that they are right. I say I don't want a labrador, I tell her that Fido is reliable; I tell her I am not getting rid of him. She says having a pet dog is a liability. She says Fido is not reliable, that Fido is untrained. She says all this in one of those supercilious bored-sounding pseudo-English South Yarra voices that get up my nose before the first phrase is completed. I tell her that Fido is trained, that I trained him myself, I tell her that poodles are in the top three percent of most-intelligent dog breeds, I tell her I have always had dogs and I have always trained them. She sighs. Apparently I am being too ridiculous for words, but of course, after a pained silence designed to make me suffer, she manages to find those words. In her snooty tightened-up voice she tells me I am not and never have been a guide dog trainer, that I am covered in bruises and cuts already from falls, and that I am taking a huge and unnecessary risk using a pet as a working dog. I tell her flatly that I am not giving Fido up. She tells me I'm not dealing with reality. Her face turns away from me as she says this – I hear the change of direction in her voice. Perhaps the insensitive bitch is looking out the window at her view of

autumn leaves and lawns and bloomed flower beds. Perhaps she's looking up at the sun in the sky, and the clouds flying past. Perhaps she's watching a posse of blind losers like me stumbling around the courtyard and I snap then and tell her I am not in being unrealistic, I am solidly hideously profoundly in the here and now. I tell her that I have had my life turned upside down in such a way that blindness is an inescapable fact that I can't deny, anymore than I can run from it. I stand up and grope forward for my stick so that I can fumble my way from the room in a dramatically pathetic, impotent impersonation of a storming-out-the-door, grand gesture of a tantrum.

"I have had everything taken from me," I tell her when I reach the fucking door which was about half a metre along the wall from where it was meant to be, so that I have had to feel my way, pathetically and slowly past her filing cabinets and her bookshelves and a stupid potted plant until I find the handle, "You are not taking Fido from me as well." Tears cloud my voice, I am choking with rage and frustration and the humiliation of being forced into a horrible emotional display, "He's the only thing I have left," I tell her, "He's the only one I can get to he ...

to he ...

to help me and it doesn't kill me to ask him for anything. You are not taking him." I yell the last sentence as I turn the handle and walk through the doorway, searching for a handkerchief to smear at the most-likely pitiful attempt I had made to put on eye shadow in an earlier class, and praying that I hadn't walked into her cupboard instead of the corridor.

That stretched snooty voice doesn't even call me back.

I shut the door thankfully when I realise I actually am in the corridor outside her office and I lean against the wall beside it, trying to control that stupid crying that I couldn't do in her sight. I find my handkerchief, and blow my nose. I wipe my face. The tears are hot. I breathe deeply and try to get my bearings. Where are the stairs? I start moving left down the corridor to get

away from her, and then I feel the direction shapes underfoot and I know I am at the stairs and I paw my way to the banister and start down with my poor torn unhealed knees stinging like a bastard from banging them into that tap in the park from hitting the concrete outside the park entrance from the corner of the coffee table from the edge of the bed from Mrs James' decorative pot plant at the front of my building. They still hurt as the fabric in my jeans slides back and forth across the damage. Probably bleeding again. I am still crying and in my head, below all the instructions about holding on and which way is left, and where do I go when I get down to the bottom and is the blood seeping through at the knees and is there a landing half way along and how can I get home when I don't want to speak to anyone ever again, underneath all that, my mind is singing a litany of, "No no no, I am not losing Fido too. I am not losing Fido too. I am not losing Fido. I am not losing. I am not. Not."

After I stagger outside, ignoring everyone who comes near me and hiding my face from the receptionist who ignorantly thought I had a happy cheerful disposition; I ruthlessly swallow more stupid tears so I can speak when I call a taxi from my mobile phone and I work up a fake smile to ask a person who I know is sighted because they are walking quickly near the entrance to the building, if they can please help me,
if they can please help poor blind me,
and walk me,
like a useless babyish incapacitated non-functioning in-valid drain on society and the world, to the front gate.

I pay for this help by making small talk and putting on a brave front about blindness and then I wait by the gate in the cold autumn wind until the taxi comes. When he toots I grope my way to the door and get into the cab and I don't even care if the driver is sizing me up as a potential victim to abduct rob beat and rape before slitting my throat and leaving me in a shallow grave to be discovered by a bushwalker at some later date. I usually phone

my answering machine and say where I'm going and when, but this time I don't do anything to leave a record of myself and my journey, because frankly, the potential psychopath in the driver's seat would be doing me a favour if he cut my throat and put me out of my misery.

When I make it back to my apartment unscathed, Fido clambers all over me for a welcome, and Cat smudge even pushes into my calf as a way of greeting me, I hug them both too tight and tell them Hooray, we've managed to stumble through another day!

That night I eat my entire weekly supply of jelly snakes instead of dinner. The next day I wake early, but stay in bed until late. I don't go to my classes at the RBI. I don't answer the phone. I eat apples and Mum's cheesecake for lunch. I take Fido to the park and let him off the lead at the entrance and tell him to run free and exercise himself. I sit myself straight down on the grass beside the path and stay there. When he comes back we walk home, me with my sensor stick, him walking to heel like a well-trained pet, and then we turn on the radio and drink hot tea and lie on the bed for the rest of the afternoon. At seven o'clock I order pizza and tell the boy I will pay an extra ten dollars if he will call into the Seven Eleven and buy me two packets of jelly snakes on his way to my house. Money opens all doors.

Sarah rings to arrange our next grocery shop for later in the week and I put on a fake voice and tell her everything is fine and Thursday will be great. Steven rings too, but I let the machine pick it up, I can't face him and the possibility of another round of tough love. The machine beeps at me in a double burst and I find there's a saved message that I'd missed: Brian from the office. Again. The O'Driscoll brief still has a problem, can I please call him back ASAP. It's night time now, and I know the office phones have been turned off, so I phone there and leave a message asking Vivienne to sort Brian out. I tell her that I know that everything in the brief is fine. Then I hang up.

The blister on my heel from my new stout shoes has burst after my walk with Fido. It stings, and I know I should put some antiseptic on it and re-seal it with a bandaid to stop it getting infected, but I can't be bothered. When the pizza arrives I thank the boy and pay him his extra cash and take possession of the food and the *Snakes Alive!* and then I limp over to sit on my bed to eat all of the pizza except for some crusts, and one whole packet of snakes. When I finish I feel sick. The phone rings and it is Mum again. I don't answer that one either. I know it is wrong, but I don't take the pizza box into the kitchen for the rubbish, instead I just push it under the bed and leave it there and sleep on top of the remains of the food. Just like the princess and the pea. Here I am in a fairy tale. I'm not sleeping on layers of mattresses with one tiny pea at the base to test whether I'm sensitive enough to be a princess, but I am sleeping above a box of used pizza. And it smells disgusting. That ought to count.

Except I'm not sensitive enough to get out of bed and move it.

The next day I don't even wake at the right time. I sleep right on through the pre-work, pre-RBI classes preparation time. I wake up at ten past nine and Cat smudge is hungry and Fido needs to go out and I have to peel the weeping sore that is my blistered heel off the sheet to get out of bed. I let Fido out for a run and this time I don't go with him. Just let him roam around the garden of the apartments. I'm blind, it's not my responsibility if my pet makes a mess of the yard. I feed Cat smudge and put down some crunchy dog food for when Fido comes back and make myself a cup of hot chocolate. The heating milk froths up and over the cup and spills into the microwave because I can't see it happening and intervene. I only know it's happened because when I open the door there is a smell of burning and when I put my hand on the cup it is slimy and hot, milky all over.

But I only swipe at the mess with the dishcloth, I don't bother taking out the revolving glass tray and rinsing it, or putting it through the dishwasher. And I don't scrub the hot wet milk from the walls and the roof and the floor and the door of the microwave either. I just leave it there to dry and bake on further and to fester quietly in a hotbed of germs, because I'm blind, and I can't be expected to cope with all of that stuff.

I grab the second packet of *Snakes Alive!* and on the way back to bed, I unlock the front door and leave it ajar for Fido so that I won't have to get up again to let him in. I eat half the snakes and find that the unpalatable, skin-covered scorched milk in my hot chocolate is just typical really. I listen to ABC Classic FM because they don't talk much and when they do it isn't in grating cheerful voices, and I yawn while the music plays and I curl up in my rugs and feel unutterably weary while the phone rings on and I don't answer it.

I eat snakes again for lunch and order pizza and more snakes for dinner at five o'clock. I feed Fido who has returned, and Cat smudge. My teeth start hurting about midnight, when I am on the last of my snake-shaped sugar treats. I think about going to the dentist, blind, and I put away the *Snakes Alive!* and get some iceblocks from the freezer to hold against my jaw and I dislodge a packet of frozen peas at the same time. I swear at the peas while I fumble around on my hands and scabbed sore knees on the kitchen floor and can't find them, so I just leave them to melt on the tiles. I bang my forehead into the open freezer door as I stand up, which is about what I deserve, and then I find the ice tray and break it open and wrap the ice cubes in a tea towel and hold them to my aching face. Cat smudge curls up on my bed and Fido reappears to snuggle up at my feet. I feel cold all through, so I eat three toothache-relieving paracetamol tablets and fall asleep while the ice on my jaw melts and soaks through my blankets and into the pillow.

I wake up mid morning the next day to a voice calling, “Yoo Hoo” from the doorway. There is no sound from Fido who should be barking by now, and the voice seems to actually be in my apartment. I unstick my still-weeping blistered heel from the sheet and crawl out of sleep and slip on the empty plastic Snakes Alive! packets on the floor by my bed and fall heavily. Rule number one with Eyes Shut: DON’T leave stuff lying around. I pause a minute to rest my aching banged up bruised knees and then Mrs James from the apartment above mine is standing next to me, hindering me up and now asking if I am alright. I tell her, automatically, that I am fine and ask her how she got in. Apparently my door has been open. Ah yes, Fido’s run outside yesterday. Pizza boy too. Forgot to shut the front door. Come in burglar.

Mrs James is worried. Fido’s been running around the front yard for half the night and when she rang me my phone wasn’t answering, am I sure I am alright? My toothache is gone and the fresh bruises are nothing new. My blistered heel is stinging and aching, but I’m used to hurting in a hundred different places, so I tell her again that I’m okay. She asks me what happened to my face,

“Your forehead, Dear?”

And I feel my face with my fingers and there’s a big lump on the side of my head, but I can’t remember how it got there. I tell her again that I am fine, but where is Fido? Well, she says, that’s the problem, he must have got out the security gate, because her friend, Janine around the corner has rung her, apparently he’s at her house, she recognised him in the park as the dog that belongs to that poor blind woman, and hadn’t Mrs James better check up on her? I thank Mrs James and I find out which house is Janine’s and ask her to phone her friend and tell her to hang on to Fido while I get dressed and go and get him. I eventually shovel Mrs James out the door, and promise to call her if I ever ever need anything. I get dressed out of the dirty clothes hamper, because I can’t face making decisions about clean clothes. I wear the torn jeans and old socks (probably unmatched) and a singlet and a

jumper and ease my Bluntstone's over my sore heel, I don't have time to put on a bandaid. I find a wool hat and a scarf and get my stick and the house keys and make my way to Janine's. But I forgot to do my necessities check before I left, so later when I pat my pockets down, my mobile phone isn't there. I get to my street corner, and turn left and then right at the next corner and start counting houses. Third along. I know that. But when I stumble up the path, and scratch my face on an over-hanging tree branch that's at eye level and not picked up by the sensor stick, and eventually make my way to the front door, there is no answer when I knock. I knock and knock. Louder and louder. There is no movement inside the house. No sound at all. That's when I realise I don't have my phone. I stumble back down the path with my left hand up in front of my face to ward off attacking trees, and I go into the next door house. Same thing, only this time I don't hit my face on a tree, instead I fall over a pot plant. Bang my leg, same knee, more ripping of jeans. No answer at the door, no movement in the house. I try the place on the other side. No pot plant, no overhanging tree, in fact, no front door. I stumble around the front of what is clearly a building and find windows, a veranda, a cane chair (the knee again), more pot plants, a snaky catching vine, but no front door. I go back out into the street. I'll have to go home and find Mrs James and phone her friend and get her to meet me or something. I stand on the footpath, trying to get my bearings. My blistered heel is rubbing against the back of my boot, the open, broken skin keeps chaffing every time I move my foot. My head is cold and I feel for my hat but I have lost it somewhere between vine and branch, fall and rise. My jeans are flapping open at the knee. I start to make my way back home. I count houses and turn left at the corner and then right at the next corner and retrace my steps back down my street. I stand at the security gate to my apartment block and buzz Mrs James. She's all a dither. She just knew she should have gone with me. Number thirteen is hard to find, although it's the biggest house on the block, the one with the white shutters,

“Oh. Sorry, Dear.”

“Forget it. Thirteen, right.” I tell her could she phone Janine and ask her to come out into the street in about five minutes to look out for me. I am yelling into the voice box at Mrs James and it takes more long minutes to persuade her not to interrupt her quilting and come down and take me to Janine’s herself. I eventually get rid of her and turn to head back to Janine’s house when a car pulls up on the kerb beside me. Doors slam and in a loud voice my cleaner yells,

“Hiya Jill!”

Shit. I’d forgotten the cleaners. I think of the *Snakes Alive!* packets and the princess and the pizzas. I don’t have time to go back in and clean up ahead of him. I think of the mess. I think of the evidence of my orgy of poor eating. I think of the filthy microwave, the dirty clothes strewn around the hamper, the pus and blood staining my tangled sheets. I think of the façade I have tried to maintain and how Mrs James and now the cleaner both know that I am falling down in a heap. I think of Fido. I have to get to him. I push down the pain in my gut, in my heart that says how could you have lost him? How could you not have noticed he was gone all night? And I push down to the slow angry burn, how could the little sod of hell have pissed off like that and left me? How could he just abandon me like that? And why did I leave the fucking door open? I give my keys to the cleaner and tell him I’ll buzz when I get back, and could he let me in then. I tell him the place is a mess. I tell him I’ll be back shortly. I don’t really like leaving him alone in my house, but with the TV the DVD the knick knacks and most of the furniture gone, I realise that there’s nothing much to steal anyway. I set off again to Janine’s house and when I’m a good halfway down her street I hear a voice calling,

“Over here!”

And I move towards the sound and it’s Janine, on the lookout for me, and I arrange my face into what I hope is a pleasant, non-insane expression. As I walk toward the sound of her voice I prepare myself to pay her too in brave little blind woman anecdotes and superficial glimpses into the life of a tragedy, which is basically the spiel they all want. Janine hello’s me again

as I get closer and I hear Fido's sharp yapping bark, just once, and I find myself smiling a real smile because I love him so. Janine must be holding him because he doesn't come bounding toward me. I eventually reach them and Janine says she didn't want to let him go in case he jumped up on me while I was walking. I tell her that he never jumps up on me, and it is true. She lets him go and he circles around and around my legs and I squat down and he puts his paws on my perennially sore knees, gently, and licks my face and yaps, once, again. I hug him tight and kiss his face and then I straighten up and prepare to go into supplicant mode. I thank Janine, at least that bit is sincere, and ask her where she found Fido. She tells me he was running around the park at around six this morning. I tell her I must have left the door open. She doesn't say anything to that and I just stand there, not sure that I have anything to add either, too weary after all to go into my routine, too weary to maintain the face, suddenly too weary for anything, then she says,

"You look like you've had a rough time."

I put my hand up to my forehead, bruised, and then feel my hair, flying all around, unbrushed unwashed, and without the camouflage of the hat I lost. I remember the clothes I am wearing came out of the dirty laundry basket and my torn up knees and that I limped to her gate because of the blister on my heel, now stuck firmly to the back of yesterday's socks, and there really isn't anything to say, except,

"I'm a bit of a mess, Janine. I just ran straight out the door when Mrs James told me about Fido."

"Yes, of course," she says, "Of course you would have. Have you had breakfast?"

I think back, I don't believe there were any *Snakes Alive!* left in the packet, so no, I missed breakfast. And I wonder if I can send the cleaner out for more? Would that be a legitimate part of his duties? Probably not. Then I remember that Sarah is coming by after work on Thursday for us to do our grocery shopping together, so I realise I can stock up then. Or is today not Thursday? I actually have no idea.

“No, I haven’t had breakfast yet,” I tell her.

“What happened to your foot?” She asks, “And your face? And your knees?”
fucking knees, forget the knees,

“Oh, don’t worry about my knees, I’ve had sore knees most of my life,”
and it’s true, I have

“Everything else is falls blisters clumsiness ... blindness. The usual.” There’s
something about her, she’s not unsympathetic, but she’s not nosy and
patronising and nervous about me, so I find myself not even bothering to lie
and cover up.

“Come inside,” she says, “Have some breakfast and relax a bit.”

I tell her I can’t; I’ve left the cleaner alone in my apartment.

She says “Come in,” again.

And, “They work better when they’re alone.”

And, “You look like you could use a decent cup of tea and a sit down.”

And her voice sounds nice, and she smells of Lux soap and eucalyptus oil and
I am tired and sick to death of myself and the dark and pain.

“I’m not much company at the moment,” I tell her, “I’m really not.”

“That’s alright,” she says, “To be frank, neither am I.

Addendum to the Princess and the Pizza

After breakfast at Janine's house where I've eaten real food while Janine hasn't watched but kept her back to me, busy doing stuff in her kitchen; we arrange to meet again. She tells me she'll cook a blind-friendly meal and we'll have a walk around her garden, sit in the sun and only talk if we have something to say. I agree to this because it sounds easy and restful and I know Fido will enjoy it.

I think I feel better by the time I leave there. I meet the cleaner at the gate and get my keys and I only apologise twice more for the state of my apartment. When I get inside I get undressed and put my torn and bloodied jeans into a plastic bag to get washed by someone who isn't me and then later they'll go to the dressmaker to be mended.

I make myself have a tepid shower and I wash my hair and then do my tai chi in clean pyjamas in my clean house in the clear space near the door. I don't like doing it much

But I know it will help my balance

It might stop me falling

So I do it to save myself revisiting those bloody knees and more wrecked pants and I do it so that maybe I'll stop hitting the ground and I won't get that jarring jolt of memory over knees torn before.

Afterwards, when there's literally nothing else to do, I lie back on my bed with a bandage on my blistered heel and Mercurochrome on my hurting cuts. The calm from Janine's is fading and in the grey and fuzzy light I smell turned earth from someone's garden. One of the neighbours is doing the Autumn preparation thing and the dirt smell comes through the windows and into my mind comes ploughed earth and diesel smoke from the tractor and John going down without a sound and there are some things you just

don't want to see.

I close my eyes, even though it makes no difference. I don't like remembering. I need my memory. But I won't remember that.

I used to ring home when it felt like this, without the blindness then, I used to ring home and check if they were alright.

I don't do that anymore, I made myself stop it.

I open grey eyes again

I stare at the grey grey world about me

I won't cry

I didn't cry for that fall before and I won't cry for this now.

It's funny how my eyes actually are grey, inside and out

But it's not funny ha ha

I am wringing my hands. I stop doing that.

I rub my diaphragm and stomach

Round and round

Clockwise

until I stop myself from doing that too.

I make myself calm and I know the jeans with the torn knees are folded up and packed away in a plastic bag on the third shelf on the empty side of the wardrobe. They're out of sight and out of mind now.

I lie still

On my bed

In the cold light.

I don't think and I don't see, it's all grey, inside and out and there isn't anything to think about and nothing to do.

I should have put those jeans into two plastic bags and onto the top shelf
inside the empty cupboard or maybe in the bathroom and right away from
me because in a wave it's made me think of him
me and my torn knees
I've stupidly let myself think about him
the sun's come out it's coming through it's stinging my eyes now
I don't like remembering I need my memory

I turn my head on the pillow and I should shut my eyes against that stinging
light I won't cry
I didn't cry for that broken crown I don't know why that was but I absolutely
will not cry for this now

I think of something else
But I don't. I'm thinking of those torn jeans those torn knees. I think of how I
wear long pants to cover my bloody knees, and how I wear make-up, to
cover my ugliness. I think of the blind women and I discussing make-up just
the other day, during morning tea at the RBl. I like thinking of this. It's
benign. There's one particular woman who's been blind from birth, I
remember her from when I was sighted and was calling by to learn the ropes
before the grey set in. She'd announced to the room that grey was the new
black this season and we'd all laughed because colour is a funny joke to us.

She knew that I'd been recently sighted and wanted to know if she should
try more make-up and I told her she'd looked okay to me when I saw her
last. We laughed together at this funny joke too. She asked if I wore make-
up at all and I'd told her no, not much.

"Just foundation to cover any bruises, eye shadow, mascara, a bit of blush
and lipstick."

She'd said if that isn't much what is? And I'd told her translucent powder,
and eyeliner and an under the cheekbones blusher in a darker shade, three
eye shadow colours, eyebrow pencil, lip liner ... that sort of thing.

I don't think she's ever considered all this before.

She'd completely missed the torturous joys of being a woman — no high heels, no skimpy tops, no make-up, no constant fussing and checking in the mirror,
what a life ...

I told her she had beautiful skin, which she has, so she only needed a light tinted moisturiser, and that the trick was to have a great lipstick. She said she was afraid she'd look like a clown.

Aren't we all?

By the time I finish thinking about her, and the make-up issue, the jeans are securely packed away in a corner of my mind, wrapped in two bags and on the furthest shelf. I breathe in and then out and then in and I'm better than I was so I find the remote and press play and music fills the spaces and I let it.

Blind Shopping

Sarah picks me up at my house. Fido stays home. The stick goes with me. I listen for Sarah's car. I stand quietly at my gate. I wear low shoes and thick stockings, the kind pregnant women and varicose vein sufferers wear. The kind blind people who stand around in the cold and fall over a lot wear. I have on an A-line skirt and the jumper that Sarah picked out for me pre-blind. There are birds in the tree on the nature strip. I feel moving air on my cold face. Fido barks at me from the window of my apartment, and I turn away because the thought of him makes my nerves grate with anger, my heart sick with guilt. There are workmen dismembering the house across the road, I imagine them in their singlets and dirty trousers. I hear heavy boots and men's footfalls, I hear their calls to each other and I wonder if they think I look like a blind person standing here, or a normal person. I smell exhaust fumes and hear the rattle of metal and I know it is Sarah's car that is vibrating down my street.

Sarah does a U-turn and stops beside me. I use my stick and find my way to the car and then I run my hand over smooth, cold metal to find the door. I've had my tetanus injection so that if my skin is pierced by rust, then I'll be alright, I won't be blind and lock-jawed in a hospital bed. Sarah asks how I am and as I have vowed not to be a boring whiner, I don't tell her. "I'm great."

As we accelerate around the corner at the top of my street, I make no mention of orange juice spilt down the front of my first change of clothes this morning, or the steam burn fiery hot on my forearm from reaching over the wrong side of the boiling kettle.

As we wait for the lights in Bridge Road, I don't tell her that this morning I had to do callisthenics in front of the heater to warm up after my cold

shower, that I had the water cold because I am afraid to turn on the hot tap without her there to supervise – Steven can't get the thermostat to change and I am still waiting for the gas man to come. I don't say I mostly wash myself with a flannel dipped in warm water. Safety first.

As we brake hard, I do tell Sarah that I brushed my teeth last night with SPF 15 sun block straight from the tube. I don't say that I did this because I simply cannot concentrate absolutely all the time on absolutely everything, I make it into a funny joke. We laugh uproariously.

While the left indicator click click clicks, at the turn into Church Street, I don't mention to Sarah that I've delayed Cameron's visit over here again because I can't bear him to see me in the state I'm in. I don't tell her that my mother still cries at the end of every second phone call. I don't tell her that I no longer go into work or down to the blind place. I don't tell her that the memory of my jeans ripped through at the knees makes me so miserable that I can hardly get out of bed. I don't tell her that I am hearing tractors and smelling turned earth all the time now.

While we idle in the street, with traffic whizzing past, waiting for a car space, I don't tell Sarah that I am planning on selling out of my practice because I'm going to lose it anyway.

I don't tell her that the fierce mental absorption involved in doing basic everyday tasks like washing and dressing and eating, is only relieved by the unremitting boredom of my relaxation periods, which can only be relaxing if I do absolutely tediously nothing.

While Sarah parallel parks I say not a thing about the horrendous loneliness of this little grey world of mine.

And while she hunts around in the back seat for her fallen purse, I don't tell her of the lure of Port Phillip Bay and my tantalising daydream of going for a swim one fine day and losing my sense of direction and not coming back, or not losing my sense of direction and still not coming back.

While she winds up her window and I listen to the slick slide of her lipstick tube unwinding the oh of her opened mouth the clip of the plastic ball and socket adjustment of the rear-vision mirror to reflect her face, I say nothing of my terrible unshakeable bitterness at what has been taken from me.

I have to make up my mind that this is my lot now and I have to try to find a way through it. I have to try to master it. I don't tell her that I can see no hope, whatsoever, of salvaging much of the old life. That the best I can hope for is to have my life together enough so that I can occasionally socialise with my old friends. But only occasionally. It's far too hard, otherwise, and I need a lot of time and energy just to get up and dressed and put food into my mouth.

As we get out of our seats and I push down the lock button on my door, I don't mention the countless falls over the cat, to the point where my Cat shadow barely comes near me anymore and will most likely have to be sent away for her safety and mine; the short temper I have with my Fido who is now wary of my moods; the despair I feel as everything I have ever valued is being pushed aside in a wave of the stumbling free-fall that is my life.

I don't say any of this as I check the straps of my back pack. I just paste onto my face what I imagine is a happy-looking smile and I take Sarah's arm and we prepare to run the gauntlet of supermarket shopping.

Sarah pushes a trolley while I hold onto the side of it, like a child. She calls out the contents of the aisles as we go by. I yearn for the old days at the Victoria Market, where I browsed and ambled and bought whatever took my

fancy. I buy vegetables for soup – I can make that. I buy cup-a-soup, in case I can't. I buy fruit, because it's so easy, I buy salad things that I can cut with a blunt knife. Sarah suggests I buy small cartons of soy milk that I don't have to read the use-by label on because I should be making a smoothie every morning so that I get some health and goodness. She assures me that the blender isn't a dangerous weapon.

"Unless you can't see whether the lid's on properly," I say, as though it's a joke, but Fido had the mixture for breakfast one morning, licking it off the floor the stool the cupboard doors the rubbish bin the inside of the crockery cupboard the bag of potatoes my shoes his fur my legs my skirt.

I say yes to the soy milk.

So that Sarah doesn't feel guilty about not living at my house, I pretend blind is an enormous fun funny adventure that I have every day. I pretend that it keeps me from being bored. I tell cheery stories of my attempts at the laundry; the time I jumped into the back seat of a neighbour's car, thinking it was the taxi I had called; the day I tried to do my bit and put the garbage bins onto the kerb and ended up stranded in the lane with rubbish all over the ground. That sort of funny fun story. I make my blindness into a jolly old ripping yarn.

We buy eggs. I only eat them hard-boiled now. When I cook eggs these days, I put them into cold water, and stand, bored but stuck, as the water heats. My hand never leaves the hotplate switch. When I hear the bubbles I turn off the stove and leave the lid on the saucepan and by the time the water has cooled, then the egg is boiled. Cold, but boiled. It is the only time I ever use my stove.

I buy awful cheese – pre-sliced.

I buy boxes and boxes of dry biscuits.

I buy that stuff in a tub that isn't butter, but doesn't entail a fight with the knife to spread it.

I buy chocolate.

I buy tea bags.

I buy seven packets of *Snakes Alive!* And then another three of *Killer Pythons!*

I buy tins of three-bean mix – small bland gluggy unappetising when cold, but filled with protein.

Sarah convinces me to buy a fruit cake. I tell her I don't eat bought cakes. She says,

“Well, do you want to get the ingredients and we'll make one?”

I buy the bought-cake.

We get soft drinks for visitors. We get orange juice in a carton which Sarah promises to open for me when we get home.

Sarah tries to get me onto Lean Cuisine and frozen dinners. I tell her I am afraid of the oven. Too many hot surfaces I'd have to reach into. She tries for microwave dinners. I remember the hot milk the other day and I tell her I can't work out the times. She says we'll write it in Braille. I tell her I'd rather stick to lettuce I can tear up, biscuits I can spread with fake butter, cheese that's already sliced. Sarah says I need more than that. I tell her that's all I can cope with. She tells me I've lost weight. I tell her the kitchen is a minefield, and I do as little as possible in there. She says we have to sort out my direct dial take-away situation. I agree. I agree to anything. I am a lost losing it loose cannon. All I can do is take direction.

We go to the pet section for cat litter and Sarah admires a swanky glittering dog collar that I can't see, but it sounds nice and she wants to buy it as a treat for Fido and it is then that my throat closes over. I feel wet tears scoring my face while Sarah talks on and on about matching the spangly colours in the show-pony collars to the non-existent highlights in Fido's fur coat. I lean over the shopping trolley. The aisle is blocked by my body and the trolley filled with horrible easy food. My face feels like it is swollen to

twice its size. I gulp huge breaths of air that still don't fill my lungs. Nothing fills me up any more. Sarah's arms are around me to hold me together and people dodge us, pushing and easing by to get to the shelves. Sarah tells me that everything will be alright and that it's perfectly natural that I'm overwhelmed at times.

I can't tell her, I can't tell her that there is no 'at times' about this. I'm trying not to be a whiner. I can't say that every day is overwhelming. I can't say that I love my dog and hate him too. I can't say that I can't do this I can't do this I can't do this. Sarah says everyone is deeply impressed by my competence my good humour my ability to manage my life.

I go under again.

I tell Sarah that I am not managing, that the good humour is a front, that my incompetence is going to leave me and/or my animals dead from food poisoning starvation electrocution scalding burning in our beds falling down stairs run over by cars broken bones in ankles and legs front doors left open all night falls in ditches and puddles ...

My list of potential disasters is going on and on.

My mouth is getting out of control.

Falls from windows walking under trams slipping in the bath knocking furniture onto us hands on hotplates crockery dropped and broken glass on the footpath paws jammed in doors ...

I can't stop babbling.

I keep listing the bad things but I know I'll never get to the end.

Sarah whistles to a boy stacking shelves and asks him to put our trolley aside for us. She puts her arm around me and steers me out of the store, past hot bodies in lines and around wire baskets and precarious clutching toddlers. We walk in a huddle through the arcade dodging more bodies and more trolleys and then we cross Church Street to the park on the other side. We

sit on a seat together like old people, we are huddled against the cold and I apologise and apologise and apologise. I know if I keep behaving like this to people who have helped me, then helping me will be tiresome and they won't bother sticking around. I don't blame them. Even I don't want to stick around. I start to panic now, as Sarah doesn't say anything and I know I shouldn't have folded and told her how I felt. I know that this sort of behaviour is terribly off-putting. I am a mess. A blind and broken mess. Sarah says nothing. I want to leap to my feet and run away. But I can't even run. I can't run at all. It is such chaos.

I pull myself together.

I force myself to calm down.

I say sorry again.

Sarah says I need a hot drink, her voice sounds like she is thinking of something else. I can't read her at the moment. I don't know what's going on underneath her words. I am so frustrated with uselessness. I am so vulnerable and helpless. Sarah bundles me in her arms to take me back across the road again because I couldn't cross it on my own. She guides me to a table in a cheap supermarket arcade coffee shop. I remember this place. The old crumpled people. The smell of burnt food and frying rice. I hate this sort of place. She orders me a hot chocolate extra sweet extra hot and says comforting things until it arrives and then she steers my cold hands to it and says she's going to get the groceries and she'll be right back. I sit on a plastic chair. I don't touch anything but my mug of hot chocolate. I listen to the sounds around me. I breathe deep and try not to panic. I drink my drink. I am very tired.

After a long long time Sarah comes back. The groceries are in the car. We are going home. She has bought hot food for dinner. She stopped at the butcher and bought a bone for Fido, and kidneys as a treat for my Cat wary. We walk to the car and I could lie down and sleep right now but I don't. I sit up and listen to the world around us. We don't speak, there's nothing to say.

I am ashamed of my tears and of the way I told the truth. I'm ashamed of the truth, that I can't cope.

We get to my apartment block and I unlock the gate and take a bag of groceries and concentrate my way along the garden path, count six; and up the stairs, thirteen; and down the corridor, count eight; to my front door. Sarah carries four bags of groceries and follows me in. Fido dances around her. I put the groceries on the floor and kneel down to pat him. I can do this safely with Sarah there because I know she will find the groceries again before I trip over them. Fido comes to me. He butts his head into my hands and I put my arms around him. He licks my face and whines into my chest. I rub his coat and smooth his ears. I kiss his forehead and hug him tight. Fido is delirious with joy. I hear Cat smudge's voice as Sarah pats her. Then her furry body twines cautiously around my kneeling legs. I hold out my hand and wait for her to slink right into it. My dog sits before me and Cat smudge is curving and curving around me. I tell them I am sorry. They forgive me.

There is the buzz of my intercom. Sarah answers it and Steven's voice is on the other side. Sarah unlocks the gate and he is on his way in. I wipe my face. I smooth my hair.

"Don't tell him," I say to Sarah.

"I already did. I phoned him from the supermarket."

"Why? Why would you do that?" I tell her. "I don't want anyone to know."

I wipe at my stupid face, which I can't even check in the mirror,

"I'll be alright, I was just overreacting," I say.

Sarah unlocks the front door, then she comes back and kneels down on the floor by me and Fido. Cat smudge wends her way around the three of us. Sarah's breath is hot on my face, it is a little stale. Her voice is low and serious. I know I've scared her. I feel so bad.

"Listen to me," she says. "We have to sort this out. You can't keep going like this. It's not working. You know it isn't."

Steven's footsteps are at the door. The door opens. I hear his quick breath in as he stops on the threshold. Sarah and I are kneeling on the floor, side by side. Sarah's cold hands are cupping my face. Fido is curled between us. Cat smudged is rubbing her cheek her face her ears against the soles of my shoes. I know I look like a distraught mess. I hear the crack of bones and joints as Steven squats down by my side. I feel his hand warm large there on the back of my neck. That familiar hand that safe warmth, it's the trigger, it hurtles me forward, I am thrown forward screaming inside. I make unknown sounds, wide mouthed sobs. I am pushing noise and despair and wretchedness out and onto the floor in front of me and Steven's hand is on the back of my neck and Sarah is lying by my side, her arm around my waist, crying aloud with me.

Engagement Party

Sarah and Leigh come over to my house and help me to paint on a happy face, and dress in something decent and festive. I don't know Leigh very well, but apparently she has a sister who has Down's Syndrome; so she'll be used to dealing with problems like me.

I'm being harsh.

I think I'm jealous of her.

Harsh about Leigh.

And dangerously nastily cruelly harsh about her sister.

This is what being in-valid does to you. It turns you into a vicious selfish bitch. But my jealousy of Leigh is even, if possible, worse than being harsh about her Down Syndrome sister who is struggling with a hell of a lot more blocks and dead ends and lost possibilities than I am.

This is Sarah's first relationship in a long time, I've got to be careful. As Leigh makes another awkward joke with me and Sarah tries to laugh naturally and I try to fake a smile; I decide that I just have to bite the bullet so I tell Leigh and Sarah that they are not to mind my surly and gauche attitude, I tell them that I am being a dog in the manger because I am used to Sarah fussing around me exclusively. I'm embarrassed and ashamed, but I make myself tell them my real self is not jealous and stupid, but my new disabled needy self is a clinging vine.

Sarah, hugs me, and says I'm not like that at all, and Leigh says, "Cling away."

And I make them promise to go easy on the make-up, and then I let them convince me to wear a red pre-blind Marilyn Monroe dress that used to be beautiful and I couldn't bring myself to throw out in the violent purge when I was preparing for this fiasco that is my blind life. But the dress is in danger of sliding off my shoulders and straight down to my ankles, without stopping

without passing Go or collecting \$200. All my clothes are falling off me now. Even my new blind-girl outfits are loose and slidy.

When Sarah pronounces me fit and ready, we sit by my fire and drink a glass of wine each to fortify ourselves for the night ahead. Steven is collecting us to drive to Susan's mother's house for the engagement party. Steven is late. Sarah says he is late because he doesn't want to go. I say nobody wants to go. Sarah says I've made it worse for him because I won't let him drink. I say I have to have one sober person by my side – I do not want to be part of a blind leading the blind exhibition. Plus, he's driving me down to the farm tomorrow, I don't want him hung-over and useless for that trip.

Leigh asks why we are all dreading the party so much and Sarah and I start babbling over the top of each other with Susan And The Wedding stories. These stories finish off the rest of the bottle and while Sarah goes into the kitchen to find more wine, I tell Leigh to remind Sarah to rescue me if she sees me bailed up by Susan or her feral mother. One of the worst things about blindness is not being able to get away from horrors. Leigh says that Sarah's friends are turning out to be quite 'colourful'; and suddenly, I realise that she is nice, and I recognise shamefully, that I know next to nothing about her – my life is so full of me me me that I haven't even let Sarah tell me anything about her new girlfriend.

Then the door buzzes and Sarah runs to let Steven in and Leigh hides the wine glasses and the second bottle so that Steven won't feel hellishly sober and when he gets to the door and is fending off Fido, Sarah pokes at my hair again and hauls up the shoulder strap on my dress. I feel his presence in the room and feel awkward and strange, I haven't been dressed up like this since I went blind and I wonder if I look like a parody of myself. And then his steps cross the room and his shape leans over and into me and his lips are giving against my cheek and he says that I smell nice but I've obviously

shrunk in the wash. He smooths the strap of my dress back onto my shoulder and I say to Sarah,

“That’s it. I can’t wear this.” And Sarah says don’t be ridiculous, and Steven says it looks fine but if I want to change he’s happy to wait because anything that keeps him from getting to that party and having to make small-talk with Mrs Roche is fine by him.

“She’s not that bad, Steven,” says Sarah grabbing my arm as I stand up, “And don’t you dare get changed, Jill, I’ll pin the dress.”

I hear rummaging – she must be rifling through her bag.

“I have pins,” I tell her, knowing it’s not worth the fight. I’d rather get changed, I feel foolish and exposed in the dress, but I know I’ll never be allowed out of it now.

“Mrs Roche’s not that bad?” Says Steven, I can feel him facing me, staring at me, looking. What’s he looking at? What does he see?

“The old slag’s a nightmare,” he tells us, “Everybody knows that. And if I’m staying sober then none of you are ever to leave me alone with her.”

“Of course we won’t, Steven, shut up about it. No-one is being left alone with any of them. Hold still, Jill.”

Sarah’s voice is wine-loud and authoritative and I stand quietly, resigned, while my dress is pinned to my underwear – I have never worn a pinned-up anything in my life, ever – and then I wait while my shoulders are smoothed and patted, my bag is fetched and my coat wrapped around me and buttoned up snugly, and all the while Steven is bitching and grumbling. His main topic of bitchery is of course Susan’s mother whom he has never liked because he claims she tried to put a move on him back when we were at uni. I’ve never believed a word of it, he’s not that good-looking. Steven’s claim is that Mrs Roche bailed him up at one of Susan’s parties and pinched his backside and told him he had great biceps. Sarah tells him that she’ll do more than pinch his arse if he doesn’t get out the door and into the car immediately and Leigh starts giggling as she takes my arm and walks me down the stairs with great care.

During the drive I sit in the front seat and Leigh quietly asks Sarah what Susan's mother is really like, but Steven butts in over the top of whatever Sarah was going to say to tell her that Mrs R is an old slut whose feverish social climbing is only matched by her equally feverish attachment to booze. He claims he's never seen her sober and that she's the type of person who will be calling herself 'a Camberwell girl' until she's wheeled away at ninety not out. Then Sarah, made chatty and adventurous with half a bottle of wine under her belt, tells Steven that he could do worse than the steamy Mrs Roche, and she and Leigh laugh immoderately from the back seat. I want to laugh immoderately too, but I haven't drunk enough wine and I am kept separate and alone with my eyes unseeing. My eyes are open, with my brows shaped fashionably by Sarah, the lashes caked in mascara and colour painted across the lids. I feel acutely that my sightlessness clashes with my party dress.

And it's lonely in this frocked-up mask and I feel scared that I am misrepresenting myself and I wish that Cameron was here and that I didn't have to play blind man's bluff with a pack of strangers.

When we arrive at Susan's mother's place, Steven gives Sarah and Leigh last minute instructions about Mrs Roche and I give them all last minute instructions about assorted bores and Sarah dabs at my hair again for good measure and I double check that the pins are keeping me clothed and we breathe in deep and walk up the path and then up the steps and the door is opened with a gust of warmth and the feel of bodies and sound and high excitement and it's on.

We are greeted on all sides by disembodied voices and people rush headlong at me, I feel streams of air and I brace myself for a clash of flesh which never materialises, they must be pulling themselves up short, for when they do actually touch me their kisses and hugs are tentative and light. Then as I take off my coat, Susan's voice is squealing over the top of the crowd and

she arrives at my side saying loudly that the caterers have messed up something or other so we'll all have to make do with hors d'oeuvres for another half an hour and then she stops rabbiting on about the food and yells,

"Jill! What's happened to you?"

And I reach up to touch my face, for a bruise or a gash, my dress to check that the straps are on my shoulders, my hair to make sure it is still pinned up.

"Where did you get that dress? It's ..."

Falling off? Ridiculous? Too bright? Too short? Too loose?

"...Very"

Very what? Last season?

"Raunchy! It's raunchy! Wow?"

Raunchy? Who says raunchy?

"You look great," she rushes in. "I'd never have expected it of you. You'll be beating off the men with a stick tonight!" She yells this to everyone and they all laugh really hard at this funny joke.

I grip tightly to the handle of my cane.

Everyone's still laughing, but awkwardly by now, Susan takes my arm and leads me away and through the throng,

"I'm taking you over to Mum," she tells me, "She's going to look after you tonight. By the way, you do look amazing Jill. Are you sure you won't fall in those heels? It'd be a bit ... you know ... funny ... if that happened, wouldn't it?"

Yeah. Hilarious. Thanks.

"I'll be fine." I say. "I'm not going far." I feel exposed. Stupid. I decide to shift the blame. "Sarah and Leigh dressed me," I tell her.

"Oh, well, that explains it," she says, obviously relieved. "Oh, there's Mum, see, over there, by the window."

That helps.

"Oh. Sorry. Um, she's over there. Sort of on the left."

But then I hear the shrill voice of Mummy, and her high girlish laughter, and I know exactly where she is. I stop short and tell Susan that I really think I'd like a drink first, and maybe a spot in the corner, just to orient myself in the room and the crowd, before I start mingling.

"Oh Mum'll get you a drink," she tells me. "I told you she's going to look after you tonight."

Fuck. Shit. Piss.

"I'd really prefer to just stop in a quiet place first, Susan."

"No, no, Mum'll do it all for you."

I'm starting to drag my feet. Where's Sarah, where's Steven?

Susan is hauling at my arm, then the way is blocked by tallness and aftershave.

"Susan!" It's a beautiful mellow man's voice. Smooth and burrish. There's a kissing sound, light but smacking. Susan tells Roger that I am Jill and then she tells me that he is Roger.

Roger tells me that we haven't met before, and that he works in Ian's Sydney office. He wants to know what I do for a living, what he's really asking is what on earth sort of job can a blind person do? But anything to put off being shovelled under Mummy's wing is a bonus, so I tell him about my practice and he takes it all in and then offers to get me a drink, but Susan interrupts expertly and says her mother will be getting my drink and generally looking after me and Roger says that perhaps we could catch up later and all the while Susan's talons are digging into my upper arm, determined to claw me away.

"I'll see you, then," says Roger and I wait for the indrawn breath, the gasp of embarrassment that invariably follows this faux pas but there is none and as Susan drags me off I realise, "He didn't know I was blind."

"What?" Says Susan.

"I don't think he knew I was blind." I say, surprised.

"Are you sure? How could he not know?"

There's nothing I can say to that.

“It must be that dress, you know, it might not be the best thing to wear too often, Jill. You don’t want to give people the wrong impression.”

What wrong impression?

Like, the impression that I am female? Sighted? Then before I know it Mrs Roche is before me, smelling of Charlie Girl perfume and hair product and, yes, Steven was right, gin; and she too is kissing my face and gripping my other arm and telling me to have a seat next to her and that she’ll stay with me all night because it’s one of her little jobs. I smile and nod and can think of nothing to say to that. Before I can extract myself, Susan is gone, off to harass the caterers and Mrs Roche is introducing me to a pack of fossils just like her, all scent and drawling matured voices which they adjust to

L-O-U-D

and

S-L-O-W

when they speak to me, because I’m obviously impaired. One of the fossils says she was very sorry to hear about my ... then there’s a longish pause as the fossil searches for a suitable description ... predicament.

And another asks if it’s true that all my other senses are heightened. I start to tell them no, they’re not heightened, I just use them more, but Mrs Roche is pulling at my arm, tugging heavily at me. I don’t know what she’s doing, until she barks, “Sit, Jill. Sit!” and she yanks at my arm again, more forcefully, but I don’t know where the chair is, I can’t feel it with the back of my legs and my hand is caught in hers, so I resist and take a small step backwards to try and feel for where the chair is and her voice is loud, saying,

“Sit here! It’s right behind you!” But I can’t find it and I’m not going to lower myself onto nothing, so I feel around with my free hand and my fingers push into something spongy and rough.

“I’ve got you Jill, just sit, the chair is right here.”

But I still can’t feel the chair and I don’t know yet what the spongy fabric thing I’m touching is. I try to feel the shape through my skin, but Mrs Roche, who is, as Steven says, an old slag and a bitch, is pulling at my arm and now

pushing with her other hand at my shoulder to send me further backwards and down into nothing. A man's voice gives a stage cough and a funny voice says,

"That's my leg, Dear." And I snatch my hand away quickly. I try to pull away from Mrs Roche's grip but I can't, so I turn to her and say,

"Please stop pushing at me, I need to feel the chair first before I sit."

There's a hissing inbreath and then praise the lord I hear Sarah's voice and then her cool hand is on my arm that was gripping the trouser leg, and she is tugging me forward and saying hello to Mrs Roche and making party sounds and gushing about the wedding and telling them she's just borrowing me to catch up with some other friends and I move away with her but Mrs Roche maintains her grip on my arm until I am stretched out across the space between the two of them, and at the last possible moment she lets go and gives that little-girl laugh like the queen gave when she was sending the hunter off to cut out Snow White's heart, and she tells Sarah to, "Bring her straight back, mind. We don't want Jill getting tired."

Sarah says that of course we don't and her arm goes around my shoulders so I can lean into her and I quicken my steps to get closer to her and freedom. We dodge around the fossils together and we push through their scent and shapes and clutching questions and groping pity and then we're out of there and moving across the room and I am shaking and breathing hard and I am never going near that lot again. Ever.

Steven meets us in the middle of the crush and he has a drink that he puts into my hand and I swallow it all before I even know what it is. I am shaking and all I want to do is go home,

"How could you leave me with her?" I ask them. I am furious frightened.

"We didn't know where you'd gone. Susan pounced on you while I was taking off my coat, and the next thing I knew you'd disappeared."

"We couldn't find you anywhere," says Steven.

I am still shaking.

"I think I'll call a cab," I say. Those clutching hands, pushing me down into nothing, those stranger's voices, detached and curious.

"No. No, you can't go yet!" Says Sarah, horrified.

"Shit." Says Steven. "I told you she was an old bag, Look, come with me, Jill. We'll find somewhere quiet."

He puts his arm around me and leads me through rooms and flesh and parts of conversations. My legs are trembling and weak. I'm so helpless in the face of Susans and their mothers. They are so pushy, so sure they know best, so determined to take over and force me this way and that and heaven help me if I don't do as I'm told. But they don't think, and they don't listen, and I'm the one who'll come a cropper if they get it wrong. I don't like them, I tell myself. I don't like them and I don't trust them.

I feel height and I hear that masculine burrish voice again and it is saying, "Well, hello again, Jill."

But Steven brushes him aside saying, "Later."

And then he guides me to the terrace in the garden in the night. The air is cool and there is no-one else around, and although I don't see anything, I know the world out here is deep dark with sparkly stars. Deep dark blue. Blue, a non-word now. A memory. A gone thing.

Steven hunkers down next to the chair he's pulled up for me and rubs my hands.

"Feel any better?" He asks me.

"Is it blue? Dark blue?" I've never asked him about colour or vision before, but I want to know this, because I hope it's not black up there too.

I feel his face move, it tilts up, and I know he is really looking for me. He keeps rubbing my cold hands and he tells me that the night is lit by a half moon, that the moonlight has everything silvered, that there are clouds flying through the sky and a few stars have beaten the city lights and are dots of light deep in the sky and the sky is blue-black. His voice is quiet, soft and calm.

Silvered dots of light clouds flying blue-black.

I sit and think about it. Then I remember why I'm out here in the night.

"I'm starting to hate Susan," I tell him.

"Don't blame you," he says. "Like mother like daughter."

I breathe in cold air, and Steven rubs my hands over and over. My head is tilted back and my face is absorbing the space of the sky.

"Dad says they got some decent rain down there last week," says Steven. He shifts his position and sits on the stone floor of the terrace, his back leaning against my chair and he tells me all about his parents' news.

My hands stop their trembling and my stomach is not so fluttery anymore. I hear footsteps. Then a small herd of people are around us, Sarah and Leigh's voices are beside me, complaining about the cold and there's a plate of food, "Finger food only," placed on my lap and a napkin put into my hand.

Sarah tells me there is wine coming and they pull up chairs, Steven starts crunching and chewing on food, so he must have been given a plate too and they give us all the gossip from the party. I feel my way through contained food, food I can manage, and I'm more confident now with everyone else in the dark too. Then another set of women's shoes crosses the terrace, and it is a quick walk. I tense and listen carefully but breathe out when I realise it isn't Susan, it's a young walk, then Janey's voice rings out and she tells me to hold out my hand for the wine and there's another chair dragged across and I am cold but calmer now and the talk is all about the happy couple and their winning ways. Janey says that speeches are going to start soon and I say they have to keep me at the back of the room, and Janey says, "I'm with you, anywhere really, so long as I'm nowhere near Susan's awful mother."

"Join the club," says Steven, and Janey leans forward and tells us that Mrs Roche scares the shit out of her,

“And I think the old bat made a pass at me too...”

We all lurch back in our chairs,

“She what?”

“Where?”

“When?”

“I knew it!”

“I’d never have picked her as gay.”

“She is definitely not gay!”

“Well she pinched my arse and keeps offering me drinks!”

“I told you,” says Steven, “I told you years ago. She's a slut.”

Two Months Three Days After

Steven's changed, he surprises me a lot these days, he's not so artificial or hard, or something. I tell him this during the last leg of our drive home. It makes him laugh,

"I've changed? I've changed!"

"Well, you have. Everybody's noticed it."

"No, idiot. It's you who's changed."

"Well, Einstein, I'm blind, now. Of course I've changed."

"No," he says, "In yourself you've changed. You're not so controlling, so boorishly over-competent, so prissily perfect. You can no longer avoid getting down and dirty, and it's good for you."

"For god's sake, Steven, I've spent half my life getting down and dirty. You're so full of it some times."

"I don't mean literally, although that too, I mean involved, affected by stuff. This blindness is the first thing in years I've actually seen you involved in."

What bullshit. I turn my face to the window. Of course I've always been involved.

I imagine what's outside the car.

Dairy cows and sheep cropping the grass.

Paddocks running on and on.

Fence lines that never falter.

And me running too.

But I don't run, so I stop that thought.

And become annoyed

because he's got me visualising when I should be experiencing. The old fall-back when I'm stressed or upset. Looking, stupidly uselessly looking with my mind's eye. Wanting to see. Telling whoever arranges all this stuff that I've

had enough now and it's time to put me back into my real life. My sighted life. My stupid secret hope. So dumb. So pointless. Still there.

"You won't believe this," he says. "But it's changed you for the better."

I want to hit him.

Instead, I pull myself back into now, into the unsighted life. I do this by compulsively automatically meticulously going through the familiar routine of checking and double checking the contents of my bag. I do this with hands and ears. I do it to make sure everything is where it should be. I do it to remind me that I am touch and sound and smell now. I go through each item slowly and methodically, it takes time but it's soothing and helpful. It takes seven and a half minutes.

Everything's there.

As usual.

I sit up straight again.

I can feel Steven's face turn to mine, quickly, his eyes looking at me, and then back at the road and then at me and then back again.

"Of course I've changed," I tell him calm now, "Being blind's changed everything. But none of it is for the better."

He snorts a laugh through his nose. The calm goes.

"The whole lot of it is a fucking nightmare disaster," I yell at him. "There is no good in this."

"See, even your language has changed," he says, ignoring my hurt my anger my sense of betrayal. "You swear now, you get angry, impatient, frustrated. You've become human again."

I am immensely tired of this conversation.

No. Not just tired of it, I want it stopped. I don't like it.

I don't like him telling me what I've become.

I don't like that Again word.

“Basically,” he says, and I feel the acceleration of the car,

“Don’t go over the limit,” I say.

“I’m not. We’re almost at the turn off ... where was I?”

“You were about to say something I don’t want to hear. Can we drop it?”

“No. Basically, you were an over-compensating control freak who has benefited from being forced to lose a bit of control.”

I breathe in slowly, “My life was just the way I liked it.”

“Exactly. Avoiding any responsibility, intimacy, commitment.”

“Where the fuck is that coming from? It’s bullshit! I’ve had the same job for thirteen years! I’ve been with Cameron for eight years! That’s commitment, responsibility. And this is great coming from you, you who’s been through god knows how many jobs, and changes girlfriends every six months.”

“Yes, but your commitments and responsibilities are to a boyfriend who lives overseas and a job that you could do blindfolded – proof: you ARE doing it blindfolded! It just goes to show how unengaged you’ve been with everything in your life, pretty much since John died.”

“Don’t be a bastard, leave him out of it.”

“Look Jill, I’m not trying to piss you off, I’m just saying, this blind thing hasn’t been all bad.”

“You are a bastard, Steven. Because it has been all bad. There is NOTHING good in this. Nothing.” I fumble with the handles of my pack, and breathe deeply, trying to fight down waves of rage that have my jaw jammed shut and my body strung tight and clenched.

“So I’ve been told,” he says, slowing the car before we hit the gravel and then swinging it smoothly around to park over in the shade of the conifers by the orchard fence. The tyres stop crackling over the stones and swish as they smooth over dead pine needles. Steven brakes and the car stops completely, Fido barks once from the back seat and I hear Dad’s footsteps steady and measured, his usual stride and then a pause, what’s he stopping for? Then I feel Steven turning to me awkwardly in the confined space of the car with its curved clutching seats steering wheel and dashboard protruding,

doors and windows blocking us locking us in. I feel his breath on my face and the closeness of his body's weight and heat.

"I am a bastard," he says, "But it's true. Think about it. It's not all bad, it really isn't. Here comes your Dad."

The steady pace of footsteps has started again.

"I know," I say. "I can hear his walk."

My side door opens and the scent and mass of Dad is right there, leaning into the car, his hand rests heavy and familiar on my shoulder, he takes my pack and steps back to let me stand and then he's holding me in a hug that is tight and filled with comfort and compassion and I let myself lean into him and let go. I let go and his arms are tight around me, holding me up and this is the safest I've felt, the only safe place I've been at all, in this long long time since the light went away.

Steven stays for the rest of the afternoon. I want him to leave. To leave me alone. Instead, he eats lunch with us. He talks poultry with Mum and fills them in on my achievements back at the city. The restaurant dinner we had, where I ate soup and didn't spill a drop, the tram ride I took to his apartment without mishap, the full circuit I did of the park where I didn't lose my way once, not even on the section of the path being dug up for new drainage.

"How do you know about that?" I ask him.

"You told me," he says, in that glib, know-all voice.

I don't recall telling him that.

Steven eats lamb's shank that Mum has simmered all morning in the pressure cooker with soft carrots and potatoes and pumpkin and a strong-tasting, salty juice running over it and through it all. I feel his arm brushing mine as his hand moves back and forth, forth and back, knifing butter onto bread cutting into tender meat rising and falling with a laden empty laden empty fork to plate to mouth to plate.

I segment my food with the side of the fork, and give each portion a tiny shake to shed the drips of gravy. Everything is soft and tender, breaking apart easily, mashing into the fork without trouble. Mum has thought about this meal. No lingering, messy spaghetti strands, no chunks of steak that have to be sawn and worked at, no bones to be negotiated, no peas to chase around the plate in the dark.

After the mains, which Mum won't let me help clear away, Steven eats three lamingtons and drinks two cups of tea and tells me I have chocolate and coconut pieces around my mouth. He's lying of course. I wipe my face religiously while I eat. If there is no napkin provided, then I provide my own. I hate his sense of humour.

Mum picks up my cup and refills it with a fresh round of tea. She pours mine first, because I have it weak. Steven makes her swirl the pot four times before he lets her near his cup. He and Dad are laughing. They both drink their tea heavily stewed. Dad says it's from the shearing, where you needed a triple-strength drink to get the taste of sheep out of your mouth and nose. Mum and Dad want to know if Steven's still going to be helping his parents during the sales, and he tells them that of course he is, and adds, to me, "Cup and saucer one o'clock," as he reaches for a fourth lamington. "Fat gut in middle age," I reply, tapping the edge of the cake tray at seven o'clock with my fingernail. Mum laughs again and later forces him to finish off the last lamington, because we all know his mother doesn't do sweets.

My parents think Steven is just the ant's pants. The talk between the three of them is easy and relaxed. He can do no wrong, except for leaving the farm to live in the city. They love his success though, and his jumping in and doing things. They like him looking after me in the city. I realise they must phone him privately to talk about me. I shudder at the thought.

We all lean back in our chairs now, stomachs full after the meal. Mum and Dad catch us up with local news and predictions that it will be a wet autumn so everyone is hopeful. Steven talks about cattle prices overseas and Dad says can he sit down with them properly sometime to talk about this futures' market stuff? Dad's been reading all about it in the Weekly Times. Then Dad goes out the front to check on the calves in the little paddock by the house while Steven helps me to help Mum with the table clearing and the washing up. I wash the dishes very very carefully, knowing Mum is watching like a hawk and twitchy with it, and Steven dries and tries to keep Mum busy. He doesn't tell me where anything goes, he doesn't check the hot water for me, he doesn't hover like Mum does. He just does his bit and leaves me to do mine, heads Mum off at the pass when I can feel her anxiety to intervene is about to overflow, keeps her busy with Tupperware and left overs, catches a plate I've placed too close to the edge of the draining board. He says nothing about any of this just catches the plate easily and dries and puts it away and all the while keeps Mum chatting about hospital gossip and getting her to give him the true story on his father's rheumatics. I hate him and want him to leave, but I wouldn't be able to do even this pathetic helping-Mum bit without him. I think he's hanging around hoping for afternoon tea. He's probably already looked in the cake tin. When the dishes are done I have a feeling of accomplishment at this one small task I've managed to complete, then Mum's half choked sob of despair at what my life has become is caught and swallowed back down; but too late not to be heard and felt by all of us.

So much for helping.

Steven sighs and I hear him patting her, probably on the back, because the sound resonates, lungs. Then he leads me from the kitchen and out to Dad on the veranda. Dad says the windmill down in the lower paddock isn't turning so we walk to the machinery shed and the three of us collect and carry a mess of tools down through the grass to the windmill, standing tall

on the edge of the swampy bit at the bottom of the property. I know it's tall, we used to climb it.

I want Fido to lead me, but Steven says he needs a day off too, I know this is true, so I have to let Steven walk next to me with his arm around my shoulder. I don't want to be this close to him. After all these weeks of leaning on his arm, holding his hand, letting him guide me around, he was virtually the only person whom I didn't feel that the enforced contact of the blind to the sighted was such an unbearable intrusion, until today. I am unbelievably furious with him, and he is holding my hand now with our fingers laced together – this is not the way a blind person and her helper hold hands. I try to untwist my fingers, extract myself from his holding, but he doesn't let go.

We walk over tussocked paddocks with the tools and Dad tells me what's going on with the stock. Steven keeps me informed about Fido's prancing. "The farm dogs," he says, "are still gobsmacked by Fido."

I try not to be sentimental.

He tells me Fido is chasing the reel of string trailing behind Dad.

I try not to laugh.

I know exactly what Steven is doing. I will not be charmed by him. Or lured out of a justifiable temper with stories of Fido that melt me from the inside out. Dad takes my arm as we go over the stile and the bumps in the paddock are getting tiresome to me now, it takes so much concentration to get around them. I hate stumbling and jerking around. Steven says we'll go back by the path. I didn't say a thing about the difficulty of walking through this paddock, but he notices everything. I don't like this. What else does he see?

We get to the windmill and it takes Steven and Dad about twenty minutes to pump it out and then another quarter of an hour to find the fault in the line, blocked by a dead bird, and then another ten minutes to fix it. Fido and I sit nearby, listening to the herd chewing, hearing the space around us,

the space that goes on and on. We listen to the occasional comments from Dad or Steven as they work on the pump, the grunts of exertion as they have to lift or hold something. When they need an extra hand, Steven calls to me and Dad and I balance the metal strut while he leans over and feeds a length of wire through the piping. This is my fourth trip up here since losing my sight, but it's the first time I've contributed anything at all to the work of the place. Even this little amount is good.

When the pump is back up and running and Fido has rolled over and over and over in the dead bird's carcass, we pack up the tools and head back to the shed. We walk around the long way by the path, and I notice that there is no change in the sound pattern where the dairy should be. I ask Dad what's happened, has he shifted the path, where's the dairy? I feel disoriented. I thought I knew where I was. But then Dad tells me they knocked it all down last week, Johnny Bristow up the road wanted to buy the bricks from him, so they pulled it apart lock stock and barrel all in one day. We hadn't used it since Dad got out of milk production and into beef. "How could you tell?" He asks me. "The sound should have shifted when we came around past the main gate," I say. Dad's surprised I could be so accurate and he starts to ask me more questions about how sound works for me. I tell him about the altered echo sounds and how if I click with my tongue, I can get a good reading. He tries it and we compare what the sounds tell us. Dad is excited about this. He clicks all the way along. He tells me I've been doing well. He says I'm a marvel. I can tell by his voice this is genuine and for a while I really do feel like a marvel. I promise to give him a go of the cane when we get to the house and he's keen as mustard. We talk about this all the rest of the way back, and as I am walking in step with Steven now, and his arm holds me to his side and I can judge the shape of the ground from the shifts in his body, I can ignore the walking part and concentrate on the conversation.

They pack the tools away while I stand quietly, following their movements with my ears, and then we go back to the house. Steven is persuaded to have another cup of tea and some of Mum's hedgehog slice and then accepts a Tupperware container holding a filled sponge for him to take up the road to his parents' house. Mum has sat me down in the chair at the end of the table, out of the way and I sit there quietly and listen to their affection. At six o'clock Steven gets up, kisses me goodbye, hugs Mum and goes out to his car and drives the short distance home. I am relieved to have him gone.

I go up to my room because Mum is over-fussing and leading me around too much. I've had to wrestle my bag from her and I insist on unpacking it myself. I fall over an armchair, which has been moved since I was here last. Mum falls over herself apologising, she must have shifted it when she was vacuuming. She says sorry again and again and again. I tell her I'm tired, even though I'm not really, just so she'll leave. She exhausts me with her worry and pity and fretting help.

When I'm alone in my room I lie on my bed with the window open. The fat house cat jumps up beside me. Fido, woolly and warm, lies on my feet. I smell that dead bird stink all over him, but I can't be bothered facing Mum to bath him. I tune out what my nose is telling me and I listen instead to the farm. I hear a car on the road and crows bark at each other from the conifers that line the drive. I do the exercises that the woman at the Blind Institute told me about. I imagine myself in the centre of this place. I let my awareness radiate out from me and the bed and this room and the house and the garden the yard the paddocks the district. I orientate myself in this world. Then I bring myself back, to just the bed I'm lying on. I try to place the animals precisely on the bed with me. I try to feel exactly where and how they are lying, how far they are from me, which way their fur is flowing. Then I test myself. I orient myself to the cat's fat centre, I try to sense precisely where she is and then I reach out my hand to stroke her body, from her shoulder to her tail. I feel thick layers of fur and fluff, I feel

the tiny bones of her forepaws. I'm slightly off centre, but close. I lie there with my hand buried in cat fur, purring pulses through us and I take my mind slowly carefully painstakingly all the way around the room. I weigh and place and smell and feel in my mind a sense of each piece of furniture the low attic ceiling the slope of the window sill. I imagine myself moving around the room, sure-footed and confident. I know how the third drawer in the bureau sticks half way, I feel its resistance as a physical memory. I try to imprint this knowledge of the room back into my body – not as a visual picture, but as a sensory one, shapes and textures and distances between things. I try to feel the solidity of the objects around me. Soft and cushiony for the bed and mattress; thin slatted layers of wood for the wardrobe; solid hard mass for the bureau; dense wads of cotton and wool stuffing laced with metal and more wood for the easy chair. I do all this while I lie on my bed with Mum's fat cat beside me purring and comforting, with Fido stretched out at my feet, giving off waves of dead bird. I do this placement and orientation over and over again, and then I do as the RBI woman said, I stop thinking and let myself go and try to just feel it instead.

I hear a car on the back road, up near Steven's parents place. I think of Steven and his crack about my becoming human again. I think of my bookshelf in the corner, so laden with books – paper and ink and cardboard – that its heavy weighted presence dominates the room. On the third shelf is a photograph. John and Steven and me, school sports, 1975. I hadn't really looked at that photograph in years. But thinking of it now, and its place in my room the space it commands, the air it displaces, I know it will stay in my consciousness as part of the everything that makes up this place. The RBI woman said that if I do this space filling thing properly, I will be aware of every little thing around me. I will miss nothing. I will notice everything. Nothing will be hidden from me. Impressions rear up in my mind, of Steven and John and I at thirteen, climbing the windmill in our shorts and t-shirts, tying a skull and cross bones flag to the top. Of us riding our ponies hell for leather up Byat's Track and along past Clooney's fence

lines, all the way to the river. Of our boat that Dad helped us make and then float on the lake. Of yabbing and fishing and eeling. Of chicken pox together and racing our bikes up the drive after school. I stop remembering and fall into sleep and wake up an hour later with Mum calling me for dinner and my skinned knees hurting.

I get up from the bed half asleep and bend down and pull on my boots and walk across the room to the door and it is only when I am standing there, with my hand on the door latch waiting for Fido, that I realise I did all of this without once thinking about it or planning any of it out, or, even better, without groping around or bumping into anything or going in the wrong direction or walking too far or anything hesitant or stumbling. I wasn't even counting in my head. I reach down then, into the right spot, and pick up my surprised Fido and hold him, hug him tight. Maybe this space stuff can work.

Then we silently slowly, go down the stairs and Mum meets me in the hall and takes my arm and I let her guide me into the kitchen and we sit down and eat dinner together. All of us using spoons.

The next morning, when I am back in my room after breakfast, having been shooed out of the kitchen without being allowed to help, even though Dad has gone on and on about my fabulous hearing and he's tried to get Mum to try the clicking thing and to have a go with the cane, but she doesn't like all that talk, so I leave her to get on with it. I go back upstairs, feeling useless again. I sit in my squishy chair, and try to orient myself in my room, but the confidence I had is fading. I hear a new sound in the drive. It is horse's hooves. Fido barks madly and for once the farm dogs join in too, until Dad yells at them to shut to buggery up. I come downstairs, cautiously, feeling my way with my stick and counting the steps out aloud and I meet Mum on the veranda and we go out to the drive with Mum holding my arm too tight and I smell horse and harness and Steven's shape is there. His breathing

comes from high up, tall above me. We rode everywhere when we were young, Steven and John were going to be jackaroos and work their way through the Northern Territory north-eastern Western Australia south-western Queensland. I was going to be a jillaroo, but closer to home, Gippsland the High Country southern New South Wales. We were horse mad. All three of us.

The scent is strong. That sweet chaffy smell. Hay and grass sweat and saddle. Steven climbs down and he and Mum are greeting each other and talking. I hear Fido's sidling gait as he works his way closer to the horse. Steven says it's one of the McMaster girls' horses. He's got it for the morning. He's going to take me riding. I tell him no thanks.

"Why not?"

"Even with you leading me around, I'd feel too unsafe." I tell him. "I've had too many falls when I could see. It would be terrifying to be on a horse and have no sight. You know how easily they scare."

"I won't be leading you around," he tells me. "I'll be in front."

Double riding. My arms around him. Nothing to hold on to to rely on to guide me.

"No way. I'm not ready for it."

"Come on," he says, "You're never going to be ready for this sort of thing, you've just got to do it."

"No. I can't." I shiver in the light breeze.

"You'll be perfectly safe," he says, "I won't let anything happen to you, you know that."

"I'm not ready." I tell him. "It's too soon."

"I don't think she's up to it, Stevie," says Mum, holding me close to her side. "It's too dangerous for her to be up on a horse."

I hear Steven sigh and turn away. I feel disloyal, backing away from this. I feel childish, hiding behind my mother. I feel grateful that she's put her foot down.

“It’s okay,” says Steven, moving back to the horse, the harness clinking as he lifts himself into the saddle,

“I’m going down to check on the calves in the back paddock, just thought you might like to get out for a bit. See you later.”

I listen to the sound of him riding away. The horse’s hooves make a good sound. I could listen to them for a long time, but Mum squeezes my arm then and leads me back into the house.

Two Months Three Weeks Four Days

Sarah and I are at the airport. We're early. The plane is late.

We have time to fill and it's incredibly boring with nothing to look at. Sarah and I sit on uncomfortable seats and I really miss watching the passing parade. I try to make myself sense the world around me, but sometimes I just get lazy. I get lazy when there's someone there to look after me. I have to stop that. Anything could happen to the person looking after me. I force myself to concentrate, because I have to know where I am and what's around me at all times.

I tell Sarah to disappear for a while so I can pretend to be on my own and see if I can understand the place I'm in.

"Tell me you won't watch me," I say, so that I really will have to do it.

"I won't watch you," she says. "I'm going into the newsagent anyway. We need a paper."

She leaves and I am left alone. I make myself not panic. I remind myself that I've been to this airport hundreds of times, and that an airport is an airport is an airport, but it doesn't feel familiar. The last time I was here I didn't know I was going blind, so I didn't think to memorise it. And worse still, this is the first time since I lost my sight that I have been in such a huge place, with hundreds and hundreds of people and exits, miles from the safety of the streets that I know with footpaths and neighbours. I get out my mobile phone and hold it. Sarah's number is two on the direct dial. I make myself sense the world around me, but it's terribly hard. There are too many people loudspeakers creaking trolleys thunderous engine sounds children wailing people laughing talking crying arguing. The brush of bodies going by me is constant. It is hideous trying to orient myself in this.

The woman from the RBI told me to start by picking out a single sound, to focus on that, and from there, bit by bit, to unravel and separate all the sounds around me. I'm to find one thing that is constant and unwavering, like the beep of a traffic signal the swish of an automatic door the position of a radio; and with that constant I can make shape and direction. I can make objects and walls, doorways and exits. I can build the environment around me, and position myself in it.

But I doubt if I can do anything here. It's all so overwhelming and in this vast space, the sounds bounce and echo around, the bodies of people swallow sound, muffle direction, nothing is where it seems to be.

Snick, snick, snick.

There's one.

Snick, snick, snick.

Rhythmic, but not always the same.

Snick, snick, sn, snick.

Irregular.

Snicksnicksnicksnick.

Speeding up, slowing down.

Snick, snick.

Then nothing. It's stopped.

Where was it? Over to my right, low down, really low, floor level almost, but not on the floor.

Snick, snick, snicksnicksnick.

It's going harder now, louder. It's not far from me.

I can't identify it, but I can use it as my centre. And there's the door opening, shutting, opening, shutting behind me. I hear it faintly, but I can feel and taste the fresh air coming in, the waves of bodies moving forward and back.

Snick, sn, sn, sn, SNICK!

What is that?

I orient the bell tinging of the elevator, left, but to the front.

A desk nearby, left again, parallel to me? No, back a bit. Computer keys slick and click telephone voices formal talking kilometres and destinations. High heels squeaky wheels voices call and interact light footsteps – children running, directly in front, but moving through a wide space, all their sounds go up and out. An open area, maybe there's an escalator or another room, a doorway? Something with a higher ceiling. A very high ceiling.

Tinny music from a walkman behind me, Celine Dion. Just my luck. The tinny, tiny voice is reaching a gut-wrenching crescendo, seeping around the edge of earphones. Yuck.

Snickety, snickety.

Snickety, snickety.

It must be a person, it's too irregular for a machine. Not good for orientation then.

Dishes clatter fried food orders called. There's a café. But not close.

Sniffing muffled must be into a handkerchief – cold or tears? Cleared throat deep breath sighing, must be tears.

Solid footsteps. Sarah. She's come back a different way, her scent moves toward me and I turn to face her and smile.

"I think I got about ten things," I say to her.

"How do you do that? I snuck up from the other side."

"Sarah, I could pick out your walk blindfolded."

We realise what I've said.

We laugh.

Sarah's good like that. She gets the blind jokes.

Then we both speak at once

She says, "I bought you a hot chocolate."

And I say, "I smell chocolate froth!"

Sarah sighs "I can never surprise you anymore."

"I know, I can sniff you out from miles away," I feel like I should be apologising, I don't know why.

"But, I mean it," she says, "I can *never* surprise you. You're like a blood

hound these days, and not just with stuff you can smell, either.”

I don’t know what she’s talking about, but she sounds sort of surprised herself and amazed, or something with astonishment in it. I feel awkward suddenly. I tilt my face at her,

“Don’t worry about the surprises. This whole fucking life is one big surprise.”

Sarah pats my shoulder and then leans over and places a curve of warm foam into my hands and then she holds my wrists to steady the cup while she pulls off the plastic top. Heat and scent envelop me. The smell alone gets my heart rate up. This is the thing with blindness; the things I come into contact with now, eyes free, are all double strength. I breathe in steam and cocoa beans the tang of chocolate sprinkles burnt milk.

I wait a few moments and then I hold my finger over the heat to test the temperature. Too hot. I hold the cup in my two hands and wait for it to cool. This is my life.

Waiting.

Waiting for help.

Waiting for signs.

Waiting for food. Waiting for people. Waiting for more help.

Waiting for Cameron.

Waiting in an overwhelming airport for Cameron to come through the gates and see that I am blind.

I don’t want to think of him coming home when I told him not to. Of what he will find ... this is just asking for trouble, so I don’t think about any of it. Instead, I ask Sarah to test me out on my orienteering. She leans back in her chair, sips boiled milk and coffee’d water and tells me to fire away.

Snick, snick, snick.

“On my right, low down, a tapping, hitting sound? I think it’s human, but maybe it’s a luggage strap or something?”

“Kid. Girl. Kicking the back of the chair in front of her. Harassed mother with a pram beside her. The bloke in front is ready to thump her.”

Hmm. I hadn't picked that one.

"Is she doing it to be annoying, or is she just bored?" I ask.

"Neither. She's reading. She doesn't know she's doing it."

"Maybe it's a pony riding book?" I say, thinking of John and Steven and me, camping in Dad's two-man tent in the orchard, and me reading *Jarrold's Pony Club Adventure* by torchlight and Steven thumping me for leg twitching during the exciting bits.

"What else?"

"Automatic outside doors behind us."

"Too easy." Sarah sips her coffee.

"Desk computers phones to the left – car rental, I think."

I feel Sarah's body shift and turn.

"Spot on. And they do accommodation too. You lose a point for missing that."

"Elevator, front left."

"Check. How many floors?"

I think about it. About the space between dings. I take a guess.

"Three?"

Sarah laughs. "Four. Close. Next."

I test the temperature of my drink again. Hot but not scalding. I sip it slowly. The taste and smell roll around my mouth. The froth melts away and the chocolate sprinkles sweeten everything.

"Escalator in front, maybe, but the space definitely opens up out there, and the ceiling's higher. People are pouring through there."

Sarah's rustling crinkly paper. Cellophane. Chips. Plain.

"Atrium. Big glass ceiling, showy and light."

She guides my hand into the chip packet, I feel grease and sharp edges. I take three chips and they dissolve on my tongue in a blissful layer of salt and fat.

"Walkman directly behind, *Best of Celine Dion* – which is actually a contradiction in terms"

Sarah leans back and then turns to me,

"Volume Two: The Very Best of Celine Dion. Close."

"Café to the right."

"No brainer. I could have sniffed that one out."

I ignore that. "Last, but not least, woman twenty something crying into a hanky behind us to the left."

Sarah turns again, "Yep, got her. Jeans too tight, red eyes."

She leans back even further,

"Whoops, minus two. Tissue, not hanky. But you're getting better."

Sarah opens the newspaper. It rumples and rustles. It's a broadsheet, and blurs the sound from the left a little.

"Do you want me to read to you?" She asks.

I'm too nervous. I can't concentrate. I'd rather focus on worrying. I have no idea what Cameron and I will say to each other. "You read," I say. "I'm just going to sit here."

"Okay." Sarah doesn't push it. Sarah doesn't fuss. Sarah reads the newspaper. I feel her attention shift. She's caught in the words and the stories. Hundreds of stories from all over the world all over the country all over the city, every day. I know this, because I get my newspaper CD's and listen to the speech-to-text program on my computer. It's not the same though. You can't browse. There's no graphics or images to drag you into a story you might not otherwise have read. But I can't sit still, I'd rather fret.

Every now and then, I feel Sarah's awareness transfer to me, just for a moment or two, then she goes back to her reading. Is she really looking my way? Or is it just a shift in focus? I don't know. Maybe I just sense her moving a little toward me, something like that. I wonder how much of my sensing of my environment is real? How much do I actually know about the world around me now, as opposed to what I think I know? There is really no way of telling, apart from what others confirm for me.

Yesterday I went for a long walk by the river with Susan — she's trying to lose ten kilos before the wedding — Susan talked, and I worried.

Last night I lay awake in my bed, Fido snored, and I worried.

Now I am sitting here, sniffing the air around me, while Sarah reads and I worry.

Nearly three months blind and Cameron is coming home. Coming home to see me in all my glory.

I feel Sarah's attention on me again. I tell her I'm good. Just nervous. She tells me it will all be okay. That Cameron will be fine. That I'm worrying about nothing.

I feel my mobile phone hard and heavy in my coat pocket. I want to call Steven and get a dose of his vicious hard line practicality; but then I remember our strained trip down to the farm, his assessment of this new me and I decide to leave him out of this for now.

There is a shift in the mood around us. People are perking up. Sarah stops being far away in the newspaper. She leans forward. I feel her concentrating.

"His flight's in."

Christ.

"Won't be long now," she says, and rubs my arm. The doors behind me open and shut. I feel cold. The doors create a draft now. Before they brought in fresh air. Now it's coldness.

Sarah turns toward me again.

"Don't look so worried," she says. "It'll be okay."

"I know. I know," I tell her.

We stay sitting in our seats. The bustle around us amps up. My stomach is churning. I want to tell Sarah I feel sick, and can we go now, but I don't say anything because here and now, there and later, it's all the same and I have to face him some time.

Except that he's my last link with my own life — and when I let myself think of him, or talk on the phone, or dictate an email, then it's just like the old me, the old relationship, that old life. I want Cameron to stay away so that I can pretend, when I connect with him, that everything is just the way it was. I loved being the old me that he talked to on the phone like a normal person.

But now he's coming back, and that means that all this has really truly happened.

I don't want him coming back, proving I'm a blind woman.

Home with Cameron

After a millenium of tap-drippingly slow time, Sarah leaves us and goes home, but she doesn't take the tension with her. She doesn't take away Cameron's complete shock over my situation. She doesn't take away the strain of our meeting like strangers.

Exit Sarah through the front door. Exit Sarah in a funny mood, annoyed and irritated, but covering it up with cheerful and enthusiastic. Is she annoyed with me? Did I do the wrong thing? Is she sick to death of babysitting me? I don't know. But either way, she's leaving me behind, alone with Cameron, two discomforted stranger selves.

I close the door behind her and lean against the wooden lintel, listening to place Cameron, then getting him, breathing over to my right by the fire. I stay standing still for three heart beats, then I too exit, into the kitchen. I try to do it quietly, with confidence and composure, so he can see ... no, no, so he can *tell* that I am in control of this, that I am coping. But instead, because I am not coping, because I feel out of sorts and unstable and not myself, because I'd let Sarah do the hostessing in my apartment, and Sarah control the meeting at the airport, and Sarah keep the conversation going on the drive home, I'm not in control and I'm not confident, even in my own place where until this afternoon, I could have placed everything without even thinking. Before I left for the airport, I could walk without counting. I could hear Cat blur stretching at the other end of the room. I could track Fido circling his food bowl, even after he'd had his claws clipped. I moved with certainty before I went to the airport, and I only realise that now, now that I have a critical audience. The critical audience is sitting by the fire, fiddling with the paper, making small talk about the cold, the current political climate, the state of my parents' health. And while he does this, fumbles his way through a hideously awkward conversation, I make my

escape. I do it badly, I insecurely grope my way across to the coffee table, I never do that, never; but Cameron breaks off his monologue to jump up and help me walk, while his attention darts over and around me, disturbing the air, not settling anywhere for long, but nevertheless it infects me, makes me clumsy and unsure. I feel as though he is perennially reaching out to catch me to re-direct me to take over from me, I tell him I'm okay and I find the coffee table, bang my shin into the corner of it – I haven't been caught like that for weeks – because the alignment with the chairs, the rug and the hearthstone had made its positioning so obvious, but now my timing is out my sense of place gone my mind and body muddled. His solicitous worry for my leg irritates me more than the banging of the shin itself, and I shrug him off, assure him I can carry three empty coffee mugs through to the kitchen and then quickly race in there at a rate of knots, counting steps and judging corners in record time, and I make it in there without hitting anything, not even a slinking wily dog. The pets have kept out of my way, they know when there's trouble in the house. I find I am breathing hard, as though I have been running for miles, instead of simply crossing the lounge room, but I only slow my breathing when I am sure he hasn't followed me. I listen intently and am relieved to hear him wandering around our apartment. I'm glad about this, because it means he won't be in here watching and sighing over me.

Alone in the kitchen, I put the china in the dishwasher, and then rinse out the coffee pot, and position it back onto its tray on the machine. I feel my way along the back of the bench and double check that the coffee maker is switched off at the power point. The switch is smooth and the pad of my finger slips across it. I put the milk in the fridge and check that Sarah properly closed the airtight lid on the tin of Mum's ginger fluff sponge cake, then I put it back into its slot on the third pantry shelf, right hand side. I hear Cameron's footsteps prowling around on my floorboards. I rinse the dishcloth and slowly and cautiously wipe down the bench. The side of my hand hits the knife Sarah used to cut the cake, sending it clattering softly

along the bench. I feel my way to the handle, and then place it point down in the dishwasher cutlery basket. The footsteps are moving into the bathroom now. I finish wiping and checking the bench. Everything is put away. Everything is tidy. There is nothing left to do in here. Cat fluff has dried food. Cat fluff has milk. Cat fluff has fresh water. Cat fluff has an organic, shredded, fat-free chicken wing on a saucer in the Cat fluff dining section of the pantry. I breathe in. I breathe all the way down to my diaphragm and hold the breath, I don't breathe out. I keep holding the breath. I don't breathe out. I keep on holding. I hold on. Fido pads back into the kitchen to check on me. I feel him sit at my feet. I'm still holding that breath. He whines at me.

I breathe out.

And then I breathe in again. And then I breathe out. And then I breathe in. Cameron comes to the kitchen door.

And then I breathe out.

He says, "Do you want to sit by the fire and talk?"

I breathe in.

Or do I want to go for a walk?

I pause in my breathing.

He'll guide me, he says, so I don't fall.

I keep holding my breath.

"It's your call," he tells me.

I keep, grimly, holding onto that breath.

"Whatever's most comfortable for you," he says, in that talking-to-an-invalid's, an in-valid's, voice, "Whatever you can manage."

I will not breathe out.

He just stands there, like an idiot, his large grey amorphous shape just hanging there, in the oblong length of light that is the doorway, tentative and useless. Completely fucking useless to me.

Fido whines again, I breathe out.

“Let’s sit by the fire,” I say, because I can’t bear the thought of his big clumsy frame pawing at me dangerously in the streets while he attempts to help me to walk.

We sit. He tells me the apartment looks so different. So much larger airy open. He says having the bedroom shielded from the living area by the narrow wall, hanging in space with wide spaces all around it, looks really good. Looks great in fact. He likes the white white walls. He says it makes the view from the windows look better. Then he stops. The L word. The V word. I know he’s cringing. I feel him cringe. He does that wincing and withdrawing thing whenever he mentions anything that is visual.

He’s like a stranger. Where has all his confidence gone?

He asks me why haven’t I put up the papier maché map we made. I tell him it didn’t work, that I couldn’t seem to translate distances and places through my fingers, much better in the long run, to try to figure out where I was using the Braille maps the sensor stick the counting steps the numbers game. Boring and slow, but practical.

“Oh.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while.

“It’s just so, blank in here ... with all our stuff gone ... ”

How strange, I think, because to me it feels full of things.

Then he’s silent. Again. He’s so uncomfortable. He’s so scared. What’s he scared of? Me being blind? Or just me? Am I scary now? Is that what it is?

“Jill,” he starts again, “I know things are awkward with us, I’m awkward, and I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, it’s just, when we were talking about you going blind, and when you were practising and showing me how you could walk around the house blindfolded, and Fido was on the harness stopping at kerbs and walking around puddles and stuff, and on the phone for all those weeks, it was just ... this is completely different. This is not what I was expecting. I didn’t expect ...”

He stops then, half way through his thought.

“What?” I ask, “What didn’t you expect?”

“Oh, look, nothing, it doesn’t matter.”

“Cameron, tell me ... “

“No, no, it’s fine, it really doesn’t matter.”

“Cameron?” I ask him, realising that I am going to have to work for this particular insight that he’s identified in the two hours he’s been back in the country, skulking around my edges, “Tell me, I’m listening.”

“I didn’t realise,” he tells me in an innocent everyday voice, “That there’s so much you can’t do, so much you need. I didn’t realise, Jill, I really didn’t, didn’t envisage, that you’d be so ... helpless.”

And oh boy, that’s it.

Slam, crash into me.

The blow I didn’t see coming.

Me knocked for six, by my wonderful boyfriend.

Three Months Six Days

I lie in our bed. I keep my eyes closed, so that the day starts like a normal person's would. In our bed, in his dark in the night, he forgot I was blind. He was reduced to me and we covered familiar territory. And I had thought to myself that at the very least, sex in the dark with all its extra-curricular senses would be one place where Eyes Shut really wouldn't matter at all. But my horrified surprise at his horrified surprise of what I have become wouldn't go away. In the dark, in the night, I can navigate my way across his body. I can reach him without looking, because I know where everything is in the night, in our bed. But the dissolving into sense and sensation doesn't happen. I think of him seeing me as helpless. I think of who I have become, and who he is.

My sense of space and place is no use to me here.

We'd mended fences, of course, before bed time. And we'd eaten take-away Thai food and sat by the fire and caught up on his job and my challenges. We'd discussed Braille learning and my new pals at the RBI, but I realised part way through the conversation, that while Cameron was right up to date with the minutiae of my life for the first month of my going blind, he really didn't know much about the last six weeks. Was that my fault, or his? Maybe he didn't really want to know, or maybe I didn't really want to tell him. Didn't I trust him? Was I protecting him? And from what? But it's all confusing and upsetting really, so I don't analyse it too much. And later when we go to bed, and I expect sensuality and heightened feelings it doesn't happen. It's mundane and awkward and sad really, but I don't tell him that; instead, I pretend I'm having the time of my life and then fall asleep, relieved because he hasn't seemed to notice. And I tell myself that maybe it's just me being awkward and sad. Maybe it's just me not being able to let myself go. And maybe it'll all be better in the morning, and in the just-dropping-off to sleep moment, his body is warm and

comforting next to mine, his hand on my back is affectionate and familiar. Maybe it is just me.

And now it is the morning. I lie in our bed. It's Eyes Shut and I feel the weight of the extra blankets spread over the doona, to keep Cameron's thin blood warm. I feel different. I feel different about him. I like the feel of someone in my bed with me. And I realise that last night was just me being paranoid and foolish over-sensitive and territorial. I hadn't given him a chance. I put my arms around him. I cling on tight. He hugs me back and runs warm hands over my skin and I know that gesture, but suddenly I'm not ready for it. All I want is arms around me and comfort. I hold onto him platonically and he gets the message and moves a little, in an away gesture and I make myself release him. I wonder if I can put up with the lust to get to the comfort. I wonder if he can put up with the comfort to get to the lust. I wonder how much either of us wants any of it. I make myself give him the benefit of the doubt. I make myself give him a fair go. I make myself remember that this is Cameron whom I have loved and adored for years. I want him to put his arms around me and make it all better, but I don't like to ask. Who wants a pity hug? I make myself count from one to ten, if he moves toward me, I can stay in bed, if he doesn't then I have to get up, like a non-clinging coping normal woman, and get into that bathroom and start the long slow routine of getting ready for the day.

With audience.

I count my breaths and when I reach thirty five I push back the top rug and then the second rug and then the doona and then the sheet and he's lying there, quiet and relaxed so I get out of bed and move in my old way, confident and sure, across to the wardrobe, counting in my head like I didn't have to do yesterday, but I don't want to mess things up now. My dressing gown is hanging where it always does and I button it up – no loose dragging cords – and it's better that I'm up first, so I don't keep him hanging around, waiting for me to go through my endless round of checking

and feeling and patting myself down. I move into the kitchen and Fido comes stretching and yawning from his basket. My shadow of Cat yowls from the premier position beside her bowl (empty) and I scratch her skull and run my hand down her spine all the way along to the tip of her tail, I fill the coffee pot with water and pour in the pre-ground beans and I turn it on and then I feed the animals. I replace their water and while they're eating I run searching hands all over their small bodies, not just their slippery-slope silk-furred backs, to check for any injuries or sores or tender spots. I do this every morning. My great fear is that one of them will be hurt, and I won't know. I leave Fido chowing down on his Weetbix and milk and I turn my back on Cat grey-blur's displeasure that she only has one finger joint's depth of milk in her saucer — I don't have to have working eyes to know her opinion about that; and I cross over to the bathroom. I hear the shower is on and I feel hothouse steam warming my skin. Cameron.

"Beat ya." He calls through running water and hot hot steam. "Yeah, yeah," I say.

"There's room in here for you too," he calls. I hear the slosh of water lapping in the bath, the echo of it draining down the plug hole, the spears of sound from shower spray.

I laugh out aloud and tell him that he needs all the hot water he can get, but that's just spiel to keep him happy: there's no way in hell that I am getting into a wet enamel bath with a soap-slick unstable person. Jesus. Doesn't he know anything?

"I've had an idea," he says, while I stand at the basin, brushing my teeth to kill time, automatically turning my face to where the mirror used to be.

"What about a dinner party?"

A what?

The shower pelts like rain. The tiles in the room throw his voice back at me as he tells me his plan.

He'd like us to give a dinner party, here tonight, with just a few of our friends,

for a catch up,

how about it?

Oh Jesus.

“Just like the old days,” he says through steam and running water, “It’ll be great.”

I try to head him off at the pass,

“Great idea!” I cry, “What about that new restaurant near Steven’s place?”

I love that new restaurant near Steven’s place. We go there once a week, so it will really only be new to Cameron – but he doesn’t have to know that.

They know how to serve a blind person there. They aren’t fussed by my table manners. They recommend dishes that don’t need cutting up. They keep me supplied with napkins. They don’t hover. I could get away with a group meal there. Steven says it’s dark in there too, all the better to hide me. I love that restaurant. “Let’s go there.” I say.

“I was thinking more of us having a dinner here, like the old days ... “
Here?

Old days?

“That restaurant is really good,” I tell him.

“I thought we could cook,” he says, “Like we used to.”

Cook?

I put my toothbrush away. I don’t know how to tell him, we never cooked.
Ever.

I cooked.

And I let him help.

He wore an apron and did as he was told and that’s not cooking. If it came to a cooking showdown between blind me and full-faculties him, I’d still win hands down. All those bloody years I spent encouraging him in the kitchen, praising his every pitiful effort supervising and smoothing the way, surreptitiously propping up his ego by letting him think he actually contributed; well, all that dishonesty has finally come back and bitten me well and truly on the backside.

"I don't know if I'm quite up to cooking for a group," I say, knowing full well I'm barely up to cooking for one.

"I think we should do it," he says. "We can do it together and it'll be good for both of us."

"I don't know about a whole meal," I say. "What about we order a pizza fix for you ... how long is it since you had a really, really good pizza? And we can invite everyone over and have red wine and the fire and it'll just be casual."

"I think we should cook something ... if you and I cook something together, then I'll know that I'm really home and everything's okay."

Shit. Fuck.

I straighten the towels. I decide on a compromise.

"How about, we order in pizza, lay on the red wine and you and I will make an entrée ... "

I hear a disappointed sigh.

"A spectacular Italian entrée?"

Silence from the shower. Just the running water. The sloshing of the wash cloth. The fall of water down the drain.

"And dessert, of course."

That's done it.

"Fair enough," he says. "We'll make it all together?"

"Yep," I say.

"Sure," I say.

"Can't wait," I tell him.

"I'd better check the coffee," I say, knowing that it won't be ready yet, but it will get me out of there.

I hear him start to sing as I move out of the steamy warmth and he only stops belting out a cheery tune long enough to call happy teasing words and bits of our old banter at me as I head into the living area.

Fucking cooking. Christ.

I wrack my brains for a way to fake cooking and give him the good old days experience that is going to make him so happy. I move around the bed,

drawing up the sheets, shaking out the doona, replacing the pillows. I trip over Cameron's shoes because I'm not used to having other people's stuff around the place and I put them away into his side of the wardrobe. I re-fold all the extra blankets and I lay them in a long rectangle of wool across the end of the bed. I step on his watch and I kick over his empty water glass and I get tangled up in his tee shirt and jeans that lie in a heap on the floor on his side of the bed where he probably hasn't expected me to be. I put all these things away, and I go to my side of the wardrobe and methodically check the Braille labels to make sure my clothes will match. I lay the clothes on my side of the bed. I take my boots out of their section in the wardrobe, and I place them next to my clothes. Fido appears for a pat and I wonder what canned food I have that I could turn into an entrée, besides Dog Casserole. I mentally check over the contents of the freezer as I move through the lounge room. I rustle over newspapers and fold them all up and then stand on a hard metal tea spoon on my way to stack the papers under the desk. I re-situate the chairs and coffee table in their correct places. I walk into Cameron's duffle bag on the floor by the door. The duffle bag conceals something vicious. I stub my toe on that something. It is sharp and unyielding, pointy and solid. Fido yelps at my scream. My toe stings and I want to hop up and down on my good foot, but I don't do that, the blind don't hop madly around a room, in a blur of pain, crashing into things and losing their sense of direction. Instead I sit cross legged on the floor, nursing my bad foot, rubbing the injured toe. Fido licks my face. I think about dinner and visitors and cooking and the organisation involved and how much harder it will be to do it all with someone else helping. Because the someone else will do things, and I won't know they've done them. They'll move things without thinking, and I'll bang and hit and fall. They'll contribute and I will have to discover their contributions the hard way. Fido licks my toe.

I try to think clearly about what I might be able to direct Cameron to cook. I wonder if we just bought a whole lot of antipasto and I got him to arrange it

all on a platter; if he might think that was cooking. The shower isn't running anymore. I get up and limp into the kitchen and I lift and weigh in my hand the coffee pot and it is full enough so I pour Cameron a cup and carry it through to the bathroom. I can smell him shaving and I move towards him and slip in a puddle on the wet floor. I almost fall but right myself as the cup is lifted from my hand and I say, "Thanks."

and he says, "You right?"

and I say, "Sure. Wet floor."

and he says, "You sure you're alright?"

and I say again, "Yes, yes, I didn't even fall, just a slip."

He hovers over me, concerned, but I wait him out.

"The shower's all yours," he eventually tells me, "Do you need a hand getting in there?"

"No, no," I tell him, "I'm fine. Absolutely fine."

"Should I stay in here and help?"

"What?" I say, "No, no. I'm fine. I do this every day."

"You sure?"

"Positive. Thanks."

Clumsy basketball-tall man helping smaller and blinder woman across a wet tiled floor. No thanks.

I listen to see where he's up to in his shaving, there's a swish of a cloth up high, he must be wiping his face. I hear the hollow slidy sound of a plastic lid unwinding from a glass bottle. I smell bergamot and something tart. Face slapping. More swish wiping. Taps turn off. Shaving's over. I step sideways as I feel his body heat, his body mass moving towards me, and he pats my shoulder as he moves on past,

"Sing out if you need help."

"Yes. Thanks. Sure will."

I wait until he's out of the bathroom and then I take off my dressing gown and hang it on the dressing gown hook near the door and I get down on my hands and knees and I crawl across the wet floor to the shower. I carefully

stand up and I adjust the shower head to direct the water away from the taps and away from me. I turn on the cold water, I adjust with the hot. I climb into the bathtub and I swivel the shower head so that it hits the top of my head. I reach for the shampoo, and it's not there. I search far and wide. It's not there. I call out to Cameron and he comes to the bathroom door.

"It's behind you. Do you want me to get it?"

"No. No. It's fine."

I feel him standing there. Waiting. I don't want to be watched while I grope around. So I concentrate on general washing until he leaves, then I turn and I start on the left and I feel my way back and forth and forth and back until I find the shampoo. I open the lid and sniff and he was right, it is shampoo and I wash my hair with the smallest, least latherable, least soap sudsy amount possible. When I've finished shampooing, I don't even bother looking for the conditioner, instead I quickly rinse and turn off the taps and lean over for my towels and of course they're not there. Of course they're not. I balance my climb from the bath with both hands holding tightly to the edge and when I reach the floor on the other side I get back onto my hands and knees and I crawl to the towel cupboard. I take out three towels and I stand on one, dry and safe, and I wrap up my dripping hair with a second towel and I blot all the water from my skin with the third. When I am dry I kneel on the floor again and I use both discarded towels to mop up, tile by tile, every inch of the floor. I find Cameron's towels on top of the laundry basket and I put them in and close the lid. When I have finished drying the floor I add my towels to the pile. Then I turn up the fan and open the windows wide. I button on my dressing gown and I move to put on make-up and just in time I remember the razor. I call to Cameron to come in and put it away. He's busy, but when he gets here the steam has cleared and I don't have to brush my teeth because I've already done that. He puts away the razor and I make him double check that it is downside up, and definitely in the bottom drawer. He humours me and when he leaves I feel my way across the bench top and I put away the other clutter, this is easy, because although I can't quite place a lot of the items, I know they're not mine, so they all go in the

third drawer. The second last empty one. Then I take out my make-up and very very carefully put on my face. Then I rub my hair half dry and arrange fresh towels. I wipe out the bath and re-arrange the showering accessories in their rightful places.

It's almost nine thirty when I check the Braille clock on my desk on my way to dress. Cameron asks if I'll be long, should he go down and get the papers or wait for me and get them on the way to breakfast? I tell him I'll only be five minutes and he says, "Take your time," but I don't. I dress quickly and get Cameron to put Fido on the lead and I sling my bag across my chest and move to the door to get my stick. On the way I trip over that duffle bag again and I bang my booted foot into whatever rock thing he has in there.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes." No.

"Cameron, you have to put your stuff away. There's more than half a wardrobe that is empty and just for you, but you have to put everything away all the time."

"Yeah, shit, sorry. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I do this all the time. Are you ready to go? Is Fido done up?"

"Fido's ready. Let's go."

I reach for my stick and kick that fucking duffle bag again. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

And it hurts like hell and Fido's jumping and whining because the lead's on and he's raring to go, and Cameron's really really sorry. I wait while Fido jumps up and down, but not on me, and I rub my aching foot against the back of my calf, because I can't get my boot off without holding up the whole exit. Cameron does the long walk with the duffle bag from the door to the wardrobe and I have no qualms whatsoever about the get-out-of-cooking scam that I have just this minute invented and will put into action as soon as Cameron is out of earshot and I can get to a phone and organise it.

He comes back from the effort of picking up after himself and my foot still hurts and I am still wild but I make myself say something happy and he hugs me and kisses my cheek and I stop him from taking my arm and guiding me to the door and we leave the apartment and head out for breakfast.

Dinner with Friends

I'm all dressed up in my finery, or at least I assume I am, and Cameron, in a shirt that is slippery swish when you rub your hand against it, is out on the balcony running up the phone bill with calls to the office to his parents to friends he's hoping to see in the next few days. I'm glad he's on the phone, because it means that I can organise the house for the visitors. I have no dining room, or dining room table anymore, so it's dinner plates on knees tonight. I arrange the furniture in a pattern I can remember. The fire is twelve o'clock and I have the comfortable chairs at four and eight and cushions placed in alignment from nine to three. I arrange glasses in rows on the left side of the coffee table and napkins and cutlery on the right. Everything's a good three inches in from the edge, so I won't send it all flying with a sleeve or the hem of my skirt, or a stray waving arm. I've carried the glasses out two by two. I've made sure that I have positioned the coffee table exactly before I arrange anything on it. I've got all my bases covered.

Cameron has trawled through four florists to find his enormous bunch of roses that actually have a scent and he's placed them front and centre on the mantelpiece with no overhanging droopy bits to catch an elbow, or snare my hair. The house smells of their pure, particular sweetness. We have wine on ice in the kitchen, cold wet glass slippery slidy to the touch; and the ice-cream cake we made earlier is freezing over like it's meant to. I am truly grateful that home-made ice-cream is so basic to make. I remembered the recipe of course, what is there to forget? And all he really had to do was line up the ingredients, throw them in a bowl, and mix for about two minutes; although I did extend the process. I made him mix everything up with three different implements at three different speeds in several different bowls in order to make him feel we were doing something

incredibly complex and tricky and there was a lot of fiddling around with the consistency once he'd put it all together – me taste-testing and getting him to add bits of this and bits of that and in the end I'm certain he thought he'd just completed an advanced class in cordon bleu. Just like the old days. I'd had to do that, to make-up for the fact that I had secretly phoned Sarah at the earliest opportunity and begged her to volunteer to make an entree when he phoned her later with the invite. She'd said, "No sweat," still in that strange mood and he'd been okay about it – especially after I'd dragged out the ice-cream making into almost forty minutes of preparation and assembly. Everyone had agreed to come and eight pizzas had been ordered. Steven has been primed to organise some activity for Cameron at the crack of dawn tomorrow so that he won't try and clean up with me – the cleaning up would kill me if he helped. Probably literally, after the duffle bag incident.

I check the time with my fingers and fiddle around with my hair in its unfamiliar good-old-days style. The wine is cold and expensive, the hard metal curl of the corkscrew lies on the bench. The animals have been fed and Fido is sleeping on the foot of my bed, absolutely cactus after an hour of pure heaven when Cameron had thrown the Frisbee for him without pause. And I had such a rush of love and affection because of that Frisbee throwing that I'd spontaneously put my arm around Cameron's waist and after the first shock at the unexpected contact, I'd kissed him back when he'd put his mouth on mine and I'd let him hold my arm as we walked home and I'd started to feel that maybe it would all work out after all.

And now Cameron's coming into the room and winding up his phone call and the buzzer goes loudly so that Fido wakes up barking and the guests are arriving and I feel a bit stupid with my hair all out and falling down my back for the occasion so I check in my pocket for my hair band so that I can tie it up as soon as they've all arrived and seen me looking just like I did in happier days, but Cameron comes over to me on his way to the gate switch

and says, “I’m going to kiss you now,” so I don’t get a fright when his face is suddenly invading mine like I did earlier, and I kiss him back, lips soft and giving, mouth warm, all of me warm and feeling lust not comfort because it is him and it’s all going to be fine.

Sarah and Leigh are here with the antipasto and they make a big, giggling production of Leigh’s fabulous cooking skills and her pathological inability to go anywhere without bringing a plate. Cameron wants to rush into the kitchen for more crockery, but Sarah says it’s all just finger food and napkins so we place the two platters on the coffee table and my mind says thank you thank you for Sarah, while Cameron makes small talk and then dashes off to prime up the CD player. Under the camouflaging busy busy clattering of plastic music covers being shuffled, I ask Sarah where they got the food and how much I owe them. Sarah says, “God love the Safeway deli department,” and I make my face not react at all to the horror of serving up supermarket Italiano-style food. And although I’ve said nothing, nothing at all, both Sarah and Leigh immediately break into fits of laughter. I know they’re laughing at me.

“You’re such a smart-alec,” I say to Sarah, but she’s giggling too much to answer. Then the doorbell buzzes again and while Sarah and Leigh fawn all over Fido and my silky Cat, Steven and Helen and Ryan arrive. There’s lots of sound, feet shuffling and body parts clapping against each other. There’s high happy exclamations and rustling of clothes and more footsteps and voices compete during the catching up between them and Cameron. Sarah brings in two bottles of wine and she and Leigh take out the corks and fill glasses and keep making extravagant comments about the deliciousness of the finger food, then the buzzer goes again and Cameron answers the door and Steven and Helen are over at my side, wanting to know how things are going, and Helen tells me I look beautiful and happy and I feel Steven’s hand lifting up a swatch of my hair and his fingers sieve through it and he says,

“What a ridiculously inappropriate hair-style for a blind woman.”

And then Susan and Ian are in the doorway and I hear Susan's mouth making that quick smooching, sucking sound that is platonic kissing and she is complaining loudly about the late autumn weather,

"... and it's so bloody dark these days!" She says, and there's a tiny funny empty pause as Cameron doesn't answer her and she goes on,

"I hate it getting dark so early, it's the worst thing about winter ... the light all

gone, completely gone by quarter past five. Can you believe it? It's impossible to live with. God I hate the bloody dark!"

And then there's Cameron's voice, low and hard,

"Shut up about the dark, Susan."

And Susan's voice goes up in surprise and the conversation where I am slows down,

"What are you talking about, Cameron? I can talk about the dark, what's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with that is that it's insensitive to Jill, that's what's wrong."

"Insensi ...? Oh. OH. Oh my god, hell, sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to ..."

And then it goes off, the even more effusive apologies,

"I forgot, Jill, I completely forgot. I'm so, so sorry." I can feel the others around me covering up their snickering, and I step back against Steven and stand on his foot, hard, to make him not laugh aloud. I am about to reply to Susan with my usual rotation of phrases, telling her not to worry about it, that people talk in visuals all the time I barely even notice it now, but Cameron speaks first,

"It's a bit fucking late for sorry now, isn't it? I can't believe you would 'forget'."

And this time the stifled laughter around me stops all by itself. Then Susan, who doesn't take criticism lightly, gets defensive,

"Shut up, Cameron! I made a mistake. A simple bloody mistake. I didn't mean anything by it, Jill knows that."

He's not having any of it.

"And how often do you make mistakes like that? How often does poor bloody

Jill have to put up with your foot in mouth? As if she hasn't got enough on her plate without listening to crap like that."

"Hang on," says Sarah.

"Cameron, it's fine, it's not a prob ... "

But it's too late, Susan has reared up, I hear it in her voice,

"Shut UP, Cameron. Jill KNOWS I didn't mean anything by it, don't you Jill? Of course she does ... I have had the most god-awful day dealing with Ian's parents over the seating for the wedding and then I come in here and you attack me over a simple bloody mistake. Who the hell are you to criticise anyway? Where have you been while the rest of us have been here looking after Jill, making sure that she gets meals and laundry done and has a shoulder to cry on? God."

"Looking after her? Looking after her?? Jesus Christ Almighty! Who the fuck is looking after her? She's living here alone in this death trap! She shouldn't be here alone. It's pathetic. She can't even carry a cup of coffee without spilling it, she can't wash her hair by herself because she can't find the frigging shampoo, she can't cook a bloody meal – I had to do everything! She's a walking disaster area and not one of you seems to have the bloody nous to get in here and sort her out. She shouldn't be on her own at all!"

Oh god oh god oh god.

I feel weak and dizzy.

Hot and stifled.

Pathetic.

And it's true, I am pathetic, because I want to sit down and I just can't remember where the chair is.

No one is speaking at all, and I feel Steven's hand around my shoulders and he pushes me down and I must be sitting at eight o'clock, that's where I am,

on nubbly woollen upholstery fabric; and Steven's walk takes him away and across the room then Sarah is kneeling down beside me, or sitting or just leaning over, I don't know which, but I think it's kneeling because I hear her joints crack but I could be completely wrong about that and I probably am. I hear Cameron's voice going on and on, but I don't listen to the words any more, I just hear angry and vicious and Susan's attacking pecking voice and Ian coming in over the top, dismay and anxiety tremors through the sounds he makes, and Cameron's still accusing but there's spite in there, and something else, something secretive and shaming that makes him nasty and that 'pathetic' word comes out again and I don't want to hear and I don't want to listen but even though Sarah is rubbing my back and Leigh's voice is saying, "Stop it," loudly and I won't hear I won't, except I still feel the meaning and it's all bad and pathetic and can't cope and wretched and sad and pitiful and it's me that he is thinking and meaning these things about, it's me.

And then Steven's voice is there quiet and intense and I hear the words that his voice says and it says,

"Shut the fuck up, Cameron, and come outside with me, now."

And Cameron's voice gets louder and then there's scuffling and Steven's words are brutal and loud and strong and the door opens again and there is more scuffling and I hear muffled padded sounds, yelling voices, Cameron's angry voice and shoes scraping and grunting thuds and then the door slams shut and there is breathing, heavy and out of rhythm and I don't want to hear anymore at all, I don't want to hear any of it. Helen puts a glass into my hand and I take a drink of wine but I'm so pathetic that I breathe in and drink at the same time so that the wine goes down the wrong way and I choke and cough and I can't even swallow I'm so pathetic.

Sarah is crying and Helen has taken over rubbing my back and Steven is talking, intense and serious at the door, and I can't hear Cameron's voice anymore. Ryan takes my spare hand in his. Fido rubs against my knees and

then I hear the clippity clippity of high heeled shoes coming towards me and I know that it is Susan and I can't bear the thought of the hysteria of her apologies and explanations and re-hashings of it all and I reel back in my seat in anticipation as she bends low so that her face is level with mine and she says,

"I'm sorry Jill, but it'll be alright. Ian and I are going to go now. I'll call you tomorrow,"

and then she kisses me on the cheek and moves away

and I hear the clippity clippity back to the door

and it opens and their footsteps move through it and away

and the door shuts and they are gone.

I think thank you, Steven. And I am slumped in my chair, and I know Cameron isn't in the room. It's quiet and unmoving now and I feel so stupid and humiliated, sitting here at eight o'clock, the centre of attention with my stupid hair all out and everyone hideously embarrassed for me and remembered words like 'pathetic' and 'wretched' and 'walking disaster area' filling all the spaces around us. Then Steven's feet cross the room back to me and I feel Helen and Leigh and Ryan moving away, backing away and Fido's gone too and Steven is sitting in the eight o'clock chair with me and his hand cups my face and I feel the calluses on his palms and smell cold night air and salt on his fingers and he says,

"It's alright, Jill. He's gone out for a while to cool off. It's fine."

And I say, "I only nearly spilt the coffee because there was water all over the bathroom floor, and I bang into things because there's another person in the house and I'm not used to it and his stuff is everywhere and things get moved and he wanted me to cook for all of you but I'm not safe in the kitchen, you know that, what he said was true, but I am eating okay, mostly, and I've stopped having *Snakes Alive!* meals, but is he right? Should I be living alone? Where can I go? Into a hostel? Is that what I should do? Go into a boarding house or a cottage for disabled people? Would I live better in there? Is that what I should do? Is it?"

“No, no, no,” they say.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” they tell me.

“Of course it’s impossible to suddenly be living with someone.”

“He’s chronically lazy, Jill, everyone knows that, of course you’d be falling over his stuff all the time.”

“He’s behaving like a moron, Jill, don’t listen to anything he’s said.”

“You’re doing amazingly well. Amazingly, wonderfully well.”

“I knew that he thought I was helpless when he first arrived,” I say, because I’m trying to make my woolly brain figure this all out,

“But I just thought he was in shock, I didn’t realise that he kept on thinking it ... You have to tell me the truth, am I really truly making a hash of this?”

“No, no, no, Jill, you’re not. Don’t you think we’d tell you if we thought you were in danger? Don’t you think we would have stepped in and done something if any of us ever thought you weren’t capable? Would your parents stand for you living here alone if they thought it wasn’t workable?”

And that all makes sense, and of course Steven is making sense, and it’s all logical and reasonable, but I don’t know anything anymore and I doubt everything about my life.

Everything.

He slept in our bed. He lay naked beside me. We lay down together. He kissed me and he put his arms around me.

My face is wet and so is Steven’s hand. I’m always bloody crying these days.

“Are you sure? Is that really the truth?” I’m so stupid and pathetic and needy, but I have to keep asking.

“I’ll tell you the truth,” says Sarah, “Cameron is being a complete and utter prick, that’s the truth.”

And I am so absolutely shocked and stunned at Sarah, Sarah saying a swear word, about a person, that my hysteria is completely sidelined, just like

that. Sarah. I am amazed. Sarah never says nasty things about people, never.

“Well, that’s a given,” Steven is saying, “But he’s also pretty mind-whacked by all this ... “

“I knew when we picked him up at the airport, that there was something really screwy about him, the way he was acting,” Sarah tells us.

“But he’d sort of settled down by this afternoon,” I say, calmer now, feeling more solid now, as the new Sarah steps into my consciousness and there’s no room for tears and crying when she’s at the wheel.

”But you could hear it in what he was saying just now, and how he said it,” says Steven, “He is really uncomfortable about all this. Really really messed up.”

“He’s a selfish shit.” That’s Sarah again. I’ve never heard her so mad.

“But how could he sleep with me, in our bed, if all the while he thought I was pathetic?”

I have to ask the worst possible question. The worst possible question.

“Well, he’d have been feeling pretty sorry ... sorry about it all, and ...”

Steven doesn’t finish his sentence. He doesn’t need to.

And it’s great. Thanks Steven. Pity sex now. Just what I needed to know.

Suddenly we all jump as the downstairs gate buzzer blasts into the room and Fido barks and I can’t help it, I cringe against Steven. I cringe into the chair and him. He puts his other arm all the way around me and I get all wrapped up by arms and shirt and strength and I want my sight back, I really really want to see again.

I shove that thought down, stupid thought. I’m in an emergency, I have to focus. My voice is stifled by cloth and person but I tell Steven I can’t face Cameron right now, I know it’s pathetic, but I just can’t and Steven has a handful of my hair and he tells me he’ll sort it out and then he stands up and goes to the intercom, then the phone rings and rings and rings and Sarah is up and at the desk before I can stop her and she yells that she’ll give him the flick tout suite. And Steven’s finished talking on the intercom

and I hear the snick of the gate switch echoing through the speaker and then Sarah's telling Mum that everything's fine, just fine, but that I'm busy with the dinner dramas and Sarah hangs up as Steven opens the front door and Fido's running across the room to bail up his good friend, the pizza boy. I can smell that pizza boy from over here. Boxes and boxes of pizza for dinner. What on earth am I going to do with all this? But I get up and I cross over to the desk for the money I had left there two hours earlier, sitting under the paperweight; but before I can get it the door's shut and the pizza boy is gone. The food's here though. I can feel the heat and smell spices and garlic and onion. I try to give Steven the money but he won't take it and I insist and he says,

"Leave it, Jill."

Then he whistles loudly and calls out to the others being discreet in the kitchen, "Grub's up!" and Sarah guides me over to the chairs and this time I sit on a cushion at one o'clock, close to the toasty warm fire because I'm so so cold now.

Helen and Leigh and Ryan come in and I smell wine with them. Everyone finds seats, Sarah takes the useless antipasto platters into the kitchen and Helen fills a plate for me, and Ryan fills a glass for me and Steven sets it down, I hear the crystal-kissing-wood sound and he says,

"Three o'clock, Jill."

And Helen leans over with my plate and it smells divine and she says,

"I scraped on extra anchovies."

Just the way I used to.

Ryan puts his arm around me and says that Cameron is a stupid bastard and I'm not to think again about any of the dumb things he said. Leigh asks me if I'm alright and Sarah slides me over some cutlery,

"Front and centre."

Fido appears at my elbow and I snuggle him up with one arm and sip my wine. I use my little finger to guide my wine back to three o'clock, but once it's there, I have to keep checking it, because I'm nervous now, I'm not sure

I'm doing anything right. People start eating and I ask for a napkin from the pile that I laid out earlier on the right hand side of the coffee table and one gets put into my hand and I lay it across my knees without any trouble, almost like a valid person.

And no one says anything much at all, apart from those eating together words like,

"Can you pass the ... "

And,

"Try some ... "

And,

"Excuse me, can I have the ... "

Words like that.

We eat. The food is good, and the smell is divine but I don't have much appetite any more. The CD stops playing and there's just the sound of glasses moving and people chewing and cutlery clashing. The silent dinner party. Cameron's words keep on running through my mind. I feel vague and empty. The others start to talk a little, scraps of ordinary conversation, but I don't join in. I don't have the energy to concentrate on following the conversation and waiting for a pause, a proper pause not just a space where the speaker is drawing breath, so that I can contribute without butting in. Without knowing what people's faces are doing, it is difficult to judge when to arrive in a conversation. More than two people talking together is incredibly tricky. I have to concentrate so hard, and even then I misjudge it a lot. Most of my friends know to move to face me when it's my turn, or to use my name a lot, so I know they're directing words to me. Tonight though, no-one uses my name and the talk is casual and slow. It just washes around me. Then Sarah starts snickering, and her laughing is muffled — is she laughing with her mouth full? Then she starts choking and there's that kiss of crystal on wood and I know she's been laughing into her wine. Someone thumps her on the back and I missed what their conversation was about so,

as usual, I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on, but then Helen says, "Okay, what's the joke?" and someone else tells Sarah to spit it out,

"Not literally."

And Sarah says, still laughing,

"Even in the midst of that awful awful row," she says, "Susan still managed to bring up the blasted wedding ..."

I can feel people's heads coming up. The air moves. Helen starts giggling and Steven says, "Not only that, she took a shot at her in-laws as well."

Laughing swells around the table. Sarah starts hiccupping from the wine and Helen says,

"She's like an obsessed mad-woman about that bloody wedding."

Ryan leans across me to get more pizza – I smell it as it floats past, and then there's a slapping sound in front of me and I realise the slice has landed on my plate; he tells us about the four hours he spent yesterday in the suit shop with Ian and Susan, getting fitted for his groomsman outfit. He says that they argued for the entire time about how to stop Ian's winter tones clashing with Susan's summer ones.

"She's a feral nutcase," says Helen.

"I've just thought of the perfect payback for Cameron," says Ryan, "I pull out of the wedding and he gets to be best man!"

Everyone laughs uproariously.

"Let him field the fucking endless emails and whining text messages and have every bloody lunch and dinner turn into a continuous bitch about that shitty wedding."

"A cruel and unusual punishment," says Sarah. "But a good one."

"Oh, God," I say, "Cameron."

I get more pats on the hand then, and they say bad things about Cameron and good things about me until the conversation moves on but I don't travel with it. Instead I stay in my head and I think about what on earth I'm going to do when he comes back, because I don't think I want to confront him or discuss anything or fight it out or express my feelings or anything at all like

that. I just want to get the hell away from him and clear my head of all this. Then Helen leans across and asks me if I'm alright and I tell her that I don't want to face Cameron at the moment, and Helen says, "Come and stay with me tonight, why don't you?"

And I think, maybe.

And Helen says, "Stay for the whole weekend, if you want. Stay as long as you like."

And Steven says, "That's an idea."

And I think, oh, that's far far too tempting.

Then Sarah says, "Why don't you go down to your parents? Good food, lots of attention if you need it, you can stay as long as you want and they'll love it."

And Steven and I together say, "Yes!" because it's a great idea. Cameron won't hassle me if I'm at the farm, and I'll get thinking time because Mum doesn't let me do things anyway. And everyone starts standing up and moving around and being vigorous and active and there's a discussion about where I will stay tonight and how I'll get to the farm and what to do about all the food and that's when I remember the home-made ice cream in the freezer.

Even after they've heard the story of the ice cream making, no one has room for dessert.

Then everyone wants to help with the clearing up, but Sarah, who knows that I can't have people putting things away willy nilly decides that she and Leigh will clear up, and I will pack for my trip; I'll stay at their house tonight, Helen will drive me to the station in the morning and Mum or Dad can meet me there; Steven will come down and collect me whenever I want to return. Helen and Ryan leave then, with boxes of divided-up pizza, and Steven stacks the dishwasher while Leigh packs up the rest of the food. I help her to make a special parcel up for Steven, the entire bowl of ice

cream wrapped in layers and layers of newspaper. Leigh asks if he will get through all of it and I tell her yes, because his mother doesn't do desserts.

I go through my wardrobe while Sarah's sorting out the kitchen, and I pack a bag of clothes and my walking boots and some Braille books and my phone charger and toiletries and Fido's harness and lead. When Sarah's all done and I have refused to double check the clearing up because I know it'll be fine, we pack my Cat fluff into her hamper along with her own personal blanket and a separate basket of food and milk for her to have on her vacation at Sarah and Leigh's house.

Steven checks that all the lights and equipment are turned off, that the fire is definitely turned off, that the windows and doors are locked and we gather my possessions and the animals and the spare food and the four of us walk down to Sarah's car. When Fido's in the front seat, on Leigh's knee, and my Cat is bitter and resigned in her hamper in the back with me and the car's exhaust smoke smells strong and toxic in the cold night air, Steven leans in the window and puts his hand on the back of my neck and says he'll call me in the morning, and suddenly I'm scared that Cameron will come to Sarah's house or he'll phone me or something and I'll have to speak to him and I really truly don't know what there is to say. Steven says not to worry about it.

"But where is he?" I ask. "He's got to come back some time."

"Well he won't come near you tonight," he tells me.

And Sarah says, "No, he'll be sitting somewhere with one packet of frozen peas on his eye and another on his jaw."

And then I realise that the salt smell on Steven's hands was blood and the moisture on his hands was blood and I don't say anything, but I put my hand up to his and I squeeze his fingers and I'm thinking in my head, "Oh god, oh god, how did my life fall down like this?"

Cemetery

Mum and Dad and I go up to the cemetery on Thursday. They've been suggesting jaunts and treats for the past four days, but I've said no to everything. I've mostly just sat around the house, walked with Dad around the farm, had Mum screen all my calls, eaten acres of food and listened to my opera CD's. But it's John's anniversary today, and of course we're all here together.

Our cemetery is not in the town, but we have to drive through there to get to it, because we live on the other side. There is no church out this way, just pasture and cows and crops. When someone dies a cavalcade of cars travels slowly from the town, all the way out here. It's always incredibly sad, that long line of cars, driving to nowhere. The cemetery is on land that was donated by one of the local farmers years and years ago, four generations, at least. It sits on the side of a hill in the middle of fresh air and slow-moving cattle. I hear a diesel engine beating a rhythm over to the west. There are lines of ancient conifers that were planted as a windbreak, their piney smell is strong and the car loses sound as Dad drives over the dropped and dying spines. As I get out of the car the wind is freezing cold, and just like at every funeral I've been to here, the conifers aren't doing their job of keeping it out.

I lean on Dad's arm, because the ground is soft and muddy from the rain. We walk the path through the rows of graves and my boots sink into the mushy earth. Each step I take I gather more and more mud. It clings to the soles of my shoes. My feet feel three sizes bigger than normal. Each step becomes harder.

"If I could see," I think to myself ...

Which is a bad thing to think.

I almost never think, "If I could see ... "

But I make a guilty exception,

If I could see, I'd just step over to the side of the path, to a tussock, or a lump of wood, or a bit of concrete on the side of a grave and I would scrape the mud from the sides of my boots, from the soles of my boots, from the backs of the heels.

But I don't do that.

Because I can't see.

Dad tells me where we are and when we're passing a grave that we know. Charlie Knowles, who owned a neighbouring farm when Mum and Dad were first married; Mum's parents; her brother Joseph; my cousin Steph; Mr Maltese's father, who is buried in Sicily, but has a headstone here, for the Malteses to visit. And then John's grave. Back to back with Mum's great aunt Gillian.

"Someone's been up," says Mum. "They've left some wattle for him."

And I do the bad thing again and I imagine the grave as it must look, and I picture a spray of wattle, luminous green, lying across the grey speckled concrete cover.

"I'll just put our flowers at the top," says Mum, talking mostly to herself. I hear the jam jar being moved and I know she'll be throwing away the dead flowers from her last visit, and I smell the new ones as she unwraps them. I hear Dad pouring water into the jam jar from the bottle he bought. The wind cuts through us as we stand there, it makes strands of my hair fly across my face, it makes my eyes water and my shoulders hunch into my coat. My ears start to ache, and Mum is murmuring something softly to herself as she stands still beside me. At home on the small table in the hall there is a china plate with sea shells, and the husked armour of a small crab and round skipping stones; John's treasures, found on the beach at Port Fairy, where we used to have our summer holidays every year.

Mum's still murmuring. Dad doesn't say anything. I wonder what they're thinking. Remembering. Imagining what might have been. I think of the

three of us, older now and changed and John young. I think of twinship and if we would have looked alike when we were adults. I think of Mum and Dad seeing his face in mine for ever after. Then Dad moves closer to me and says,

“Pick up your feet, Jill.”

And I lift my right foot and Dad bends down and holds my ankle in his two hands like it's a pony's hoof and he stands to the side of me so I can't kick and he guides my foot forward and presses the sole of my boot onto a hard pointed surface, John's gravestone, and he scrapes my foot back and forth forth and back getting all the clagged-up mud off.

“Now the other one.”

I lift my left foot and we do the same to it. Then there's a rustling of cloth, and a clinking sound, metal against rock, concrete. Dad's scraping the mud off the gravestone. Pocket knife? Screwdriver? Could be anything he had in his pocket. Then he's finished and he takes my arm and we turn our faces into that miserable icy filthy headwind and push our bodies back up the path and out of there.

Hate that fucking place.

It's still and quiet at home. When Mum's at work Dad spends more time in the house with me, but mostly I'm on my own. I lie around a lot. There's nothing to do but think of why I'm here and what I'm going back to. Then Cameron arrives. Mum lets him in and we make small talk with her and then we walk up to John's hill. We walk without touching. I have my sensor stick and he doesn't try to take my arm or my hand. We sit on the side of the hill facing the water. Cameron will have a view of the trees Dad and I planted the day after I told them I was losing my sight, and we worked in the light. The trees have grown, and Dad's planted more here and there since then, and of course there are the mature trees we planted after John died. I listen to the sound of the leaves in the wind. Cameron moves beside me. He swallows. He breathes in and his lips part, he's about to speak. His lips close again on a sigh. His body leans back and down and he's lying on his back

now. His clothes and muscles rustle. That breath in again, those lips opening, that nothing.

The trees are never still, except maybe on hot hot dry days. But even then there's always something going on. I feel the house over to my left. The width of solid brick and rendered plaster, the warmth of rugs and carpets curtains and upholstered furniture. I think of my room upstairs and my soft bed. I think of my old worn floor rug and the lines of books on the far wall by the window. I think of all those pages thickening the space and strengthening the walls. I think of school books and uni texts all squashed together, of novels and philosophy side to side, and my school stories of dormitories midnight feasts schoolgirls playing tricks on hapless mistresses, I think of all the fun in my *Girls' Own Adventure* books filling the high shelves in the middle, all worn and bursting out of their covers.

All the girls in those books were terribly active. They went hiking and camping they swam and explored. They solved crimes and caught crooks and rode ponies everywhere. Those girls sorted out the dishonest prefect and the wrongfully expelled fifth former. They all *did* things. Did the right things. My heroes.

Cameron still breathes in and opens his mouth and shifts and sighs and says no words.

Some of those girls even flew planes. One girl and her brother were involved in a rescue on the fens with a high-powered motorboat. There were treacherous mountain passes to negotiate and trouble to be averted at the skating rink and in the Vicar's garden at the village fete.

Cameron goes still.

They always wore gym tunics and blazers or jodhpurs and blazers, but for a party or event they'd be in a full skirted frock.

"I can't do this." Says Cameron suddenly. The skin of his hands rubs against the skin of his face.

"I can't do this. I can't do it. I can't. I want to, but I can't."

I put my face up to the sky. There's no sunlight around, but I turn up to it anyway.

"I thought I could, I wanted to, but ..."

Past tense already, I think.

"I love you." He says.

And I love you too, I think dutifully, wondering why girls were flying planes in my 1930's books and by the 1950's were grovelling over vacuum cleaners, in not dissimilar frocks?

"I can't do this. I really can't do this. You're too changed. You're angry. You need too much from me. I'm sorry, I'm really really sorry. I wish I could but ..."

"But you can't. Right. Got it."

"I feel like you don't need me, me personally."

What I need, I think, is for blazers to come back into fashion, so that I could always be stylish in something with pockets.

"I can't do it," he says, "Because it's too hard."

Jesus. I turn to him, surprised. The truth.

"I don't have the ..."

Guts? Intestinal fortitude? Longevity? Nuts? Balls? Spine?

"I thought I loved you, and I did, I do ... but I ... I think I loved *us* more."

I stop chewing through his body parts, surprised. Gob-smacked really. So surprised because he's right. He's exactly right, and the awful awful thing is that I realise that what he's said is true for me as well.

I am so sad.

God I'm sad.

My face collapses from its hard lines and set expression of closed studied boredom.

I thought that too, I think. I thought I really really loved you, but instead I loved *us*. I want to cry because it's true, I loved *us* more than I loved him. I did. I did. And he's cruel for saying it out aloud, and for only figuring it out

now when I'm completely fucked and on my own in this shitty nightmare, but it's so true and Christ, imagine if I hadn't gone blind and I'd spent the rest of my life with him? Jesus fuck. Jesus.

He leaves after that. Goes. Nothing else to say, really. I get hugged. I get patted and my hair gets pushed away from my face. I get my mouth kissed. I get held tightly. I get more sorry and regret. I get an itinerary of when and how he'll get his things from my apartment. I get a time and date for when he'll drop off his keys.

I get it all.

He goes.

I stay.

It hurts and Mum will be up soon to fuss and flutter, but I cry to myself anyway before she gets here. I cry and cry because I'm useless now, and she doesn't come. And I feel self-pity and loneliness and a sense of reprieve. I don't understand. I cry again. I'm not even that sad any more, but I still cry. I loved that fucking life. That fucking lie. I lift my head back and search for sunlight but there's none because it's so overcast and the wind is cold and my hands are numb and my cheeks are frozen and I'm out of the lie and it's onwards and upwards back on the horse into the fray Excelsior! and all that. I know it's a reprieve, which is almost the worst thing about it, it's a reprieve.

No-one comes for me, I feel the day leaving the sky, I've had enough, Christ I've had enough. I get up and count myself on tired tired feet down John's hill and I bloody trip and fall and I roll a bit before I stop the momentum with an arm flung out and I've banged that fucking knee all over again and it's like that dumb nursery rhyme all over again, it's every hideous thing all over again

Jack and Jill went up the hill, to fetch a pail of water

We hated them calling him Jack because we weren't twins like that. The rhyme sings in my head while I lie on the side of his hill in the darkening day and rub my bruised knee. It sings in my head as though it's true even though it's not right because we didn't go up together at all

I took him up some of Mum's lemon barley water, he was ploughing

Autumn

Going round and round

Boring job

On the tractor

Round and round, clockwise

Keep the furrows straight

I went up the hill

Not even a big one

Just a rise really

I went up the hill to take him a bottle of iced barley water

Dad laid up on the veranda in the sun

Watching with impatient, twitching hands

Broken leg laid out before him

A toe bent wrong in the setting of the leg

It'd never be right again

We didn't know that then

I went up the hill squinting into bright gold light to take him a bottle of water and climbed up above him so he could see I was there when he went around for the turn

It happens all the time

A hill

The weight of the machine

The angle too much

Or an unexpected bump

People killed in tractor accidents all over Australia all the time just about
the most common farm death each year always a few just a risk of the job

That's all

Dad watching on the veranda

I carry the bottle with icy drips down the side

John frowning and hot

Concentrating on the lines, the lift of the plough, the smooth digging and
turning of the earth smelling damp

The angle of the blades and taking the turn too tight and the hill the weight
of the engine the chassis the cab the wheels themselves the heavy tyres too
probably tipped him up and over

Jill went up the hill

Jack fell down and broke his crown

When Dad got up there on metal crutches through the ploughed paddock
knee deep in dirt and earth

Jill came tumbling after

With torn jeans

Torn knees

His chest cut open

Rib crushed

Bubbled bloodied breathing

Dad with the cast leg cast out to the side
Can't bend

Torn jeans
Torn knees

Jill came tumbling after

We never called him Jack
Just a school nickname when we arrived together
Brother and sister different eggs same birthday
Not good with birthdays now
Nor torn knees torn jeans
Ploughed earth isn't great
Falls are bad
Don't like legs in casts
The sunshine's okay, too beautiful to damage
Accidental deaths aren't good
The Darwin Awards each year when I could read print, telling amusingly of
freakish deaths really pissed me off
John with the gear stick thrust into his chest and his head so knocked
around he's covered in blood and brain
Crown broken
The king is dead

Jill came tumbling after

He broke his crown
I wasn't ploughing that day
Had a Chinese history essay to write about the Boxer Rebellion and Mum
said you'd better do it because it'll be late planting any minute as soon as
the rains come properly and then there'll be the netball finals and the hem

on your flower girl dress to sort out and all that hoo ha and no time for anything else, John can plough, won't hurt him to do it

Jack and Jill went up the hill and Jack fell down and he broke his crown and Jill came a tumbling after

After

Afterwards I heard them talking and Dad said if only he hadn't gone into the stockyards after that ruddy calf and had the mother fall on him and his leg broken in the crush and it should have been him on the tractor it should have been him and what's going to happen to the farm now cause Jill's too smart to stay on the land, bright kid like that, she'll go into some big job in the city that's what she'll do and why shouldn't she? She should be going for broke if she can get into the uni or whatever but Jeez it's quiet around the place now

Sold that cow

And the calf

Didn't get much for them

Didn't care

Dad crying out aloud and Mum too and me tumbling after

At the funeral when people are milling around and just waiting and hovering I feel stupid and useless because it's much worse for Mum and Dad

People talk to me and I speak normally

Steven is crying in the rows behind us and I can make small talk with the relatives and friends

At school I just put my head down and work until everyone stops tiptoeing around me and I'm just like myself again

I try to make noise in the house because we all know it's not meant to be like this but two are a hundred times louder than one

I stop taking off my boots when I come in because he never did and one day
Mum's going to yell at me for that too
I help Dad and we work like the blazes
I'm never allowed to drive the tractor and we plant trees on the side of that
hill so it won't be ploughed again
I go to the city as soon as I'm eighteen, like they expected
I get myself involved with suburban boys who could never ever live in the
country or drive tractors
I refuse to buy a car with a stick shift
I keep coming home to the farm because I love it but my life is in Melbourne
like it should be
We just keep going on and on but
No-one forgets and he's still gone
For good and all

This is why I'm friends with Susan
My best friend at uni
She knows nothing about my old life
The farm's an oddity that she visits once on a long weekend in second year
She thinks it's terribly quaint
Cameron a boy I meet and go out with hints that he'd like it too
He says he'd like to see that side of me
But it's only in small doses that he'd like the me from there
So I set up my Melbourne life as separate from the farm where I could be
both people it works beautifully for a time I have my two worlds and I get to
be both of myself

But then Steven muscles in and makes friends with my friends and talks
about the past and obviously disappears down to our neck of the woods to
help in the busy season and makes everyone curious about our life there and
then he throws parties in the old shearing shed on his parent's place and

turns the whole damned district into a place on the map for people I wanted
to keep out of there
They sort of blend in
It's sort of okay
Mum and Dad love it
They love it when I have friends down
They love us filling up the house
And Steven and I get to see Dad staring amazed at people's clothes, the get-
up on them, at the blatant displays of ignorance about stock and gates and
trying to make pets out of working dogs and we skate around conversations
where people admire the stand of tall trees on the edge of John's hill

People blandly ask if I'm an only child and most of the time I just say yes I
don't want to go into the whole story then later I find that a few of them
know about John because Steven has told them and that's okay
So long as I don't have to go through it all I don't care
They're kind
And sympathetic
And some of them too have horror stories of their own behind them but I
refuse to bond with someone over my dead brother

In my head he's always a boy and now I'm old enough to be his mother
I told this to Steven one day not long back when I could see and he said yeah
it's sort of creepy and odd and I say yeah it is too and that was that
conversation over with
I don't like falling over
Or lemon barley water
Or running down hills anymore ever more

It all hurts
out here in the dark
dark in me, dark in the world

Cameron blindness John it's too much to feel

I breathe in the cold and dark

then I get up and throw out some sounds and find my sense of direction,
find the house and start walking my way back.

Back to Work

I go into work. It has taken me an hour and a half to wash and dress and eat a third of a muesli bar. Fido is in harness. Steven picks me up on his way into the city and uses my disabled car sticker to park in Spring Street. He swears he won't leave his car in this prime spot all day, not at all, that would be immoral; then he walks me down to my office. We go up in the elevator. When people first brought me into work, when I first went blind, I used to make a game of finding my own way around, of identifying which buttons to push, of clickety clacking with my stick up to reception. It was my grand production. My Look How Well I'm Coping performance. I was really good at acting blind, particularly when I had an audience. Particularly when I thought I could control it. Particularly when I thought it really truly couldn't wouldn't last, really positively wasn't actually happening to me. But I can't be bothered with all that now, the fiction is too hard to maintain. I'm drained of energy to fight this reality. And now I'm fronting up at chambers, anxious and overwhelmed. I'm only in here because Steven and Sarah made me come. Over red wine in a booth at a hotel in Richmond, the night I got back from the farm and a week after Cameron flew out of the country; they said:

"What else are you going to do all day?"

And,

"If you don't go back, at least a couple of days a week, then you'll lose it all and you won't be able to go back."

And,

"You, of all people, need a job."

And,

"If you stay home all day, I doubt the *Snakes Alive!* factory could keep up with the demand."

Steven's such a smart arse.

He wants to know if I am planning to go through my savings and then live off my parents for the rest of my life?

He's not just a smart arse, he's obvious too. I want to turn on him and snap and snarl, but Sarah puts her hand on my arm and says in a sensible voice, "Give it three months, Jill. If you truly can't do it after that, then we'll find something else for you to do."

I whined at them, but particularly at Sarah, who's a bit of a soft touch, and told her that it took so long to do anything, that I would be permanently behind in my work.

"Then delegate," interrupts Steven.

I told him that my work was highly specialised, and that if I could delegate then it would no longer be a specialised field.

Sarah said to just give it a go; I might find that there are some things I can palm off.

I told them I got so tired, that I wouldn't be able concentrate very well and I was afraid of making mistakes.

"Then get someone to double check it all for you," said Steven, in a *Play School* voice. I hear him drinking his wine and then swirling the wine in the glass – I can feel his arm moving in a slow circular motion, then he drinks again. Savours. Swallows. He seems to be drinking a lot these days. It's funny, but I thought when I went blind and then fell in that heap, that I would be the one turning to the bottle, but I haven't. I never liked getting drunk before, but now it fills me with terror – being unsteady and blind would be foul – but then again, oblivion would be nice.

And seductive too.

I quickly break that thought, and I go back to our discussion and my whining. I tell them about what is almost my worst fear about going back to my job, I tell them that I was the person that everyone else used to come to, and now I had to turn around and ask them for things. Things like,

"Where's my coffee cup?"

And,

“Can you read me that page?”

And,

“Please check my spelling.”

Sarah holds my hand,

“I know, Sweetie, but it’s just until you get the hang of the new equipment. You’ll find a way around all this.”

Steven snorts through his nose, like Dad does at the sales when someone says his stock looks rough,

“Point One,” says Steven, in a bored, I-can’t-believe-I-have-to-state-the-bleeding-obvious voice,

“Why am I not surprised that you not being in control is your worst fear? Falling down a flight of stairs, getting mugged in broad daylight, walking through a plate glass window, stepping in front of the traffic, those are genuine fears that would be absolutely reasonable and understandable, but it seems they are nothing compared to the terror you feel at having to ask some poor bastard to pass you the sugar. You never cease to amaze me, Jill. You’re a scream.”

I say nothing. Jeez he shits me at times.

Sarah makes an odd muffled sound, I ask her if she’s okay. She tells me she’s fine. Steven butts in again,

“And Point Two: Just Get Over It. Point Three: Jesus Christ, Jill, it won’t kill you to ask someone for something.”

No hugs or Sweeties from Steven, just swearing and abuse, “Fuck, they’re the people you work with, they’re the bloody staff! Helping you is what they’re supposed to do! Jesus.”

“But I don’t like asking people to help me.” I tell him, whispering at him. “I don’t like doing that.”

This time he really laughs, not just snorting.

“Gosh, we’d never have picked that.”

“But I don’t.”

“Why not? Fuck, just get over it. You ask them. They tell you. End of story. Why do you have to make everything so fucking hard for yourself?”

Sarah doesn't say anything. Steven drinks his wine noisily. I sit there, like a blind lump on my side of the booth but I don't say anymore, because he's right. He's right and I'm wrong. But I don't want to face work.

Except I have to.

I have to go back and see if I can salvage anything from my old career, because I can't be a farmer, that's for sure. My couple of weeks spent at the farm avoiding Cameron and practising my spatial alertness had shown me that. It was the stock. You can't work alone with animals when you're blind and that's a fact.

I take a sip of my wine, the first lift of the glass almost to my chin is at the same old sighted-me speed, it's at the last few moments that it all slows down; I sometimes put my other hand up, to steady the glass and guide it to my mouth. Steven and Sarah are waiting so I tell them they are right, and I'm scared spitless, but they are still right and yes I'll go back to work. Poor me.

The air moves as Steven's glass lifts and his throat swallows and he says good and Sarah says I'm terribly brave and I feel, for a moment, that I am brave after all. Then Steven says better make it tomorrow, he's got a light day on and will be able to drive me in and I say,

"No, no, no, no, no."

And he says, "Yes."

And I say it's too soon, I'm not organised, I have to build up my courage, and Steven says better not to have too much time to think about it, and Sarah says, "Do it now, Jill, don't wait, it'll just get worse otherwise."

And,

"Wear your straight skirt and the box jacket."

So even though the fear is a solid block in my chest, in my diaphragm, I give in because what the hell, it doesn't matter much anyway and who cares

because it's going to be god-awful at home and it'll be the same at work too. The whole lot's just a mess, so I might as well be in the office.

I listen to them organise their time and mine to get me dressed and cleaned up and functional and into the office and I buy us all another round of drinks against their protests, and I do that successfully because I can walk the three steps to the bar. I can feel if there are bodies in the way that I might bump into, and bars in pubs are high so they're in easy touching reach of hands and the barman always kindly brings my order to our table. By the time the drinks are paid for and the booze-hound leaning next to me at the bar has been tossed a few crumbs about blind life we're all completely agreed on my return to work so all's right in the world and Sarah introduces a subject much closer to our hearts: Susan and the drawn-out saga of her drama-laden nuptials. I spark up a bit then. Susan's total turn around is hideous, but also strangely fascinating. Sarah says I'm not the only one who's been going on ten k walks by the Yarra and around the Tan track in order to help Susan lose those extra kilos for the wedding. Sarah said she wouldn't mind the walks so much, if it wasn't for having to listen to the endless barrage of complaints and meaningless trivia about the whole shebang that Susan goes on and on with. I told Sarah to take her ipod and to wear just one earphone, secretly, and only pretend to listen to Susan. Steven said just cut to the chase and tell Susan to shut the fuck up. Sarah thanked us for our suggestions, and said that at least she was getting fit.

Then we clamber over each other to tell our Awful Susan stories and after half an hour of bitching Steven decides that we are giving too much column space to Susan and from now on we should just each select our best Awful Susan story, tell it and then move on to happier subjects. We all agree on this and toast each other a little tipsily. Well, I don't really toast anyone, I just raise my drink over what I think is the centre of the table and hope that someone will notice and clink the glass before it gets embarrassing.

Later, when they drop me off at my house, and I realise that I am facing the office tomorrow, I cling to Sarah when she gives me her usual hug goodbye. I am suddenly scared because she is leaving me to go home to her own house, and that in a few moments I will have to go inside and go to bed and then tomorrow I will have to face the day and my once-loved career. I won't be playing at being the brave blind woman toughing it out at the office; I will have to go in there and actually try and do my job. Sarah hugs me back and offers, again, to stay the night to come into work with me to hold my hand to make it all better to be my companion and friend nursemaid and mother. But I don't take her up on it. I stop hugging her so tight. I wear a brave rictus smile. I know I have to save her for emergencies. I tell her thanks and I promise to call if I need her and that I'll get a good night's sleep. I use my stick and I tappety tap my way along the path and veer too far left at the foot of the stairs and I feel the pot of geraniums through my sensor stick, and Steven's voice calls.

"Just a bit to your right." And I grit my teeth, even though he's helping me, and I wave my hand backwards at them sitting in the car, windows down, watching me. I make it to my door, and when I get inside I fall into a chair and cling to the pets, and then get up and set the alarm for early and go to bed and worry all night long, I lie awake until four a.m. and wake up again at six thirty and cry self pitying tears because when I open my eyes I realise that it's all still happening.

Steven drives me into the city and doesn't say anything about my eyes which I can feel are swollen and puffy, he tells me my suit looks normal and my make-up is on straight. I believe him. He rubs my back while we stand in the elevator and he guides me through reception and into my office. He asks Vivienne at the front desk to get Brian to come in and he takes me to my chair. He tells Brian to bring in all the files on the last thing I was working on, and organises Vivienne to bring me a hot drink and the office diary and get me up to date with everything that's happened since I've been gone. He

settles Fido on the floor in the corner and fills a water bowl for him. Then he kisses me on the cheek, rubs my back again and leaves. He's coming back for me at lunchtime.

Vivienne is good, although she sounds a bit stressed. I ask her if it's me that's the problem and she says,

"No. No. Not at all."

"Oh, it's Robert," I say. Of course. I can feel him pulsing in the air around her. "What's he been up to? Trouble at school?"

"Yes! He's been a complete monster. I had no idea what it was all about. We were worried he was taking something. His school work dropped right off, he almost failed his chemistry exam. We didn't know what to do about him."

Poor kid. Probably realised he doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps. I tell her not to worry, and maybe she should take him to the careers person at the school .

"But ... that's what we did," she says, surprised, "It turned out he didn't want to go into medicine. His father was upset, of course, at first, but ... How did you know?" She's stopped flipping through folders. She's quite still.

"Just a guess." I tell her.

She says nothing for a moment, then starts moving again, shuffling papers. She breathes all the way in, then tells herself aloud that it'll all work out and starts going through my mail, quickly and thoroughly. She tells me all the details of what's going on with my briefs. She's completely prepared because Steven rang her a few days ago and told her I was coming back to work this week. He's such a know-all. She also gives me her personal opinion on how the office generally is travelling, and reminds me how long I've got on my various deadlines. I go by her timeline, she's rarely wrong. So I send Brian back out for more files and then the three of us sit down and work out a new timetable for the next fortnight. We decide to start work on the submissions, no time-frame on them. Brian has done the research, I'll

check it over and then we'll file them with the court. I send Brian out to the storeroom again for a new box of files and Vivienne suggests we organise another table for my room – I can't have papers and boxes piled up on the floor like I used to. We check the court documents for the dates we've got coming up and when Brian finishes lugging in the files Vivienne leaves and he and I set to work. Brian reads aloud from his notes pretty much all morning. I type in Braille and keep sending him in and out to look up citations and to double check the notes I'd made previously against the relevant authorities. I want to look things up on my computer, but I'm still not completely confident with the new program, and I'm really slow with it, so instead, I hand over my desk to Brian and he does the keyboarding. More reading aloud. By about twelve o'clock his voice is starting to crack and we have found an anomaly in the earlier research, and I realise this will involve reaching back through more and more authorities. Brian keeps asking me if I'm sure there really is an anomaly. And I keep telling him that I am. He's getting frustrated. I tell him this sort of thing happens all the time. He knows it does. I shouldn't have to tell him this. He sighs. I want to sigh too, half the work is now redundant, more than half. I can feel his heavy breathing. I tell him that we must have just missed something earlier. He suggests we clarify it. A paralegal doesn't suggest I could be so wrong. Brian would never ever, in my Eyes Open days, have suggested I clarify anything like this. I rub my face and then I tell him we'll double check. I make him read the article again. I feel my way across the pages of Braille notes I had made. I ask him to re-read a paragraph. I stop him half way, there it is, we will have to re-do it. The reasoning is faulty. He doesn't say anything. He still doesn't believe me. I want to snap at him. I want to say I'm blind not stupid. I want to say that I still know my work. I don't say anything. Reading aloud for three and a half hours would be tiring. I give him a break. I send him out to do some of his own work and I tell Vivienne to keep visitors away and I call to Fido who jumps up into my lap. I lean back in my office chair and stare towards the window where the view used to be and I put on my

thinking cap and go back over all the information again, and try to work my way through the problem.

At one o'clock Steven arrives to take me to lunch, but I tell him I'm too busy. He sends Brian downstairs for sandwiches and then tells him to go out for his own lunch and to take Fido with him. Brian doesn't like dogs much, but he does what he's told, poor bastard. I'll have to do something about him. Maybe find something a bit more responsible or interesting to do, to balance out the monotony. I put it on my to-do list, then Steven and I, we sit at my desk and eat and he makes me go through everything I've done this morning. I feel my notes and give him a précis of all my activities. He asks me what was easy to do and what was hard, he wants to know what was time-consuming and what was quick. That makes me laugh,
"Nothing was quick."

"You know what I mean," he says, "What went at the same pace as it used to, before you went blind."

"Nothing." I tell him. "Everything takes forever."

"There must be something that has stayed the same. Some process that hasn't changed."

"Only my analysis," I tell him, as I try to eat without smearing my lipstick, but it's hard to bite without using your lips.

"What analysis?"

"The part where Brian says, 'What case relates to this issue on Section 51 (xxxix)? And I would say, 'that's Hingle v the Commonwealth (1936) CLR 137 per Mason CJ.' And Brian would go and get it and then we'd go back to dull plodding and reading aloud and painfully slow note-taking."

"But were you right? Was Hingus vs. The Commonwealth the one you wanted?"

"Hingle. Yes."

Our chewing is loud in the quiet without words. The traffic downstairs is no longer white noise, but there are many individual cars churning up and down

Collins Street. Vivienne's phone rings and I hear her secretarial voice, polite and distant. The elevator bell rings and there are sudden loud men's voices in the foyer.

"What's the most important part of your job?" asks Steven.

"Sourcing the precedents, and then matching them to the desired outcome in each specific case; um, finding the relevant judicial authorities plus analytical authorities; that sort of thing ... it's a bit hard to explain."

I put my sandwich down and rub my eyes. I rub my eyes carefully, so as not to smudge more make-up. I rub my eyes, even though they've done nothing all day, just shown me a grey, misty light and indecipherable dark shapes.

"So, if you could sort out the precedents for Hinges vs. The Commonwealth ... "

"Hingle."

"Hingle. So if you could sort out him ..."

"Them."

"Them. So if you could find the precedents for them, then that means you can do the most crucial part of your job, yes?"

"Maybe."

Steven's body shifts as he leans over the desk. I hear paper tearing. He's opening more food. He's like a dog around mealtimes. Always ravenous.

"Maybe I can do it, but I will have to take on a lot less work, it's slow though. Really slow."

"Jill?"

He's eating something squishy and soft.

"Is that custard you've got?" I ask him.

"Mille feuille," he tells me, "French snot block, not a patch on your mother's; there's one there for you."

"No thanks." Too messy.

"Jill, you've done this job for years and years, you won't lose those skills."

"Maybe," I tell him. "But it could easily all get pushed out of my head because I'm using most of my brain cells for finding my toothbrush every

morning and knowing how to boil the kettle. I'm using up a lot of brain power just existing."

"You'll be right. Just take your time."

"I don't think I have a lot of time, actually. Because I really have to get this submission finished, and get it right, because if I don't, then no-one is going to send me any work again. And until I do that I won't know if I am capable of making this happen. I may have to get a reader until I get a whole lot quicker at the computer aid program, and get my main reference files translated into Braille or voice activated, and that probably wouldn't be viable until I know whether or not I can do this successfully."

"Just do this one brief. Just do this one brief with Brian reading, and either get us to help on the weekend or hire some student to read to you, someone that's familiar with the terminology, and just get through this one."

"Yeah." Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I wipe my mouth with the napkin. The napkin I remembered to tuck into my sleeve so that I wouldn't lose it – another brain cell used and wasted, on a bloody napkin – and I find my bag, second drawer, and take out my lipstick and smooth it on, and ask Steven to check me for smudges and crumbs, and then I tell him I'll be ready to be collected at six. He says goodbye and she'll be right and then I go back to my computer and make dot point notes with my voice about what I have to do for the rest of the day and the rest of the week and in the thick of all this, I don't think about Cameron at all.

Opera

Fido and I kick back on the balcony, listening to Maria Callas belting out something merciless in Italian. I never never liked opera before. I couldn't get into the wailing and weeping, the gut-wrenching holding of the high notes. I loathed the over-blown fuss and histrionics. I hated the carry on. But there's something about those voices, the blending and soaring. The way they dip and fall but never land; the way they slide effortlessly up the scale, or end properly precisely without losing tone or strength or dropping the note where it's not meant to be.

I think I love it so, because those pure voices glide through sound and emotion like instruments themselves, which is why I prefer to listen to the operas in other languages, languages which I do not speak. The English is distracting, I start looking for the intellectual meaning, for the story in there. Voiced sounds flying through the air in a foreign language means that I just listen to that alone without trying to decipher meaning. I just follow the sound, the emotion. I slide right along with it as it climbs and falls and gets absorbed physically in my body in my bones. Maria Callas hitting me right in the chest, aching and searing through my breast bone. When Callas hits that top note in the *Volta Sola* I press my fingers to my chest and there in me is a trembling a fluttering a resonance. It is remarkable. Involuntary. Like a shiver of cold a tingle of fear a rush of desire.

As Callas swings into *La Traviata* I follow it with my insides, and then brace myself as my blurred Cat springs suddenly into my lap. I'm not startled. Did I hear her? But who hears a cat gliding across the floor?

Fido's head lifts from where he's been resting on my foot but he doesn't get up, he knows better than to get between Cat's silky sensuous soft and her snuggling. He wasn't startled either.

I raise my hand and I place it directly unerringly, without even positioning myself properly, onto the centre of my Cat's back and the sunlight falls onto us both. Her fur is hot already, she must have been sitting nearby in a patch of sunlight all along, just waiting for me to stop fidgeting and settle down. My fingers automatically naturally so easily sink into the fluff of her short fine fur and I rub her shoulders I massage her spine I stroke heated fur from the top of a tiny skull all the way down to the tip of her tail. I feel like Gomez Addams, and the way he adored Morticia, from her neck all the way down her arms to her fingertips. My blurred Cat's purring is deep and rhythmic, I dig my fingers in and give her a deep tissue massage. The sun shines down on us. Callas sings on and I feel it and my Cat feels it and she starts purring on the in breath as well as the exhale. Fido has fallen asleep on my foot. The purring trembles through my fingers, it sends subtle vibrations through my legs where she sits, it resonates in my hands. Is it the sound? Or the feel?

I close my eyelids and the sun heats my face. Winter sun warms the three of us as we sit outside together, safe from the wind here on my protected balcony. The CD has run its course. My notebook is on the table. There are notes in there from work – they're on the left hand pages of the book, the notes about my life are on the right:

Brian re-check Mercer brief?

Look up case notes 13.4: 1998 to 2002

Check margin notes

Section 41 (xxvi) ???

Dean brief

Vivienne – new reader Monday

Ph Janey: re-fitting dresses

Dinner Sarah Friday

Ph Ian between 7 & 10 only

Steven's mother's birthday – florist NOT Deb in Colac

I run my fingers over these messages, reading through my hands. Reading in the dark. I think of all the work I have to do. I think about not doing it at all, and then I think about doing nothing but navigate my way around this apartment for the next forty years. I think about Cameron, back in Asia now. Still phoning me up. Still sending me cards and letters, the writing translated into Braille for me by someone he knows in Manila. My fingers read his letters for me. Letters of sadness and guilt. Letters of worry and pity. Letters of regret and apology.

I reply to some of his letters. I respond to some of his comments. I try to find a way to express what I feel; but I don't even know what it is I truly feel. I write these letters in Braille too. Maybe Cameron's Filipina nun friend will translate it back to writing for him. Maybe I'll send them one day.

I don't have handwriting any more now.

I never read subtitles.

I think in adjectives a lot.

Tactile adjectives. Sensory adjectives. Dimensions.

Trees rustle around me.

Fido yawns and I sit on, centre-ing myself in this space on this balcony hanging off the side of a building; framed by garden lane and road; abutting the park Punt Road the railway yards; on the inside of a city curved around a bay on the southern-most edge of an endless land mass that rears up forever beyond in the north and west of where I am.

Hidden Stories

Mum's on her way here for a visit. Dad's getting stock ready for the sales, so he's tied up at home. I used to take a few days off work around this time, and go and help.

Not any more.

I wait for her to arrive. I think about what I used to do. I think about the farm work, the cattle the long days and the excitement of the sales. I think about what I can't do and I so hate these days that I immediately gather my travel pack and I clip the lead onto Fido and take my stick and we walk to the Fitzroy gardens. I cross two busy roads and a quiet one to get there. It takes concentration to maintain my bearings to get us around and back again so there's no room for thinking on an outing like this. We walk until it's time to stop and then we go home again.

Mum arrives. I am hugged at the door and told to relax while she brings in the bags and packages. I am encouraged to sit still while she commandeers the kettle. I am hustled onto the high chair and out of the way while she investigates the state of the fridge and my pantry. I am fluttered around while she checks my eyes and my health. I'm instructed to drink my tea while she unpacks a basket full of cooked food bags of preserved fruit from our place and vegetables sent to me by the neighbours. I'm given the third degree while jars of jam and a sponge cake and a tin of Anzac biscuits are placed on the empty shelf in the pantry that is labelled visitor's food only. If I don't keep a shelf for them, they distribute their offerings all over the kitchen all over the shelves, all over my controlled environment. I stay sitting, still and quiet, and listen to Mum. I eat home-made fruit cake while the scent of cream puffs wafts up to me from their plate on the bench. I listen as Mum forgets my disability and rearranges the fridge to fit everything in. It's too late to stop her now. I remind myself to label the fridge shelves in English and Braille especially for those visitors who like to

bustle in and take over. It amazes me that Mum can so easily forget that I am blind now. Even though my blindness keeps her permanently anxious and in tears at the drop of a hat.

I reach out to touch a cream puff and my fingers meet yielding plastic wrap. The plastic covers the plate entirely, but the scent is there underneath it all. I push against the plastic film with the pad of my finger. The plastic clings and stretches, silky slidy to my skin.

“They’re cream puffs,” says Mum.

“I know,” I say.

“I haven’t filled them yet,” she tells me, removing the plate from my poking finger, “I’ll just pop the cream in the fridge and do them when he gets here.”

“Who gets here?” I ask, but I already know.

Steven. The golden-haired boy.

Before I went blind, when I’d be heading back to the city after a weekend at the farm, Mum always put a special sweet-something into my going-home food, especially for Steven. His mother’s inability to bake has long been a black mark against her. There were always bought biscuits and cakes at Steven’s house, and Mum was always horrified and just a wee bit judgmental about this sign of blatant neglect.

“She doesn’t even try,” she’d say, which was the worst criticism Mum could ever make.

Steven, of course, has always played his deprivation up to the hilt.

After the food is unpacked, Mum is toey and restless. She wants to be doing something. But as I have just fallen over the bag of O’Grady’s potatoes, she’s remembered again that I am blind, and now that she has finished guiltily shovelling all of her things into the empty closet and removing all traces of herself from the apartment, there is nothing whatsoever that she can do, nothing that won’t interfere with the pristine safety of my floor plan.

Welcome to my world.

We sit in chairs by the fake fire, the warmth orients me in the room and I like the idea of an element of cosiness or energy in my stark light white house. I ask Mum for all the farm news, but she is not the sort of person who is comfortable just sitting around and talking, she likes to be doing things. So she fidgets. Skin flickering over cloth, weight shifting and sliding on the chair. She twists her hands swishing and whispering them together, calluses scrape faintly. She rubs her wedding ring and taps it tick tick tick with her fingernail. She crosses and uncrosses her legs, muscles work and bones crack, wool slacks shush. She re-laces her shoes, small clicks and slicks and scurries as the string, tipped with a slide of plastic, flicks against leather; the stretch and pull of the laces makes the shoes creak. She smooths her hair more swishing but a different sound from skin on skin. The hair swishing is finer lighter, a barely-there sound.

My house isn't very visitor-friendly these days. There are no paintings on the walls to catch the eye and start a conversation; no objets d'art to look at and remind people of something they once saw or thought or said or wanted to tell me about. There are no knick-knacks to touch there aren't any magazines or newspapers to stimulate conversation no television to distract – I don't like the idea of a box of visuals, light and colour, sneering at me in my own house. There are no photographs to question admire ooh and ahh over. There's none of my embroidery or dressmaking stuff to paw through and advise on. I don't collect or read recipe books any more. I have no interesting articles cut out of the paper. I don't go to the theatre much or ever to films or window shop. I don't know about the latest fashions or this season's colours, and the personal lives and new hairstyles of celebrities have no meaning in my life.

I have music.

I have Braille books.

I have a lot of empty floor space and blank surfaces.

I can't stand the fidgeting any more, so I put Mum out of her misery by asking her to have a check around and see how the cleaners are doing. I make her promise to not move a single solitary thing without first telling me, but she can rummage and inspect to her heart's delight.

Mum loves this job. It's right up her alley. I give her the low-down on what the cleaner's duties are, and let her run amok. I listen as she wipes a finger over the bookshelves, to check for dust. I hear her shaking out the bed covers to investigate for dirt. She paces along beside skirting boards, ready to pounce on scuff marks. She creaks down onto hands and knees to monitor under the bed for dust balls. She examines the state of the linen cupboard to check if the laundry service is doing its job properly (it's not), and bustles around in corners looking for cobwebs. She re-folds my clothes in the wardrobe and shifts her position again and again to get the right angle to check the state of the glass in each and every window. She tut-tuts over my desk and I am relieved beyond words; she's busy she's useful and she's happy. She no longer needs to be entertained. I start to think about other jobs like this that I can occupy her with. She's here for three days.

Cat blur sits in my lap. Fido follows Mum around. Mum at the farm is a constant giver of food scraps and titbits and chop bones and a dog never forgets the source.

While they roam around, inspecting for evidence of furniture polish and sniffing for indications that disinfectant has been used, Mum starts telling me properly about the farm and Dad, the relatives and the district. I don't just hear the words she's using, or the story she's telling; I don't just hear the literal rendering of what everyone has been up to in the past few weeks and the plans they've made for the future; what happens is that I start to tune into what seems to be a secret story. I start to listen to the story

beneath the words, and I can't identify what it is, but there's some strong emotion layered in there. Something to do with the farm and home. Something to do with her life there.

Maybe I pick this up because the rhythm of the news is familiar so I don't have to listen too hard, and maybe because it's fairly predictable, maybe because I am sitting warm and purred upon and slightly dreamy, but my hearing my listening, drops down a level. I get the feeling behind the bland day to day detail of Mum's life and interests, to her true story. Easter baking plans (excitement), bugs in the tomato plants (annoyance frustration), an influx of cancer patients at the hospital (sad and worrisome), Mrs Beckwith going to Sydney for her daughter's wedding (happy for her), Jillian Dinero's affair with the bloke from the High School (disgusted), Joe and Nessa Clayton's decision to move off their farm – and that's the one.

Joe and Nessa moving is the story that's got the heavy undertones. I ask her more about it, and the sensory complexity of a myriad of powerful, buried feelings start coming at me thick and fast as Mum's voice doesn't change in an obvious way, but still there's something below the surface, that pushes behind the words: another meaning.

Mum has her head buried in the cupboard under the desk, "Neatening, not re-arranging at all, Love." She tells me that the move is definitely going ahead. Joe's found a house in the town for them, the stock's being sold off and the property is on the market. It's the best thing for them. Joe can't keep up with the work and Nessa's been unwell since spring. It's time they had a rest from the farm, long past time. And of course Mum is sad, sad that they're going, they've been good neighbours good friends for years and years, but they're doing the right thing. That's the surface story.

But the underneath story isn't about being a bit sad. The hidden the secretive the secreted story is stronger than that. It's feelings of grieving for Joe and Nessa, aging and not capable any more, grieving for herself, and the strength the Claytons represented, like grandparents, like her parents, like older, stable relatives of the sort she never really had close by. Joe and Nessa were always settled solidly wiser more experienced secure accessible, *there*. The secret story is about the changing of the guard. She and Dad and Steven's parents will be the older ones now, and Mum, Mum who's so competent and able and organised and authoritative, feeling underneath it all that she doesn't want them to go, because she still needs them. Oh Mum.

I don't know what to say to her. None of this has been said aloud. How did I hear it? Did I hear it? Gestures in the voice, gestures that are hidden from seeing eyes, but are exposed and naked when sight is gone? I try to remember Mum's voice as she told me about the Claytons and I am sure there wasn't that much of a change in it. I'm sure this buried story isn't an obvious thing. Mum is not overly emotional. Mum does not wear her heart on her sleeve. Mum does not discuss feelings. Maybe I just made it up? Maybe I'm just imagining this hidden story? I sit quietly in my chair. I don't say anything. I think it through.

Fido sighs loudly and rolls over. He is lying near my desk and Mum. Mum keeps tidying and sorting. I fear she has moved on from neatening and is now actively rearranging. I let her go. I say to her that she can drop in and visit Nessa and Joe after work, on her way home from the hospital, have a reviving cup of tea and give them all the news. Mum perks up a bit at this, but then her voice goes bland again, "I won't have time. Not every day. And it won't be the same. Anyway, they won't be interested in all our stuff, they'll be caught up in their new life, in the town."

“There won’t be many older people left in our area once they’re gone, will there?” I say, trying to ferret out confirmation or denial of what I think she’s really said.

“Of course there will! There’ll be me, and your father, Joan and ... this desk is a disgrace. I don’t think they wipe it at all. Tell them it needs to be dusted and polished regularly.” And off she goes, on a rampage, hell bent on exposing the cleaners for their inefficiency their slackness their irresponsibility their shameless and disrespectful taking advantage of a helpless blind woman. I try to steer the conversation back to Joe and Nessa, and the story below the words, but that only incites Mum into an even greater sense of outrage about the cleaners. She works herself up into a real lather over the state of the apartment. Before I can stop her she’s found the phone number for the company, the phone itself is grubby she tells me, and smells of dog not disinfectant; so she tells the receptionist at CleanAway all about that too, as well as the water rings on the desk, the scuff marks on furniture and skirting boards and the uncleaned grout in the bathroom. The foolish receptionist must have disagreed with Mum about something, and for the first time in years I hear Mum really lose it. She mentions false advertising my affliction lack of standards, she says the word disgrace over and over. Her voice rises a notch when she tells the receptionist that I am blind and helpless and at the very least I need a clean house to live in. She finishes more quietly, after the threats of Consumer Affairs radio talkback and television current affairs programs with an add-on of her local MP being a friend of the family and a parting warning that we will take a lifetime’s worth of my business elsewhere. After she hangs up, we celebrate my one month’s free cleaning trial where CleanAway will prove that they really are the people for the job, with a calming cup of tea and then a spot of lunch and we giggle together guiltily about Mum getting her dander up.

Later that day, when Steven arrives to admire his plate of cream puffs before taking us out to dinner, Mum tells him the whole CleanAway story and Steven pats her on the back and says,

“That’s the spirit, Naomi.”

And Mum is pleased as punch with her assertiveness, but perhaps on the wings of her triumph over that receptionist, she tells Steven that she is surprised he didn’t notice the state of my apartment and do something about it earlier.

Good on you, Mum, I think to myself; but Steven, as usual, wriggles out of trouble. He tells Mum that he didn’t dare say anything, due to my fierce and unpredictable temper. Besides, he adds as he guides me to the door, he thought it was a hell of a lot cleaner in here since I went blind than it was before. He and Mum laugh gleefully at this. And as they go into one of their even funnier reminiscences about that hilarious time when I used NapiSan to clean the venetians (it worked), I realise that Steven has them well and truly wrapped around his little finger.

The next day, while Mum has been sent in to battle at my local shops to organise a delivery service for a decent range of fresh vegetables, I phone Dad. He’s already had the, “Arrived safely, Love,” phone call from Mum, but I want to see how he’s getting on with the cattle. I catch him at elevenes. He’ll be sitting at the kitchen table, listening to Radio National while he has a quick cup of tea and a slice of Ginger Fluff or Mum’s no-mix fruit cake. He says he’s had a good few days, with no major problems. The vet’s coming out this afternoon and if all goes well, they’ll be loaded up tomorrow and off to the market. We talk on a little further. My health. Mum’s activities. The prices he expects to get. I say that Mum told me about Nessa and Joe moving.

“Yeah,” he tells me. “It’s a bit sad. None of their kids wants to farm. A shame really, it’s good land.”

Ah, I think. That’s the clincher. That’s the sticking point. That’s the regret and loss of all the parents on all the farms these days – the kids don’t want

to, or can't afford to take over the farm after the parents are past it. I think of our farm. Four generations on the land, not where we are now, but on properties all around the area, and I knew when I told them I was blind, that a part of the grief was that now the farm would never be passed on.

I feel guilty, ashamed that this blindness has cheated them of a future they had dreamed of and planned for: the farm going on and on beyond them, but still part of us one of the family always there. The guilt at what I've done to them nearly chokes me. I tell Dad I'd better get off the phone in case Mum wants to call and check in on me and we say our goodbyes and I hang up fast. I stay sitting in my chair while Fido stands next to me, licking my hand. Cat blur must have noticed my not moving, I hear her advancing on me because the purring is getting louder and louder. I reach down to pick her up, but she doesn't want snuggling, Cat blur wants lunch. I feel my way to the kitchen, I try to count the steps, but I am preoccupied with Dad and the future and the farm and I get muddled, or I forget, or I'm stupidly overconfident and I walk into that wall between the kitchen and the living room and it fucking hurts when you do that. It really hurts. Temple and my chin and cheekbone, the pain stinging and sharp. I rub my face to take away the pain but it doesn't help. I grope my way into the kitchen. Cat treachery is wailing for food, but I locate the fridge and I open the freezer door, looking for the bag of frozen peas I keep handy for bruises and aches and sprains. My hand in the icy stinging numbing cold meets a wall of frozen packages. Mum's stocked the freezer. I try to feel my way to the peas, but everything my hand encounters is squared off, boxed up, packaged and impenetrable. My fingers are stinging from the cold now, and my head and face hurt more, I pull out a few packages to try to find the peas but that dislodges others and they fall out of the freezer, crashing onto my chest and shoulders before slithering down my body and the fridge door to bounce off my bare feet.

Fido yelps in sympathy for me and jumps back. I swear out aloud at him and then at me and then at my shitty shitty life. I shut the freezer door and kneel to pick up the frozen food. My freezer hand is aching now, along with my face. I don't cry, but I want to, so I stop picking up packages and just kneel there on the floor, thinking not of my face or my hand or the damaged food or the curses and blame game still roiling around inside my head; but the farm and my responsibilities there and how John and I were going to share it all, how we were going to be farmers together, how one of us was going to build another house on the other side of the property, and all that stuff of dreams. I stay kneeling on the kitchen floor until I get up. Then I get down again and pick up all the frozen food and re-pack it in the freezer. I run a cloth under the cold water tap and hold it against my face because I'm not going after the peas again and then I quickly feed the Cat before I go into the bathroom and find the medicine cabinet and rub arnica into the bruises, then I get out my foundation make-up and smooth it carefully over my face and before Mum gets home I switch off the overhead lights and put on the lamps only and she doesn't notice a thing. Poor me.

Blind in Space

I sit on a bench seat in our park. I listen for Fido. I track his movements with my ears. I lost him a minute or so back in the sound block of the bushes behind me, but that doesn't mean I've really lost him; one blind thing I've learnt about dogs, is that they stand still for surprisingly long periods. A dog like Fido, who jumps and bounds and prances, seems to be always on the go, except when he's sleeping, and even then he's always half alert and ready to leap into action; but as I follow his travels by sound only, I find that he pauses a lot to sniff listen observe. And when he does this, he is absolutely still. At first, this was disconcerting, it frightened me, I thought I was missing something, that I'd lost concentration lost time or else just didn't pick up his very very quiet movements; so I put jingle bells on his collar and that was how I found out that when he went quiet, he was just standing perfectly still.

A while back I got Steven to come to the park with us, to sit beside me not speaking, so I could track Fido and then ask him what he could see. And there it was, my bouncing leaping never-still dog, standing unmoving and silent, just breathing in the world around him.

Steven is here at the park with us today. He's reading the paper. He's also sitting quiet, but not still not silent not unmoving. I'm the one breathing in the world, Steven is breathing in printer's ink and world news and the football results. He sighs and shifts and makes shushing jerky sounds. I breathe in winter sunshine and damp grass. I breathe in moving air across my cheeks and the crackle of leaves as Fido starts up again, investigating the bushes beyond the path. There are birds on branches above us, I feel their urgency their energy their bustling society going about its business.

I follow everything with my ears my nose my skin. I create a likeness in my mind of this world around me. The likeness consists of shape and space texture and density. Because I have to negotiate my way through these experiences, it doesn't serve me any more to think of the world in pictures. It's not that I can't visualise, because I can and do, but mostly now, I think in dimensions. I calculate volume and depth distance and parameters. I monitor these things I listen for them I memorise and process them, because the world I live in now is rarely a place for detached observance; instead, it is a minefield I have to negotiate every waking moment. I deliberately don't think in pictures and images. When I think of my front door, I don't think coloured square high. I think crenulated edges, I think fingertips tracing the change from knobbly rendered wall to smooth painted wood. I think light, high sound when I tap upon it, I think thickened drop of paint, dried curved and smooth, millimetres from the keyhole. I think cold metal for my key. I think click snick sound; thick fitted feel as the key goes in; weighted pressure pushing against my hand as I move the door open and inwards. It's a concept made of feelings of layer upon layer of meaning. Sitting here today, quiet and still on my side of the wooden bench in our park, I am relieved and pleased really, to notice that it is no longer an effort to think in tone and volume, in weight and carry.

I can no longer think of blindness as an aberration, it has to be the norm for me; and if I only ever always think in blind, then surely that has to make my life easier? The flaw here is when images sidle in, sneak up on me in dreams slide around the corners of my mind in reverie, catch me unawares; then the memory of what I had, of what the world was like for me, is almost unbearable. Best to ignore all that. Concentrate on what is here and now and real.

Right now Fido is on the trail of a something. He's moving at a brisk trot, I hear him scuffling leaves and his claws hit the path and he clicketies along, following following. Steven sighs at something in the paper, but he doesn't

awaken from his absorption. I stay still and quiet. Fido's noises fade. I listen for him, giving him a moment, in case he's just absorbing too, but there is no sense of him nearby at all. I whistle his 'where are you?' note, and in the distance I hear a yap and I know he knows I'm waiting for him. I picture him then, suddenly without warning, clear as clear: head up, curls lush and tight, nose polished and working alert and aware, maybe one paw raised. And I feel nostalgia for sight and seeing, I feel the marvel of what our eyes deliver us. I push this nostalgia away sharply. I focus on space objects direction, on what the echoes and quality of my call and his reply tell me. I will not make pictures.

Steven's head rises, his attention comes up from the paper, his face turns to Fido's yap,

"Can't see him," he says.

Steven's body rises, the paper rustles and I feel his height above me. His shoes squeak slightly on the grass as he turns and looks behind us, around us.

Then I hear paws thudding in the distance, over to the south west, Fido's trot is familiar, his jingle bells tinkle and ring. A moment later Steven turns again, back toward Fido's direction,

"I can see him now," he tells me. "He's on his way."

"Yes."

I remember then, another picture in my mind: a person's face smiling, the crinkly eyes and the stretched mouth, mischief and delight revealed in the pull and play of muscles under skin. I remember how infectious a smile is. How guilty and delicious laughter can be, when you see it on someone's face. I stop that picture quick smart too.

Those memories are tantalising and seductive, but I like it better when I just think in shapes and objects, sound and movement.

Hens Night Out

I sit in a chair with my back to a wall, while Susan walks all over my nerves. So solicitous, so jarring.

Bitching about the in-laws and the reception plans, the latest florist out to get her and Janey creating havoc wherever she goes. She interrupts herself to move my water glass out of alignment with the corner of the table; she leans into my face and breathes on me as she asks too loudly if I am sure I am alright? And why do I think the others are so late? Why aren't they answering their phones? She should never have trusted Janey to organise this, she's probably told them all the wrong time. Do I want the table shifted? Is my water okay? Do I need help with anything?

The helping without listening to what I really need has been a constant theme with Susan since I lost my sight. I've started to believe it is deliberate. No one could be that ignorant by mistake. The only thing she doesn't mention is Cameron. I have no idea what Steven said to her, and it would have been him, but I have been spared that conversation. And if there's any speculation, and of course there would be, I've been kept right out of the loop. Thank god.

The waiter arrives then and I hear the ting of glassware, the crackle of foil, Susan had ordered a bottle of champagne and a tray of glasses. Because this is a celebration. She raises her voice to get above the waiter's movements and carries on with the spiel about that bitch of a marriage celebrant who refuses, outright, to dress in a pale pink suit.

"Because, honestly, Jill, how's it going to look if she's in black or mission brown or something, and we're all spring? Oh, sorry."

Clunk.

She's aghast.

Pictures.

She hurries quickly to repair the damage by barking at the waiter,
“Don’t put anything near her, she’s blind!”

The waiter, startled by the sudden attack and hysterical lilt to her voice,
jumps back and there’s a thump and a tinkling clatter as he knocks over
heavy and solid, light and fragile.

Glass. Broken spilt.

Then we get five minutes of his apologies and Susan’s recriminations;
stuttering stammering cold mean superiority, a refrain of, “I told you she
was blind, she could have been sliced open,” and a “God they’re useless!”
fume as the waiter disappears to get another bottle.

I surreptitiously open my watch and check the time with my fingers to see
how late the cavalry are, but alas Susan has noticed,

“Are you okay? You’re not too tired?”

“Actually,” I say, “What I am really really tired of is you being so bloody
bossy. And snarly. And just plain nasty to people. It’s all the time, Susan,
and I really hope it’s just the stress of the wedding making you like this,
because if you don’t lighten up soon, I can’t see you having too many
friends left at all.”

“Well ... ”

I wait.

And wait.

For what comes after, “Well ... ” ?

I keep waiting, but there’s nothing. She is, amazingly, lost for words.

The silence stretches on.

The sounds of the restaurant freefall into that ever-widening empty space
between two old friends.

I stop waiting.

Then the clumsy one returns and finishes clearing up the mess over on the other side of Susan. He apologises again, re-arranges the glassware and pours us both a drink. He places mine directly in front of me and says, "Ten centimetres, twelve o'clock."

He's nice. He's kind. He knows blind.

Susan re-positions my glass.

She doesn't speak to him at all. She audibly breathes in as I feel my way to the glass in its new spot, not at twelve o'clock, ten centimetres anymore, but somewhere that I have to grope for.

"Don't," I say, as I feel her hand hovering to lift the glass again and give it to me bodily. So she ostentatiously breathes out in a loud sigh while I find the glass, take a sip, and place it back on the table, guiding my hand across the cloth with my little finger, and I leave it where it belongs: ten centimetres, twelve o'clock. I feel her attention on every move I make. I hate her watching me.

I turn my face out towards the rest of the room and the drink is held there in my mouth as for a moment I don't swallow, but just feel the taste of it. The bubbles are tingly in my nose and on the roof of my mouth. The cold is against my teeth. The taste is clean and there's a tang. Bitter? Fruity? Alcohol.

The other diners tap metal against china. A man across the room speaks all the time without stopping. He speaks in a monotone that goes on and on flat and bland a gentle hum underneath all the other voices. The kitchen doors flap open and shut time and again and release bursts of scent and heat and clattery staccato noise and a wild energy that we only get in pieces, but it feels exciting. There's laughter bubbling between a group of men at a table across from us, but one of them isn't laughing truly, it's just a disguise, the note beneath the sounds he makes is a dull helpless hurt.

This isn't really sitting in silence for me, just for Susan.
It must be killing her.

The street door opens and a few seconds later a light cool breeze brushes against my face and arms. High heels come closer and I hear the shape of Sarah's footsteps amongst several others, it's the old university contingent. They greet us and before they sit there is the clang of the door again, and the breeze on my skin again and shoes clippity clippity across the wooden floor again and another round of hello hello. People and kisses and hands touching my arm and shoulders. Then again there is the door the breeze the high heels, and the last of Susan's friends arrives. The restaurant noise slows down, is muffled, absorbed by the extra bodies around our table. All these friends, noisy and rustling and cheerful. Full of apologies and exclamations about the traffic and the trams. Scraping chairs and bumping arms. Sitting and loudness, bottle against glass. I smell alcohol on breath, on more than one person and realise they must have met earlier and fortified themselves before the ordeal. Nobody told me. Dis-ableds don't count? Maybe they think I should be grateful just to be here? Maybe they think I crave some one on one time with Susan? Maybe it was a last-minute thing? Maybe I'm too hard to organise for spontaneous events? Maybe they just forgot about me. And maybe I don't give a shit.

I feel Susan forcing gaiety into her voice, doing the welcome bit and I feel guilty about my outburst earlier, but then I hear Janey's stiff and mutinous greeting to her, the coldness between them, the sneer in Susan's voice as she replies and says she hopes Janey won't be this late on the wedding day and I stop feeling sorry for her and move to make room for another chair.

Susan makes a concerted effort to resurrect her old self so she swings into action and takes over the evening.

She'd already ordered the meal in advance and tells us all what we'll be eating and pours champagne and grills everyone about how their day has been. No one mentions pre-dinner drinks. I feel a limb swinging through the air before me and nails on china as she snatches up my plate and there's a scraping and shuffling of platters and slopping of heavy liquid and utensils crack against tableware as she describes the food to me, as though because I am now blind, I won't know what antipasto is, I won't remember what constitutes a bowl of oil and a slice of bread. As the plate thumps back down in front of me again, she doesn't tell me where anything is in relation to me, she just tells me useless words about what is there, with no directions for getting it.

"... and this is a plain rice, so there's nothing else in it."

I can feel my temper rising, and Helen on the other side of the table intervenes by asking Susan to sit next to her and tell her all about the music for the big day. Susan's reluctant to leave the role of Florence Attila Nightingale that she fulfils so well, but the opportunity to detail more wedding blues is unmissable. I tell her I have enough on my plate, thank you and send her on her way, reminding myself to call the florist at the crack of dawn and have them deliver Helen at least a dozen roses.

Janey. Body bending, weight on arms, arms leaning on chair back, swish slides in some silky fabric onto Susan's vacant chair and finishes filling up the plate in front of me.

"Food you can eat with your fingers on the left, ignore the stuff in the middle — it's too sloppy, rice at the top, bread on your right."

"Thank you." Another dozen roses.

Then she leans in close,

"I can't read your face anymore," she says to me.

"I'm just concentrating, this is a concentrating face. I haven't been here since I went blind. There's a lot to take in."

"Okay," she says easily, "Sing out when you want more food. The share meal isn't great for a blind person, is it?"

No. It's not. You have to rely on others. Draw attention to yourself, fumble around on the plate trying to work out if you need a knife or a fork or a spoon to eat with. Every mouthful is a surprise and olives in oil on a flat plate could make you weep with frustration.

"Just find me a napkin." I ask Janey and then I make a show at eating, trying to avoid anything that might have touched the sloppy stuff in the middle and so will drip and spill and make a mess. I make an effort to eat so I won't appear pathetic in valid or difficult, but I have no intention of making a spectacle of myself by trying to have a real meal with awkward food that I will, most likely, end up wearing. Assuming I'm not wearing it already.

Janey asks if I could possibly be dreading the wedding as much as she is. I say that it's shaping up to be the nightmare of all nightmares, and that I am now wondering if I should have an even more severe talk with Susan about her behaviour. Susan and I have been friends since our twenties. She's never shown any indication before that she would turn out like this. Janey is alarmed. Apparently Ian had already tried to have several quiet words with Susan last month. The backlash was so fierce that he has begged everyone in his entire family to just put up with it and say nothing. Susan is unrecognisable. Janey thinks Susan has always been like this, and that other sane and pleasant self was the act. I think I'm beginning to agree with her. I think that despite all the talk and independence, this is what she has always wanted. It's just come twenty years too late. Maybe that explains it.

Or maybe she's just a stupid selfish bitch.

"Never mind," says Janey, "We'll just do what we're told, keep our heads down and hope she doesn't notice us ... and if Ian's stupid enough to marry her after this performance then he deserves everything he gets. It'll be over soon enough."

“I don’t think so,” I say, drinking champagne which I don’t spill, and relaxing into tingles numbing my mouth.

“She won’t stop at a wedding. There’ll be kids next.”

Janey’s breathing stops. Then she starts choking. She coughs and splutters and yanks at the napkin held in my left hand, she spits food into the napkin and I can feel her turned right around to face me, and it’s the pause before the storm,

“Fucking hell! I never thought of that. Oh Fuck.”

The table noise closes down. Janey sounds as though the sky has literally fallen in. I recognise that pursed mouth at the other side of the table as soon as it speaks, I hear the shape of it in the words that spit out at us across the mass of food dishes and crockery and glassware.

“God, Janey, can you keep your voice down. And watch your language.”

There is a pause for her to indulge in an inane giggle. “You’re not at some uni bar or something!”

There’s an indulgent smile in there, broadening the mouth, altering the tones of Susan’s speech. I can hear the widening, the upward tilting of consonants that the on-the-surface smile-face brings while long-held resentment filters through from underneath and spites the words.

Oh, the smugness of her.

Sarah leans over and whispers to me,

“What put the wind up Janey?”

I tell her about the prospect of children.

Sarah leans past me this time and pats Janey’s arm, soft muffled taps hand on cloth draping bone and muscle:

“She’s already picked the colour scheme for the nursery.”

“Oh God.”

Janey’s forehead hits the table.

A breaking, tinkling laugh rings out from that smiling mouth confirming the tension at the end of the table and Susan asks,

“What on earth’s going on over there with you three?”

Janey's head keeps knocking against the table.

"Are you alright, Jill? Are they looking after you properly?" Calls the spite voice, jealous of our camaraderie, stretched tight with anxiety worry the quest for perfection, "Not too tired?"

"Absolutely fine, Susan. I'm blind, Susan, not infirm."

Janey's head still bang bang bangs on the table. Sarah can't stop giggling and Susan's whisper to her work mate is like a shout to me with my blind hearing,

"Jill's having a really hard time adjusting to it all. We're just being really patient with her."

I want to join Janey with the head banging, but at that point she stops.

"Our family's lost Ian completely now, haven't we?"

"We all have," I realise. He's made his choices. He's pandered to this horrendous behaviour. And it's not funny any more, because if I can't stomach the new Susan, then that means no more Ian.

Janey eats her meal. And I leave her alone and instead try catching up with friends and acquaintances scattered around the table. It's difficult trying to take part in a conversation where voices are coming from every direction and the noise levels are rising with all the alcohol. It's hard to know when to break in to say anything, hard to know what is directed at me. Hard too because I hear semi-private conversations quite clearly, and forget that I'm not supposed to be contributing to them. Without the visual cues, a group discussion is difficult to negotiate and I now fear jumping into conversations that are none of my beeswax. I hate that, it makes me different and stupid.

Janey stays very subdued for the rest of the meal. She doesn't say much at all, at least not until her fourth glass of wine has been demolished, and with this on top of the champagne, it turns out she's quietly been getting well and truly plastered. She rambles on and on about Ian and Susan and children and the horror of it all while the other side of the table is all cracked laughing and bubbled clinking of glass after glass.

“But!” She says in a loud voice, “I’ve just thought of the up side to all of this.”

“What’s that?” I ask, thinking there is no upside possible to the fiasco that is my former friend.

“Well, seeing that she’s completely out of control, and that she’s going to stay that way and become even more of a snobby, self-centred beast once she has children, and that we’ve lost Ian anyway; then I don’t have to tiptoe around her anymore, I can tell her what I think, because I’ve got nothing at all to lose.”

I feel Janey leaning back expansively in her chair. Drunkenly cheerful and pleased with herself.

And even though Sarah tries to talk her out of this plan, which is clearly family suicide, I have to admit that it makes sense. Sarah and I convince her to wait until after the wedding to see if Susan settles down and returns to some semblance of her old self, but my heart isn’t really in it. I suspect, like Janey, that the New Susan is here to stay.

The Long Ride Back

I am at the farm again. I had a semi-triumphant trip down on the train to Camperdown on Thursday night for a long weekend and Dad picked me up at the station. I have a pile of reading to listen to and some hard-line decisions to make about future work. Steven's feet are wearing boots with heels. I hear his altered step as he walks along the path and across the veranda through the hall and into the kitchen. He used to swagger in boots when he was a boy.

"I'm taking you riding," he says over the CD of my student's voice reading on and on.

"You'll love it," he tells me.

"You'll be fine," he says.

I tell him we've been down this road before, and that,

"It's far far too scary."

And that,

"I'd fall."

Or,

"The horse will buck."

Or,

"I won't be able to stay on."

And,

"I can't steer blind."

And,

"I'm scared of falling."

And,

"I'm working."

"You won't fall," he says, leading me into the hall.

"The horse is one of Marylou's, it won't buck," he guides me up the stairs.

"You'll only be scared for a while," he says, pushing me into my bedroom.

“You can work again when we come back,” he tells me, opening the wardrobe and rifling through my shoe holder.

“You’ll be safe and you’ll love it. Now, here are your boots, get some old jeans on and meet me in the kitchen in five minutes.”

And I’m left standing in the middle of the room with a pair of riding boots in my arms.

“If I stay scared will you stop and let me off?” I call out to him as he clatters down the stairs.

“Yes,” he says over his shoulder, not breaking stride, sniffing out tea cake at a hundred paces.

While I change into jeans, old soft and worn, I hear his voice in the kitchen and the faint gasp of sound as Mum, inevitably, peels off the airtight lid of the cake tin. I hear them laughing together. Their voices a soft murmur of familiarity and ease. The kettle whistles and I find a belt to tighten my jeans in the third drawer that sticks. My fingers reach coiled leather, nestled in balls of wool socks. I take socks and the belt. Mum’s voice sounds again, this time high and excited, she’s telling a happy story. They laugh again. I turn until my back is facing the wardrobe and then walk a few paces to my left, and I turn again until the sunlight hits my face and I’m standing by the bed, a soft, thick presence in the centre of the room. My feet are brushing the fringe of the floor rug, feeling for the worn patch under my right toe and it is just where it’s meant to be. I sit on the side of the bed. I take off my slipper socks with the suction pads dotted all over the soles, and I unball the real socks and unravel them onto my feet, then I bend again and pull on my riding boots. The leather melds to my feet, the way it always has. The sounds below go on. There’s the swing and screech of the screen door and Dad’s familiar stride thuds across the kitchen floor. The conversation expands to include and enfold his voice too. The three of them are so uncomplicated together. Their voices work in concert with one another, the rhythm and cadence match and swirl around slide and glide intimate and comfortable over and around and through each other. Then

the radio comes on in the kitchen and their sounds are muted, they are listening to the news; soft comments, Dad's voice has a question in it. I pull a thick wool jumper over my head and check that I have a handkerchief and the mobile phone secured in my pockets. There is no talking downstairs at all now: they'll be listening for the weather report – sacred space in a farm house – the announcer's voice is clear and impersonal, loud in the sudden quiet of the house, there's a gale warning for East Gippsland tonight, waves to three metres along our coast ...

I tie my hair back into a pony tail and grab my stick, but keep it folded for now. I move down the stairs as the weather report finishes and they all start speaking again. Steven's heard my footsteps and meets me in the hall. He smells of baking and sugar. He takes the stick and it clatters onto the little table there,

"You won't need that," He tells me.

"What if we want to get off, or have a walk or something?" I ask.

"I'll guide you," he says. "But we won't be doing that. We'll just have a quick ride and come back. We're off!" He calls to Mum and Dad.

I call goodbye too, but they are already in the hall, hovering with tension. They follow us out to the yard, trying not to fuss but I can feel my mother yearning leaning reaching out to me without moving, Dad's presence beside her holding her back. She is tight with worry. They walk toward us and stop again, lingering by the shed doors, solid bodies side by side, backed and reinforced by the old wood and peeling paint behind them as Steven leads me to the horse and places my hands on the saddle. The horse's weight and height, its benign presence, looms over me. The horse's solid aliveness takes up a lot of space. My mother's tension and fear reach out to me again. I call over my shoulder,

"I'll be okay, Mum. If it's too awful or scary we'll dismount and walk home.

I have my phone if there's any dramas."

“Have a good time,” says my Dad. He radiates confidence, with an under score of anxiety for me that he is fighting to control.

“She’ll be right,” says Steven, calm and steady. I feel them relax a little. I feel their unwavering faith in him. I lift my head up, it feels heavy on my neck, but I can’t do this with my head down. I bend my right knee before I can think too hard about what I’m doing, because I trust Steven as well, and then he boosts me up and into the saddle and I’m there, miles off the ground, with a living thing holding me up. I feel strange and high. The only thing keeping me in place is my remembered sense of balance. My feet don’t reach the stirrups, and I clutch the front of the saddle. Steven’s hand is on the small of my back, steadying me. Fido barks and kicks up small stones and dust as he dances around the horse.

“You alright?” Steven asks up to me.

I nod my head. “Yes.”

I’m nervous, my stomach is tumbling around, but I’m okay. My body knows how to sit in a saddle, the horse Tybalt is quiet serene there’s no tension in the horse only in me. Steven moves away then and there’s a struggle and a spattering of paws and dirt as he picks Fido up and stamps back, boot heels crackling over the gravel. Then there’s bumping noises, a small Fido whine and Dad’s breath makes a loud sighing sound, Steven’s feet are returning and his voice tells Dad to hang onto him until we’re over the rise. Mum’s laughing now and Dad swears and Fido barks once and once only and the tension is broken, then Steven’s back beside me. “Still alright?”

“Yes,” I tell him. Nervous, but alright.

“Good.” He says. I feel him moving around to the front of the horse and the slapping sound as he unties the reins and flicks the leather over Tybalt’s head. He touches my leg and tells me to wriggle back over the edge of the saddle. I’m going to sit behind him, where I can hold on. I find a place, it’s uncomfortable but the saddle’s in front of me and I hold onto that while Steven swings himself up and then he’s there, his body wide and solid and warm in front of me. I wrap my arms around his waist and his back flexes and straightens as he gathers in the reins.

“Take it easy,” calls Dad.

“See you in a while,” Steven tells them, and I raise my hand to wave but have to drop it quickly to grab at Steven’s back because we’re moving. Down the drive and up the road and then a right turn onto Hoyden’s lane. The horse walks slowly. Steven’s back is straight, his muscles relaxed and easy, my fingers are digging into him, gripping fistfuls of wool. My body sways with the horse’s gait. My legs are splayed uncomfortably over the widest part of the horse so I can’t grip with my knees, I hold onto wool for dear life. I am terrified. Tybalt’s hooves thud a rhythm onto the long grass and I smell hay and turned earth and fresh lush pasture. I smell cows and conifers. I try to ignore my fear and I smell wood smoke from someone’s illegal bonfire coming from the east, it’ll be Dave McPherson burning off. I hear magpies yodelling and crows calling. The horse’s stride never changes and I get hypnotised a bit into relaxing just a little. The track winds around, occasionally there is a small rise, but nothing to break our rhythm. The sounds around us shift and change as we pass by windbreaks and open fence lines. I breathe in the air. I feel our height off the ground. We walk on and on. We don’t speak. I press my face against Steven’s back, he is warm and alive and content. The paddocks pace by us, one after the other after the other. I hear the wind change its tune and I pinch Steven’s arm,

“Where are we?”

“Up by Byat’s hay shed. You going okay? Feel like upping the speed?”

“We can’t up the speed,” I say, “Or I’ll definitely fall off, I haven’t got much grip back here.”

The saddle is pinching my legs and my back is hurting. I start to calculate how far it will be to get home. My legs are aching from dangling awkwardly over Tybalt’s wide back and my clinging arms are strained too. Steven reins in the horse and when Tybalt comes to a stop, he un-pries my fingers and swings himself down to the ground.

“I forgot,” he says, “How bloody uncomfortable it is sitting on the back. You alright otherwise?”

I quickly slide myself forward so I am sitting in the saddle because even though I'm sure Steven is holding the reins so the horse can't go anywhere, dangling off Tybalt's rump with nothing to hang onto is too scary.

"It's great. Everything hurts, but it's wonderful anyway. Thanks for making me do this."

"Any time." He says, "Shift up."

I wriggle forward and he slots his foot into the stirrup and starts to swing himself up. Then there's a mess of leather and grass and sliding and thumping feet.

"What's happened?" I call.

But I know, he's lost his grip and landed back on the ground. I laugh. I think of all his grand childhood dreams of being a jackaroo, and when he tries to mount again, and again slides back to the ground, I laugh even harder.

There's swearing and dusting of clothes and flickering sounds – he's plucking at something from his shirt sleeves, probably burrs.

"There's no room to get up with you there too." He tells me, and warns that he's moving Tybalt, then the horse and I are swung around to the west, so he can mount from the high side of the hill and he climbs on board easily now, sliding quickly into the saddle behind me so that we are wedged in tight. I wriggle as far forward as I can go.

"I've got nothing to hold onto," I tell Steven, as I clutch at Tybalt's mane. Hair, not wool.

"Give us a minute," he says, and his left foot kicks my heel as he fumbles for the stirrup. Then he gathers in the reins and holds them in his right hand. He guides my palm down his arm until I am holding the reins too, hand over hand. He steers my feet so that they rest on top of his boots in the stirrups. I feel anchored now.

"Hold onto the pommel with your spare hand," he tells me and wraps his arm around my waist.

We nudge his heels into Tybalt's sides and turn back the way we were facing and move forward. Bit by bit I loosen up, slowly I fall into the rhythm of

real riding again, almost guiding the horse myself, with the air on my face, no longer just being a passenger. I grip the horse and my hand on the reins is firm, I feel Tybalt through his mouth. My head comes up again.

“Relax,” he tells me

“I am relaxed. This is so much better.”

I am surrounded, I am safe and protected. My hand on the reins feels all the shape and movement of the horse’s head. I am riding again.

“Bit of speed?”

And suddenly I am excited and keen. I nod my head and he straightens up and we kick his heels into Tybalt’s sides and we lurch forward into a jogging walk and then a trot that stutters into rhythm. I barely jolt at all, so secured in place by person and saddle pommel and reins gripping knees and my feet on his. Steven nudges Tybalt again and he shifts gear into a slow and easy canter. I grip with my knees, we sway in rhythm, hooves loud now, the air rushes into my face and streams strands of my hair away and behind me. Steven leans forward and my body curves with him. We run. Scent and sound fly past us. Hooves thud so loud. The ground is somewhere below me, but I am safe and running.

The track gets steeper and we lean back to slow Tybalt down. The canter eases and he drops into a jog then a walk and we stop. The wind has made my eyes water and my nose run but my face feels clean and open. I breathe in deep and then let go of the reins, Steven’s arm is around me solid so I can relax and scramble around and find my handkerchief in my pocket.

“Is that crying or sniffles?” Steven mumbles at me, but I can’t make my voice work to reply to him. Rough sound comes out. I feel like I’ve had freedom for the first time since I can remember.

Tybalt’s head jerks on the reins and they slither and flicker and slide through our hands. I hear Tybalt’s chewing as he crops the grass. The reins

slap softly against the leather of the pommel where Steven's hands make complicated shapes as he wraps their length around it.

We sit there. Tybalt keeps making crunching sounds our breathing slows and I think about how good I feel. Steven raises his hand and holds the back of my neck my head, Tybalt moves slightly and we are rocked against each other and when I turn to hear what's going on better our faces touch, our bodies legs clothes boots are touching and his mouth has accidentally hit mine and he doesn't move away.

Neither of us moves at all,
but this is another gallop up Byat's Track.
This is being me on a horse again.
This is me on the farm, me in my true world.
This is him leaning on the bench in the kitchen for years, eating Mum's cakes.
This is him and me and John running amok on the farm, climbing the woodpile, running through paddocks, chasing cows and sheep.
This is him coming down the driveway to take me back to the city weekend after weekend.
This is him dropping by phoning up calling in picking me up holding me down teasing fighting carrying being there.
And his underneath story is my underneath story after all.

Tybalt shifts his weight. We sway away from each other.

He says nothing. I say nothing. I face forward and Tybalt moves again. He takes one step further, then another, chasing sweeter grass. Steven gathers the reins and takes my hand and twines the leather through my fingers. He places his hand over mine and holds tight to my waist and our feet nudge Tybalt to turn him slowly, taking the long way home.

Slipper socks

When Steven drops me off at home from our time at the farm I get out of the car fast and he carries my bags inside just as fast. He turns on all the lights, quick sticks, and switches on the fire because he knows I like it going even if it's not cold. He feeds Fido who is already fat as a barrel from farm scraps and checks the cupboards for burglars even though I've told him a million times that Fido and I could hear a burglar's heavy, anticipatory breathing at a hundred paces, he says he's got to get home and make phone calls for work and I say thanks for the lift. He's at the door and then turns and comes back to where I am standing and I think he's going to kiss me on the cheek, like he always does, brotherly affectionate; but instead he kisses me on the temple, heightened sensitivity, and then stands there, still, breathing in the scent of my hair while I stand there too, held by the feeling of us; then he says he'll see me at the wedding and exits. Fast.

The wedding.

Two days till the wedding.

As soon as he is out the door I begin pacing. I pace the room of my house and I don't stop. I pace twenty-five steps down the length of the apartment and twenty-five steps back and I think of riding and Steven and Tybalt's warm presence. I think of the galloping run up the track and the slow plodding homewards. I think of a changed charged relationship and I keep on pacing. I think of riding at the front of the horse and feeling safe and wrapped up. I think of the speed of the run. I think of work tomorrow and the wedding. I think of being all wrapped up and what I felt in the instant he touched my mouth like that. I think of our friendship altered and changed when John died. I think of years passing and us tiptoeing around our losses. I set the alarm. I go to bed. I get up again and I put on my slippers that are not sloppy and loose like slippers should be, but tight and

firm and practical with rubber soles and laces and they really aren't like a slipper at all, they are like every other single solitary thing in my life now, they are *practical*. And so I pace again. Twelve steps front door to balcony and back again. The pacing is noisy in tight firm non-dangerous highly-practical-just-like-me slipper-shoes so I take them off and find my slipper socks in my weekend bag. These socks are soft and wool but have those suction pads on the soles not unlike Spiderman had on his arms and knees and other bodily parts to give him grip while he scaled walls and buildings ceilings and pointy-topped roofs and the impossible heights of the criminal world, and I pace again in these slipper replacements. I pace until my mind stops thinking and I can get back into bed and try to get warm and maybe sleep this time, but I miss my Cat who is still holidaying at Sarah's house. I keep my eyes open and look at nothing, I don't even know why I close them to sleep, odd that, when Eyes Closed is almost the same as Eyes Open. I think it must be habit. I stop thinking about my eyes and think only about the wedding and work. Work and the wedding. But there is no sleep and I go on pacing in my mind, being on that horse in my mind, because my world seems like it could be off kilter because of that horse, and maybe I don't like that.

Bridesmaid's Duty

Susan is livid. Janey has got out of staying overnight with the bride at the bride's mother's house on the night before the wedding by claiming an injured lumbar disk that can only be kept in place by sleeping in her own bed. At her own home.

I have got out of staying overnight with the bride at the bride's mother's house on the night before the wedding by claiming to be blind and incapable of sleepovers.

We compromise by going over to Mrs Roche's Camberwell mausoleum to drink champers with strawberries floating amongst the bubbles that nobody has told me about so that when the strawberry sloshes unexpectedly into my mouth I think it is a spider and spit it out and drop the glass and gag at the nightmare thought of swallowing a spider by mistake. Jesus. I'll be re-living this for months. Years.

Mrs Roche gives a long-suffering sigh as she cleans up the mess as if alcohol's never been spilt in this place before. Janey just laughs and pours me another drink. I've already told her I have to stay stone cold sober, but she tells me there is no way in hell a sober person could possibly stomach six hours of non-stop Susan and her lunatic mother. While Janey drinks herself out of the atmosphere, I listen to my old uni friend and her hideous template telling each other lies about the wonderfulness of the occasion. Lies which keep on covertly slipping into a litany of incompetent caterers, idiot wedding celebrants and hellish in-laws. Then they remember this is a celebration of the happiest day of Susan's life and the culmination of her mother's reason for living after she gave up on her own life and married Susan's father whose womanising was enough to send anyone around the bend – the man was insatiable – then they rev themselves back up to wax

lyrical about the romance, the frock, until reality hits again and they launch into the true story of that fucking modiste who claimed she could make an exact copy, an exact copy mind you, of the twenty eight thousand dollar Vogue frock they both adored ... an exact copy! Well. How wrong can you be?

But ...

More champagne is swigged by Susan and Janey, Mrs R's onto the martinis by now and I hear her shaking the gizzards out of the Vermouth in the ice pitcher.

But ...

We're not to mind all that, because of course the dress is beautiful. Naturally Lillian's daughter's no Collette Dinnigan, and if they'd known she'd dropped out of the Swinburne design course *before* they'd commissioned the dress, then of course everything would be different.

But...

But never mind all that.

And,

"Least said, soonest mended," Susan's mother reminds us as I get another blast of straight vermouth on her out-breath.

And,

On a positive note,

"Ian's really smartened himself up." This is, frankly, a relief to us all.

And on it goes.

I think about love and romance, while Mrs Roche and Susan talk about all the love in the room, and the romance of the wedding preparations, and whether or not Ian's friends, and in particular That Steven are behaving themselves. Susan had previously banned any buck's party shenanigans and Janey had told me Ian was too terrified of the potential outcry, let alone payback, to do anything about it. The men were having a quiet drink at Ian's dad's local pub. Susan was worried sick. Mrs Roche was predicting dire consequences, but Steven had told me neither Ian, nor his exhausted wedding party, nor especially his long-suffering father and brothers, had any

plans for anything but an early night in anticipation of bringing the great day closer and thus getting it over and done with.

“It’s just all been so beautiful,” Susan tells the three of us, drunkenly and untruthfully.

“You’re so right, Darling.” Lies her mother, drinking up large.

“Yeah. Spot on,” says Janey and I feel the sofa cushions billow up around me as she stands and there’s a muffled slapping jingling sound which is leather handbag straps and Susan cries,

“You can’t be going already!” and Janey tells her it’s getting on for eleven o’clock and the two of us have to get home and the taxi she booked three months ago for eleven ten precisely is going to be here any minute and we all need our beauty sleep. She gathers me up, which really doesn’t help because she’s drunk, and I try to shake her off and unclip my sensor stick, and check for all my things, but I find that I never actually unslung my bag from across my chest, or took off my coat so I’m ready immediately to get myself out the door, if only I can just stop Janey from clutching at me and trying to help; then I realise that she’s not clutching to help me, she’s clutching at me because she’s plastered and can’t stand up straight without leaning on someone.

The Roches say goodbye, piteously, so I hug Susan extra hard at the door because they feel so forlorn, so lonely, the two of them, with the greatest day of their lives only hours away and the groom just wanting it over and done with and the bridesmaids desperate to get the hell away from them and the circle of friends that Susan once had all driven away, and their voices pitch higher and higher to cover the depth of the stress and insecurity about what they’ve done and how they’ve done it.

She’s breaking my heart, this choppy angry desperate messed-up Susan. I hold her tight and tell her tomorrow will be wonderful and that she’ll be the most beautiful bride and that I’m really happy that she’s included me in the

wedding party; and she tells me that I'm her oldest friend and that she loves me and that she couldn't possibly have left me out of the wedding, even if I am handicapped, and that the photographer's been warned about me and he'll be checking especially to make sure my head is straight and my eyes are open and looking in the right direction for the photographs.

Instead of hitting Susan across the back of the head with my sensor stick, I call a sharpish goodbye to her mother and quickly count my way down the front steps, eight, and I listen for the slapping of Janey's sandals as she zig zags down the garden path ahead of me. I use the echo of her footsteps to navigate the shrubbery and there's the gate opening and the engine of a car and Susan and her mother call cheery things at us in even higher, stretched-out voices which I don't bother to answer because Janey is yelling back at them, loud enough and drunk enough, for both of us. I stand on the kerb and feel with my stick for the car and then Janey realises and steers me to the door handle and I climb in and we drive to my apartment with Janey spending the entire trip giving a lurid description of Mrs Roche's clammy wet kiss and overly-familiar hug on the doorstep as we were leaving. Janey stays with the taxi and I find my way up my own garden path, thirteen steps, and the staircase, twelve, and through my front door and I greet the animals and heat up my wheat bag and change into my pyjamas and go to bed still wearing my slipper socks illegally, but toastily, and lie there, Eyes Open, staring at the dark like I always do and listening to the weight of my Cat purring on my chest and feeling Fido heavy on my left foot and I think about tomorrow and a wedding and vows and honeymoons. I think of love nests and decorating and a shared mortgage and pregnancy tests and photographs of fetuses in the womb and a baby in arms. I think about family photos and parent-teacher nights and curriculum days coming in the middle of a working week and sports carnivals and ferrying children and their friends to birthday parties and sleepovers and I know that none of that is mine.

I wake up my Cat by scratching her under the chin. I glide the back of my hand down the silky soft slide of her throat and I do it until she starts purring louder and I keep doing it until she gets annoyed with my neediness and stands up and turns her back on me and falls asleep again in a huff. I think about children and the heartbreak of them and in that dozy space before real sleep I think about Tybalt and I am riding again and Steven is holding me in the saddle and then I drift further back and I am running down the hill at the back of our place over and over again towards John, and I fall into sleep feeling the ache of my sore knees.

When the alarm rings I wake up.

When the phone rings I get up.

And it's Susan,

saying where am I?

They were expecting me to be there before breakfast,

and the hair stylist is on her way,

and Janey's not answering her phone,

and the make-up girl is already there, with the wrong colour box;

and her mother says the dress doesn't look as bad as it could have.

The wedding is on.

And on.

And on.

All five hours of preparation and hair styles and make-up done and undone and done again and dresses put on and off and my head being positioned continuously in between orders "Not to move, Jill. At. All." for tableaux arranged by that idiot photographer Sambi doing the *Girls' Dressing* series in Mrs Roche's dining room made up to look like a nineteenth century boudoir for the occasion, or so I'm told. Sambi and Susan have a knock-down drag-out fight over whether she should be photographed in her underwear sitting in front of the mirror and fiddling with her hair, or standing in front of the

mirror and fiddling with her hair. They have a whispered hissing argument about me which of course I can hear because I hear everything, and the source of the “Not to move, Jill” instruction becomes clear. Apparently my tilting head isn’t working for Sambi. Ah, the vicissitudes of the disabled. What a trial we are to others. Although to be honest, being blind in this situation is actually something of an advantage because this is five hours of my life I’m never getting back again, and I thank Christ I don’t actually have to *look* at it.

Janey drinks champagne; I drink coffee, black; Susan is in full panicked-bitch mode. It is a short-lived relief when the chauffeurs arrive and we are packed up and moved off with frazzled nerves and a hundred instructions about behaviour and dress codes ringing in our ears.

The drive to the church is a happy silent eighteen minutes of relief. Janey doesn’t move or utter a word, and neither do I. I think about Fido at Janine’s house, being coddled and disciplined and fed up large for the day. I think about my black Cat lying in her basket that Steven has re-positioned on my balcony for maximum northern light and sunshine exposure, but aligned so she’d be out of any stray breezes and in handy reach of her water bowl; with a pot of catnip there, as well as a wedding treat of Frisky’s *Crunchable Turkey and Salmon Bites*. I think of that. I think of sunshine on purring fur and the drive to the church is really very pleasant.

Then suddenly the time speeds up with phone calls and cars stopping and starting and first we’re at the church and then we’re not and then we are again and now we’re not. Conflicting instructions and barked orders and questions questions questions fly between the phones connecting the two cars and now Janey and I are holding each other’s clammy hands, bewildered and confused and suspicious, huddled in the back seat of the front wedding car as we circle the block around the church for the third time.

Susan has just been on Janey's mobile's speaker phone, laughing too loudly, telling us that we're not to panic, because she's always been early for every important event in her life. I'd like to look at Janey and roll my eyes, for we're actually ten minutes late, and not only due to the screaming fight that went on between Mrs and Mr Roche just before the cars were due to leave the mausoleum; but the rolling of eyes is a useless gesture for the blind, and anyway, ever since Susan's comment about the photographer being put on high alert to make sure my eyes are actually facing the camera, I've been consumed by worry about what they actually do these days. I thought they were still appearing as normal. I thought that because I can see light and dark, and some smudges of objects, that I at least appeared to be looking at the right things in the right places. I've asked Janey if my eyes are funny. If they look unfocused. If I seem vacant and stupid. She's said no. I just look blind.

I just look blind.

What does that mean? Do I look like that creepy old fossil from the *Kung Fu* TV show? Do I look scary? Monstrous?

Steven has said that my eyes haven't changed at all. Much.

I asked him what "much" meant.

He said that my pupils just seemed larger.

"Do I stare?" I asked him. "Inappropriately stare, I mean?"

"No. No more than you always did."

No more than I always did? I was a starrer?

Luckily, Susan explained it to me ...

"I just meant that when you concentrate you have your head tilted to one side and you don't always look at the person you're talking to."

"Well, that's because I can't see them, Susan."

“You look off to the side, Jill.”

“That’s because *I’m not looking at anything, Susan.*”

“I know. But you look like you’re looking at something, like you’re staring.”

I’m so glad she explained that to me.

I don’t look at things anymore because I can’t see detail.

It seems fairly simple.

I listen to the world. I see it with my fingers and my ears, isn’t that totally obvious? And if I have to tilt my head because I’ve only got my hearing as a handle to identify one single level and tone of sound in what is an all-encompassing cacophony of an aural world that is a rushing driving blanketing relentless insanity of white noise coming at me at a million miles an hour, then isn’t that okay? Isn’t that understandable? Why do I have to hide this? And if they understand that because my ears are at the side of my head, not front and centre like their eyes are and that is the reason why my head is tilted SO I CAN HEAR THEIR STUPID GENERIC TEDIOUS BLOODY VOICES; then why can’t they take a photo of me as I am? Why can’t they take a photo of my real head-tilted listening-self?

Bastards.

Phonies.

Pretentious shits.

Sometimes I yearn to be a hermit.

Sometimes like now.

Right now Janey’s hand is sweaty and tight, gripping mine; and Susan’s disembodied voice is telling us that there’s some complication in the vestry with the suits, so we’re going around the block again, then my mobile calls and it’s Steven’s ring-tone and we’ve barely caught up at all since we got back from the farm and he tells me,

“There’s a bit of a problem.”

“Of course there’s a problem,” I say, “We’re still out here in the bloody cars with that mad woman on the phone every five minutes, I’m not allowed to tilt my head to listen to anybody and the wedding hasn’t even started.

What’s the hold up? Can we please get this over with? Can’t you just sort out the blasted suits and make up some lie for Susan later?”

“I can’t sort out the suits and make up a lie later, because the suits are the lie.”

“The suits are the lie?”

“The problem is Ian.”

Janey’s breathing heavily into my ear, listening to Steven and holding my arm.

“What’s the problem with Ian? God, this wedding!” Her other fingernails are drumming on the door.

“Janey!” Says Steven, “Good. Um, can you stop the car at the next circuit, but keep Susan going around the block?”

“Steven?” Why is he being so bloody obtuse? “What’s going on?”

“Well, it seems Ian’s done a bit of a Scotty of the Antarctic and ‘just stepped outside’.”

“He’s what??”

“Scotty of the Who? The what?” Janey is sitting up straighter now. Those fingers have stopped their tap tap tapping.

“Scotty and the boys in the Antarctic,” I tell her, “On their last mission, when they’d run out of all their supplies and were going to freeze to death, one of them said to his mates in the tent, ‘I’m just going outside. I may be away some time.’ No-one steps outside the tent in a blizzard in the Antarctic. He went outside to die.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I think it means Ian’s walked out.” I tell her.

“Oh God ... Oh fuck ... Oh shit, oh hell.” Janey throws herself back against the car seat.

“That’s all we frigging need. That stupid shit. Why did he have

to pick *now*?”

I try to block her out and concentrate on what Steven is saying, but I’m already imagining Ian curled up in a foetal position on the floor of the vestry, moaning “Oh God. Oh fuck. Oh shit, oh hell,” just like Janey.

“We don’t know where he is. He literally just stepped outside twenty minutes ago, and no one has seen him since.”

“Does Mrs Roche know?”

“Hell no, we told her that the hold-up was with Susan.”

“What does Dad say?” Janey has snatched the phone out of my hand and holds it up for both of us to hear, she speaks loudly and sharply into it.

“Your dad says Ian’s been under a lot of pressure.” Steven’s voice sounds electronic and small.

“And?”

“And? And that’s it. ‘Ian’s been under a lot of pressure.’ That’s all.”

“Oh God. Oh fuck. Oh shit, oh hell.”

I fumble at Janey’s head and ears and find her hand and take the phone.

“Has he taken a car or is he on foot?” Is he lurking in the back of the church somewhere? Knocking back a packet of Winnie Blues in the grave yard?

“We’re checking all that, but we only realised he was properly gone about five minutes ago. I thought he was with Ryan, Ryan thought he was with me, and his dad thought he was with the bloody Vicar who’s the most useless bastard in a crisis I’ve ever met. All he can say is ‘What will Ms Roche say? What will Ms Roche say?’.”

“Wait a minute,” I butt in, as Janey’s phone goes off and we both know it’s bound to be Susan, “Isn’t the marriage celebrant meant to be a woman? Iris? Isabel? Eva?”

“Susan sacked her. Two days ago. Get with the program, Jill, something to do with the clothes, Christ knows ... anyway they got this bloke in at the last minute and he’s scared to death of them all. The thing is, I thought Ian might have phoned Janey.”

Janey's phone's still ringing. It's Susan calling us. Steven tells Janey to say nothing about this conversation, get rid of her, and to start checking her messages for a call from Ian.

And now our car is slowing, so we must have arrived back at the church for the fourth time and Susan, when Janey answers the phone, is getting shrill and is difficult to shake off. Janey reminds her to call the caterers and make sure they are icing the champers around about now and then rings off and tells the chauffeur to let Susan's car pass ours and to park here, then she starts fidgeting with musical buttons on her phone to bring up message bank. Steven's in my ear wanting to know what's going on, telling me he's coming around the back of the church now and he can see our car now and then he's at the door, opening it and climbing in to sit next to me.

"Anything on the phone?"

"There's a call from his mobile. But there's no message. Just his number."

"What time?" Steven's arm swishes over and across me as he reaches for Janey's phone,

"About two ten?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. Christ, he could be miles away." Janey has leaned in close to me and they are talking face to face across me. I can smell their hair shampoo and Janey's perfume which matches mine, Steven's head brushes against my temple and Janey's shoulder is pushed into my chest, their hands fumble together with the tinny metal awkwardness of a tiny phone.

"What about Jill's phone? Maybe he tried to contact you?" Steven asks and I move my hand from under bodies and suit fabric and out of the froth of my bridesmaid dress and hold out my phone to him – it'll be quicker to get through the menu with eyes than waiting for the voice instructions like I have to.

"Fuck. He did ring you. It's a text."

"But he knows I can't use the text."

“What does it say? What’s he said?” Janey yells in my ear and then bangs her chin into my nose as she tries to read the phone in Steven’s hand. I smell who they are again as we huddle together and Steven reads the words out aloud.

“Just need a bit of space. Will call when I get my head around this. Ian.”

Janey’s head comes up, as I hear the engine of the other car pulling in beside us.

“FUUUUCK!” Screams Janey,

“It’s Susan” I tell Steven, as if he wouldn’t know.

”Try and call him! Keep calling him!” Screeches Janey, untangling herself from Steven and I and getting out of the car. I feel the rip of fabric as my dress is caught and the stitching opens up in a sharp tearing sound. Janey pulls away, swearing more. I feel with my hands and find a gap in the skirt that is at least ten centimetres long and tell Steven this is all we need.

Christ. Steven presses buttons on my phone and I hear the sound of another door opening and then raised voices. My phone makes that ring ring ringing sound, and while I hold the torn fabric together with one hand and search through my safety bag for pins with the other, Steven, hunched against me in the middle of the back seat starts to laugh silently and hysterically at the sheer ludicrous misery of it all. We listen to Janey making pacifying words at Susan and Mr Roche who isn’t as scary as his ex-wife and daughter, but can be felt as an emanating wall of man blocking the space beside Susan. Ian’s phone rings out and Steven is laughing like a mad bastard as he re-dials and Susan’s car door slams.

Hard.

Then the engine revs and they move away down the road and Janey’s back in the seat beside us and Steven hits more buttons and the ringing buzz starts up again as I find three pins and start working on the hole in my dress. Then the phone suddenly switches to voice mail and Steven stops laughing as we hear Ian’s voice message and then he calmly tells Ian that we are all

worried about him, and can he please call and let us help sort it out and then Janey butts in and screams at Ian to “Fucking call us, you selfish bastard, you can’t do this to her!” Then there’s a tussle over me as Steven seems to be fighting for the phone and telling Janey that abusing Ian is hardly helping him and Janey saying that standing Susan up at the altar is a weak as piss act and that Ian *has* to come back and he can’t possibly do this to her. Then Steven seems to have won the fight because the phone is snapped shut and the two of them go into silence, fuming across the pinned-together tulle of me.

Time.

In the time it takes for a bride’s wedding car to circle a city block we three sit tight. Tight together waiting. We sit tight and touching, leaning into and onto each other. We wait for Susan to get back and get told the awful news. Or we wait for Ian to call and do the sorting.

We wait for the inevitability of Mrs Roche charging out of the church to confront us.

Or we wait for Ryan to appear and say, “He’s back and it’s all over, it’s all fine”.

We wait like survivors for a rescue craft to save us from this mess.

Then Janey moves and she lays her head on my shoulder,

“I can’t stand her, you know that, but Jill there’s a hundred and fifty people in there and she’s going to have to get up in front of all of them on her own, in that revolting Lady Di dress, and say he’s walked out on her.

She’s a stupid selfish bitch, but even Susan doesn’t deserve this.”

She crumples further against me and I feel her crying small tears. Steven moves his arm around us both so he can rub her back and then he finds my hand and holds it and I sit straight and upright, head un-tilted, like I’m strong.

The engine of the car bearing the bride sounds up the street behind us and it stops next to us and the door opens and it’s not shrill Susan anymore it’s

quiet Susan and she pushes Janey and Steven and I further over into the door on his side and gets into the car with us and Steven and Janey tell her what has happened and Janey is crying harder now and Steven still holds onto my hand and I hold onto Susan's and the foam and lather of her enormous dress covers my legs and now the four of us wait together.

Wedding

Bloody Ian showed up, of course, after the guests had sat waiting in the church for nearly forty minutes. He got down on one knee on the road beside our car and apologised to Susan and asked again for her hand in marriage. Steven told me the bit about the down on one knee. Janey had to be restrained from punching him in the face. Steven didn't need to tell me that part because although he was the one doing the restraining, it all happened across me.

Susan, to my amazement, was ecstatic and only cried happy tears and Ian was as pleased as punch, so presumably he'd made his point; and the upshot of all this was that I was well and truly stuck with having to fumble my way up the aisle and onto the altar when, for a while there, it had looked like I was going to get out of that particular humiliation.

And now, in less time than it takes to lean out of a car door and say, *I do*, Janey and I find ourselves walking slowly into the church with our arms linked and our strides matching, all the way up the aisle ahead of a cheerful laughing Susan and her bemused father. There is a brightness that must be sunlight streaming in from a window behind the altar and it is searing across my eyes, so whatever light and shade I might have normally had is gone completely, but the bright is so warm so all-encompassing so un-grey that I don't mind at all. I stop counting my steps and just let Janey lead me into it. It is like that day I'd had at home with Dad all that time ago before Eyes Shut, where the light was perfect and the colours in the paddocks and the dogs and the trees and in my Dad just glowed. I'm not seeing colours now of course. I'm not actually seeing anything even remotely like sight, but it feels like there is glowing around me. I drift into the nave and let Janey steer me to my spot and I stand there as

Susan's gown ruffles and flutters and Janey dodges around setting it to rights and there is that puff-kissing sound and Mr Roche's footsteps rhythm slowly away to a space behind me and there is a creaking of wooden pews and coughing from the minister and re-arrangements of feet and limbs, suits rustle and the talking of the service begins and that sunlight is still full on my face. I hear Susan's voice actually sounding sincere as she makes her elaborate and individualistic vows and something solid falls at the fourth pew back on the groom's side. Probably a handbag. Or a hymn book. No, it's a bag, tinkling insides.

Ian's voice talks next. He doesn't use his practiced carrying lawyer's voice, he speaks softly. He sounds urgent determined. I hear Steven moving over on my right and Janey's hand briefly adjusts my hair. The minister says more words and there is some talk about the Lord and we stand, still and waiting. There is music again, soft and humble, music that slides underneath the voices and the vows and then Janey takes my arm and says, "Sideways, forward twice, the table's on your right, elbow height." Susan's froth brushes against me and I feel them sitting and standing and sitting and standing and the scratch of an olde worlde ink pen carves signatures into paper. Then Ryan takes my elbow and helps me feel the chair with my hand and I sit and the pen is placed between my fingers and I write my name between the cut-out space on a piece of card that is useful for writing in a straight line when you can't see the page.

I stand up and Ryan's there again and he helps me to step back safely and there's more sitting and signing by other people and the minister makes a small joke into an atmosphere that is serious and strangely intense. Then we are paraded back to our places in front of the altar and pronouncements are made and there is discreet clapping from the crowd and silence and skin on face noises and someone gives a cheer and Ryan is beside me and has his arm linked

through mine and he walks me down the aisle behind the clicking shoes of the happy couple, past eyes watching, and this time the bright warm is on my back, pushing through the layers of dress to reach my skin and I feel it all through me.

End Notes

Outside and away from the heat hard on my back, I ask Ryan to move me off to the side without the crowd and he says it's already arranged. And there is cheerful noise all around, and glad handing and kissing sounds and high, relieved chatter from the people washing by me and crowding the entrance, and an odd uneasiness wavers through all this although no-one could know what went on with Ian and the stepping outside of the tent, but forty minutes of waiting for the bride has taken the edge off the fairytale. I hear the hissing breath of Mrs Roche over to my left and then Steven is here and he asks if I'm alright and I say the light in there was strange and he says everything in there was strange and he puts his arms all the way around me, both arms, and holds me tightly, which is also warmth.

Sarah comes up and kisses me and tells me that she is looking stunning in a hat that has jet beads sewn into the brim so I reach out my hand and she guides me to feel the beads. They are slim and sewn tightly together. The brim is made of fine silk. I tell her she's right, she does look stunning. I feel the lean of her body and the noise as she kisses Steven, then her arm is linked into mine and she says,

"Photo time."

I turn to walk to where I think I'm going and my legs are caught in the length of my dress and I stumble. I bang my knees into the edge of the steps but Sarah's arm is still linked in mine so it's not a bad fall. Just scrapes. I don't think in colour or pictures now, but I get an image in my mind of my knees torn and broken, grey and mud-coloured with fresh dirt smeared over them, bright with sudden blood, livid through torn strips of skin. My legacy.

"Shit," says Sarah, "The bloody dress."

Yes, the dress ...

I wake up: Yes! The dress!

“Oh, Christ. Did I tear it?”

I start feeling my way down the layers of cloth as Sarah feels her way up from the hem.

“It’s not too bad, it’s mostly just the blood.”

Knees.

I tell her maybe it’s the same spot I tore it earlier and we can just re-do the pins. She says no, that it’s a new tear.

“Bugger.”

Typical.

I’m suddenly angry, cross with all the banging and scraping and tumbling down. Always I’m falling into space. Always I’m landing hard. I keep hurting myself over and over.

I ask Steven to grab my bag from the back of the car and I tell Sarah I’ve got first aid stuff in there, plus more pins, plus needle and thread.

“Didn’t Janey tell her the long dresses were stupid?” asks Sarah.

“Endlessly. But when has she ever listened to Janey?”

Then Sarah is shoving away acres of cloth and fussing and dabbing at my knees which sting and ache which is nothing new.

The first aid is done and I’ve stalled the photographs for the happy couple. Fucking knees. Fucking photos. Fucking happy couple. Steven says to calm down, even though I’ve said none of this out aloud. He says don’t worry about it and you’ll be right and it’ll be over soon and it’s just as well I’ve slowed things down as it’s given everyone more time to try and muster up sincere-looking smiles. I can’t answer, I’m livid. Livid like blood under skin. I hold onto my dress and keep it well out of the way as we head back to the front steps and even before I get there I can hear Sambi screaming instructions at a

strangely docile Susan and Ian. Janey is nowhere to be heard. All through the ceremony she was silent and withdrawn and when I ask about her I'm told she's far away from me on the other side of the symmetry of our line-up. Sarah and Steven deliver me to Ryan who says Sambi's a complete bastard and the newly-weds are behaving really well and it's weird. The crowd in the forecourt is chattering around us and I know they are watching the construction of the photograph. Sarah re-does my lipstick and smooths at my hair and brushes at my dress again. She says you can hardly see the blood stains which we've rinsed in mineral water. I feel the spots occasionally as damp patches when the breeze blows the skirt around my legs. My knees hurt and I have my head angled to listen to Ryan's running commentary in my ear and Steven calls out stupid remarks to Janey to cheer her and it seems to be working a bit, I can feel her head go up, her vigorous energy starts to rise from across the mob between us. Sambi's idiot commands are coming from two o'clock. Sambi tells Janey to put her shoulders back and to lean towards Susan; he tells Susan to smile, big and happy; Ian to hold his wife closer and me to stop tilting my head and to turn my face towards his voice. There is shuffling and wriggling as bodies move and orders are followed, but I don't move my face towards his stupid voice because then I won't be able to hear what's going on.

There's still a bit of chatter and then I hear Sambi walking towards us, heavy tread poser's boots on concrete. I feel him rearrange the swish of Susan's dress. He tells Janey to move closer, closer still to the bride and I get a burst of her old spirited self coming at me in a sudden blast. Ah, Janey. Then Sambi's hand brushes against my own arm as he directs Ryan into another position, then his cologned-face is in mine and he says very loudly, that I have to turn my face to the left,

"THE LEFT, JILL, BECAUSE YOU'RE LOOKING THE WRONG WAY."

I tell him that he's been misinformed, and that I am blind and so I don't actually look any way at all.

The people around me stop talking and Sambi says that he knows I'm blind, but he's trying to get a uniform photo here and having me in profile doesn't work. I tell him that I live in profile and he hisses at me that wedding photos are about unnatural postures and pretence and very few of them, if any, bear a resemblance to how anyone really is, and so could I kindly face the right way? I say, "Sure. Of course I will. Whatever you say." So that he plonks away in his pretentious clippity clip boots. Fool. But I keep my head tilted because that's the way I hear and when he's back where he was standing before and he spins around I know he sees me, still tilting, because he loses his temper and yells, "Look, Jill just face the camera, and let me take the photo, alright?" But I'm tired now and I hate these sore knees that are stinging more every time my dress brushes the raw skin, I feel Steven start to move from the thick of the crowd where he's been standing watching me and I say, "Why don't you just point the camera, Sambi, and take the photo as is instead?"

Then he says that, "Having the chief bridesmaid staring vacantly off into the middle distance will ruin the entire shoot."

And I've had enough and I say, "Well, bad luck, Pal."

He snorts out through his nose, but I turn my face up to the sunshine and I don't even listen to what he's saying.

I feel Steven and Sarah close at hand, with Steven ready to go Sambi but I know Sarah's holding him back and I smell dry cut grass from somewhere, like hay, maybe the gardens nearby? And turned earth, maybe they're putting in some annuals? Ripping out the cold-weather survivors, like they do every year, and planting spring flowers ...

When I tune back in my knees still hurt and Sambi's still ranting and Ryan says, "I think we've reached a stalemate."

There's no sound of shutters clicking, I hear Sambi storming around and he marches back to our group and it turns out he's having a bitch about me to Susan and Ian. Ryan advises me to tell him to shove his camera, because without me on side and in the picture, Sambi is cactus. Then after much whispering Susan calls out to me in a voice that seems to indicate that she may have regained a small amount of her bounce,

"Jill, couldn't you ...?"

"No."

"But I really think ... "

"No."

There is more whispering with Sambi, then Ian's voice chimes in,

"Jill, don't you think ...?"

"No."

"Sambi says you're ruining the ... "

"I beg your pardon, Ian?"

Silence.

Susan again, "Jill, couldn't you just ... ?"

"No."

"Oh for God's sake!" Sambi's more than a little toey now.

"No. No. No." I say, "You can take the photo with me looking blind, or you can take the photo without me. Your call Sambi, but I'm tired, my knees hurt and I'm not hanging around here for much longer, so you'd better make up your mind which it's going to be."

I wonder if we can call in at a chemist and get some anaesthetic spray. Numbness would be good. I'd like numb.

Then there are more words told to Sambi, but I don't listen, there's giggling coming from the stalls and I try my hardest to blank out the pain because the

sun's shining on and it's so warm and it's plastered all over my body and I hear traffic and people and if I switch gears it sounds like wind flying through big trees on the side of a hill, not like the city at all, then there's the sound of small childish feet running hard before the fall when Jack and Jill went up the hill and

Dad cried at the kitchen table and said it should have been him

I sat near the stove and knew it should have been me

I'd slacked off and hadn't done my essay the night before and John ended up doing the ploughing and

Christ knows it should have been any of us

But you always ask why and why not and why us and why him and why me.

And I did come tumbling after

all these years later I've come a real cropper alright. It's irony, how I fall all the time now, keep opening up those same old wounds.

I stand in the wedding party and close my eyes against that light coming down and those knees nagging at me, even though it makes no difference.

I turn and the sun's directly in my eyes they sting and water and I should shut them again I won't cry

The camera shutters click and whirr so Sambi's stomped back to two o'clock

The sun is moving and Sambi's calling out instructions to everybody except me and some bodies shuffle and rearrange and straighten up my knees smart I think I will have to get some of that anaesthetic spray, even though I know it will only just take the edge off.

The breeze wraps my dress right around me again. There are conifers somewhere over to the west, I can smell them, if I turn again I catch the scent.

We planted conifers on John's hill, because they're my favourites, and river gums for Dad. Mum wanted a flaming liquid amber and we put in blue gums too because he liked them.

Finally it's over and Sambi's gone. The relatives and friends begin to mill around us and Steven and Sarah and Leigh are next to me and they are laughing and Steven confirms that my head was fully tilted in every single shot and Ryan behind us starts sniggering and Steven says, "Are you alright?" and I could tell him, because he was there, he's always been there and he lived through it too with his best friend dead on the side of the hill, but I can hear Susan's coy bridal giggle from here and I am really tired now, it must be the noise and the crowd, wearing me out. I lean against my friend and that feels a bit better.

Now Leigh and Sarah are walking us over to their car and Steven and I get into the back seat with my big blind woman's emergency bag. Steven's being chauffeured because he's allowed to drink at the wedding, which was the deal we made at the engagement party and Leigh drives us towards the snooty hotel where the caterers will have messed up the arrangements and the flowers will be all wrong and the cake will somehow be bugged. I lean back into the car seat while Steven gives directions to a pharmacy he knows in the city without me even asking and as we turn into Collins Street the sun hits my face again through the side window and Steven is holding my hand again and I have my eyes open and I am staring into the stinging warm.

Who am I? I think. Who am I?

Blinded.

Disabled, unabled; those too.

A swimmer ... only in open water, with a guide.

A walker.

Who am I?

A frightened person. Yes. Afraid of the dark and the future the world.

Who am I?

A terrified person. Afraid of a fall of cars and bikes and trucks. Afraid of risk and no risk of the dark and not coping.

Who am I?

A brave person, really, because after all I'm still here.

A fake, because I put on the happy face, even to me.

Who am I?

An only child

Who am I?

Morbid. Strictured. Structured. Lost. Alone. Lone. Lonely. Left behind. Self pitying. Self absorbed. Selfish.

Who am I?

I'm a tunnel I'm falling into.

Why am I here? In this fall? Where's it taking me? Where have I even been?

I can scarcely remember what I did with this life before blind.

I remember back to when John and I were kids, that's vivid and strong, the three of us running around. But after he fell under the tractor ...

I know what happened after that, but I just don't seem to remember doing any of it.

Who was I? Who am I? What is this for? Is there a for? If I don't remember be-fore, what's next? What am I doing in this life?

What do I do now, but count steps as I walk and throw out echoes and concentrate on how to cross a room?

What do I do now but tear up my knees all over again. Again and again and again. The most affecting times of my life spent ripping my skin open.

I'm waiting.

I'm waiting for a rescue craft to save me from this mess.

Like I'm waiting for John not to be dead.

Like I'm waiting for the right time to go back and live on the farm.

Like I'm waiting for my parents to stop showing signs of age.

Like I used to wait foolishly hopelessly for this blind punishment to be over and life to start again.

Like I'm waiting for Steven to speak up to speak out to state what this is

I've never believed that crap about life being one big lesson, and our job here is just to learn and learn until we get perfect.

So what am I waiting for?

I remember me running down that hill towards the tractor

And me running flat out down the road late for school

And us running up the lane to the Wrights' milking shed

And running through the paddocks when they were wet

And running because that's just what we did.

And I think, I miss that.

I lean back and ask Steven if he has any ideas about a place we could go where I could safely run by myself?

When he turns to answer he brushes my head with the skin of his face
lips and breath are touch on my forehead.

And one of these days,
I decide here and now,
one of these days
I'm going to run
I'm going to find a place that's open
and I'm going to run like anything without thinking.

The Mechanics of Blind

Volume II: The Exegesis
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How to imagine blindness: an exegesis

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Part 1

Researching

Introduction

Twenty-one years ago I, the writer, was given a second-hand glimpse of a tiny portion of another person's story. A friend I was working with was commuting daily on the train. Those were the days when people sat enclosed in six or eight-person compartments, with a conductor who came through on every journey, selling and checking tickets. One morning a woman got into the compartment with my friend. The woman had a guide dog and black glasses and was blind. She managed the doors, the steps, the seating, the tickets and the conductor, all without looking; but when the train had moved out of the station, she took out a book, removed her glasses, opened her eyes and began to read. My friend asked her what she was doing and she explained that she would soon be losing her sight, and so she was practicing.

From this brief account I began to imagine the rest of her story. Who was she? How could she plan for this? What did it mean for her? What sort of future was she anticipating? Over the years, I thought about her again and again and wondered what sort of life she would be living now, all this time later. This woman's narrative has innate drama — intense, character-based drama. It has struggle, how could it not? Loss, grief and a journey that is inescapably confronting. And yet it is also remarkably ordinary; a small, personal tragedy: one person's world upended and re-configured so that they are forced to find a way through. But the added interest in this story for me was the immediate assumptions I conjured because of my pre-conceived ideas about blindness. I wondered about the new and special qualities that this woman would acquire. What would the woman gain through her blindness? What new world would she discover? What extra-ordinary skills would she develop?

The immediacy with which I attached the symbols of an ancient trope to what was essentially a modern story surprised me. In the process of working through my imaginings of this woman's experiences, and creating a story from it, I became interested in not simply giving an account of her world, but also in the question of how the historical representations of blindness could be bound to this story to mark the writing not just within the context of contemporary fiction, but also within a longer history of the trope of blindness in literature.

This exegesis examines, firstly from the perspective of a creative writer, the background to my research, and secondly, reflects on the way in which I applied this work to my novel. It therefore, together with the novel, offers a significant contribution to the scholarship of writing practice as well as to literary discussions of the trope of blindness.

A number of different strands of research have informed my work: Reception Studies; Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the Greek concept of ἄτη; the unraveling of the way in which metaphors work; sociologist Arthur Frank's illness narratives and other receptions of the trope of blindness in western literature. In addition, I re-examined these research areas specifically in terms of the writing process, so they are revisited within a discussion of narrative form, the narrative voice, mythical narrative structures and the body as a subject of action within fiction.

Reception Studies

Reception Studies examines the way in which a classical work is 'received' — in any form, at any time after the initial original presentation. A classical work is considered to be an original work from the ancient Greek or Roman periods of 500 to 336 BCE and approximately 250 BCE to 350 AD.

How do Reception Studies offer some insights into the writing of my novel? *The Mechanics Of Blind* is a work of fiction in a long line of representations of blindness in literature, which stretches back to as early as the 8th century BCE with the oral tradition which preceded Homer, followed in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles who wrote of blindness as a punishment and a gift. The metaphor grew from the creation of two powerful and iconic characters: Oedipus Tyrannus and Tires the prophet. Studies into the reception of classical works provides a frame for the exploration of the metaphor and its context within this new writing. Blindness in literature has been received in many forms since Sophocles, but it has not, to my knowledge, been written of without the metaphor of the parallel of special insight, as a substantial presence. The detailed re-examination of the metaphor separates this novel from previous work. I have examined the layers of meaning in metaphors themselves and the actual trope and sought to consciously re-present blindness in a new way. The links

embedded in the metaphor by the Greek writers have endured to the point where fictional blindness is routinely represented as insightful, prophetic, punitive and frequently preceded by an inability to grasp an obvious truth. The novel is positioned within the history of the receptions of this metaphor as an attempt to re-visit blindness as a self-evident story form in a contemporary work.

Reception Studies seek to deconstruct later renderings of any classical work, whether they be in the form of an opera, play, film, painting, media installation, novel, poem, architectural design or speech from any period. The reception of a classical work is a study which takes into account the context in which the original work is used, the meanings ascribed to it both in the past and in the time when the work is reproduced or re-developed. Much of Reception Studies is about context and meaning and the ways in which these two areas overlap and affect each other. Lorna Hardwick in her definitive 2003 text, *Reception Studies*, states that:

Reception Studies have to be concerned with investigating the routes by which a text has moved and the cultural focus which shaped or filtered the ways in which the text was regarded. Reception Studies therefore participate in the continuous dialogue between the past and the present and also require some “lateral” dialogue in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time. (Hardwick 2003, p4)

Reception Studies analyse how and why an earlier work has been referenced and what added meaning or cachet can be attached to the old idea as it is re-interpreted and revisited in order to explore a 'truth' or a concept in a different cultural or historical context.

Greek and Roman texts and art continue to be referenced by writers, artists and designers in order to give added depth or a sense of 'quality' to re-enforce and add weight to a work or an ideal. By association, it seems, a classical reference endows a later work with strength and respect. A vivid example of this is the classical architecture that emerged in Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries after British architects and designers were commissioned to travel to ancient sites to retrieve a culture that could be transposed to the British Isles and would consequently evoke images of the power and might of the empire (JACT 2007). This is not the only example of reception on a large scale, Hardwick uses the example of Mussolini and his

identification of the rising fascist movement with the Roman Empire:

Historians have identified three main stages in the development of Mussolini's regime, and in connection with each there were adaptations in the exploitation of the association with ancient Rome.
(Hardwick 2003, p43)

The reception of works from antiquity takes many forms and has the capacity to reframe events or works from the past, as well as being an opportunity to evaluate, because of this connection, post-classical and contemporary work by questioning the implications of that reception.

A dominant line of the research for this thesis was the tracking back through the stories of blindness to uncover more about the metaphor and from there to examine the way it has been received since then, and to apply this knowledge to the creative writing. In this way the exegesis and novel create the lateral dialogue Hardwick describes, in historical terms, with the ancient Greeks through Oedipus and Tiresias and subsequent receptions of blindness until the present.

Oedipus Tyrannus

While the metaphor has its origins in Homer and his references to the prophet Tiresias, it is expanded further through the beauty and sophistication of Oedipus' fall from grace and has subsequently endured as an image and a state that has emerged to symbolise a paradox. As a consequence, blindness in literature is a concept with specific significance that has been repeated and therefore strengthened over the ensuing years to become an iconistic narrative line that has contributed an immediately recognisable story structure to our literary history.

One of the earliest characterisations of blindness in literature is that of Tiresias the blind prophet, who is himself an enduring character and symbol:

As a seer, Tiresias was "a common title for soothsayers throughout Greek legendary history". In Greek Literature, Tiresias's pronouncements are always gnomic but never wrong. He is generally extremely reluctant to offer his visions like most oracles. Often when his name is attached to a mythic prophecy, it is introduced simply to supply a personality to the generic example of a seer ... (Graves 1955, p105.5)

Tiresias is the strongest initial source for the metaphor of blindness and despite being a “generic” blind prophet, his particular story goes a long way back into the mythology that formed the basis for so much of Greek literature. There are a number of myths and stories about Tiresias and each of them attributes his blindness to different events, all of which are related in some way to him seeing things he should not have seen. His story which begins before blindness, is a story connecting him to the gods, a story which has him transformed from male to female and back again, from sighted to blind, and as compensation for his blindness, he is granted prophetic qualities. All of his subsequent experiences and adventures, as well as those versions connected with losing his sight, have the gods involved. The gods, fate, punishment, vengeance, compensation: the story of Tiresias sets up all the elements of the metaphor from the beginning.

However, the mythology and symbolism of blindness deepened considerably with the creation of the character and metaphor that emerged in Oedipus Tyrannus, the King of Thebes. Oedipus blinded himself in an act of poetic justice after discovering his own unwitting crimes of patricide and incest. The first specific writings about Oedipus are attributed to Homer’s *Oidipodia* 600BC and later in Aeschylus’ *Theban Trilogy*; there are fragments of Oedipus’ story found in Euripides but the extant references culminate in Sophocles’ definitive *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Written in 429BC, this play was to become the template for renderings of blindness in Western literature for the ensuing centuries, and as a result, writers have been drawing on the trope of blind mythology generated by the ancient Greeks ever since.

Bernard Knox, in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and his Time* (1998) wrote that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is principally a detective story: “The action of the play is a characteristically Athenian process: it is a legal investigation, the identification of a murder” (1998, p78). Oedipus is not pitiful, foolish, ignorant or passive and his character is hugely significant in terms of his role (alongside Tiresias’) in building the metaphor of blindness:

Oedipus represents all that is intelligent, vigorous, courageous, and creative in man. In his relentless pursuit of the truth he shows his true greatness: all the powers of intellect and energy which make him a hero are exhibited in his lonely, stubborn progress to knowledge ... the process of self-destruction is presented as a difficult and heroic task to which he stubbornly dedicates himself ... his self-destruction is in fact his greatest achievement, which puts all his qualities and powers to the supreme test. (Knox 1998, p50)

Oedipus is a character who becomes swept up through his own strengths, into the mythological and metaphorical meanings of blindness. Oedipus, according to Knox, creates his own destiny:

Sophocles has very carefully arranged the material of the myth in such a way as to exclude the external factor in the life of Oedipus from the action of the tragedy. The action is not Oedipus' fulfilment of the prophecy, but his discovery that he has already fulfilled it. The catastrophe of Oedipus is that he discovers his own identity, and for this discovery he is first and last responsible. The main events in the play are in fact not even part of the prophecy ... In the action of Oedipus in the play "fate" plays no part at all. (Knox 1998, p5)

The central difference between Oedipus and the original stories of blindness explored through the character of Tiresias is that with Oedipus the gods aren't there, they don't 'do' anything to Oedipus. He's more realised than Tiresias, there is no deified punishment on a whim, no dramatic pay-back for his sins. Despite their presence in Oedipus' story, particularly in the setting up of his personal narrative, the gods are not portrayed as puppeteers pulling strings that force Oedipus to act in a given way. It is clear that he makes his own choices and that these choices are dictated by his own personality traits. It is Oedipus who blinds himself, he does this because he did everything right based on the assumption that he could see the truth, and consequently he'd done everything wrong. Everything. Despite his integrity, intelligence and strength of character he's fouled up so badly that there is no way out. He is a character of honour and as such he accepts all responsibility for his actions and subsequently passes judgement on himself. He won't even allow himself to die, but sentences himself to live with the shame of his choices and the add-on of a humiliating, debilitating penance that causes him to suffer for the rest of his life: a hard punishment that leaves no need for intervention by the gods. From this it can be construed that the metaphor is even more delicately inlaid into the work than it might initially appear. Although the concept of *ἄλγη* (blindness) in the play is powerfully connected to fate and the gods, it is, like the experiences and consequences (imposed or self-inflicted) for Oedipus, also *external* to these influences. Oedipus, who was earlier explored in depth by Aeschylus, has been re-created by Sophocles as a more modern, more accessible character, in part through his advocacy of a sense of free will. Hardwick, in framing her approach to Reception Studies, notes that one of her guiding assumptions is:

Receptions within antiquity need to be considered within the same framework of enquiry as subsequent receptions so that the diversity of ancient culture is more fully recognized and the impact of ancient reception approaches on intervening interpretations is investigated. (Hardwick 2003, p10)

Sophocles, by re-forming Oedipus from the initial *Theban Trilogy*, and even earlier oral tales, has shifted the balance of power for the character. If we carry that development further, we can see how the focus on free will is also a modern sensibility that resonates in the present where it continues to have relevance and recognition in our society. In *The Mechanics of Blind* much of the protagonist's battles are to do with choices. In a first-world country, where many of us through our education, our financial security and our stable political structures have privileges that were previously only available to a few, the availability of choices open to us, and the freedom to choose, is an integral part of our lives. The challenges facing a blind woman in 2009 include the responsibility of choice and self determination regarding how she might respond to her disability within these available options. By positioning the novel in the present time, in this society, there is a connection and an imitation of the power and possibilities that in ancient times were only available to elites such as royalty. Hardwick states:

Reception Studies require us to look closely at the source text and context as well as at the receiving ones. This does not imply that the source is a yardstick of value but rather that a “critical distance” between source and reception illuminates both. (Hardwick 2003, p10)

Critical distance, says Hardwick, uses a literal and figurative distance in “time, space and culture ... in order to enable the reader/spectator to move outside the limits of his or her own society and cultural horizons and thus to see these more clearly and more critically” (2003, p8). I would argue that it also allows the reader to see the connections, such as themes within *The Theban Plays* of self-determination and free will that have managed to transcend divides in time and culture, so that a novel written in 2009 utilises these connections to build on and further communicate an idea that was generated in ancient times. In this case it is perhaps the philosophical beliefs posited by Sophocles that are a strong part of the continued resonance for *The Theban Plays* and consequently the metaphor of blindness.

Moshe Barasch in *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought*, describes the metaphor of blindness in relation to its earliest artistic and literary occurrences:

For an understanding of blindness and the blind in the ancient mind we should recall that in classical culture a cluster of various, intricate mental images in which blindness, even if it is not explicitly physical, occupies an important place. In these complex images blindness is neither fully physical nor completely metaphorical. Blindness is here in twilight ... however ... in Homer and almost all that occur in the works of later poets, *ate* (blindness - physical and metaphorical) does not have such an explicitly physical condition; it is not restricted to only physically losing one's eyesight. A whole complex of conditions, psychological, social, and religious, is evoked by the term.
(Barasch 2001, p33)

ἄτη is the Greek word for blindness. In the study of classical works it has meaning beyond the physical:

Any study of ἄτη must have Greek tragedy at its centre ... What does occur in tragedy is the emergence ... of another meaning: namely, not the subjective state of mental "blindness", "infatuation" or "folly", but the objective state of "ruin", "calamity" or "disaster".
Once these two notions are juxtaposed in the same word, one of the major themes of Greek tragedy can begin to appear: that is, the problem of human freedom and responsibility, or, if you will, the *tension* between fate and free will, between the divine plan and human choice, between determinism and freedom. (Doyle 1984, p1)

Doyle's text, *ἄτη: its use and meaning: a study in the Greek poetic tradition from Homer to Euripides* (1984), sources ἄτη – with its complex and multiple meanings – back to Homer and his lyric predecessors. When Doyle breaks ἄτη down into its many permutations, we can begin to see the trajectory of blindness as a specific *form* in literature. The Athenian writers set a precedent for this concept that has been taken up and used again and again. It works as form partly because irony and then drama – the lifeblood of character-based literature, theatre or poetry – is so inherent. But, as Doyle points out in his examination of ἄτη, the objective interpretation is deeply connected to fate and the gods. The subjective expression of ἄτη is the internal relationship where the "blindness" or "folly" or "infatuation" is self-generated. Both forms, though, involve conflict and/or an altered state through which the character relates to the world.

In part, however, the complexity of ἄτη and accordingly the form that it generates are a direct consequence of the inherently untranslatable nature of the concept. When

discussing translation in her text, *Reception Studies*, Hardwick describes the constraints that need to be addressed,

... to map a fuller range of interaction between source and new text an additional set of concepts is needed, indicating intersections between values and cultural practices ... analysis of their use brings out the sometimes uneasy relationships between source and receiving cultures. (Hardwick 2003, p22)

Within the context of her research into translation, Hardwick refers to Cicero in 46 BCE who had set up guides for translating Greek into Latin. Cicero used the word *transfere*, literally meaning to carry across, "... to indicate translation into another language and also to indicate figurative or metaphorical use" (Cicero cited in Hardwick 2003, p22). Issues of how one translates or even transfers a concept or an idea that is very much a product of a particular society and culture have long been challenging for writers and historians and the actual process of grappling with this complexity is on-going. However, to approach such a concept from a creative base gives an opportunity to construct a cultural or imaginative context that may, to some extent, mirror or enhance the original idea in a way that a direct, literal, word-by-word application may not. In this way, the metaphor of blindness becomes an on-going concept that has validity in a contemporary context, so that one outcome is that the metaphor, in the modern world, conveys and even embraces the idea that blindness for all of its disadvantages, its aura of ruin and disaster, is not all bad, and there can be extra-ordinary compensations.

The earlier example given, of the British using Roman and Greek architecture to represent and re-position their sense of themselves as growing in importance, signifies an appropriation of ideas and beliefs as well as a literal transference – the sense of power, strength, omnipotence, divine right, overreaching governance – of ideas and ideals that fitted in with existing 19th century beliefs that Europeans and the British had about empire and status. Co-opting the intricacies of ἀν within a creative work about 21st century blindness is a literal use of a contemporary interpretation of the metaphor. As well, it is a representational transference of an assumed meaning garnered through a retrospective analysis of the term and its previous applications. Receiving an ancient text or idea takes on many forms, all of which, because of the "critical distance" in time, space and culture that is inherent in all receptions, are open to interpretation and a translative partiality.

Metaphor

Metaphor permeates language and thinking, writing and life. It conveys juxtaposing ideas that take us to new places and lead us to new perspectives. Metaphors make us think *more*: literary metaphors endure because they work and are subsequently re-used repeatedly. In *Reception Studies* (2003), Hardwick uses examples of recent re-workings of Sophoclean plays to illustrate the strong connections and relevancy between ancient writers and contemporary artists and states that, “classical referents are still a vital springboard in new creative work” (2003, p98). Hardwick cites Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy: a version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (1990, first performed in Derry, Ireland):

The play has provoked considerable debate about the representation of equivalence between ancient and modern situations ... Heaney uses the Greek conventions associated with tragedy ... (and) also communicates the intensive and sometimes problematic urgency of ethical choice. (Hardwick 2003, pp103-104)

Heaney's re-situating of *Philoctetes* was a direct commentary about the ongoing political crisis in Northern Ireland. The play itself, with its strong imagery and powerful messages about civil conflict, was set up as an allegorical tale to challenge and to generate new ways of addressing the political impasse. Text-imagery from Heaney's re-worked play has been subsequently quoted and referenced in connection with the peace process so that Heaney's play, based on Sophocles' play, became a metaphor for a way to recognise and address the issues involved in the religious, social and political debate at that time. In this way, Heaney also created a 'new language', combining the language of Greek philosophy, of Greek tragedy, of Greek ethics, and his own poetry, and used it to speak in a new way on a notoriously complex subject and to 'transfer' insights and ideas.

Language forms such as poetry use a combination of intent, language structure and image to create complex constructions of ideas that are much more than the sum of their parts. Metaphor, a central building block of poetry, works to initiate an implicit analogy that is not meant literally but by means of a vivid comparison expresses something more about what or who is being described. It is figurative language, involving figures of speech or symbolism, and acts as a signal where one thing is used or

considered to represent another. The origin of the word comes from the late 15th century from French *métaphore*, via Latin from Greek *metaphora*, from *metapherein* “to transfer” (Oxford Reference Online 2008) from *pherein* “to carry” – and therefore links to 'transfer' and 'translate'.

'Carry' as a transitive verb, means to hold and transport somebody or something (Oxford Reference Online 2008). In terms of the receiving of ancient works, ideas and philosophies are carried through time and space and place to new audiences and new interpretations. In terms of metaphor, the ideas built into a contrasting image or concept carry us to new places from which to observe or assess a person or thing.

Metaphors show us the known in another way. Metaphors give us access to the unknown and to the past. Blindness, in its form as a disability, is a distinct enough concept; but blindness as a metaphor, and as a literary metaphor, becomes something else entirely. Blindness, ironically, becomes a metaphor for insight, insight being perceptiveness: the ability to see clearly and intuitively into the nature of a complex person, situation, or subject. Insight suggests a clear perception or self-awareness (Oxford Reference Online 2008). The concept of blindness as a literary metaphor manages to have a cross-over point with blindness as a functional and tangible physical disability. The literary 'glamour' attached to the blind of fiction and drama, who have been 'somewhere', to a place where ordinary people cannot follow, also has a relationship to the individual coping with loss of sight in the contemporary, non-fiction world. They too have been on a journey to an unknown place, they have crossed Joseph Campbell's “threshold” as identified within his mythical story forms (see p18 for discussion of Joseph Campbell). The genuine and imaginary experiences of blindness both converge at this point, creating a moment of physical recognition that gives added power to the metaphor.

Blindness as a literary metaphor is vivid, lucid and almost instantly recognisable. It is present in our storytelling from the classical and romantic periods into contemporary times. The metaphor is re-enforced through biblical references, such as Saint Paul being blinded on the road to Damascus in a blaze of light and thus converted instantly to Christianity (*The Holy Bible*, 1982 Acts, 9.2 & 26) and by its use in psychiatry with Sigmund Freud's identification of the Oedipus Complex (Freud 2000) . Freud uses the

story of Oedipus and Jocasta to elucidate his theory that men subconsciously wish to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. While Freud's hypothesis is not directly connected to blindness, his very specific naming of Oedipus has kept the entire story, and not just the murder and marriage, in the foreground of 20th century thinking and discussion. The metaphor is strengthened through diverse retellings such as this, which cement it further into our cultural heritage.

The metaphor of literary blindness is predicated on the idea that it is an irony, in that blindness is a mask worn by one who can actually see more clearly than those who are sighted. This is in part related to the perceived and far from irrational idea that the loss of the sense of sight, has led to the unsighted person accessing their other senses in a much more acute way. However the logic of this occurrence, which makes perfect sense, is still a logic that can be ignored or put on hold in real life. So that when evidence of a sightless person's independence or capabilities is apparent, it can still be perceived as a surprise, an item of wonder and amazement which further re-enforces the other-worldly mythology of literary blindness. The mere fact that a person who has lived with blindness is capable, controlled, human is seen as an extraordinary feat all by itself. Lists of examples of this capacity to live successfully, can be found in real life and in fiction. However blindness when expressed in literature becomes more than a re-configured disability. Tiresias becomes a blind man, then a prophet and sage, while Oedipus sighted was blind to the truth but then blinds himself because he sees all too clearly. Blindness as a literary metaphor has qualities that go beyond simply a heightened perception of the everyday world.

Susan Sontag, writing in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), deconstructs the way in which metaphor is used to empower disease, and in particular, tuberculosis and cancer. Metaphor is more allusive and elusive than outright comparison, therefore it layers meaning from a variety of sources and contexts to strengthen images and ideas. Metaphor connects what may appear as a simple idea, to cultural or historical references, like blindness, like illness, like disease, like a journey – and creates a longer and deeper narrative line than a straight comparison could give. A metaphor is much more than the sum of its parts. It relies on wider knowledge, on cultural awareness and a person's place in the world to give it meaning. Sontag explores the layers of meaning

that have been imprinted into and over the two conditions she is comparing: tuberculosis which came to be seen as a disease of passion, of personalities with too much sensitivity for the ordinary world, persons who led fevered inner lives that ultimately consumed them, literally; and cancer which was identified as an aggressive, encroaching, devouring disease afflicting those who repress their emotions, who deny their true selves, who are locked into anger and rage. For those who look at illness as a metaphor, and for those who see illness as a physical manifestation of one's inner world, then cancer (the canker) becomes something 'bad' inside the person or personality, something hidden and shameful that rots the body from within, while tuberculosis is a condition that devours, like fire, all passion, yearning and desire. Sontag argues that the use of illness as a metaphor leads to labelling, to judging, to assuming knowledge of the secret life of the patient, based purely on historical and even literary, not to say religious, ideas about illness. The long association of illness with punishment is challenged by Sontag. In the 20th century, she argues, cancer was seen as a punishment for a person's inner lack, for their inability to be expressive and honest. Blindness obviously has also been associated with punishment, but as a punishment for actions: for wrongdoing against the moral code of the time. In her conclusion to *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag writes of the dependency cancer has on such a powerful metaphor:

It refers to a disease so overlaid with mystification, so charged with the fantasy of inescapable fatality. Since our views about cancer, and the metaphors we have imposed on it, are so much a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture, for our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real "problems of growth", for our inability to construct an advanced industrial society which properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history. The cancer metaphor will be made obsolete, I would predict, long before the problems it has reflected so persuasively will be resolved. (Sontag 1978, p91)

So what then of the metaphoric properties of blindness that have been referenced throughout this paper, and in the creative writing? What is the metaphor of literary blindness reflecting persuasively? One response might be that it indicates that not all disability is utterly negative, that suffering (as in quest mythology/quest illness narratives, see pp16-19) is strengthening. After all, both Oedipus and Tiresias are redeemed through their acceptance of their punishments. Perhaps also, the metaphor is arguing to persuade us of the 'rightness' of physical punishment for transgressions, a theme that has been a cornerstone of our culture and society for thousands of years? The caveat of literary blindness is that through the 'gifts' of insight and prophesy

endowed on Tiresias and Oedipus a parable has been created that explores the necessity of taking responsibility for one's own fate. Consequently, Oedipus and Tiresias are rewarded inversely with an ability to 'see' the actual truth. They both eventually have their honour restored after accepting the punishment and hardship that is blindness.

Sontag argues that we shouldn't apply metaphor to illness, because metaphors are real, tangible and powerful entities that can have negative and damaging implications for the individual. I would agree that metaphors are powerful, but I believe that this is partially because they reflect aspects of people's experiences or cultural beliefs. A metaphor cannot survive for long periods of time unless there is a perception that there is a truth lying somewhere in there. If this 'truth' is challenged and found wanting, as time and science proved in the case of tuberculosis and as Sontag predicted would happen with cancer, then the metaphor dies. In the case of blindness as a literary trope, perhaps it has endured not simply because it is a romantic notion that physical blindness equals heightened awareness, equals deeper insight, equals seer-like qualities; but because there is evidence that, as one sense slips, the others work harder. Hearing, touch, smell and taste bring us different impressions, therefore it is common sense that when used exclusively without vision, these sensations bring a different perspective to the world. The visual is so pervasive, it dominates the other senses most of the time, *seeing is believing* after all and if it is taken away, then perhaps the sightless one begins to believe other things, to be aware of other elements, other versions of their experiences. Arguably, the weight of a metaphor, good or bad, is dependent on its relationship to the number of strands of truth that are embedded in it, and the vivid renderings of fictional blindness that suggest there is something *more* to the person who is blind are in fact valid, because there actually *is* something more.

The setting up of blindness as a trope is powerfully linked to its inherent relationship with irony. Oedipus, the personification of the trope, could see and yet saw nothing. He blinded himself to punish and to prevent himself from the further punishment of 'seeing' his wife and children, the victims and proof of his previous blindness. But the act of being blind is ironically the period in his life when he 'sees' most clearly. Irony is a word sourced to the early 16th century, via the Latin *ironia* and coming from the Greek *eirōneia* "pretended ignorance" from the word *eirōn* "dissembler" (Oxford Reference

Online 2008). Part of the definition of irony is that it is something humorous based on contradiction. Irony also carries within itself a sense of the incongruity between what actually happens and what might be expected to happen. Blindness as it is used as a metaphor for insight and keen perception is therefore ironic. To create a character who can explore this, without being clichéd is challenging and problematic. It is a paradox of blindness that so much is unknown, and must be accepted as that, while attempts to control this unknown have to be relinquished. Yet to survive, the blind person has to be constantly alert and processing: counting, smelling, listening, sensing, touching in order to gain some dominance over their changed and dangerous world. They become, therefore, more conscious, alert and observant than before, less empowered than ever.

Illness and Quest Narratives

From the beginning, I was attracted to the actual mechanism of blindness as a way into the story, which brought me to consider American sociologist Arthur Frank's 1988 work *The Wounded Storyteller*. Frank's work explores the literary and the functional form of established narratives within the context of illness and illness as a story. Frank divides all illness stories into three categories. There is the restitution narrative where all involved (healthy and ill alike) are heroes; there is action and endings, recovery and redemption and there is a recognisable beginning, middle and end. These are popular stories and their telling is encouraged in our society. The second form is the chaos narrative which is diametrically opposed to the restitution stories. Chaos narratives are told in the passive voice, are fatalistic, and there are no endings, and no salvation; there is no narrative order of beginning, middle and end. The final narrative structure identified by Frank is the quest narrative. In the quest narrative the patient has no hope of a return to full health, and there is pain, suffering, discomfort and trauma. The condition being dealt with is emotionally confronting, but nevertheless, wisdom comes from the quest story, a wisdom that is attained in this way and no other. The reality of the individual living with suffering on an on-going basis, inherent in the quest story, is identified as being unpalatable to the healthy because there is no redemption. In *Just Listening: Narrative and Deep Illness* (1988), Frank asserts that quest stories are about being forced to accept life unconditionally.

I became interested in quest stories and story archetypes examined in the 1950's writing of Joseph Campbell, known for his work in comparative mythology and comparative religion. He contends that our most consistently known and re-worked stories arise from unchanging base story plots which are essentially the same structures recycled again and again over thousands of years (Campbell 1993). Frank's quest illness narrative links to Campbell's quest stories, where heroes and heroism play a crucial role. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) set out the idea of the monomyth, a streamlined version of the archetypal patterns Campbell had recognised from his studies of fiction, classical stories, mythology and religious beliefs from around the world. In the 1990 text, *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*, the monomyth is explained:

The monomyth involves the hero receiving a "call to adventure" – to leave the ordinary world which he has psychologically or spiritually outgrown. After passing "threshold guardians" (often with the aid of a wise mentor or spirit guide) the hero enters a dreamlike world - generally a dark forest, a desert, an underworld or a mysterious island. After a series of trials in which the hero eventually surpasses his mentor, the hero achieves the object of his quest (often atonement with the father, a sacred marriage or an apotheosis) before returning to his homeland, bringing with him a spiritual boon. (Campbell 1990, p1.01)

Campbell wrote that almost all hero myths, throughout history and across cultures, can be shown to contain at least a subset of these patterns. These patterns are re-visited when one considers the reception of a classical work, which may be re-working the structure in its entirety, or in fragments. Lorna Hardwick poses questions about the use of an ancient story when she asks:

Does it explicitly or implicitly appropriate aspects of the ancient as artistic, cultural or political examples or foundation myths to give authority to contemporary practices or ideas? Does it recuperate or regenerate ancient practices in a way which makes them more acceptable or comprehensible to a subsequent society? Does it regrow these in different cultural ground? (Hardwick, 2003 p112)

It appears that many of our stories and ideas have been "regrown" on different cultural ground and accordingly been received as both new and older works.

A vivid example of the "regrowing" of myth, archetype and recurring symbolism is found in the work of Jack Zipes, whose examination of traditional fairy tales has involved exploring the linguistic roots of these fables and their role in and for societies. Fairy tales, not unlike the base narratives studied by Campbell and Frank, work with established imagery, and use known structures, characters and metaphors. According to

Zipes, fairy tales:

serve a meaningful social function, not just for compensation but for revelation: the worlds projected by the best of our fairy tales reveal the gaps between truth and falsehood in our immediate society. (Zipes 2004, *Mythcon*)

In the context of *The Mechanics of Blind* and its relationship to the metaphor of blindness in literature, the creative writing can, by emulating the story-structures found within fairy tales and quest narratives, call upon familiar and much-repeated story forms. Literary blindness, by being re-explored in a contemporary novel, can be consciously or unconsciously recognised and accepted by readers because the form and/or some of the symbolic elements of the fictional experiences have been embedded into our consciousness through the repetition and *reception* of this idea over time in many and varied forms. Literary blindness, like princesses who are rescued, like cautionary tales for girls, and the fantastical and ultimately successful exploits of heroes, has attained a cultural cachet that allows it not only to be recognised, but to be reconfigured again and again.

Examining the theories of these particular story structures – hero mythology and fairy tale motifs – established stronger connections to the illness narratives and the way they could act as a conduit linking this contemporary novel to an archetypal literary motif. Specifically, Frank's illness narratives connect the two by joining a strongly-embodied narrative line (of genuine illness-story arcs) which have resonance and believability for contemporary readers; but these narratives have their roots deeply embedded in ancient story structures and symbols (the prototypical quest story form), thus connecting my 21st century story to the 5th century BCE Greek original and beyond. While Frank, a sociologist, has taken literary archetypes and storylines and applied them as a device to unravel and explore illness experiences, I have reversed this process and taken his variation and re-applied it, in its altered state, back to literature. What this brings to the work is a continuity of form which I have aimed to strengthen by applying the physicality of the illness narratives to what is essentially, an idea. Blindness in literature is an old, old idea. To use Hardwick's expression, I have tried to “regrow” it and create a vehicle for it to travel across time, space and cultural differences into the present to produce a new construction of the trope.

This connection generated a path for me to take through the novel to re-enforce the

relationship between two widely divergent works, and gave me an established narrative line to follow that emphasised the physical. The quest illness narrative in particular is the one that has most interested me (although I have used elements of the other two story forms), and it has subsequently informed the narrative structure that I have been working with. Those who live a quest illness narrative inhabit that space between the old healthy self and the new 'damaged' self. They embody a state and live in a world which has been profoundly altered by the physical reality of an unresolved illness or injury.

My interest in the quest narrative occurred principally because literary blindness can be simultaneously both a blessing and a curse and because the novel is arguably both an archetypal quest story and an illness narrative. It could be described, like Zipes' fairy tales, to be drawing on an "...arsenal of folk motifs to vary well-known schemes so that they will touch on the dreams and needs of the audience" (Zipes 2005, p32). Although many explorations of blindness draw extensively on the metaphor, and use the signifiers set down by Homer and elaborated on by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the difference in my work is the grinding of the experience into the contemporary narrative through first person descriptions (some of which are constructed from the illness narrative story forms), and by pursuing the physical as a source for the manifestation and recognition of the metaphorical properties of blindness found in literature.

While the established story structures seemed to give 'authenticity' to an ancient concept, the challenge was to find a way to achieve this in a work of contemporary fiction and in this process to contribute to the body of knowledge in a new way.

Representations of Blindness

In writing a story exploring the metaphor of blindness, I wanted to build a strong character that had a long way to fall, from confident self-reliance and success to dependency and uncertainty. One of the qualities in Sophocles' development of and authority over this metaphor, has been the placement of the central character, Oedipus, as a person of strength, decisiveness and power. It is the initial confidence of subsequent and key characters exploring blindness: Oedipus in the 5th Century BCE,

Gloucester in *King Lear* (1607) and later Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) that makes their fall into the external state of calamity, ruin and disaster so extreme within their very different contexts. These characters share this commonality: they all have so much to lose, namely their pride, status and dominance. However all these falls tend to be portrayed as meaningful for their internal or spiritual loss and devastation and the physical is a means to underline this. In *The Mechanics of Blind* the main protagonist falls in this way too, but it is documented as a parallel with her physical state, it is not written into the text for its own sake but to stress the loss and enormous change she experiences. What is actually happening to her body is described in detail, as a map to read the internal damage,

My teeth start hurting about midnight, when I am on the last of my snake-shaped sugar treats. I think about going to the dentist, blind, and I put away the *Snakes Alive!* and get some iceblocks from the freezer to hold against my jaw and I dislodge a packet of frozen peas at the same time. I swear at the peas while I fumble around on my hands and scabbed sore knees on the kitchen floor and can't find them, so I just leave them to melt on the tiles. I bang my forehead into the open freezer door as I stand up, which is about what I deserve, and then I find the ice tray and break it open and wrap the ice cubes in a tea towel and hold them to my aching face. (Fitzgerald, 2009 p84)

Jill dissolves emotionally and physically as she becomes more and more disconnected from her sighted life. Her inability to find her way back to that life is characterised by many many literal falls. Her knees and legs are permanently cut and bruised, scabbed and healing – her fall is remorselessly unrhetorical.

In the building of the novel, I searched for portrayals of blindness not only as a literary plot device or metaphor, but as a functional experience. Functionality is dealt with to varying degrees in fiction about blindness, but the detail of the day-to-day experience is not always present.

The tangible elements of blindness can be fairly quickly summed up with expressions like *groping hands*, *unsteady gait*, *questing fingertips*. For example, the reader is not invited to witness *Jane Eyre's* Mr Rochester dressing or feeding himself; Oedipus in the later plays where he figures as a blind man is represented wielding his staff, but not negotiating the intricacies of pouring himself a drink of water or making his bed. Selina, in Elizabeth Kata's novel, *A Patch of Blue* (1961) cooks and cleans and works, and these

activities are described to the extent that the reader gets a sense of the feel and touch sensitivity that she has, but this is still couched in relatively general terms, the narrative tells us *what* Selina does, but it rarely tells us *how* she does it:

I worked, neatening up the room, washed out Rose-ann's nylons and undies. I cleaned Ole Pa's shoes, made up Rose-ann's bed - did everything that should have been done during the day. (Kata 1961, p34)

H.G.Wells' *The Country of the Blind* (1904) details the daily lives of the blind villagers hidden in their valley in the Andes, through the amazed gaze of the stranger, Nunez, who describes their movements and activities as sure and steady. The point of wonder and detail in this story comes from Nunez' surprise at the way the villagers have organised and refined their environment so that their lack of sight is simply not an issue for them. They do not consider themselves to be impaired in any way. British writer Peter Dickinson, in his novella *Annerton Pit* (1977), hides his character's blindness early in the story through deliberately neutral descriptions of Jake's life, but Jake's disability is highlighted over the length of the work to encompass the otherworldly insightfulness that can be directly attributed to the classically-inspired metaphor. French fiction writer Patrick Cauvin's romantic, humorous novel, *Blind Love* (1979), explores blindness from the narrative perspective of a seeing main character, and so the blind character, Laura, is always observed, and her experiences reported and processed through the point of view of the sighted protagonist. Laura's skill in negotiating a sighted world is continually commented on, and her maturity, sexuality and humanity are reported in proportion to the main character's perceived insecurities, mistakes and sense of dysfunctionality, especially when comparing himself to her. The difference here, between this work and *The Mechanics of Blind* is that in *Blind Love*, Laura is described from the *outside*, her experiences are interpreted and externally explained. As readers we can 'see' and imagine her life as a blind woman, but we don't feel it.

Australian writers have explored blindness in both memoir and fiction. Again, in *A Patch of Blue*, Kata uses blindness as an allegorical tale about racism and bigotry. Drusilla Modjeska's 1994 novel, *The Orchard*, muses on the strangeness, gift-like qualities, and the hardship of blindness, while also referencing historical allusions to women who have lost their sight. The experiences of these characters are also told from the outside, with the personal, inner workings of living with blindness focusing almost exclusively on the emotional, spiritual awakening that the condition brings.

Zoltan Torey's 2003 memoir *Out of Darkness* is both a description of blindness and an extraordinary mapping of the mind's ability to circumnavigate disability. As with so many of the fictional (and non-fictional) representations of blindness, the limitations and the frustrations of the experience, as well as the unexpected insights, are a part of these narratives, but, with perhaps the exception of *The Country of the Blind* where Wells gives an outsider's detailed description of how he perceives the blind villagers moving, working and sensing the world around them, none of the fiction (or non-fiction) that I have come across has explored the experience in the relentlessly literal way that I have sought to do in this novel.

Blindness in literature is evocative of a myriad of now stock meanings, signifiers and metaphors. There is the ugliness and fearfulness of R.L. Stevenson's Blind Pew, a grasping, desperate man. There is the duality of blindness as an affliction that is both a loss and a gain, experienced by both Tiresias and Oedipus in *The Theban Plays* and Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Blindness is used as a trigger for a supernatural sixth-sense-awareness that is exclusive to the blind, such as in *Annerton Pit*, the 2005/2006 U.S. television series *Blind Justice*, and a long list of films such as *Proof* (1991), *The Village* (2004) and *Blind Injustice* (2005). Blindness is the classic ironic punishment for those who refuse to 'see' – Oedipus, Gloucester, Rochester – but always connected to that is the insight that blindness may give. Blindness has been explored and written of in these terms in exaggerated and subtle ways repeatedly over the years as an ancient, as a classical, as a modern trope which continues to signify the paradox of helplessness, stillness, vulnerability, strength, will-power, loss, clarity, knowledge, ability, disability, observation, weakness, shame and perceptivity.

Charlotte Bronte exploration of the metaphor of literary blindness can be read as a symbolic representation of castration in her 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre* (S.Gilbert, S.M. & Gubar, S. 1979). Mr Rochester, a classically romantic figure, suffered the loss of his home, social position, vigour and his sight as an authorial, cultural, feminist punishment that affirmed Jane Eyre's power and vindicated her personal morality. Rochester's blindness, although only one of a series of blights inflicted upon him, is seen as particularly calamitous:

Entering the room very softly, I had a view of him before he discovered my presence. It was mournful indeed, to witness the subjugation of that vigorous spirit to a corporeal infirmity. He sat in his chair - still, but not at rest: expectant, evidently; the lines of now habitual sadness marking his strong features. His countenance reminded one of the lamp quenched, waiting to be re-lit. (Bronte 1977, p464)

Rochester does gain from his suffering, he gets Jane Eyre. Perhaps without his suffering, this would not have happened. Rochester gets forgiveness. His fate has almost biblical elements of moral transgression, punishment and redemption – previous biblical or Christian references to blindness have involved strong imagery and, in the case of Saint Paul, enormous change. The moral divide Rochester crossed, not unlike that of Oedipus, was brought about when a powerful, and not amoral man, found himself in an impossible position. Rochester could not abandon his wife – whom he had married without knowledge of her family history of mental instability. But he also sought happiness for himself. There is a sense that Rochester was betrayed, manipulated and, like Oedipus, tried to find a way to escape his fate. Rochester and Oedipus are both punished, but both, in the end, find a measure of peace. Although it is doubtful that Rochester, without Jane Eyre's intervention, would necessarily have achieved this. Both men are rescued by women, Oedipus leans on Antigone, who cares for him in life and after his death, putting his needs before her own. Although these stories, despite a 2000 year difference, have similarities, they are not entirely the same, nevertheless, Rochester's path echoes that of Oedipus and the metaphorical meanings attributed to blindness are present for both characters.

These parallels are again evident in Shakespeare's exploration of blindness in *King Lear*. Gloucester has his eyes gouged out by Regan and Cornwall, this leaves him blind, but consequently, it is this merciless blinding that allows him to realise Edmund's betrayal and to discover Edgar's loyalty and the 'truth' about Goneril, Albany, Regan and Cornwall. Gloucester's blindness in *King Lear* does not fit exactly into the Sophoclean pattern (but then, no other rendering of the metaphor attains the near-perfect unity of fate, crime, punishment and irony of *Oedipus Tyrannus*). Gloucester's blindness is not as 'appropriate' for the 'crimes' committed, namely gullibility and hubris, but the parallels Shakespeare builds between blindness and insight connect this story to the Greek concept of ἄρνη and the twin imports of Doyle's subjective sense of mental blindness or folly and the objective experience of ruin, calamity or disaster associated with it (Doyle

1984, p1). Gloucester's blindness clearly is embedded in both of these meanings. His authority is in ruins; his son Edgar exiled; his bastard son, Edmund has engineered his downfall; he is wandering blind and agonised, in search of a cliff face to throw himself from. Gloucester may not be the embodiment of all that can be extracted from the metaphor of blindness, nor does he occupy the elegant symmetry of the trope's personification in the character of Oedipus himself, but his physical and mental blindness, the tension in his life between the responsibilities and imperatives of his position and his loyalty to others nevertheless draws truly on the multiplicity of the construct of ἄτη, which still resonates from its earliest Greek origins.

Tiresias, Oedipus, Gloucester and Rochester and the many other characters created by novelists, short story writers, poets, film makers, playwrights and television writers have explored blindness as a device for plot, character development, metaphor or 'lesson'. While many of the fictional forms of blindness draw on the historical and classical motifs and mythology which has been generated around this image, not all replicate the detail and layered complexity and not all work in the same way. However, all of them do, to a larger or smaller extent, continue to maintain the *sense* of the metaphor; and so blindness in literature is an extra-ordinarily enduring composite of ideas that extends beyond a simple experience, and undergoes continuous reception and renewal.

Prior to the 20th and 21st centuries, blind female characters in Western literature existed mainly as historical figures – namely in the realm of religion. The 12th century German abbess, writer and painter, Hildegard of Bingen, is the most prominent. Hildegard is known for her musical compositions and treatises on nature, medicine, God and religion. Many of the insights and visions which led to these works are believed to have occurred after severe migraine attacks, during which she suffered from total blindness, and after, according to Oliver Sacks, she may well have experienced a sense of euphoria or certitude which inspired her to reproduce her insights as works of art or texts (Sacks 1987). There are saints and martyrs who also feature in connection with blindness. The most prominent being St Lucy (283 to 304AD), the Roman Catholic Church's patron saint of blindness, who was beatified after purportedly being tortured and murdered for her religion. It is believed her eyes were gouged out and she has subsequently been painted carrying her eyes on a plate. The goddess Athena too is linked with blindness and insight

due to the mythology surrounding Tiresias and the way in which she contributed to his loss of sight. Women emerge as satellite, sighted characters around the great images of blind men – Antigone and Ismene from *The Theban Plays* and Goneril, Regan and Cordelia from *King Lear*; Jane Eyre, from *Jane Eyre* – but until the 20th century women have not had their own experiences of blindness explored much in literature at all. While women with injuries and disabilities, with mental illnesses and physical limitations have been present in some narratives, it is only as women's writing has expanded, that female characters who are blind have emerged as central within a narrative. The arc of the woman on a journey of discovery, and self discovery, with the added mythological concept of blindness, is not present in my understanding of earlier writing. A woman's journey is different from a man's. The woman tends to be the prize in a male narrative, but what happens when the prize herself is 'damaged' and yet still goes off searching? The blind woman as a central character appears to figure more fully in film than in literature, but is nevertheless still under-represented. Perhaps the combination is just too vulnerable. Perhaps the odds are stacked too high against such a character, who is already, through her gender, perceived in our patriarchal world as already being too much of an outsider, without the added burden of blindness. And yet, of course there are many women who are sight-impaired, who live with this reality, who cope and flounder, flourish and survive. I believe, however, that it is possible that a reason why women have been separated from the mythology of blindness in literature may be because blindness in literature is powerful. It is a symbol of a character becoming realised and 'real' which has traditionally been the preserve of males. Because the metaphor is powerful, the blind character does develop special and extraordinary abilities, the blind character does have strengths above and beyond the norm, in spite of, or because of their blindness. So perhaps blindness in literature, with its insight and prestige, has been held almost exclusively within the sphere of the male because to inhabit this powerful metaphor is yet another representation of male potency and dominion.

Kata's character in *A Patch of Blue*, Selina, does not come across as especially strong, rather she is clever, adaptable, capable of growth and learning. In Modjeska's work, *The Orchard*, blindness brings contemplation, re-assessment and a stronger recognition of the self. A rare exception is science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin's *Threshold*. In this

novel, Le Guin creates a frightening monster who is threatening the town of Tambrebezi hidden in a twilight world, accessed by two young people. The monster, who must be killed by the boy, Hugh, is referenced as a she-dragon; the creature is blind and menacing. Her call is plaintive and threatening. The result of her presence is devastating to the townspeople. This she-dragon is a curious creation, and while she could be described as a “threshold guardian” in Hugh and Irene’s own quest story, she is particularly frightening because it is her blindness and femaleness which also makes her vulnerable and pitiable. Her helpless, pained lurching across the mountainside causes them to feel an anguish that is almost as great as their fear. Le Guin’s character, however, is rare, but her combining of the vulnerable (female and blind) and the fearful within the one monstrous beast, gives the she-dragon a poignancy and sadness that is not usually the preserve of fantasy monsters. It is one of the few occasions where the combination of both characteristics is utilised in such a way. In Diana Wynne Jones’ (the British fantasy novelist) 2007 novel, *The Game*, she includes the Maenads, three women with only one eye between them which they share around. The Maenads are sourced to Greek mythology and were originally depicted as frenzied followers of Dionysus. I can find few other references to their blindness apart from Wynne Jones’ novel where the Maenads are creepy, rather than plaintive or especially menacing. There is no character development in these mythical, monstrous creations. What they and Le Guin’s creature do bring to these stories is shock-value and a morbid fascination for the combination of vulnerability, malice and pain that is brought to bear with an assembling of the characteristics of female, blind, powerful and monstrous. *The Mechanics of Blind*, however, is not fantasy and is not aiming to shock or to use the metaphor as a means to an end. The novel has been written, in part, to explore the illuminating qualities of suffering and hardship, which are articulated so clearly through the metaphor of blindness.

Tiresias knew the truth of Oedipus from the beginning, when everyone else was blinded by the glamour of his status, luck and strength. When Oedipus himself loses his sight, it also marks his transition to ‘seeing’ what has really been happening. Selina, in *A Patch of Blue* is acutely observant of the minutiae in the very small world in which she lives as she administers to her family and stakes out her independence in an environment which is deeply uncaring. Jake in *Annerton Pit* sees beyond the everyday world into a deeper,

more ancient level. This insightfulness has been constructed into a perception that few representations of blindness fail to play on. It is interesting that in the many receptions of Sophocles' play, the metaphor of blindness as an entity in itself, with its accompanying motifs and attributes is, to my knowledge, rarely questioned. Receptions of the role of the chorus, Tiresias, the character and motivations of Oedipus himself, the messenger's actions, the role of fate and gods – all are questioned, challenged and argued over – but the layered meanings and beliefs surrounding blindness as a literary metaphor are largely left alone. The trope of blindness is, if not sacrosanct, then at least embedded deeply enough to be accepted as a given. Not unlike Sontag's identification of the layers of meaning in the metaphors associated with cancer and tuberculosis, literary blindness also has connections and interpretations that are folded in and around blindness which make the metaphor similarly complex, meaningful and resonant.

When Drusilla Modjeska's character in *The Orchard* loses her sight, and through this experience is clearly led towards seeing her own life in new ways, these ways are directly related to the visual so that her perceptions of a previously familiar street-scape, home, garden, the entirety of her own world, become altered, and the character herself looms larger in her own life, in her own place on that street, in that house, in that suburban world. Her aloneness becomes a survival mechanism and a talisman as well, as she sloughs off lovers and friends in order to participate fully in the alien, darkened world in which she finds herself.

In *Annerton Pit*, Dickinson has created a character that reveals to us his highly developed emotional antennae, and progressively throughout the novel we see it as an extra perception that he relies on more and more and is, as he says, frequently accurate:

Jake was almost at the door when he heard Martin say in a quite different voice "Hey, that isn't a bill!" As he went up the stairs he felt the mood of the house change – first a shock wave of excitement and then a violent lurch into fear and depression, something far deeper and more intense than his own fret about not hearing from Granpa. This was only a guess, of course: when Jake had these feelings about the mood of the house he was sometimes wrong, but he was quite often right. (Dickinson 1977, p7)

Later in the novel, when Dickinson's characters become embroiled in the complexity of

the mythical, ancient, presence which exists below the ground in the long-disused tunnels of an abandoned coal mine. Jake, with his extra perception which none of the other sighted characters has, is able to communicate with this creature. The boy is gifted *because of* his lack of sight, and indeed the plot of the novel hinges on the extra abilities which manifest as he comprehends much more than anyone else.

This sixth sense – interpreted variously as a deeper understanding of the layers of meaning in the world, a certain fore-knowledge, an ability to observe in a remarkably exact way, an accurate intuitive sensibility – has evolved into a strange duality of beliefs about blindness. And these are beliefs that have persisted and existed through the many genres and stratum of writing and expression within Western literature, culture and art for centuries. On the one hand, the blind are to be pitied and cared for because of their vulnerability; on the other they are to be respected and listened to because of their insight and wisdom.

The 2005 - 2006 United States television drama *Blind Justice* features a blind New York police detective who has curious 'visions' of crime scenes – visions that no-one else experiences, visions that he had never had before losing his sight, visions that are accurate and true. In the 2004 film, *The Village* the blind character, Ivy, is told:

You are a strong one, Ivy. You see the light when others see dark. You lead when others follow. I trust you, Ivy, above all others. (The Village 2004, s17)

Ivy often perceives change and trouble before anyone else in the community, and she is the only person in the second generation of inhabitants of the village, who is trusted with the truth about the world they live in. In *A Patch of Blue* the supernatural aspect is hardly touched upon, but Selina's ability to function at a high level in difficult circumstances is extra-ordinary and is clearly the result of her intelligence, phenomenal memory and strong ability to adapt to her condition and her surroundings. She too is a powerful character. Her survival within that chaotic and dangerous environment is an enthralling account. Her basic skilfulness at simply coping with her world is enviable. The violence, ignorance and insensitivity around her, the lack of stimulation and support, dealing with this alone singles Selina out as someone unique and gifted. Her isolated and lonely survival, which does not delve too deeply or directly into the mythical, metaphorical heritage of otherworldly blind characters, is in itself a little

otherworldly, which is characteristic of the contemporary treatment of blind characters in Western literature. Even without reference to the genealogy of fictional blindness, the connections are still there, they still exist, irrespective of an unadorned and deliberately naturalistic story:

“I want my supper at the time I’m used to.” Rose-ann, I knew, was pouting out her lips, speaking sulky. I knew, because I always copy the way people sound and to sound sulky one pouts out one’s lips. It’s the only way to sound good and sulky. (Kata 1975p, 18)

Selina is alert and perceptive and unlike the other, sighted characters, by the end of the novel she is capable of great change.

Turning from fictional representations to non-fiction, Zoltan Torey, an Australian psychologist, is the author of *Out of Darkness*, a memoir about the loss of his sight and his life as a fully visualising blind man. He writes of the other world, the world he passed into after a burst of battery acid to his face blinded him at the age of twenty one. Torey is a person whose experience of sightlessness is incredibly visual:

...very interesting, complicated adjustments occur in the human body when some fragment of it is lost. I felt compelled to make headway against this grey fog that was engulfing me, so increasingly I began to impact my inner visualisation upon it. Then it began to retreat and lighten up, and transformed into a screen, upon which I could place my own visualisation ... My brain was used to perceiving the world through sight, and in normal sight, you look first, then think about what you see. I do the reverse: I think, then see. (Torey 2003, p6)

Oliver Sacks has written the foreword to Torey’s memoir and has questioned the ways in which different people respond to blindness (Torey 2003). He has referenced another Australian, John Hull, who also wrote of his experiences as a blind man – experiences that were markedly different from Torey’s. Hull, on losing his sight, also lost all visual memory and subsequently has experienced the world in what Sacks describes as “deep blindness” (Sacks 2003, line 23):

... he describes his own blindness as “a dark paradoxical gift”, and he immersed himself in the other senses. He has no visual nostalgia, has not tried to live in a visual world, and in a way, has been released from visuality. (Hawley 2003, p38)

In this description of a living person and *not* a fictional one, of a person who has rejected all visuals, even those of memory, the metaphor is still present and vibrant: because to describe Hull’s world, he himself uses the word ‘gift’.

Summary

Lorna Hardwick, in *Reception Studies* (2003), asks of modern work and its reception:

Does it stimulate debate, offer insights and critique and transform perspectives; does it appeal to an unchanging aesthetic standard or notion of human nature; does it reaffirm certain kinds of values in a different context? (Hardwick, 2003 p112)

The creative writing in this thesis is a novel about the experience of becoming blind. At various stages in the process of writing this work I drew on the research mostly, as I explained it to myself, to make the story *deeper*. I was already familiar with the play, *Oedipus Tyrannus* before I began writing, but subsequent re-readings kept pushing that extraordinary symmetry at me. The research about ἄτη helped to illuminate the complexity of the metaphor, and studying metaphor in turn helped to clarify the concept of ἄτη. By investigating how other writers had received the metaphor of blindness, I became conscious that I was doing something different to their approaches. I had not followed the familiar pattern of writing about blindness by 'retracting' the blind character from the everyday and putting them into a special, more soulful, other-world which is mostly achieved by ignoring or by-passing the dramas of negotiating a kitchen, the boredom of counting each step taken, the aching alertness necessary to negotiate public places, the acute isolation of trying to participate in a sighted world. By using the harsh, take-no-prisoners 'realism' of Frank's illness narrative forms I found that I was creating a reception of ἄτη that was uncharacteristically bound to the physical. By embedding the story in blunt, first person prose; by layering in literal, domestic detail of how the world actually feels and sounds and impacts without the benefit of sight; I discovered that I had found a new way into the metaphor. It is so complex and so ingenious, the metaphor of blindness and insight. It is symbolic and actual. It is, in its earliest forms, through the exposition of ἄτη as a concept, much more definitely supported by the physical body than I had previously imagined. Therefore in the writing, the persistent referencing of the physicality of blindness has been an attempt to circumvent the romanticism of earlier receptions and which subsequently allow their blind characters to trade on the metaphor in a way that almost immediately enacts all the 'givens' about literary blindness and therefore doesn't need to explain or justify their buying-into the mythology. I have felt, with my approach through the illness narratives, through the form and structure of the writing, that I have had to fight my way to the metaphor and consequently rebuild it, from the inside out, in order to re-generate it in

a new and credible way.

Part II

Writing

Introduction

In Part I of this exegesis I wrote of the research areas that I pursued to support the writing of the novel. Part II connects this research to the specific processes of writing I used to explore the metaphor of blindness.

The novel has been devised as a new reception of blindness in literature in the 21st century. In the creative text, my aim has always been to ground the metaphor in the functioning body. This has been a part of its role in exploring the central question of this thesis in an original way, namely: how does one bind this work to historical representations of blindness in order to connect this writing to the long history of the trope of blindness in literature? Form, narrative structure and syntax all contribute to producing a work that aims to explore the metaphor to generate a new and relevant reception of the trope.

The novel is about a lawyer, Jill who is diagnosed with Retinitus Pigmentosa, an eye disease that can cause total or partial blindness. The story is written in two parts: part one takes place in the first six months immediately after the diagnosis and part two documents Jill's experience of blindness.

The novel is written as a first-person account. It has somewhat of a circular narrative style where events and places experienced before Jill goes blind are later re-visited by her as a blind person, the aim being for the locations as well as the experiences within the novel to be constantly throwing up contrasts and comparisons. These not only serve the narrative path, but also maintain the focus on the qualities of blindness identified through the metaphor: chaos, ruin, disaster, insight, infatuation, folly, which manifest in the novel.

Illness Narratives

While it is hard to identify the precise extent to which ideas of quests and heroes, illness stories and narrative paths have influenced the text, the ongoing processing and contemplation of these theories has clearly impacted on the form and structure of the

novel. Their presence in the novel, as a guiding structural frame, has been crucial to my aim of linking this work with earlier representations of blindness in literature. The story itself clearly places this writing within the accumulation of blindness-inspired work; but it is the bridge that exists through the use of traditional, known story-forms that strengthens the connection of this story to its historical antecedents. It is these structural links which extend the idea beyond just the borrowing or re-working of a useful plot device.

I wrote of Jill being blind, and wanted to explore the actuality of this experience, the intricacies of how one lives with this condition, mentally, emotionally and physically. I began researching Frank's illness narratives because I was interested in the *stories* of those who live with 'damaged' bodies:

Because the pedagogy of suffering is taught in the testimony of illness stories, the kind of ethic it supports is a narrative ethic. The question such an ethic poses is the core of what the (illness narratives) are about: how are lives to be affected by stories? (Frank 1995, p155)

Frank's particular view of the significance of these stories, for what he terms their "narrative ethic", as a key way to access people's experience of illness and its aftermath, led me to examine narrative lines and their structures which in turn led me to re-negotiate or re-frame the actual novel writing. So that, in practice, the passages where Jill has recently lost her sight, and is also losing her grip on her ability to cope, have been re-drafted, using Frank's descriptions of the story patterns of the chaos narrative. The chaos narratives Frank describes are powerful and moving to read. The syntax is the link, as much as the words used themselves, even more so at times as people can tend to minimise their experience of illness with their choice of words, but reveal much more, and much more shockingly, their true state of mind, through the placement of disjointed sentence structures in the often bland, un-emotional descriptions:

In the chaos narrative, consciousness has given up the struggle for sovereignty over its own experience. When such a struggle can be told, then there is some distance from the chaos; some part of the teller has emerged. Thus just as the chaos narrative is an anti-narrative, so it is a non-self-story. Where life can be given narrative order, chaos is already at bay. In stories told out of the deepest chaos, no sense of sequence redeems suffering as orderly, and no self finds purpose in suffering. (Frank 1995, p105)

The strength in this for me is the linking of *all* the signals that the teller is sending out,

without their speech or writing patterns being tidied up or sanitised. It is clear that it is the way in which we speak, and not just what we say, that is a signifier for a state of mind, or an expression of an experience that is very present; and in these cases often helpless and hopeless.

Because Part II of the novel is set entirely after Jill has lost her sight, there were always going to be passages of panic and chaos. The sentence construction in these particular parts of *The Mechanics of Blind* was always going to be disjointed, but research into the non-fictional illness narratives gave me the confidence to position the chaos even more deeply into the words themselves, into the grammar, into the punctuation, into the sentence and paragraph forms, into the lack of outcome. Frank describes the chaos narratives as stories that are diametrically opposed to restitution stories; they are told in the passive voice, they are fatalistic, there are no endings, there is no salvation. In the chaos story, sentences are often incomplete, with no object for the verb, and the story and the method of the telling trails away into inconclusiveness. In the novel, this is all present, including broken paragraphing and the dismantling of dialogue forms which keep the text always slightly out of alignment. As there is no narrative order of beginning, middle and end, there is no resolution to the chaos story, and these stories are recognised as being difficult to hear or read about. Katie Ellis, an Australian film student who suffered a stroke at the age of 18, writes in her 2001 essay, *Testimony: Illness, Narrative and Desire*:

In the chaos narrative I have dissociated from my body, abandoned my desire. As Frank elaborates, “Whatever desires it once had have been too frequently frustrated. In a world so permeated by contingencies that turn out badly, desire is not only pointless but dangerous”

. In my journal immediately following my stroke I described events without detail or feeling and often in a frenzied ‘and then this happened after that’ kind of way ... In the chaos story illness stretches on forever, and the writer does not associate with what she is writing, there is no future in sight. These stories are free writing - they do not link thinking and feeling ... (Ellis 2001, p5)

In the second draft of *The Mechanics of Blind* I have taken the basic structural components of Frank’s chaos narrative as instruction and embraced the particularity of Frank’s interpretation specifically in relation to the way that language leads meaning, and used it in different parts of the novel. For example, when I initially wrote Chapter Two, Part II of the novel, including the following extract, I was using form to give

meaning as I had all along; but in this case I used short, sharp sentences to give urgency; I used repetition to lead the reader to feel the sameness, the lack of change in the unseen environment in order to re-enforce the sense that Jill was getting nowhere, that she could be anywhere, that she was lost. I wanted to panic the reader, to have them feel claustrophobic outdoors, in a park, in Jill's blindness:

Then I feel the warmth on my face fading, I'm not facing the sun any more! I quickly turn around, I don't remember turning, but I must have, but when I face the other side, there's no sun there either. I make a half turn, no sun, I make another half turn, no sun, and another, no sun. Fuck, the sun's behind a cloud. There's no north, south, east or west any more The phone rings out. I call to Fido again. I stand still and yell at the top of my lungs. I press redial. I try to whistle, but my mouth is dry, then the phone stops ringing and Susan's voice is there, "Yes? What?"

"It's Jill," I say, "I'm at the park. I've lost Fido and I can't find the path."
(Fitzgerald 2005, p60)

In a subsequent draft I re-examined this passage and others in the light of the signifiers that Frank had nominated to identify real chaos narratives – narratives generated by people who were actually living in chaos. The following is Frank's description of the negative space now occupied by Nancy, a woman experiencing the chaos of living with an unresolved illness:

Nancy's world is unmade. As her chaos story describes her mother in the kitchen, Nancy herself becomes a null point around which her mother moves. The physical space of the kitchen surrounds Nancy, but what is eerie in her description is that Nancy does not move through this space; instead, she is there only as obstructed. Reduced to being an occasion for obstruction, Nancy's body has lost any agency. She is the disembodied subject of a story that she nominally tells but that contains nothing of her subjectivity. (Frank 1995, p103)

Things happen to and around and despite this person. Chaos is when the person starts losing their connections, has lost their footing in their familiar world. Chaos is where familiarity is gone, even from the known.

I wanted this chaotic part of the text to give the reader a sense that this story perhaps wasn't going to turn out alright after all, that it wasn't a restitution story, that it wasn't even going to be a quest story, that maybe there was no way out. To do this, I needed to intensify the sense of indistinct or partly-developed messiness in the words and the scene. I went back to Frank's theory about the form of the chaos narratives, a form that he constructed out of authentic illness: stories of hopelessness and defeat, loss and fear,

desolation and panic. I tried to apply this form to the text. I reasoned that by taking on the specific and identifiable language and structural markers, I should be able to make these passages resonate as 'genuine' chaos narratives. The form, then, as much as the text and the meaning should make the reader believe that there would be no good outcome here, there would be no redemption, no way out. And, of course, for those who live with illness, with impairment, there often isn't. By using Frank's chaos narrative form very deliberately and more exactly, I could, perhaps, make this felt and give the reader the experience of it, even if just for a short time.

I needed to instil a sense of doubt about Jill's ability to survive. I needed to do this to drive the story beyond the established Athenian, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, outcomes of blindness being an ironic gift, as much as a punishment, so that the reader might forget the outcome of the trope for a moment, despite my desire to use it and build on it, within the story. I felt that in a reverse way, this might strengthen the trope. If I could make the reader block out the very foregone conclusions that I was already setting up and using.

To facilitate and intensify this I used the characteristics of the chaos narratives to have the reader forget hope and feel the authenticity of the fear of living without sight. These passages, therefore, needed to be hard to read, not just because of the grammar and the syntax, but because of what this particular combination of Frank's signifiers of grammatical combinations would mean, unconsciously or subliminally, to readers who instinctively know these patterns too. These are the patterns that make illness narratives familiar as they connect the illness stories to older structures. In this extract from the novel, I hoped to tap into a recognisable narrative pattern of chaos using language structures that, like poetry, as Michael Black describes, "... can convey unique effects within and without the bounds of syntax" (Black 1973, p67):

Then I feel the warmth on my face fading, I'm not facing the sun any more!
I quickly turn around, I don't remember
but I must have,
I
I turning
I face the other side
there's sun no either.
I make a half turn, no sun, I make another half turn, no sun, and another, no
sun.

Fuck, the sun's behind
Behind
Behind
Cloud there's no north, south, south, east, westerly any more
The phone rings out.
I Fido.
Again.
I still and yell at my lungs.
Press redial. I whistle dry mouth is dry,
then the phone stops
stops
stops ringing and Susan's voice is annoyed hurried there,
"Yes? What?"
"It's Jill," I say, "Park I'm at. I've lost park path. I can't find the path."
(Fitzgerald 2006, p67)

The aim here is not just for the reader to be lost in Jill's description of being lost, but for them to be lost in the language structure itself. Verbs were removed. Words repeated or used out of context. Dialogue sentences were re-written to be run on without conventional paragraphing in order to slide thought into voice into action and disrupt the expected form. The sense of place lacked any clear pattern. In this way, the plot structure became a prescription for form as well as content. *The Mechanics of Blind* isn't a true chaos narrative, it is a quest story, but there are parts of the novel where it *appears* to be thus, to Jill herself and to the reader, so that when adopting some of the characteristics of a chaos story, the hopelessness and fear can be generated more forcefully because it is not just an aspect of a simple plot device. As Wynne Jones says, "To shape a narrative, you have to phase the various incidents and so control their nature ..." (Wynne Jones 1995, p129). Controlling the nature of the narrative involves controlling the language.

As I wrote Jill's experience in *The Mechanics of Blind*, I found her narrative was positioned at that meeting point between aspects of Joseph Campbell's work and that of Arthur Frank's illness narratives. Campbell articulated the repetition of plot that occurs in story archetypes and this has been utilised by Frank in his analysis of illness narratives.

This novel of blindness set in Melbourne, Australia, in the 21st century, formed itself into a story that drew on the historical patterns of the trope. Blindness, as a disability and as a literary metaphor has connections to life journeys, challenges, heroism, failure

and triumph. In the novel, like Campbell's quest story heroes, the main protagonist, Jill, "leaves the ordinary world" when she loses her sight; passes "threshold guardians" of hardship and difficulty as she re-learns her way around the new, non-visual environment; enters a "dreamlike world" that is blindness (that has an entirely different landscape to her previously sighted life) and potentially receives a "boon" from this experience, as her heightened senses, the absence of vision and her changed circumstances give her an insight and knowledge that she otherwise may never have attained.

Jill's story in *The Mechanics of Blind* is an illness narrative. Her narrative experiences are reflected in Frank's observation, "serious illness is a loss of the 'destination and the map' that had previously guided the ill person's life" and "(the) body tells new stories when disease disrupts the old ones" (Frank 1995, p1). For Jill this is the truth that actually forces the narrative line through the novel; and it does this on many levels, not only in terms of shaping it as an illness narrative quest story, but in terms of re-enforcing and supporting the sense of a story grounded in the material. It is *the body* telling the story, in Frank's hypothesis, and it is this corporeality that has resonated powerfully for me and for this story to create a new way of approaching the metaphor. *The Mechanics of Blind* is an attempt to catch that moment which the Illness Narratives document, when the counterpoints of two different narratives disrupt each other, when Jill's version of her world and her life collides with the narrative line that her physical body is on. This is the point of drama and transformation, this is the power behind Frank's naïve narrators from *The Wounded Storyteller* as it indicates an inherent strength in the story itself, even when told by those who are not writers nor artists creating a fictional experience that can be controlled, built and altered to fit chosen patterns. Even without this artistic control, Frank's narrators, who are living their own stories, are also on a collision between past, present and future, between a previously whole and healthy body and a now damaged body. This is where the physical dictates and demands the self takes note; this is the authority of the body as narrator of its own story.

In the creative writing, I wanted the space between the demands of the physical and the beliefs or conceits of the mind and emotions, to draw closer. Jill had been written of

initially as a strong person very much in control of her life. I wanted one of Jill's direct acquisitions from her blindness to be a break-down of this studied self control, and a way of showing this was for the physical demands of blindness to keep dragging her back into herself. As a character, and as a blind person, I wanted her tactile experiences to reflect and to take the lead in her inner world, and constantly recall her to her own emotions – which she had previously been able to detach from. The reality of ill health or a disability is that the body takes over and forcefully requires attention. When Jill's partner first confronts her as a blind woman, his perceptions have the capacity to reduce her to being tentative and dysfunctional, and it impels her to re-inhabit her damaged body:

I moved with certainty before I went to the airport ... (but now) I feel as though he is perennially reaching out to catch me, to re-direct me, to take over from me, I tell him I'm okay, and I find the coffee table, bang my knee into the corner of it - I haven't been caught like that for weeks because the alignment with the chairs, the rug and the hearthstone had made its positioning so obvious - but now my timing is out, my sense of place gone, my mind and body muddled. (Fitzgerald 2008, p93)

This is the gap between truth and fiction that Jack Zipes (whose work was further explored in Part I, Chapter 6) writes of, and it occurs here when the physical imposes itself upon the mind and draws it uncompromisingly into the present. As Zipes explains, this gap serves to reveal the flaws, secrets and hidden truths in our society. In the novel, when Jill's fragile composure is challenged, the reality of her powerlessness is exposed; in addition, so too are the weaknesses in her relationships which had previously been hidden by the veneer of a relatively trouble-free existence.

Oedipus Tyrannus

Oedipus Tyrannus is an enormously powerful character and his journey in *The Theban Plays* becomes the metaphor. I wasn't looking to re-create Oedipus, but to distil some of his qualities into my protagonist to both maintain a parallel between this work and *Oedipus Tyrannus* and because the story form demands a strong character. The arc of Sophocles' play follows a traditional dramatic line of the rise of the king, the power of the king, the fall of the king, the new age. That structure supports the metaphor, both in the original, and now.

Oedipus, as he is described by Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and his Time* (1988), is a relentlessly intelligent and capable man who lives in fantastical times (see Part I, p6). He is also proud, ruthless and confident and draws our empathy as his downfall becomes inevitable, the closer he comes to realising the truth of his own role in the tragedy that befalls him. I have tried to make the main protagonist in *The Mechanics of Blind* as prosaic and down-to-earth as possible. I hoped that in this way the insights she developed and the skills that emerged from her loss of sight, might, paradoxically, be more believable, and yet still exceptional. Because this is a 21st century work, written in a literary environment where sentimentality or romanticism is not encouraged, I worked to strengthen the metaphor by situating it, and Jill, in rigorous 'normality'. Jill needed to be a character where 'what you see is what you get'. A reader had in fact, described her as, 'rather charmless'. This worked for me because it has meant that she ceased to be a deserving hero. She is a rather hard, self-centred, controlling person whose life it could be said, becomes calamitous. Her prospects do fall to ruin. Blindness is a disaster for her. It is only, in the context of this mess and pain and wretchedness, that the "gifts" of blindness perversely become the lifeline that drags her back from the brink - and in fact drags her back into an alternative experience of herself and her life than she had previously known. Oedipus' discovery of the truth about himself is his tragedy and his triumph. *The Mechanics of Blind* does not have such a huge scope as this, but for Jill, the tragedy does liberate her from the confines of her earlier life. When blind, there are fewer places to hide. Blindness, like many disabilities in our society enforces isolation. It tests relationships. It forces previously hidden or suppressed experiences and emotions to be exposed to a harsh perusal. Blindness as an all-consuming experience places enormous pressure on the individual, and in the novel exposes the weak links in Jill's apparently smooth life. It is this exposure which is brought about by suffering, by time for introspection, but it is the 'insight' blindness brings that forces Jill into self-discovery, and although on a smaller scale than that experienced by Oedipus Tyrannus, it is nevertheless profound for her.

Prior to my research, I had interpreted the blindness of both Oedipus and Tiresias as being chiefly symbolic. I had believed their blindness to be essentially a dramatic device. My desire to establish the main character of the creative text within the corporeality of blindness was an attempt to bridge the gap between a contemporary

work, which I didn't believe could be sustained without the gods as genuine, believable players in 2008 sensibilities, unless I embraced a form such as the fantasy-realism genre. However, on further research into the concept of ἄτη, the physicality of blindness has revealed itself to be surprisingly strong in the writing of the Athenians. It has proved to be a powerful experience in both its literal and figurative representations either of which can be pre-emptive of the other. For example, physical blindness has been shown to be a *consequence* of an altered (internal) state; as with Oedipus who is 'blind' to the truth and then literally blinds himself *after* he discovers this. Or it can be an objective or external experience such as Tiresias' interaction with the goddess Athena who blinds him physically, but subsequently this external imposition brings about his highly developed qualities of wisdom and far-sightedness – both of which can, paradoxically, lead to an altered external or internal state of being. Oedipus realises the truth and blinds himself – internal leads to physical. Tiresias is blinded and thus develops internal powers or qualities of insight that may never have manifested – the external state leads to an internal awakening. The metaphor holds, no matter which way you approach it, and can exist as a figurative 'idea' or an actual experience or a combination of both which ingeniously becomes a third form. The interconnectedness of all of these aspects of ἄτη, which can be approached through inner or external change, continue to push the many aspects of meaning that the concept encompasses.

In my work with a classical trope, I am using pre-configured forms and ideas to generate a story. While the novel is a reception of an idea generated in the 5th Century BC, there is no explicit reference to Oedipus or Tiresias in the novel. But the 'receiving' of the metaphor of blindness into this work has allowed for much unspoken information to be conveyed because the trope is so familiar. Consequently, it has meant that I could both work within a given frame, and challenge it by, for example, creating a strong female character rather than an upper class or royal male. I could place her in dissimilar circumstances and explore ways in which her experience would be different, and yet the same.

The necessity of the punishment fitting the crime in *Oedipus Tyrannus* ensures that Oedipus remains blind ... all cannot be forgiven. Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* is suitably and seriously punished, and part of his redemption is to get some vision back, but not all. He

is still, for all intents and purposes, a “damaged” man, forever marked. Gloucester could be seen to be punished for not realising what was really going on, for not truly understanding the character of Edmund, for ignorantly believing in Regan and Goneril. This aspect of illness – and also literary blindness – being a punishment for so-called crimes committed, is linked to notions of morality, gods and God. It is very much part of a world where events that are outside of the control of humans, are attributed to a higher entity. I had no desire to re-create this aspect of the mythology, but also could not ignore it, as it is important and a part of the symmetry of the metaphor. Jill has therefore been set up as a strong and forthright character, who would have little time for notions of cosmic punishment, but I did build a back story where she believed herself to be implicated in her brother's accidental death. I wanted the inference to be that she had done something wrong, and might feel she was being suitably punished. The choice of the legal profession for Jill's career re-enforces this concept of penalties and repercussions. I wrote of the death of her brother because, in line with the parameters of the mythology, her wrong-doing had to be connected to family, and to upsetting the 'natural' order of what is moral and 'right'. At the same time, because I don't agree with the idea that those who are ill or disabled are being punished for their transgressions, I included the caveat that Jill's account of the circumstances surrounding her brother's death would be flawed. Her survivor-guilt was self-generated. It is only because of her own inability to self-examine this painful tragedy in her past that she carries any sense of wrong-doing.

Άτη, Metaphor and Character

In terms of my objectives for this thesis, it was a complex task to work so hard to set up archetypal and known story forms, and then try to use the language and the character to divert the reader from what I was actually hoping they would have been instinctively responding to. In order to explore the metaphor believably, and to generate the insight, the other-worldly knowledge, the special “edge” that is a part of the myth; the function of the form (first person) was to involve the reader enough to allow them to invest in and accept the idea that literary blindness has layers of meaning and elements of the extra-ordinary. The aim was to have this belief endure, while the reader is actively involved in the story.

The Mechanics of Blind is actually a very small, very ordinary story. It is not earth-shattering, nor does it have explosive significance, and yet it can have aspects of both of these elements, simply because of its very ordinariness. Jill does not go on an heroic Indiana Jones-type quest. She doesn't travel into outer space, or lose and gain a kingdom. She doesn't do battle with the gods or trade riddles with a sphinx, but she does go on a journey which is challenging and sad and lonely and human. It is a journey that has been taken by others before her for thousands of years, but through the corporeality of her experience some of the myth and illusion surrounding literary blindness can be transported into a 21st century work. And the means of transference, is, as it was in *Oedipus Tyrannus*; as it was embedded in the many appearances of the prophet Tiresias; as it was bundled up in all of its complexity in the concept of ἄτη: that blindness as a metaphor is both a mental state and a profoundly physical one.

Blindness in literature has consistently thrown up images and plot forms that embrace the irony of 'new insight' generated by sightlessness. What has emerged in my later research into the meanings surrounding ἄτη, is that the concept is strongly based in the material world. Ἄτη makes the connection between the inner and outer domain, free will and gods, emotional and intellect-based responses.

In *The Mechanics of Blind* the form found me, it was already there, waiting. From the very beginning I related to the protagonist, and believed that she might be someone very like myself. I had imagined myself blind many many times, trying to find the heart of this experience, the emotion, the hurt, the mystery, the authenticity. I had the unarticulated but decided notion that my own self would be the basis for the protagonist; but as she came out onto the page, as is often the case, my blind woman, my soon-to-be blind woman, took her own form, her own character and self, quite distinct from me. Hence Annie Dillard's words, "One does not 'choose' a prose ... as a fitting tool for a given task ... rather ... the book is a side effect of the prose..." (Dillard 1982, p65).

Jill, in *The Mechanics of Blind* is confident and cool, calm and efficient. This Jill knows her place in the world. She is a person of certainty and common sense, she is somewhat

snobbish, she has a type of a jolly hockey-sticks personality. Because of the sort of person she is, Jill's journey takes us on a particular path and there is a more dramatic fall for her than might be for a person who is already vulnerable, and maybe frail and fragile, a person who has doubts and worries. The fall is considerable for Jill because she doesn't realise she's fragile, because she thinks she has it all figured out. It is a harder landing for her because she has locked herself into not knowing, living a life without too much self-examination. Because in order to connect with the myth, the fall has to matter a great deal, the loss has to be severe. *The Mechanics of Blind* therefore becomes a tale of the character who falls, and falls again, who hits the ground and is in danger of being seriously marginalised, but somehow, some way, she gets back on her feet again. The quest story. ἀή. An archetype. Except, contemporary writing of blindness does what classical literature does, what Frank's quest story in the illness narratives does ... it demands that some form of the damage remains, not everything is to be swept up in the happy ending.

The classical portrayals of blindness have saturated us with the metaphor, but now, as a writer in a contemporary context, there is a distinct lack of an over-reaching 'world view' such as existed in the diverse writing of German Abbess, Hildegard of Bingen's hierarchically God-dominated Christian world or in the mythology that prevailed in the classical world of ancient Greece. Consequently, I found in the process of writing that I could draw on the metaphor of blindness, but when writing of a blind character and attempting to embrace or build on, or develop further the metaphor, it became more complex. It is not possible to write of blindness now, as in the grand metaphoric way of the past. The framework is no longer there. In the first draft of *The Mechanics of Blind*, my practical methodology for at least putting this concept on the table, had been to develop a character who was blind and initially rather locked in. She saw what she wanted to see, did what she chose and kept herself on a fairly tight leash; but with her descent into "the country of the blind", she becomes thrown into a situation that is confronting, difficult and which could, potentially, destroy her. In Part II of the novel, Jill's attempts to deal with her blindness and to maintain control of her life are what keep her going, but the reality of her situation overtakes her. The gaps in her world and her ideas about herself in that world are constantly challenged by her memories of sight and the ever-present reality of her unsighted experiences. Attempting to live a version

of her previous self, to *project* for the outside world the idea that she is unchanged and coping, is actually the most difficult (and unwinnable) battle of all.

Sarah asks how I am and as I have vowed not be a boring whiner, I tell her, "I'm great."

As we accelerate around the corner at the top of my street, I make no mention of orange juice spilt down the front of my first change of clothes this morning, or the steam burn still fiery hot on my forearm from reaching over the wrong side of the boiling kettle.

As we wait for the lights in Bridge Road, I don't tell her that this morning I had to do callisthenics in front of the heater to warm up after my cold shower, that I had the water cold because I am afraid to turn on the hot tap without her there to supervise - Steven can't get the thermostat to change and I am still waiting for the gas man to come. I don't say I mostly wash myself with a flannel dipped in warm water in the bathroom, standing on a towel to catch drops of water that could slip me up on the tiles.

As we brake hard, I do tell Sarah that I brushed my teeth last night with SPF 15 sun block straight from the tube. I don't say that I did this because I simply cannot concentrate absolutely all the time on absolutely everything, I make it into a funny joke. We laugh uproariously.

While the left indicator clicks clicks clicks, at the turn into Church Street, I don't mention to Sarah that I've delayed Cameron's visit over here again because I can't bear him to see me in the state I'm in. I don't tell her that my mother still cries at the end of every second phone call. I don't tell her that my mother rings me twice a day. (Fitzgerald 2008, p93)

Irony, which lies at the heart of the metaphor of blindness, surfaces when Jill makes the choice to present herself as coping and in command of her situation, as though by pretending she is not devastated by this she will be in control. The reality is that when she reveals her true experiences, and states what she has lost and how she is lost, paradoxically she gains more mastery of her life.

I am not sure that I have fully achieved the depth I aimed to give Jill. It was in the second and third drafts that I worked to try to do this: to strengthen her as a character, to make her more 'genuine', so that she travels through the text, not as an adjunct to blindness, but as a primary source for its exploration. In these later drafts, I worked to develop Jill's humanity, the personal, personality-based details of her character so that this story could not possibly simply be just about blindness, but was actually about her: a person, a character, a creation that exists and is believable to the reader. It is this sort of writing, character-based writing, that is steeped in the detail of the *now*, that I believe gives the text more of a chance to work in building the metaphor than an overtly emphasised, grander narrative could.

Because Jill's character has had to face a major overhaul, because she has been challenged by this relentless experience, because she has been forced to make profound changes in her relationships and her sense of self and her perceptions of the world around her; she does become more insightful, more aware, more consciously authentic in her responses and her sensitivity towards her environment and the people in it. In this way, she comes to embody, to a small extent, some of the classical, ephemeral, metaphorical properties of the literary treatment of blindness. *They are blind, but they can see ...* (John 9: 1-38) the biblical adage that foregrounds the enduring trope of blindness, has the opportunity to be present in *The Mechanics of Blind* as the text documents some of the extraordinary skills that a blind person develops in order to exist in a sighted world. This is reinforced by structuring the narrative around a known form – classic quest stories – strengthened and contemporised by adopting aspects of the illness narratives deconstructed in Arthur Frank's work; this allows the historical and literary frame of the metaphor to seep through a contemporary story and find its place. The form does not block the metaphor, but enables it and contemporises it across the chasm of time and altered narrative structures and social, religious, cultural and literary beliefs.

Mr Rochester suffers for his previous sins, and is ultimately rewarded for his suffering, he gets Jane. Gloucester finally 'sees' the truth about his sons. Oedipus achieves nobility and has a role to play in righting some of the damage played out after he has fulfilled the prophecy. These are grand works where right and wrong are clearly known and accepted. In more contemporary writing the metaphor of blindness persists when characters gain insight or understanding (*The Orchard*), when they find love (*A Patch of Blue*), when their 'sixth sense' comes to the fore (*Annerton Pit*), when their blindness 'rescues' them in a way that sight could not (*Blind Justice*). Blindness in these receptions is characterised by classic imagery of fumbling and stillness, of the blind character being peripheral, but acutely observing the life around them. In this novel, I wanted to recreate blindness through Frank's specificity of the illness experience, through the first person narrative which lends immediacy and through the minutiae of domestic detail.

The first draft of this novel had entire chapters devoted to walking down the street, negotiating public transport, the actual shift in muscles required to sit on a horse.

Eventually this detail was cut, but the absence of all of this particularity has become more informative within the structure of the novel than its actual presence was. These chapters are no longer there, but because they were there, they are referenced inadvertently and persistently, as though they still existed. These missing elements have become an unseen presence in the novel, much in the way that a palimpsest works with the erased work never completely gone. This method of working layers-in specificity, that even when removed still carries an echo of itself that has resonance. It is this detailed, in-your-face descriptive persistence in creating actual, tangible experiences for the reader within the known realm of the everyday that is my way of accessing the metaphor in contemporary times. From my research, no other reception of ἄτη has so ground out the form in the physical, in order to give it the meaning that carries it beyond the literal, and so sustain the metaphor.

Reception Studies, the 'receiving' of a text after its initial presentation, investigates and deconstructs the ways in which the original has been used and impacted upon in this new way. The receiving of a work can include an entire, unaltered presentation, or fragments, references or just an extraction of the ideas generated in classical times. Exploring the metaphor of blindness in *The Mechanics of Blind* has ended up as mostly a borrowing of an idea, although fragments of the original work do keep pushing into the novel, particularly in terms of character building.

Blindness in literature, with all of its embedded meanings and mythology and ancient metaphoric properties, has traditionally been much more than merely an instrument to serve the plot, and by using classical story structures, more of these qualities can be brought out and revealed, even in a contemporary work. As Hardwick states when referencing the use of classical works in later productions:

No description is neutral ... (and) ... factors outside the ancient source contribute to its reception and sometimes introduce new dimensions. (Hardwick 2003, p5)

These new dimensions can include using the metaphor to deepen character development or to introduce other themes and ideas that may not have been considered had the history not been there.

Narrative

The form has palpably shaped the narrative. Writing *The Mechanics of Blind* as a first person account has led me to considerations of the nature of the narrative voice and the role of the god/author. It has led to an appraisal of how grammar and syntax work not only to produce form, but also to affect the narrative by the impact they have on character, most specifically, their shaping of the narrator's voice. Wayne C. Booth, writing in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) says:

A surprising number of writers, even those who have thought of their writing as "self-expression", have sought a freedom from the tyranny of subjectivity ... From time to time others have risen to defend commitment, engagement, involvement. But, at least until recently, the predominant demand in this century has been for some sort of objectivity. (Booth 1961, p67)

This is in stark contrast to Arthur Frank's illness narratives where the 'loss of subjectivity' by the storyteller indicates a fall into chaos and consequently can be seen as a predictor of the type of story being told. I did not want this novel to be neutral or impartial. I needed the protagonist's personal experience and emotions to lead the story and to consequently, dictate the form. To separate it from the personal, the subjective, would have compromised the intent, which has always been to draw the reader into the experience of blindness. I felt that if I developed a strong enough connection and belief in the story and the characters, then the reader could be invested in the aspects of the metaphor that I wanted to explore. If there was no investment, then the extra-ordinary would not be believable and the whole point of pursuing it would be lost. As a consequence, this novel has presented itself as a first person singular account, written almost exclusively in the present tense. I was not familiar with writing in this form in prose, but this is how my character presented herself, so there she is, here and now. Not neutral, not detached, not unimpassioned.

Annie Dillard, writing of forms of prose, says:

...it is interesting to note Robbe-Grillet's notion (which I think is accurate) that a writer thinks of a future novel first as 'a way of writing'. The narrative, he says, 'what will happen in the book[,] comes afterward, as though secreted by the style itself.' One does not 'choose' a prose ... as a fitting tool for a given task, the way one chooses a 5/16 wrench to open a 5/16 bolt ... the prose 'secretes' the book. The book is a side effect of the prose ... (Dillard 1982, p65)

In this novel form came first. It led the tone and voice, and as a consequence, it also directed the narrative. In this way, *who* a character is, prescribed *what* they did. At the very least this determined how Jill might deal with the twists and turns within the story.

As a result, this ultimately affected the narrative line, the outcome and the sense of what the story would be.

First person singular denotes the personal and removes from the reader the safety net of the third person with its implied, over-seeing narrator/god/authorial omnipotence. There is no higher entity to call on in a book written in the first person. There is no author's voice to give the overview, to neaten loose ends, to explain for us the readers, what we may have missed. No comforting author's voice to guide us through the tricky bits, to reassure us that there's *someone, somewhere* who has it all figured out, who knows what's what, someone who can bear witness to it all and instil meaning. This is another thing that found me all by itself and secreted its way into the text, because I *like* the overseer/author who knows the score – I wanted *someone* to know the score. I can't bear it when things happen in a life – even a fictitious life – and there is nobody who knows what really went on, what really happened. But here in this book, in *The Mechanics Of Blind*, there is no safety net for Jill, she falls alone. And that's the crux of writing in first person, they are all alone, even on the page, they're all alone. Alone in that gap between truth and falsehood, new and old, past and present – no-one's land.

The novel is written in the present tense, as a companion to the first person singular, and as a device to generate immediacy and sometimes urgency, and to reinforce the lack of over-view that a retrospective tense would provide. The two forms of the present tense are both used here: present simple and present continuous, and I move back and forth between both, but lean towards the present simple which allows for actions and events that are completed as we speak; temporary continuing actions and events that are going on around now; permanent situations, things that happen regularly or all the time (Swan 2003, p457). I have tended to move into present continuous when events are happening quickly, as the continuous gives a greater sense of pace and of time moving:

No one is speaking at all, and I feel Steven's hand around my shoulders and he pushes me down and I must be sitting at eight o'clock, that's where I am, on nubbly woollen upholstery fabric; and Steven's walk takes him away and across the room then Sarah is kneeling down beside me, or sitting or just leaning over, I don't know which, but I think it's kneeling because I hear her joints crack but I could be completely wrong about that and I probably am. (Fitzgerald 2008, p105)

Both of these tenses also work to solidify the narrative voice, they keep it very much

front and centre within the context of the form and the story. First person present simple and present continuous are a structural rejection of Booth's neutral, detached, "objective" narrator.

This is where the drama is the narrative, where it is *in* the narrative. It is from here that the character is built and dismantled and built again. It is here that the reader, by the means of the form, is forced to stumble along for the ride – because it is crucial that the reader *experience* Jill's experiences: the helplessness, loss, grief and wonder of this sightless world – and to get the reader to this point, first person present simple and continuous do a large part of the work. This may be connected to Zipes' comments in his 2005 text, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Misunderstood Storyteller*:

From the outset the reader or listener of a folk tale knows that the narrative perspective is partial to the hero, who is bound to succeed; the question is always how the magic of the oral tale, while important, depends not so much on its miraculous quality in the tale itself as on the ingenuity of the narrator in using the arsenal of folk motifs to vary well-known schemes so that they will touch on the dreams and needs of the audience. (Zipes 2005, p32)

Framing the story around an identifiable form – such as the treatment of blindness in literature, such as the illness narratives – has the advantage of connecting the reader intrinsically to an established "motif" that is, on some level, recognisable and accessible.

Writing *The Mechanics of Blind* I was aware that the reader would be partial to the hero, Jill, and read the narrative with a desire for her to succeed, to overcome. By using the first person present and creating her, initially anyway, as somewhat unlikeable, my aim was to cast doubt about this outcome; to have her successes and heroism come as a relief, a surprise even; to have the ultimate finale of the quest not be a foregone conclusion. This needed to happen so that the story and the character would be leading the narrative, and that any pre-conceived notions of how quests end would be 'forgotten' in the reader's immersion in the story. An additional element to this is that creating an 'unlikeable' character challenges the story structures. By following recognisable story forms, such as the quest narrative, even with an initially unprepossessing hero, the reader will stay with the novel until a personal connection is made.

Manfred Jahn writes in *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (2005) that

there are a number of signifiers within a text that project the narrator's voice, and that these various forms of the narrator's voice fall into several sub-categories under the principal headings of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives. These are forms which either consciously connect with the reader on an intimate and personal level, or are used to create distance between the narrator and the reader, and the narrator and the characters. *The Mechanics of Blind* has an overt narrative voice that is projected by the text and, according to Jahn, the work falls into the category of an homodiegetic narrative: the narrator is present in her own story, is one of the story's acting characters and thus she is an 'experiencing I' in the action sequences. This means that everything that is described comes through Jill and is filtered via her perceptions and limitations. This creates an intimacy and connection between reader and narrator, because it is so personal, and consequently generates an investment by the reader, into the story (Jahn 2005, p5.1.1).

In addition, *The Mechanics of Blind* also operates within Jahn's definition of Concurrent Narration where the "discourse-Now and story-Now is identical" (Jahn 2005, p5.1.3) so that this time sequence, which is also accompanied by direct discourse, re-enforces the sense of immediacy.

... of the two narrative tenses ...(narrative past and narrative present) ... the narrative present foregrounds the story-NOW and backgrounds the discourse-NOW. (Jahn 2005, n5.1.3)

This then, maintains a strong sense of immediacy through the use of form and grammatical structures by keeping the "story-NOW" of Jill's everyday experiences continually immediate and close.

In the normal way of things, the present tense doesn't work for me – not as a writer and not as a reader – but it's here, written into this novel that is exploring blindness. Dillard's prose "secreting the book" is absolutely a truism from my experience, and *The Mechanics Of Blind* was no different. Jill's voice came out of my fingers, into the keyboard and onto the screen as a "series of actions and events that (were) completed as (she spoke)" (Swan 2003, p457). Notwithstanding that there was an authorial control and vision that shaped the work, nevertheless, her voice told her own story, and it was in the present tense.

But what present simple brings is the impossibility of hindsight, and by implication, little immediate insight as things are happening. There's no time in the present tense, there's no time to think things through, to ruminate, to speculate, to anticipate, to give perspective, or that overview - it's all here and now, now, now. Right now. And Jill, blinded, is sent reeling into the dark, falling and flailing right now:

“I have had everything taken from me,” I tell her when I reach the fucking door which was about half a metre along the wall from where it was meant to be, so that I have had to feel my way, pathetically and slowly past her filing cabinets and her bookshelves and a stupid potted plant, until I find the handle, “You are not taking Fido from me as well.” (Fitzgerald 2008, p57)

Writing in the present feels, at times, cruel. It's relentlessly harsh. You can't save your characters when they are trapped in the relentless “now”. The present tense keeps the future at bay and indignities, difficulties and suffering cannot be skimmed over. Everything has to happen in its own time. There is nothing to be done but to see it out. The voice might “secrete the plot”, but the grammar and language serve the plot and, in this case in terms of time and tense, to a certain extent, they reflect it back at us.

Jahn describes the constraints inherent in this form when writing in this immediate and personal way:

... (in) a typical first-person narrative ... she is subject to “ordinary human limitations” (Lanser): she is restricted to a personal and subjective point of view; she has no direct access to (or authority on) events she did not witness in person; she can't be in two places at the same time (this is sometimes called the *law against bilocation*), and she has no way of knowing for certain what went on in the minds of other characters (in philosophy, this restriction is called the “Other Minds” problem). It is obvious that a narrator's handling of these limitations, and a text's relative closeness to, or distance from, such typicality conditions (“default conditions”) can tell us a lot about the “slant” or attitude of the narrative voice as well as the motives for telling the story. (Jahn 2005, n1.13)

So here the story stands – now and I – written in this form that allows no avoidance for the reader, no guiding hand, no relief in looking back at it all from a safe distance. That's what this form gives to the story – no way out. Which is, of course, what the story is about. It is, in fact, what a true *quest* as well as an illness quest, is about: being in a journey that must be travelled, inescapably, to the end. This is the story within *ἀτη*, and the story travelled by Oedipus and Rochester. By re-connecting *ἀτη* to a journey and a quest, the metaphor's reference points of insight and folly, fate and change find their places along the path this journey takes. In this way, my 2009 story of blindness is

connected, through form as well as plot and character, to a 5th century BCE idea that is so complex it needed an entire play to reveal it.

Zipes' contention suggests that the ways in which the kind of narrative, for example the oral form of folk tales and their re-worked written successors, is directly addressing the narratee is crucial. Therefore, Baldick's broad definition of narrative with its basic, central ingredients, has been refined by Zipes so that the context in which he examines story through fairy and folk tales, brings to the fore the dominion of the narrator, which in the case of this work, is the subjective and singular 'I'.

Diana Wynne Jones is a British fantasy fiction writer who draws on many varied classical stories from the British Isles and ancient mythology:

... the bare plot is to any writer no more than the main theme of a sort of symphony which requires other themes added to it and the whole orchestrated into a narrative. To shape a narrative, you have to phase the various incidents and so control their nature that you set up significances, correspondences, foretastes and expectations, until your finished story becomes something else again from its simple outline.
(Wynne Jones 1995, p129)

The simple outline for *The Mechanics of Blind* has always remained as it originally appeared, the structure has barely changed from my first imaginings of it: Jill is sighted, Jill goes blind, Jill stays blind. It is, however, the meaning, the outcome, Wynne Jones' "significances" that have shifted and impacted within the narrative, drawing meaning from the mythology of literary blindness, that has affected what happens within this simple plot, and too, the actual sense of the plot.

In this novel, I have tried to use form and syntax as devices to keep the literal experience of blindness foregrounded. Writing in first person encourages this as the narrator can't use the third person omniscient view to describe events in images. One of the structural devices I decided on from the very beginning was to use visual adjectives: colour, distance, perspective and landscape, only in the first third of the book before Jill loses her sight, but after that, descriptions are strictly non-visual. In the last two thirds of the text, with two exceptions, the only colours mentioned for more than one hundred pages are smudged grey and black. No descriptions are represented in pictures. Gestures are only conveyed as internal, embodied experiences through the movement of air or sensation against the body; facial expressions no longer exist; landscape is

confined to what can be touched or felt.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Sense and Non-sense* (1991), when writing of perception, says that:

... the perceptual habits are formed by the embodied person ... in order to perceive, we must be involved in the world we are perceiving ... since it is from within the world that we perceive, our experience is always perspectival, that is, incomplete. For although we can be practically certain for example that we see a house, there is always more to the object than we can ever perceive ... the object we assume, is completely determinate and independent of our investigation of it. (Merleau-Ponty 1991, pxiii)

Merleau-Ponty's examinations of perspective resonate particularly in the memoirs of writers who are themselves blind and also in the discussion of these experiences by those who have observed and studied these occurrences. In light of the issue of perspective, of what is "real" and what is perceived to be real, of what is remembered and what is imagined, of what is visibly, tangibly "present" and what is unknown and unknowable; the deeper I got into the novel, the more difficult and restrictive the language constraints became. I felt at times that I was running out of words to say things with. I was running out of ways to express this new perspective, particularly as it was highly personal, alien to many of us, and based on assumptions that are a collision between the remembered visual and the present non-visual. I had to find ways to avoid becoming repetitive. If you are limited to reading what is essentially an incredibly visual world just through skin, sound and scent, the store of words to describe in this way decreases the further you go on.

The Body

In the text the mechanism, the mechanics of being blind is such a pervasive part of the fabric of the work because the way Jill does things, the things she is doing, are ever-present and unavoidable and, in a way, the actual doing of these things takes precedence over the story. *The Mechanics of Blind* is a somatic novel, and the physicality, the actuality of the now is unavoidable in first person present. In *Bodies Moving and Moved*, J. Parviainen, writing about the body, dance and the consequently meaningful analysis of movement, related psychology and physiology to perception, phenomenology and the politics of the body:

The theory of the body, which comes close to body schema and body image as culturally shaped, sets the precondition for one's own body and one's own perception of another's ... the body is not only a vehicle to present moral statements, but the subject of action itself. (Parviainen 1998, p12)

Jill is blind and therefore consistently, consciously present in her body, in a way that able-bodied people rarely are. That she is also painfully present in her sense of her body image is a construct devised to allow some form of the external world and its perspectives, to gain a foothold in the first person present. By using Jill's imagined perception, and memories of a world that most of us (including her) are familiar with, the text is establishing a contrast that works to embed the reality of Jill's situation into the reader's consciousness, while all the time reminding them, through Jill's own remembering and knowledge of the sighted world, that while she no longer has access to that place, it does still exist. My aim is to keep up a tension – for both Jill and the reader – which has them pulled back and forth between the *known*, the *remembered*, the *everyday* sighted, safe world that is true for most of us reading – and the new, unknown, dangerous, mysterious world that is the terrain through which the blind must negotiate their way. I have tried to do this by letting Jill's memories and the references around her drag her back to the sighted world, and her sense of herself there, “ ... searching for a handkerchief to smear at the most-likely pitiful attempt I had made to put on eye shadow in an earlier blind ladies class ...” (Fitzgerald 2008, p79) and at the same time, having her body, and her body's behaviour, and her body's needs ground her actual self in the present.

Focusing on “the body as a subject of action itself” (Parviainen 1998, p12), doesn't only drive the plot, but it works too, to make the reality strong, to draw the reader through this experience, to hold them in it. There's no escape from an embodied present tense, there's no comfort to be found in knowing that it's all been noted down after the fact as an intellectual experience, memoir-like, that's been carefully considered and edited and tied up judiciously and, above all, a memoir that is *over*. There is no safe and sound, there is no remembering it over hot buttered crumpets beside the fire, when the story is *now*. There's no solace in the present tense.

The telling of the story through the wounded body, a communicative body is exactly what I have tried to achieve. In my wider reading, the wounded bodies of blind

characters appear chiefly as a vehicle: the body isn't the story in these stories. But to a person who is ill, or disabled or incapacitated, the body rules their world. And in the writing of this novel, the body provided a way into the metaphor.

Why was this such a strong impulse for me? Why did I feel the need to push this line so hard? Placing the story within the frame of Jill's physicality was incredibly limiting, yet at the same time, it was the only way I could even consider writing it. Maybe this desire, in part, developed because I wanted to convey an understanding of what illness does to a person, how it damages and shapes them, how their psyche is altered, how they lose part of themselves, and how they try to claw themselves back – or why they don't. Or possibly it comes too from my years of writing for the theatre, where you literally see your characters embodied by actors so that the physical is a non-negotiable. But, by immersing Jill and the reader in the body as a narrative line, I also hoped to re-present the metaphoric aspects of blindness in a new way. A way that would be contemporary, non-romantic, non-mythical (there's little romance to be found in smashing your face into an open door). Because of the very unadorned nature of this story, I envisaged it would return the essence of the story to its origins in a more interesting, concrete way than the less-engaged, literary stories which mostly just join the dots of the metaphor. They are using it mainly as a device to drive plot or character development. I wanted blindness to be the plot and therefore carry the metaphor with greater conviction. I think too, that Jill's story is so personal, so intimately individual, that her physical experience had to be expressed very forcefully. I had a great desire to have the reader undergo Jill's journey with her. I wanted the reader to be in the story as much as I could manage it, and the common denominator we all share, regardless of culture, language, race, gender or age: is that we are physical beings. We know what it is to walk, run, sit, stand and fall. We share a common bond because we all exist in physical bodies that function in essentially similar ways and if I could draw the reader into Jill's situation by calling attention to that, by documenting it and making it as vivid as possible, then perhaps the reader would be caught in the sense of the wider gamut of Jill's experiences and be drawn deeper into her internal world, her emotional world and therefore have a stronger relationship with her.

Conclusion

At the very end of my writing, when the novel is all but done, and is just waiting for plot arrangements and addendum, I re-read some of my blind fiction novels again. I re-read *A Patch of Blue*. I re-read *Annerton Pit*. I re-read Katie Ellis' short text on her own illness and Frank's illness narratives. I re-read *The Wounded Storyteller*. I re-read *The Country of the Blind* and *Threshold*. I re-read Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*, set in Australia. I re-read the passages where her character experiences blindness. I find that Modjeska has written of the pervasiveness of visual references that exist in our English speech patterns. She writes of the way grammar changes in the world of the newly blind, and the hyper-reality of the aural world, the internal world. Modjeska goes back into the past, to the 12th century and writes of Hildegard of Bingen, and strongly connects her transformative visions, her powerful writing and imagery with her experiences of blindness. I re-read again of Hildegard herself – and the way in which her work is now received; and I think about the ways she and all of the characters in these books re-enforce the mythology of blindness. How they all, to some extent, draw on Sophoclean connections between blindness and insight, blindness as a concept of duality, blindness and special capabilities, blindness as special.

Why do we so love the idea of blindness being *more*? Why does it call to us? Enthral us? Make sense to us? Is it that, as a mythic idea that was generated so long ago, it has, as Campbell and others have contended with other stories, become an idea that has been embedded in our collective story-making coda to the point where we accept it, expect it? When the shallow, derivative, one-dimensional blind soap opera character gets an unusual sensory intuition that proves to be correct, is this a part of the same embedded myth that we have lived with for so long that we don't even challenge it? Or is it a dangerously seductive, yet inaccurate portrait, much like the flawed and judgemental metaphors of illness that Sontag describes?

If blindness is to work as a literary metaphor, in a post-modern work of fiction, it cannot be prescriptive like the symbolic, significant, mythical character of Tiresias who has come to personify the classical concept of ἄτη. It cannot run the perfect, encapsulating, punishing irony of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It cannot achieve the neat, psychologically satisfying and ultimately redemptive experience of Mr Rochester. You cannot miss the

metaphor of blindness in these characters, or their stories. *The Mechanics of Blind* can no doubt be read without making any conscious connections to any literary context or a history of representation of blindness. But all culturally generated metaphors rely on some collective experiences. We are born into cultural references. The age we live in, the religion we are born to, our genealogy, nationality, education, the politics of our world ... they all shape our symbols and create our internal classification systems. Metaphors grow from these experiences, they are elegant plays on our history, our society. Arthur Frank used this when he developed his work on illness narratives and connected these story-frames to ancient story forms. There is a wealth of information, coming from many, many angles, that drives a work about blindness. So much so, that a writer born in Melbourne, Australia in 1963, who grew up in a small town on the west coast of Victoria, and was educated in convent schools, lived her teenaged years and early twenties in a climate of workers' strikes and racism, of an emerging Australian theatre culture, of anti-intellectualism and ex-pats and locals culturally cringing, of the heat and distance of an island that had clung for two centuries to European and British antecedents and ignored what was on its own doorstep; who had 70's, 80's, 90's popular music and film and literature as the image-drivers in her world, and who lived in a cultural climate that was built on the detritus of the television's version of story-telling and information pushing – all of these influences are part of the frame from which *The Mechanics of Blind* was built. And on this frame are hung ancient signifiers from a past world that created a metaphor that has endured for at least 2500 years and will most likely go on and on in our literary, storytelling consciousness for many more years to come.

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