

# **Whispering into knowing: teachers as creative beings**

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*Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of 'Doctor of  
Philosophy'*

May 2017

## Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

“I, Ligia Pelosi, declare that the PhD exegesis entitled *Whispering into knowing: teachers as creative beings* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This exegesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this exegesis is my own work”.

Signature:

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Date: May 4, 2017

## **Abstract**

This study (re)presents how teachers enact pedagogy in order to become transformative agents of change in their students' lives. The importance of teacher agency and creative, arts-based practices in the teaching and learning of literacy was explored during interviews with a small sample of Australian primary school practitioners. The field texts are (re)presented in the form of a novel that interrogates the contemporary landscape of schooling as a data-driven, political instrument. The novel, which should be read first, looks at the impact of creativity in classrooms and on teachers' lives and reframes the meaning of teacher agency.

The study sought to define, reflect on and re-evaluate how creative processes in literacy education have flow-on effects for the broader literacy curriculum in Australian schools. The focus on the constraints and challenges of teaching and learning in neoliberal times frames the concept of childhood in the novel. The accompanying exegesis contextualises the contemporary educational landscape as an environment into which teachers are inducted into didactic, mechanistic and metric-driven practices. The novel and the exegesis seek to articulate the effects of the neoliberal landscape on the teaching and learning interface by looking at the role of creativity in shaping professional practice and children's learning.

The life history narratives of the participants (re)presented as an ethnographic fiction draws upon the principles and practices of performative social science to question methodological orthodoxies in educational research. In such studies, knowledge reproduction, and the notion of truth are not innocent practices but can be contested. In this study, the experiential (re)presentations of teachers' lives and work are transformed to evoke affect and thoughtful response in the reader. The writing of the ethnographic novel both as process and product is accounted for in the accompanying exegesis in which theoretical and methodological directions are outlined and substantiated.

Conclusions from the study indicate that creativity and agency are essential to teachers' and students' wellbeing in the classroom. The focus on how teachers face the mechanisation of teaching and learning is considered in context of transformative and nurturing pedagogies with students. The increased emphasis on teacher wellbeing is aimed at retaining committed, passionate educators in the profession who will guide students to agentic, critical literacy and creative approaches to the 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which they live.

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# **The Joy Principle**

A novel by Ligia Pelosi

## **Dedication**

For Louise, who taught us how to live.

## Prologue

The decision to action *The Joy Project* wasn't sudden. It certainly wasn't a life-changing, epiphany kind of moment. In fact, Alex wasn't really sure how the idea developed. Because it was so much a part of his way of thinking, he found it hard to understand why everyone else didn't see things in quite the same way. All he knew was that one day, everything he'd ever known and believed in his life converged into one pointy moment. And then he knew he could never turn back.

## Chapter 1 – Running

Alex Kiernan locked up his classroom and wandered across the oval to the library for the weekly professional learning session. In the distance, he could hear the low thrum of a truck's brakes on the freeway. It had been a still, grey day, and the palpable fog that usually lifted by mid-morning was still hanging low over Beauvista Primary.

The desire to take off in his car and breathe some clean, beach air, was like a niggling itch. Only an hour and a half, he told himself as he neared the library, and then he could drive off towards the water and go for a run.

Inside the library, Alex's colleagues and other teachers from the local network milled about, bleary-eyed after a day's teaching, exchanging a few pleasantries with the joyless camaraderie of trench-weary soldiers.

Felicity Ryan stood stiffly before the group and cleared her throat. She waited for everyone to get seated on the kid-sized chairs, and a hush to descend before speaking. 'Welcome to the third session in our professional learning feature on literacy,' she said. Though her lipstick was freshly applied, Alex noted a heaviness around the eyes. A long day of looking cheerful, of modelling exemplary behaviour to teachers, parents and students, everything from rationalising curriculum edicts to not being able to walk past a piece of rubbish in the yard without bending over to pick it up, took its toll on a person. Despite the infuriating minutiae, Alex wouldn't trade his lowly classroom job for a turn in Felicity's assistant principal's shoes for a year of glorious beach sunsets.

Alex knew most of the teachers in the library. Some he knew well enough to ask about their upcoming holidays, or the exact stage of their kids' orthodontic treatment, which he'd memorised from the regular instalments he got every time they sat down at one of these boring professional learning sessions. Fuck, teachers could be so beige. The mind-numbing tedium of those conversations made Alex wonder how long he could keep teaching. The whingeing about little Mohammed's inability to sit still for longer than one minute; the fear-driven rants about how bad crime had become in the area, and how, as a consequence, the streets were no longer safe at night; the difficulties teachers were having getting parents to return any of the forms. And the latest hot topic: how to tackle the scourge of empty chip packets flying about at lunchtime without banning chips altogether. And all these rants came from seemingly normal people. Well, okay, Mohammed's teacher was more than a tad burnt-out. But the others, aside from suffering what Alex called *small-world syndrome*, really had no excuse. They just needed to spread their horizons a little.

In Alex's opinion, they'd do better focusing on teaching and learning instead of dreaming up new ways to deal with rubbish. Like improving standards of punctuation, for example. Every time he sat in the staffroom, he was visually tortured by the heading on the noticeboard. Ten centimetre-high, multi-coloured fluoro letters that screamed: TIMETABLE'S. Alex couldn't understand how

nobody – not even senior staff – had picked it up. They were already into term two, for fuck’s sake. If the teachers didn’t notice such an abomination, what hope was there for the students?

Sitting in the library squeezed between one willing disciple and the next, all Alex wanted to do was to catapult himself out of the room, break into a run and never come back. He glanced around, hoping something – anything – might save him from this tedium.

A framed photo of Conor Reynolds hung in a prominent spot above the loans desk. Conor was famous now, having started on the TV soaps and graduated to Hollywood. And once upon a time, he’d worked right here at Beauvista Primary. Phys Ed. teacher with smashing good looks that air-lifted him right out of this ordinariness and into the stratosphere. Alex averted his gaze. Being reminded of Conor Reynolds’ exciting life, of his escape from this routine, check-in, check-out existence, didn’t grant him the relief he was looking for.

Felicity introduced Ivana Hepner, the session leader for the afternoon, and the network’s literacy coach, by rattling off a long list of Ivana’s achievements. Ivana puffed herself as she took centre stage and began bleating about the same old stuff they’d been belted about the ears with all year: the need to keep striving for better results, creating opportunities for enhancing literacy at school and in the community. *Blah, blah, blah-di-blah*. Alex glanced at his watch. Five minutes into the session. 85 minutes to go.

It was at that moment when Ivana reached for the butcher’s paper, that Alex felt a thrilling recklessness rise up from the depths of his stomach. What would people think if he just stood and walked out of there? He knew they’d be puzzled. They’d talk about him afterwards, but what would they do? *Really*. Nothing, that’s what. Even Nick Metaxas, the principal, might ask the next day if everything was okay, but would surely accept the lamest of excuses. All around the room were stifled yawns and deadpan faces. Ivana pressed on.

Any residual politeness faded as Alex realised he couldn’t stand it a minute longer. Once the decision was made, he was immediately suffused with energy. He tapped his feet, eager to sprint out of his chair. He glanced left and

right. Straight ahead, Ivana kept on with the bleating. It was possible he'd leave without anyone noticing.

And then he was on his feet, marching across the room. He encountered a few pleading looks as he darted past. Futile and powerless; everything he so desperately didn't want to be. *Take me with you*, they seemed to say.

The knowledge that he'd left everyone behind made him light-headed. He was now on the run. A fugitive. Snatching at freedom was like taking a morsel of something sweet and dark and forbidden and it filled Alex with a deliciously subversive taste of escape.

Propelled by nervous energy, he rushed to the car park. Relief washed over him as the car's engine roared into life. Transformed into a getaway car, his little Mazda took the escape seriously, clinging to the curb as he turned onto the road, and surging ahead above the speed limit.

Soon he was home. After changing into his skins, he ran the couple of blocks down to the beach and checked his watch. He'd be back from his run and showered by the time the professional learning session finished back at school.

His stomach tightened at the thought of what Madeleine would say when he told her what he'd done.

\* \* \*

Later, still tingling with subversion, and basking in the heightened sense of being that running always delivered, Alex phoned Madeleine.

'Are you okay?' he said when she answered, her voice hoarse.

'Just tired. Sick of the sound of my voice, actually. What are we doing tonight?'

'Feel like some fish and chips on the beach?'

Madeleine's tone lightened immediately. 'Sure. Will you pick me up?'

'I'll get the food first, and I'll be at your house in twenty.'

Waiting for his order, Alex didn't realise he was smiling to himself until he noticed a woman smiling back. He looked down at her two young children.

They, too, beamed at him, and Alex thought about his own class of Grade Twos. Did he have enough time to smile at them as often as he'd like? The other day, as they were leaving, he'd even forgotten to say *Good Afternoon*, instead barking instructions about the notes he was sending home.

From now on, he would make it his business to smile more often.

Later, as he and Madeleine sat on the beach, eating the fish and chips, and licking the salt off each other's lips, he pushed his ideas towards her in a roundabout way. Pippa ran circles around them, chasing gulls eager to scavenge the remains of their feast.

Madeleine snuggled a little closer, and called him a rebel before she kissed him again, longer this time. Maybe all the talk about rebellion had fired her up. He wasn't sure she was taking him seriously just yet. He'd show her.

But perhaps not straight away.

First, Alex needed time to come up with a plan with more definition than just a vague intention to flout rules. It was an ambitious notion, and in that moment, it flowed with the strength of a torrent right through Alex's core.

## Chapter 2 – Fanfare and disquiet

Beauvista Primary had the kind of name that epitomised a false bravado. If you were looking to translate the part-French, part-Italian name, you would logically come up with *Beautiful View*, and might expect to see such a view from Beauvista Primary's grounds, or at least from the end of the street.

Indeed, there was a beautiful view not that far from Beauvista Primary; if one could get into a car and drive for fifteen minutes, or catch the bus that operated along the well-travelled arterial route between the shopping centre and St Margaret beach. Once there, the view of the bay stretched as far as the eye could see, and belonged to the more salubrious, eastern side of the suburb; a suburb that was founded principally to accommodate the hordes of migrants that had flocked to Melbourne from a ravaged post-war Europe.

By name, St Margaret evoked the coastal splendour of seaside gems like Santa Margherita or Santa Barbara. In geographical reality, the similarities were illusory at best. St Margaret did have a beach. It was an expansive ribbon of white sand that would take a good hour to walk from end to end. At night, the twinkling lights of suburbs closer to the city trailed the edge of the water like a casually strewn necklace of glittering gemstones. The cluster of city skyscrapers, shining metal monoliths that by day appeared perched on the edge of the bay, gave the necklace its centrepiece.

Despite its natural beauty, and apart from a few large and solid 1950s clinker brick residences, St Margaret was predominantly blanketed in tired 1960s homes and public buildings. Most of the homes had been built quickly

and cheaply to accommodate the baby boom, and had long been in need of renovation. Those that were in any decent proximity to the water had been reinvented or demolished to make room for ostentatious, glass-fronted mansions whose residents were rarely seen lounging on their balconies.

The reason for their absence was that the topography of St Margaret was not favourable in terms of winds and currents. Each day, tons of drifting seaweed was inexorably washed on to the sand, where it sat, decomposing. In the summer a pungent odour prompted the more well-heeled residents to raise complaints with the local council, a fact that was regularly reported in the local paper in pieces that were at once nobly enraged and foolishly optimistic. From time to time, over-zealous local councillors got involved, and numerous ambitious plans were devised; all to no end. Anyone with a working understanding of geoscience knew that shifting tons of seaweed on an ongoing basis would be nothing but futile and costly.

The opposite side of St Margaret – the one without the beach – was the more functional end of the suburb. There, thousands of homes were laid out in a neat grid. It had an arterial road that led out of the place, and a large, concrete shopping centre whose façade was littered with neon signs and graffiti. For those who wanted to shop and run, a six lane freeway linking the city to the outer west suburbs ran almost adjacent to the centre's car park. A sound barrier had been built to protect the salubrious side of St Margaret from the relentless onslaught of traffic noise that continued around the clock.

Not far from the noisy side of the barrier sat Beauvista Primary. The view from there, if not of the beach, was, at least, of the screaming freeway.

\* \* \*

'Greetings, comrade,' Gus said as he stepped into Alex's portable.

Gus Watson was Alex's next-door-neighbour; his classroom was second last in the lonely row of portables that lined one side of the oval. One side of his classroom was Vivian Pinkus's classroom, the other side was Alex's. He often

referred to himself as the cushion between the petal and the thorn; the thorn being Vivian, their team leader.

Every Monday morning without fail, he popped his head into Alex's class to start the week with a chat.

'What can I say? I'm a relic of a period in history when socialising was seen as integral to work,' he retorted to anyone who dared to comment on his lackadaisical approach to time.

'What's on for this week, then?' he said this Monday as he entered Alex's class, mug of coffee in hand.

Alex looked at the timetable that was pinned to his classroom notice board and raised his brows. 'Not sure, mate. Same traffic jam, different cars.'

The timetable was the only clear and logical representation of the mayhem of his school week. A neat grid, it detailed all activities, specialist classes and any ad hoc changes to the schedule as though they could be navigated with a modicum of calm. *This week I'll try not to over-complicate it*, Alex vowed to himself each Monday morning. *It can be done*. On paper, it seemed do-able. But put a class of kids into the mix, and Alex was propelled forward, barely in control, from class to meetings to yard duty, to whatever else, like a surfer riding the pocket of an enormous pipeline.

'You could get the kids to decorate the room a bit, mate. All these anchor charts are making my head hurt.'

Alex glanced at the charts of instructions hung around the room; evidence of every new bit of grammar, punctuation and spelling he'd ever taught. The older ones hung askew, the edges greasy from frequent re-tacking. He thought of Gus's room. An almost impenetrable jungle of art hanging on vines that nearly scraped the floor. Felicity and Nick had given everyone the talk about optimal learning; the ideal classroom should have a moderate amount of neatly displayed anchor charts, with very few distractions.

Gus slapped a poster hanging from a line strung across the room as though he were swatting a fly. He sat on the edge of a desk. 'You need a bit of art in here, mate.'

'Frankly, Gus, I don't know how you get away with it. Or how you find the time.'

'It's my charisma, Alex. And my age. I can do what I want because they think I'm a lost cause.'

'But you still follow what we plan, right?'

'Mate, God only knows what's going to happen this week. You can plan all you like, but when the hand grenades keep getting chucked our way, we do what we can to dodge them.' He clutched at his chest. 'Sometimes we get wounded in the crossfire, but nevertheless, comrade, we go on.'

Gus let out a drawn-out sigh. His normally relaxed brand of insubordination seemed to lack the usual vivacity today.

'Everything okay?' Alex said.

'Fine,' Gus said, shaking his head. 'Nothing a permanent dose of retirement won't fix.'

Alex busied himself with separating the kids' maths books from the writing books. 'Really?' I didn't know you were thinking of retiring.'

'Mate, it feels like I've been thinking about leaving longer than I've been teaching, which I know isn't possible.' He laughed. 'But seriously, I'll tell you the one word that keeps me turning up each day. And it's not *curriculum*.'

Alex put one stack of books aside and faced Gus.

'It's a long word, now. Are you sure you can handle it?'

Alex raised an eyebrow.

Gus took his time, breaking the word into syllables. '*Superannuation*.'

Alex shook his head, smiling.

'The more days I keep turning up here, the more my retirement sum grows. Jesus, with Olivia at uni for four years, and now unemployed and contemplating post-graduate study, it takes two wages to keep her in the lifestyle to which she's accustomed. Sheryl and I often joke we'll still be in the workforce at seventy.'

'That's not a bad thing,' Alex said. 'Work keeps you young.'

‘Not in this job, it doesn’t.’ Gus glanced at his watch and stood. ‘Anyway, that’s a conversation for another day. Right now there’s kids to see and places to be. Like the art room in about ten minutes.’

‘Let me know if I can do anything...’

Gus dismissed the offer with a wave. ‘The kids are easy, and they’re actually what keeps me sane. It’s the other stuff that does my head in.’

Music started blaring from the speaker as Gus left. Alex went outside, keeping watch as his class assembled. Kids were running to line up at their respective classrooms, school backpacks hoisted on shoulders. Chatter and squealing could be heard above the din of the music, as his kids jostled in line for a preferred spot or partner, eyes bright and faces expectant.

‘Alex, Amir was kicking me,’ Cody said as he filed into the classroom.

Alex looked at Amir, who slunk past, studiously avoiding his gaze.

‘Right, everyone, go and sit on the mat,’ Alex said, his spirits dipping. ‘Cody, Amir, come to my desk, please.’ He glanced at the morning’s activities listed on the board and knew there wouldn’t be enough time to properly deal with the altercation now. Instead, Alex would quickly go through the same old token admonishment, which Amir would ignore, and the whole process would begin again, perhaps as soon as independent reading was underway, when Alex would be too busy with his teaching group to keep an eye on every child.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes earlier, in the room next door, Felicity was speaking to Vivian Pinkus.

‘Look,’ Vivian said, her features tense, ‘I really don’t have time to get into it now. I have photocopying to do before the bell. I just wanted to flag this before it gets out of hand.’

‘That’s okay, I’ll send you an invite and we can sit down calmly. Should I send it to the others?’

‘Pfff, I don’t think so. Best I outline my concerns with you first, and then once we’ve decided on a strategy, you can come along to one of our next team meetings to support me as I tell them.’

‘Good idea.’

There was a knock at the door, and Felicity saw one of the parents, Mrs Reyes, peering, wide-eyed through the glass panel. She waved a piece of paper to indicate what she’d come for.

‘Jesus, that’s the photocopying taken care of,’ Vivian said to Felicity, but smiled as she walked to greet the parent. ‘Good morning, Magdalena. What can I do for you?’

‘Morning, Mrs Pinkus, Mrs Ryan. Very, very sorry to disturb you,’ Magdalena said with a slight bow of her head.

‘It’s no trouble,’ Vivian said as she ushered the mother into the room and waved her in the direction of a chair.

‘I’ll get going,’ Felicity said. ‘Can I help with the photocopying?’

‘You’re an angel,’ Vivian said, handing her a few worksheets and uttering quick instructions before turning her attention back to Magdalena.

‘Angelica no give me this until last night,’ Magdalena said, holding out the following day’s excursion form.

‘Oh, it’s okay, Magdalena. You can just sign it now.’

‘But money... My pay Thursday...’ She made a rolling motion with her index finger to indicate wasn’t going to be paid until Thursday the following week.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ Vivian said. ‘Just the paper,’ she said as she handed Magdalena a pen and pointed to the dotted signature line. ‘You can pay next week. No problem.’

Felicity watched Vivian work her magic. Her smile and reassuring tone worked wonders with all but the most scornful of parents. Magdalena bowed her thanks as she handed the signed slip back to Vivian, her face now luminous as sunshine after rain.

Outside, Felicity heard deep-throated chuckles coming from Alex’s portable. The door had been left open, and she could see Alex and Gus sitting

around having what looked like a casual catch-up. *On Monday morning.* Did they have nothing to do? No wonder Vivian was so stressed. She resisted the urge to shame them by offering to take their mugs to the staffroom. As she broke into a run, Felicity took a deep breath to quell the rising anger, chiding herself for being so petty.

\* \* \*

Alex was out on the second shift of his Wednesday yard duty when he heard a voice behind him.

‘Hey, Mr Kiernan. Do you know Conor Reynolds?’

Alex turned to face the girl. He instantly recognised her as one of the popular girls in the senior grades. She had smooth olive skin, and her long black hair was tied back into a glossy pony tail that fell halfway down her back. At Monday morning assembly, she could be seen getting the flag ready to hoist, fiddling with microphone cables and organising the younger kids who came up to collect awards or to play a predetermined part in the proceedings.

‘Oh... yes. Of course I know who he is.’

She tilted her head and crossed her arms. Thickly lashed eyelids fluttered over coffee coloured irises.

She brought a hand to her chest. ‘I’m Yasemin. I’m a Grade Six. Ms Ryan used to work with him, you know? So did Mr Metaxas.’

‘Uh huh. And what do you think of his films?’

‘I just saw *Ten Reasons to Live*. Have you seen it? It’s really cool.’

‘Not yet. Maybe I will, though.’

‘He’s coming back to Australia. He just tweeted it.’

‘Is that right?’

‘His next movie’s going to be shot in Melbourne. Sooo exciting.’

‘Sounds it,’ Alex said, but by then Yasemin had spun around and taken off, her ponytail flicking from side to side as she skipped across the oval towards a group of younger girls to whom Alex guessed she would next deliver the thrilling news.

*Conor Reynolds.* Alex sighed. He wondered how many days like this one Conor had got through at Beauvista Primary before taking his super-leap into stardom. How many days like Alex's frenzied Wednesdays did he work before creating an escape plan?

Perhaps teaching hadn't fazed Conor like it did Alex.

Alex had seen a few of Conor's films, and without exception, he always played tough-yet-lovable characters who saved the planet from certain doom.

But had Conor ever had days like Alex's Wednesdays?

Alex cast his eyes around the sun-baked oval, kids stirring up dust as they raced around. The long row of flat-roofed portables that extended almost to the fence seemed to glare back, undaunted. They were a shabby but complementary match for the 1960s grey-speckled concrete buildings that were only meant to last ten years at the height of the immigration boom, yet had hung on through successive patch-ups for over fifty years. Like them, the portables would hold firm on their sagging concrete stumps way past their due date. Year after year, successive hordes of kids would traipse upon their threadbare carpeted floors until some well-meaning government grant was tossed the school's way, allowing for replacement buildings that vaguely resembled places of learning.

He kicked a stone as he walked to patrol the opposite end of the oval. No matter how he turned it around in his head, Alex found the connection between a Hollywood megastar like Conor Reynolds and a place like this practically unfathomable.

## Chapter 3 – Rules of engagement

That night, after Madeleine had driven off in the misty night air, Alex sat in his living room, the silver light of the television flickering against the blotchy walls. He had no interest in the re-run of some 1990s American sit-com playing on the screen. He would have gone to bed, except that his mind was buzzing.

He had to do something about what was happening at school. Problem was, he had no idea where to start. He thought about the conversation with Yasemin that afternoon, and his musings on that other teacher's fabled life, and felt an urgent need to know more about his escape. But how? He couldn't just pick up the phone and call Conor Reynolds to pick his brains about teaching, much less to seek life advice.

Blogging was something he'd tried a couple of years earlier. A few disjointed posts with no particular theme except a desire to write himself into something better. Since boyhood, Alex had used writing to get himself out of corners. Now he found himself backed into the deepest corner imaginable, and writing was something he knew. Something he could depend upon. He doubted it would pull him out of trouble completely, but in the absence of any better ideas, it would have to do.

Five minutes later, he'd created a fresh blog. He called it *Running Man: thoughts on teaching, fear and freedom*. Anonymity was a necessity. It would allow him to express himself more freely, and to spread his creative wings without fear of consequences at work or with Madeleine.

The blurb came easily to him.

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## **ABOUT**

*Posted March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

*Running Man* is the author of this blog.

Here's the thing: I like to run, and when I have a few things to figure out, it gets my brain going. Writing will help me capture some of those ideas, and generate a few more. Lately, something's been getting under my skin, and I'm looking for answers.

Then he set to work on his first post.

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## **A DIFFERENT LIFE**

*Posted March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Some of us are teachers. Some of us are movie stars.

Sometimes I sit and think about the twists and turns of life. Destiny's flip of a coin that lands one person in the classroom and another behind the lens of a camera.

My world is crammed with the mind-numbing amount of multi-tasking that's required to get to the endpoint of a lesson. It is filled with planning, selecting resources, implementing lessons, and carrying out assessment, which includes giving feedback, receiving feedback and moderation. It includes professional development and wall-to-wall meetings where I am required to listen to, collaborate, empathise and socialise with my colleagues.

Would all this make a movie star's head spin the way it does mine?

I close my eyes and bring up a snapshot of my day at school. I am sitting in on writing conference for one group of students while at the same time flitting over to another group using iPads to publish their narratives on the Book Creator app. When I started uni, apps were something I had on my phone, not something I thought I'd be using to teach. Don't get me wrong, I think the apps are great, and kids are happy using them. They make my job easy. But sometimes I wonder if it's the best way to teach something inherently creative like writing. I wonder is there a different, a better way to do this?

On a busy day, I have a double shift of yard duty. If I don't plan my bathroom break, I don't get a chance to go until nearly two. Sometimes I don't have time to eat lunch. Sometimes that's because I forget to pack it in the morning, and there's no time to go out and get anything, not even at the school canteen because the rest of my lunch hour is taken up with a team meeting. Sometimes I get so caught up in my students' inquiry unit that I lose track of time and turn up unprepared for whatever professional learning session we're having after school. Yesterday I rocked up to the meeting on writing moderation without any writing samples.

I think of myself in a new life. Lately I've been putting myself in the shoes of a movie star who used to be a teacher. Bit pointless, really. No matter how much I question and wonder, I must still front up every day at school. Then there are the unaccounted hours; the ones in my head, those between one day and the next.

On that big screen, a movie star's life looks pretty damn perfect. I want to look invincible. I want to be that strong. I can't imagine a movie star being just like me. Running towards something I don't yet know. Running away from the thousand obligations about to crush me.

Dreaming of something different.

\* \* \*

Next morning, Alex felt decidedly lighter as he got in his car and headed towards Beauvista. He was nowhere near an answer, but articulating the question – even to the blackness of cyberspace – was a blessed relief.

The one bedroom unit he called home was at the privileged end of St Margaret, only a block from the beach. It was one of eight in what was once a red brick block of flats. The entire building had been painted a sickly peach colour as part of a cheap renovation effort, most likely in the 1980s. Here and there, where the paint was peeling, the original colour of the bricks could be seen, giving the building a spotty, measles-ridden appearance. The ugliness of the building was a bonus for Alex, as it translated to affordable rent. Inside, the flats had been kept reasonably well maintained. Despite the dated fittings, everything was in working order; the orange 1970s kitchen and bathroom décor miraculously intact. The tenants of the other seven units, despite frequent changes in occupancy, were for the most part like Alex. Young singles, or couples starting out. Like Alex, they were similarly attracted to bargain level rent in the suburb's bluest ribbon location.

A one hundred metre drive to the end of his street and he was straight onto Vicars Rd, the arterial that led almost directly to Beauvista. In terms of convenience, the school was well-located. Snugly tucked into a corner between the freeway and the arterial road, it was easy enough to get in and out of. But with the volume of trucks speeding past, spewing black smoke into the air for most of the day, Alex did wonder about those pristine and pink children's lungs. On still days the air was heavy with smog and a smell he couldn't reliably identify. It wasn't quite the smell of rotting seaweed that perfumed the air near his home, but was perhaps a blend of exhaust fumes from cars, as well as the odour of the frequent burn-offs at the local oil refinery.

Fifteen minutes after stepping out of his apartment he could be in his classroom ready to start the day. But each morning, driving to school felt like he was taking part in an elaborate pantomime.

Surely this was not his life? Not really.

Though he graduated with a Bachelor of Education, Alex hadn't spent much time visualising a teaching career. He always thought he'd do some casual relief work to finance other, more interesting projects. He applied for a teaching job more as a means to get good practice writing the application, and if he was lucky, attend the interview, than out of an expectation that he was embarking on a life in education.

The job landed in his lap. He interviewed casually and confidently purely because he didn't really want it. After he got the call offering him the position, he thought it was probably his lack of nerves that made the panel equate confidence with competence.

'I'll do it for a year,' he'd told Madeleine. It was a contract, after all. She smiled her usual knowing smile. 'Typical you. Arse yourself into a job in your first interview, and cocky enough not to be thrilled about it.'

'What?' he'd said, pulling her close. 'It's an excuse to celebrate.'

'I don't have a job yet, so you'll have to shout me.'

Madeleine got a job a few weeks later. She took to it in her usual Madeleine way; wholeheartedly following all the rules and regulations anyone threw at her. If there were no obvious rules, she looked to her colleagues and followed their lead. She wanted to belong. Assimilation and compliance became her trump cards.

Alex was different. He rocked up to school vowing he would not get drawn in. He would be cool and distant, appraise the situation without getting emotionally tangled. That first week, he watched his colleagues griping with each other, nagging, yelling at the kids, never looking for, (never mind finding) a positive angle, and following rules as though teaching were a board game. On the first day of the year, some took pride in knowing the exact number of days until Christmas. He did not want to be like them, hanging grimly on, waiting for

their retirement sapling to grow into a tall, strong oak from which they hoped to catch a glimpse of a world beyond the school ground.

The car's engine sputtered as though in protest as Alex turned into Magnolia Boulevard. Beauvista Primary rested stoically on its tilting foundations, held together by a lick of paint and gallons of silicone.

Felicity was unloading her car as he pulled in. She waited for him to alight. 'Good morning, Alex.'

'Morning, Felicity.' He stretched, arching his back with hands clasped behind his head. It was a good way to release tension. The air was heavy with it anytime Felicity was near.

'Sore back?'

He grinned, 'No, just like a stretch in the morning.' He leant sideways, reaching with his fingers as far down his leg as he could, then switched sides and repeated the exercise. He felt odd, but kept on regardless.

Felicity narrowed her eyes. 'That is quite a stretch. Do you do this often?'

'I run, so yeah. Ten minutes at least three times a week.'

'I didn't know you were a runner. My niece runs. Quite fanatical. Don't quite get it.' Felicity shook her head and bent down to pick up a box of art materials next to her car.

'Passionate is a better word for it,' Alex said. 'Does wonders for wellbeing.'

He doubted she'd get it. Beauvista was the kind of place where leadership worked overtime thinking up more hoops for teachers to jump through. Consciously focusing on de-stressing by focusing on wellbeing and health was clearly not on the school's agenda.

Felicity sighed. 'I'll feel a lot better after this application's been submitted.'

'What's that?'

'We're putting in for a part time literacy coach. If successful, everyone in the junior school will get one-on-one coaching to improve their practice.'

'How would that work?' Alex said, trying to sound neutral. The idea of letting some literacy Gestapo loose in his classroom freaked him out.

'Oh, I don't know, exactly. It depends on the funding. But I guess at least one literacy session a week with the coach.'

Alex nodded.

‘At Beauvista we’re keen to engage in best practice, and it’s important we do this in a variety of ways. Professional Learning sessions are not everyone’s cup of tea. Learning through doing – in the classroom through authentic practice – sometimes works best.’

‘Sure,’ Alex said as the awkward truth dawned on him. She was referring to his escape from the library the other week.

Felicity paused. Alex shifted uncomfortably in the intensity of her gaze. ‘Everything okay at the school for you, Alex? I know it’s been a busy term, and seeing it’s your first, I understand you must be quite bamboozled by it all.’

It was a simple question, but instead of answering with honesty, Alex chose avoidance. ‘Here, let me take that box,’ he said. Hoisting his backpack onto one shoulder, he took the box off Felicity before she had a chance to remonstrate.

With the box firmly in hand, Alex began to walk towards the office. Felicity followed, her legs moving quickly to keep up with his long strides.

A stray soccer ball rolled in Alex’s direction, and he kicked it back to the ruddy-faced little boy chasing it. ‘Here, mate. Why don’t you take it onto the oval? No windows there.’

When they reached the office, Alex climbed the steps and held the door open for Felicity.

‘Thanks,’ she said, reaching for the box.

‘I can put it on your desk...’

Felicity took it off him. ‘These are materials for the ReWARd program. I haven’t seen you there yet. Be good of you to volunteer, if you have some time on a Saturday morning. We have preservice teachers helping. I’m always on the lookout for unofficial mentors.’

Everyone at Beauvista knew about ReWARd. The name was a clumsy anagram of *reading*, *writing* and the *arts*. Felicity promoted the program often enough, asking staff to devote time to students whose literacy results needed lifting. It was also a way to squeeze the arts into a curriculum filled to bursting

with more important subjects. Well, Felicity didn't quite put it that way, but that was how it came out.

She fixed him with another quizzical stare. Alex felt raw, unprotected. She may well have been peering into his soul.

'I'll check my diary and let you know.' He turned to go.

'Alex...'

'Yes?'

'You didn't answer my question.'

He raised an eyebrow.

'You don't have to answer right now, but I just want you to know that I'll be asking again. When you're ready. Please know I'm always ready to listen to my staff.'

He forced a smile as he walked away.

## Chapter 4 – Grounded in reality

Immediately after the encounter with Alex, Felicity walked into the administration section of Beauvista looking for Nick. Parents and kids clogged the space; backpacks littered the thoroughfare, through which Felicity had to negotiate her way. Excursion forms and money were being waved about, and though she hated to see a queue building at reception, Felicity resisted the urge to get involved. Glenys, the school receptionist, would deal with the queue in her usual way: methodically and with a superhuman level of diplomacy. A faded sign on the front counter issued a rhetorical warning.

*At Beauvista we believe in the importance of respectful relationships between parents, teachers and students. Abusive or aggressive language and behaviour will not be tolerated. Police will be called in the event of an incident.*

A quick knock at Nick's door, and Felicity stepped inside. He looked up, greeting her with a wide smile. 'G'day, Flick.'

Felicity dumped the box on his desk and angled her head towards the comfy chairs. 'Have you got a minute?'

Nick stood and followed her to the loungey corner of his office. It comprised a sturdy, glass-top coffee table fit to hold copious amounts of paperwork and laptops, and burnt orange vinyl armchairs; if they could be called that, given there were no arms. All were department issue circa 1985. Felicity had long felt an emotional attachment to this standard-issue furniture.

Firstly, they appealed to the Greenie heart that still beat wildly in her chest (they were virtually indestructible). Secondly, the thick, square shape of the chairs now had a distinctly vintage look that was so *in*. Thirdly, but most importantly, the lounge chairs held a sentimental value that could not be dislodged. They reminded Felicity of days long past; days when she was in her twenties and teaching had felt like an adventure. A mission. Those times now seemed so out-dated. Back then, they worked with chalk and blackboards instead of taps and swipes on iPads, or scrawls on interactive whiteboards. Computers had barely been heard of. Everything relied on the tangible rather than the virtual, and though there was more teacher-led learning, there was what by today's standards would seem an inordinate amount of time to dream. Show and tell, finger plays, drama, art and music in the classroom had all been in great abundance. Felicity stroked the back of the chair as an image of a class of six year olds sitting before her flashed into her mind. Those kids would be in their mid-thirties by now.

And that unfortunate sign at reception. There was a time when Felicity would have railed at the audacity of anyone who dared insult parents in that manner. Now she just saw it as expedient and, sadly, necessary. Not that those for whom it was meant ever bothered to read it.

'What's up?' Nick said as he sat. In his usual, patient way, he waited for her to begin.

It was hard to put into words what she felt about Alex. There was no way to phrase it that would not make her come across like a dinosaur. 'Nick, what do you think of Alex?'

'Seems like a nice young man. A bit green, I guess. But so were we all, at his age.'

'He's not that young. I mean, not just out of high school. He's had a few years to work some things out.'

'Yeah, but let's not forget we're still working things out.' Nick gave a crooked grin.

'I know. And I'm not saying anything in particular might be wrong. It's just that I...'

Nick crossed his arms. 'Look, as far as I can see, he's doing fine. He has a nice manner with the kids. They like him. The parents like him.' He paused for a beat. 'Sure, it was a bit weird when he just took off out of the library that day.'

'Yeah, right?'

'But that doesn't really tell us anything. For all we know, he had diarrhoea and had to leave in a hurry. Which also accounts for why he didn't offer an explanation. I mean, would you?' He grinned like a naughty boy.

'It's not just the PL thing. He strikes me generally as being a bit weird. Even this morning, get this: he climbs out of this car and starts doing stretches in the car park. While I was standing there talking to him.'

Nick shrugged.

'I know, I know. There's nothing definite. It's just...'

'You reckon we need to keep an eye on him.'

'That's it.'

'We can do that. But for now, I have no real concerns. He gives off a good vibe. I've seen how he relates to the children, and there's nothing strange about that. That's the most important part of being a teacher, if you ask me.'

'There's a lot more to it.'

'I know. Still...'

Felicity stood, and repeated the stretch she'd seen Alex perform in the car park. 'Maybe he's on to something here.'

'What have you got on today?'

She hoisted the box onto her hip. 'Just finalising the application for the literacy coach. It's due on Friday.'

'Great. Send it through so I can have a look when you're done.'

In the corridor, the queue of parents had almost dissipated. Only two remained. The last was Zara Catumini who, on a good day, was likely to spit in your face. Noticing the sheen on Glenys's forehead, Felicity decided she'd put her box down in her office and hang around in case reinforcements were needed.

\* \* \*

The bell rang. Kids tumbled in the class in their usual knockabout way. For the first five minutes the bag room was like an overcrowded game of Twister. Backpacks were hooked and unhooked, fell down, were picked up again; and all in the midst of a constant stream of jabbering. Alex picked up snippets here and there. Football was a hot topic, and in particular, footy cards. Amir was already stuffing some cards down the back of his pants. Alex noted Jake was onto it, shoving his hand deep into Amir's pants in a fit of proactive restorative justice. Nothing to do with football ever got past Jake.

Soon the kids were sitting on the mat, some nudging and niggling each other, others looking at Alex with eyes wide and backs straight as iron rods.

'Good morning everyone,' Alex said.

'Good moorning, Alex,' the class chorused.

Alex consulted his literacy planning on the board. Four activity groups were listed, with corresponding learning intentions. On the other side of the board, the entire week's literacy learning was on display. He'd long wondered about the wisdom of this. He tried to see it from a child's point of view, and all he could surmise was that revealing in advance every single thing you were going to do all through the week would be a total anti-climax. A bit like spoiling the ending to a good page-turner.

But it was pretty clear everyone in the junior school team did it this way. The point had been smashed home numerous times in every single, tedious literacy PL. And so he had to keep reminding himself to stop questioning everything, and just do it the way everyone else did it.

In the far corner, paints, easels, plasticine and tubs containing sequins, feathers, Styrofoam balls and coloured icy pole sticks stood, were stacked far too neatly to suggest regular use. Alex groaned inwardly, making a mental note to find time to use the stuff at some point this week.

After he'd finished the routine with the instructional text for that morning, he said, 'Good work with the questions about recycling waste. Now just check the board and go to your learning groups, please.'

The kids headed off to their tables. Alex smiled as he stood and watched them organise themselves. It was like watching an ant colony. Kids loved order, he thought, even the most chaotic among them.

‘Alex?’

He looked down. Bridie stood in front of him, her red curls tumbling over her forehead so he could hardly see her eyes. Her school fleece was dotted with food stains.

‘Hey, Bridie. Everything okay?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ She smiled, revealing gaps where both her baby front teeth once were. ‘Can we do *Reading in The Park* today?’

Alex lifted Bridie’s curls to one side of her forehead so he could see her eyes. She blinked her thick lashes several times as she looked up at him.

*Reading in The Park* was something he’d come up with at random one day. They had half an hour to spare at the end of the day, and Alex had made an executive decision not to follow up on unfinished work. With a mind to do something different, he’d glanced out to the corner of the oval he’d dubbed The Park. The rest of the oval was a barren wasteland; the grass not more than dried up yellow stubble for most of the year. But years earlier, someone had obviously had the foresight to plant up a thicket of eucalyptus trees in the furthest corner. The shrubs flowered every now and then. Armed with two plastic tubs; one containing the class supply of art smocks, the other filled with picture books, they made their way down, Alex shushing the kids’ squeals of delight lest they be discovered and sent back.

The kids often talked about that afternoon. He’d vowed they’d do it again. It was nice. Kids sitting quietly on art smocks, reading their favourite books, swapping what they’d brought, or taking turns reading to each other while leaves rustled gently and birds chirped overhead. It was only when the chatter of parents entering the yard came floating their way that Alex realised bell time was upon them, and so he promptly asked the kids to pack up so they could return to class.

Hearing Bridie’s request now, he realised they hadn’t been back since that day. There just hadn’t been any time.

'It was a long time ago we did that, wasn't it?'

Bridie nodded. 'Will and Dylan go there with their friends after school to smoke. But I told them they had to pick up their butts.'

'Right. And Will and Dylan are...?'

'My brothers,' Bridie said proudly.

Alex had noticed Bridie trotting off eagerly towards one of two lanky, awkward-looking teenagers in high school uniform at pick-up time; her little legs working at full speed under the weight of her enormous backpack. They usually hung back at the edge of the school periphery, away from the gaggle of school mums clustered around the classroom.

'You're right, we should do *Reading in The Park* again soon.'

'Can we do it now?'

Alex looked around the room. Most of the kids were on task, and he'd put a lot of work into preparing each literacy activity. The tables were all set up, word cards were out, picture books were arranged neatly in the book corner, and the contents of the kids' own book boxes seemed also to be in use. Madeleine had lent Alex some of her own picture books with strict instructions they were not to be shared around the classroom. She was precious about her classroom resources, so Alex had told the kids they were to take care, and what she didn't know... Now he could see Jake thumbing through *Kick with my Left Foot* with the same enthusiasm he reserved for his footy cards, and even Manny seemed absorbed in *Meet Douglas Mawson*, though Alex suspected he was just looking at the pictures.

It seemed a shame to upend the session for a quick and fairly lightweight session of reading on the oval. The morning session was considered prime learning time.

What was going on in the classroom was structured learning that had taken effort on his part and would pay dividends in terms of learning outcomes. In comparison, going outside to read under the trees seemed a bludge. He glanced out of the window. Autumn sunshine had all but dried the last remnants of dew on the grass. High up, the sky was the colour of a faded sapphire. Every edge and surface appeared crisp and new, as though washed clean by

overnight rain. A brisk southerly would keep at bay the smog from the freeway for several hours yet.

'Maybe this afternoon.'

'Please!' said Bridie.

'We'll see. Come on, now. Which group are you in?'

Bridie pointed to a table near the front of the room, where the students were cutting and pasting words into gaps in sentences.

'Come on, then. Off you go.'

Bridie headed off, her shoulders slumped. She reached her group and sat, propping her head with her hands. Her curls tumbled over her eyes once more.

Alex glanced towards The Park. It was a balmy day that would hold its warmth until the late afternoon. Surely he'd find time for a bit of *Reading in The Park* before the day was done.

\* \* \*

That night Alex couldn't get to sleep.

It bothered him that he hadn't managed to get the kids out to the oval to sit under the trees. The hollow promise to do it *soon* bothered him even more.

He padded into the living room, where he opened his laptop and started a new blog. They were coming out of him at a prodigious pace now. Generally, he did not know what he would blog about until his fingers were on the keys, or until he'd written a few sentences. And then all sorts of questions would flow out to the ether, to an audience he didn't wish to know.

It did not matter to Alex if nobody read his musings. He welcomed the empty space, the silence. Sometimes his blogs were written with such frustration and verve that he was glad he was shouting into nothingness. The anonymity gave him courage. No question was too stupid or embarrassing. For now, Alex wrote for himself. He wrote to nut things out. He wrote to understand. He did not know if he would find answers, but something felt right. He was in some way he could not yet define, moving forward.

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## **WHERE DOES TIME GO?**

*Posted March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Where the hell does time go? Where does it hide, dissolve, vaporise, vanish, disappear, abscond, escape, flee, run, disperse and quite soul-breakingly cease to be?

Why are there so many constraints, regulations, obligations, rules, guidelines, protocols, procedures, systems, policies, directives, and mind-fuck parameters to keep to?

This is the stuff that stops the beauty and the wonder in teaching. It sure as hell takes everything away from learning. You can see it in the kids' eyes some lessons. If only you could set their passions on fire, instead of dousing them until there is not even the hint of a spark left.

And why do we actually do this to our students? What are we really trying to achieve? Do we think hammering them in these tightly prescribed sessions will really make them learn more? Will it make them better people? Will it make the world a better place? Really? Or will it just tick the boxes, satisfy principals and small-minded politicians that we teachers are all doing our jobs?

Today I had a chance to make a difference. There was a small opening for me. I could have snuck through it, taking my class with me, and I could have created a special moment. Something on which I and the kids could build. But did I do that? Of course not. Because like the weasely coward that I am, I took the easy path, and kept on with the rules and edicts that are passed down to me, and which I mindlessly follow day after day after fucking day.

Will the kids remember what we did today in that session instead of doing Reading in The Park? Not a chance. Would they have remembered sitting in the shade of the trees, listening to stories, and reading to themselves or to each other. I think there was a good chance of that.

It's a moot point. Because I did not go out there, and I did not give the students that gift today. Shame on me.

Alex read the piece over before posting it. It was a rant, to be sure. A tad snivelling and self-indulgent, but hey, nobody would guess the identity of the author or give a flying fuck about the tone.

If he wanted the blog to help him find an answer, then he had to be prepared to put his voice out there the way it echoed in his head. Defeated and angry was how he felt. What the hell could be wrong with keeping it real out there?

## Chapter 5 – Dreams and imaginings

Next morning, Vivian dropped off the literacy assessment rubrics they'd discussed at their previous team meeting. She gave Alex an update on the changes she'd made, and promptly disappeared at a run. Did the woman not know how to walk?

Alex looked at the grid. Each row began with a learning statement that was lifted, verbatim, from the government's education department webpage. Statements that Alex was somehow meant to put into layman's terms. How else were parents, many of whom did not have a high level of education or were not fluent speakers of English, to make any sense of a learning statement like: *Understand how to use digraphs, long vowels, blends and silent letters to spell words, and use morphemes and syllabification to break up simple words and use visual memory to write irregular words?*

For fuck's sake, he had to look up some of those terms himself so he didn't make a complete dick of himself. Vivian had pressed upon him and Gus the importance of beginning lessons with learning intention statements, but Alex did wonder how much sense the kids themselves were making of such statements, recited each day with the repetition and predictability of a religious ritual. Did they really understand the terminology or were they just parroting what he'd been teaching them? Alex scratched his head. It all seemed like such a mind-numbing waste of time.

And now Amir was shoving Amber against the wall, while he messed up the books in her reading box.

‘Amir, stop that,’ Alex yelled. Everyone stopped talking to watch the unfolding drama.

Amber started to cry. ‘He tore my book!’ She buried her face in her little hands. Amir dropped the book and looked blankly at Alex.

‘Come here now, Amir,’ Alex said, and reached for an iPad. ‘Sit.’

Alex consoled Amber, fixing the tear with sticky tape. Next, he’d think up something for Amir to do away from the other kids. Plus, he had to figure out how to handle the damn assessment sheet. This kind of distraction reminded him of the organisational nightmare of the English online interview, which had to be done with each child at the start of the year. The teacher aides in the school were pooled for this ordeal, helping to supervise kids in the junior classes while their teachers sat for forty minutes, one-to-one with each child as the assessment was completed. The idea of being on a continuous assessment treadmill made his head spin.

What was the point of it all?

While the treadmill ate up their weeks and months, the arts materials in the corner continued to gather dust. Alex had yet to figure out how to squeeze some art time into the week. And what of music? There were several containers of percussion instruments tucked away under the students’ work tubs, all but forgotten except for when an accidental bumping brought them to life.

If the primary curriculum were a government, it would have been a racist, capitalist one, Alex thought. Some areas, English and Maths, despite being no more essential than others, devoured all the resources, leaving little for the untouchables of the curriculum: arts and physical education. It was a contentious issue, sure, but Alex couldn’t help but reminisce about his own childhood. The joy of surrendering to the flow of an art activity. He hadn’t experienced a particularly arty education as a kid, nor had he become a dedicated lover of the arts. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d walked into a gallery. And yet he knew deep in his heart what these kids needed. They needed *that* kind of play, and they needed the joy it brought. The joy Alex remembered from his own childhood. He did not remember the maths or the writing lessons, despite being glad he’d been good at both. What he

remembered was the joy of getting lost in playful wandering with a paintbrush, or a crayon. It was as simple as needing to breathe. It was as simple as the need for oxygen.

What these kids did *not* need was to be part of a school system that could not designate a decent chunk of time to artful play, or where they could become lost in their own thoughts. What these kids *did* need was to be part of a school system that valued the creation of something beautiful, something from which they took meaning without any semblance whatsoever of a word or a number.

Alex drew a breath and put aside the evaluation grid for another day. It was only April, and reports didn't have to be done until the end of June.

He addressed the class. 'Right, everyone. Put away your literacy books.' Kids threw wayward glances at each other before complying.

'Now come and sit down again. I'm going to change our morning groups because I've had an idea.' He erased the literacy tasks that were listed on the board and in their place, wrote:

- Painting
- Plasticine
- Collage
- Pastel drawing

The lesson rolled right off Alex's cuff. It was everything they say about bad lessons: ad hoc, disorganised, and chaotic. The bell went before anyone had a chance to pack up. Even with art smocks on, kids had not escaped smears of paint or glue in their hair, on hands, cheeks and the hems of dresses or track pants.

With works still drying on easels and on every spare surface, the room looked like it had been trampled by Elmer, the harlequin elephant.

Alex smiled as the kids spilled into the playground. Every small face was alive with happiness; toothy grins, eyes crinkled at the corners and cheeks aglow.

\* \* \*

Still euphoric after the art lesson, Alex took a while to process the conversations swirling around the staffroom that recess.

‘He’s making a movie in Melbourne.’

‘It’s going to be around June, give or take a month.’

‘Will that woman come too?’

‘Are we going to be on TV?’

Alex asked Gus what was going on.

‘Rumour at large that the movie star’s gonna visit the school.’

Ten minutes later, Nick stood before them, his hands clasped together and shoulders squared. A hush descended.

‘As you all know, Conor Reynolds was once a teacher at this school. And as you’re also aware, Mr Reynolds will be shooting his next film right here in Melbourne. I can confirm that he has been invited to visit Beauvista.’

People began to murmur excitedly. Alex met Felicity’s unblinking gaze for an instant before she looked away. She was the only person in the room who looked utterly unmoved. Nick waved his hands in the air to regain everybody’s attention.

‘You might be interested to know why I have invited Mr Reynolds to visit his old workplace.’ Nick paused. Alex could hear the ticking of the clock above the sink. ‘The reason is that I was approached by one of our students, Yasemin Elhouli, in Aloysius’s class.’

The Grade Six teachers, Aloysius and Daisy, exchanged knowing smiles.

‘Apparently, she is quite the organiser and has large a following on Twitter. Don’t ask me to comment on what *a large following* actually means, but she tells me that there are many students from nearby schools, and others across the western side of Melbourne that have joined her Conor Reynolds fan club. We’ve placed a request with Mr Reynolds’ publicist, and are at this stage awaiting a response.’

The chatter grew loud once more.

‘Again, I stress,’ Nick bellowed over the din, ‘It’s of the utmost importance that we keep this confidential until we have a response from Mr Reynolds’

people. Please ensure this news does not get through to the students. If Mr Reynolds declines the invitation, we may have a riot on our hands.'

The bell rang. As Alex got up, he noticed the colour of Felicity's face resembled the St Margaret sky on a smoggy day.

\* \* \*

The lines of cocaine were perfectly straight on the mirrored surface before him. Just the way he liked it. Conor tidied up each side with the razor blade one more time before rolling a fifty dollar bill, plugging up one nostril and neatly snorting the first line. He repeated the procedure on the other side.

He threw himself back against the cushions and admired the ocean view beyond the edge of his infinity pool as he waited for the stuff to kick in.

'Baby, you want me to move the shade for you?' he heard Kym say from what sounded like miles away. 'You look a little burnt.'

'Nah, I need to tan up for my next role. Starts shooting...'

And then he remembered Australia.

He hadn't been back since his first major role in the US. As his star rose, Melbourne had faded into a deep and profound shadow. Everything he'd found away from Australia – both in the US and Europe – seemed so much bigger and better. As soon as his fame began to take hold in the US and he realised he wouldn't have to return home, he'd understood for the first time why others before him hadn't given the land down under a backward glance. Barry Humphries, Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman; they were all proof that you couldn't build an international career from the antipodes.

As for what he once did for a crust in the real world, it was so remote it could well have all been a dream. The classroom, in all its ordinariness, held a confronting, savage kind of realism. It was as far as anyone could possibly imagine to the shifting, make-believe world he now inhabited.

He closed his eyes and luxuriated in the warmth of the sun on his chest as he succumbed to a numbing whirlpool.

After dozing for he knew not how long, he opened his eyes a crack, feeling oddly disoriented. A dull ache hammered his temples. He looked about him. Was he in Malibu or the Hamptons? The two homes had remarkably similar sun decks, but the low view to the ocean before him told him he was in Amagansett, East Hampton, not at Cliffside Drive.

A hand on his bare chest. Kym's voice. 'Meeting the girls down at Sango's for lunch.'

Before he had a chance to reply, he heard his iPhone ringing.

'Here, I made you a drink.' Kym guided his hand to a tall glass, dark orange at the very bottom, graduating to the colour of weak tea at the rim edge. She stirred it a little with a long swizzle stick, the ice cubes tinkling against the edge. 'Tequila Sunrise. Very 1980s. Just like you, and just the way you like it.' She put the phone in his other hand, her eyes shielded behind large sunglasses.

Conor squinted at the display. Vince, his publicist. He groaned, before he answered the call. 'See ya, babe,' he called after Kym.

'Now I warn you, sweet talking will get you nowhere,' Vince said.

'Not talking to you, obviously.'

'Charisse not around?'

'Don't want to discuss it.' Conor's head hurt. Fuck Vince for reminding him of the complications in his life. He knew he should ring Charisse to make amends, to talk, to... well, anything would be better than this not-knowing. Damn these bloody obligations.

'Listen, mate, I just rang to check off a few engagements that have been requested while you're filming down under. I've got one from the Virgin Megastore in South Yarra, one from—'

'Just...'

Conor winced as the pain in his temples intensified. 'Fuck, mate, just make a selection. Not more than one appearance on any of my free days, okay? And no weekends.'

'You're sure? No complaints later...'

'No complaints. You know what works best. I trust you, man.'

'Okay. Easy. Done. See you Friday?'

'Friday...?'

'LA. Meeting with Jonas Kritz to discuss the next script.'

Conor shook his head. What day was it today? Another flight to the other side of the country. God only knew how many other trips backwards and forwards before he was off to Melbourne in a couple of weeks. He had to find a bit of space for himself soon, or he'd... 'Okay, sure.'

He inhaled deeply, willing the calm emanating from the vast expanse of ocean before him to somehow tidy up the mess inside of him. 'Vince, I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea if I had some time off before starting the next project?'

He waited for Vince to reply, but heard nothing. He looked at the screen. The line was dead.

## Chapter 6 – Why teach?

Friday afternoon, Alex went for a run along the beach. The sun was still high in the sky; a strong breeze made white caps on the waves. In the water, a horde of wind surfers were making the most of the conditions, flipping their boards above the water. On the sand, a sign advertised wind surfing lessons, and several instructors were kitting up their students. One was already wading into the water with his young charge, demonstrating how to hop onto the board and paddle out.

Alex slowed to a walk as he watched the pair. He stopped for a few minutes, mesmerised by the easy rapport between the two; the way the boy's eager participation made the teaching look so easy. The sound of laughter skimmed the water. A little down the beach, a group of women sat with sketch books perched on their knees. Alex passed them as they drew various details of the landscape, at times smudging the lines of charcoal with their fingers. Further along, a couple posed together, smiling as the woman took a selfie. They walked towards the water, taking turns to snap each other.

Slowly, Alex became aware a knot had formed in his stomach. At first, the reason eluded him. He was out, doing something healthy and relaxing. He had no tight schedule or timelines to keep to. This afternoon he was his own man. So why was he feeling this way? He turned back to glance at the instructor and the boy once more. Then at the women, and the couple, now sitting on the sand, arms entwined.

Here was joy. Manifested in many ways. Easy to reach. It was in teaching and learning, in surrendering to the flow of art, and in togetherness. Alex knew these joys, and yet he felt strangely empty, like an outsider, as he watched these people.

Teaching was something Alex chose without much deliberation. He didn't overthink it because from the outside, the idea of teaching felt as obvious and natural as a reflex. But now he was on the inside, teaching felt all wrong. Maybe his parents had been right all along.

He'd never forget the looks on their faces when he announced he would study education. Their ashen faces spoke of a mild distaste. In his family, where a strong tradition of entrepreneurship dominated, teaching was seen as well-meaning, but underachieving. Alex remembered the conversation that day, his parents discussing the news as though he were no longer present in the room.

'They need to raise tertiary entry scores for teaching,' his mother said. Alex's ATAR (a numerical rank that defined the courses that he could, or could not enter), was much higher than the cut-off score for teaching. The way she kept referring to what other courses he could get into, Alex got a sense she viewed his score as a currency, which once spent on a too-affordable course, would leave him with loads of spare change he could do nothing with. His mother made it sound like an embarrassing waste. If he'd tried to get into commerce, or science, or arts, it would have seemed to her to be better value for money.

At least she'd made an effort to mask her disappointment, skirting around the topic somewhat delicately. 'Teachers used to be respected...'

His father wasn't quite so subtle. 'Teachers respected? Bullshit! Maybe once upon a time, when nobody except the very rich had the opportunity to study. Nowadays everyone goes to university, and those who can, pick something better. Apart from having to spend your life wiping rug rats' noses, it pays a pittance.'

He'd caught his mother's eyes, then. Registering his discomfort, she brightened. 'It's not all about money and prestige, Trevor. It's about making a contribution, helping people. Isn't that right, Alex?'

Trevor wasn't about to let Alex get a word in.

'Helping people isn't what this generation aspire to. Life is a lot more expensive nowadays. No hope of buying a house without decent income. I've built a solid real estate chain from the bottom rung of rentals clerk. I didn't need a degree to get me there. You of all people, should know this, Caroline. Unlike lots of women, you've enjoyed the luxury of not having to go out and work.'

His mother had stiffened at the words. 'I've done my fair share of work.'

Eighteen year old Alex, watching with mute disdain, could see his mother's foot tapping away nervously.

Now running along St Margaret beach, he stopped and bent double to catch his breath.

The memory was from so long ago, yet so vivid. At the time, the conversation hadn't made much sense. Now he understood the depth of his parents' disappointment.

He used the hem of his T-shirt to wipe his face. Caught up in his thoughts, he'd run to the end of the beach – a good six kilometres. It would take him at least another forty minutes to get back. The thought of Madeleine, waiting and hungry, sat heavily on his mind. His legs were like jelly. Hovering above the horizon, the sun was large and orange and about to dip into the sea.

\* \* \*

When he pulled up outside his unit, he saw Madeleine's car. Inside, she was waiting, her face like a darkened sky.

'I'm sorry I'm late.'

He was about to apologise, tell her he'd lost track of time, perhaps distract her with the story about the people on the beach and make her laugh at the superficiality of his parents, when she burst into tears. After she'd spent a minute soaking the front of his T-shirt, she sniffled and spoke. 'I had a horrible experience today.'

Alex's chest tightened. 'What is it? Who...?' An image of Madeleine being assaulted flashed into his mind. Federation Primary School was a small, period

style school in a posh suburb not far from St Margaret. There was no car park on site, and teachers found spots along the nearby streets. Madeleine liked to leave her car on the other side of a small, lush park. It gave her the feeling she worked in a country town, she once remarked to him. Lately, there had been some people sleeping rough in the park, and the principal had been onto the local council to move them on. Alex imagined a harrowing scenario, Madeleine terrorised in the dark, away from the safety of the street.

'They've sent the literacy coach into my room,' Madeleine sobbed.

Alex blinked, relieved.

'The literacy coach. She came into my room and watched me teach today.'

'...and?'

'It was horrible. She made me feel awful, picking on everything I did.'

'What, in front of the kids?'

'Some, yes, and then she spoke to me afterwards. As if I didn't feel bad enough.'

Alex let out a slow breath. 'Is that all? Jesus, I thought something really bad had happened.'

'What do you mean?' Madeleine's face was thunderous now, her eyebrows bisected by a deep crease. 'You don't care, do you?'

Alex tried not to laugh. 'I do care, I do. It's just that when I saw you like this, I thought something much worse happened.'

Madeleine sobbed, her nose streaming. She took a tissue from her sleeve and wiped her nose. 'Like what?'

'Like someone attacked you or something... You looked so upset, I thought we might have to call the cops.' A chuckle escaped his lips. He tried to clamp his mouth shut, but that just made it worse. Then he let out a long laugh.

'Well, thanks for being happy I wasn't physically assaulted,' Madeleine said. 'But I kind of was assaulted, emotionally.'

Alex was laughing too much to be able to speak. When he regained his composure. 'You'll live. Now, would you like a glass of wine while you tell me all about it?'

Madeleine sniffed. 'Yes.' Her lips curled ever so slightly at the corners.

‘Okay, then. One glass of Pinot Grigio coming up for you. And while you tell me about the big, bad literacy coach, we can talk about dinner.’

In the kitchen, rustling around looking for the wine bottle, Alex shook his head. He was sure teaching had never been this ridiculous when he was a student. He couldn’t remember anyone coming in to monitor lessons or berate teachers on how they taught. He imagined it had been a bit of a freestyle sport in those days. But maybe that was only a childish and unrealistic perception. Things were always different from the other side.

Alex opened a beer and brought Madeleine’s wine to the living room. He sat with his arm around her while she gave him a blow-by-blow description of the coaching episode. It was hard to choose between amusement or alarm. Certainly it didn’t warrant Madeleine’s hysteria, but still he wondered if it might not be a complete overreaction. Felicity said there might be a literacy coach coming their way. He’d walked out of the last opportunity to learn about the latest literacy stuff, and the times before he’d zoned out. All Alex had as a guide to how literacy should be taught was a loose version of what he’d seen happening in other classrooms at Beauvista and earlier, as a student teacher. He loved reading and writing for what they gave to him, but in literacy classes at uni he’d never paid much attention. They were always so bland, taken by librarian types who killed literacy rather than brought it to life.

One thing was sure. If anyone quizzed him, he’d be dead meat.

\* \* \*

Later in bed, Alex held Madeleine close, reassuring her once more. In his preoccupation, Alex went through the motions of sex rather mechanically. Madeleine didn’t seem to notice his detachment. Afterwards, when he heard her breathing change, he gently extricated himself so he could drift off to sleep. Instead, he tossed and turned, unable to still his restlessness. Finally, he got up and attempted to quell the turmoil through writing.

*Posted March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

I ran today. It didn't give me the usual rush. I was not myself.

On a good day, running clears my head. Everything becomes crystallised. Edges are defined. I can see.

Today, I felt muddled and hazy.

I didn't like it.

There was teaching and learning on the beach, a kid getting taught how to windsurf. There was art, a group of women drawing, and there were people just having fun. I watched them like I was behind a plate glass window. I felt empty, like I wished I had what they had, but didn't. Point is, I do have what they have. I teach. I have ways to express myself. I live near a beach. I have someone to love.

So why does my life seem so distant and different? What is missing? What is wrong?

Take my job. You see, I want to do something to change it for the better, but day-to-day practicalities being what they are, it's hard to act. Days move past in such a blur I hardly have time to gather myself, to think up a plan. Teaching swallows me whole.

Will it get easier with time? The drained, haggard looks on the faces of my older colleagues tell me no. By the end of each day, we we're all in the same shell-shocked stupor.

The kids I teach each day should be a source of joy. Sure, some of them are challenging, but that's the job, isn't it? Except it isn't. There are so many administrative hoops to jump through that students have to take a back seat. Teaching feels

less like something you learn, and more like paint-by-numbers.  
So wrong.

OK, whinge-fest is over for today. Next post will be more upbeat. Promise.

Alex read over the blog. The words made him feel naked. He let the mouse hover over the publish button, wondering if negative rants like this were a fast track to spiralling out of control. In voicing his despair, was he surrendering to it?

Pippa wandered into the living room and nudged his leg with her nose. She whined and settled herself at his feet.

‘Hey, old girl. This will be our secret.’

He sighed and clicked *publish*.

## Chapter 7 – Different worlds

Alex woke first. Daylight was beginning to break, and though usually he would just have turned over and snoozed on, this morning he was hyperaware. He reasoned he wasn't used to Madeleine staying over the entire night. The apartment looked different when she was in residence. If everything in it didn't already have a place, Madeleine would have found one. Her after dinner clean-ups were worthy of a forensic team. Alex wasn't used to waking up in such a tidy house on Saturday morning; the place was virtually unrecognisable. Funny thing was, Madeleine would see it a good thing, not as the intrusion that it was. He could almost hear her saying, *How could anyone not appreciate this? Was he ungrateful? Maybe.* For Madeleine never begrudged him making a mess. It was the way she swooped in and sanitised everything that he couldn't understand. It was hard to relax around someone like that. But for now, while she slept, he would grant himself the luxury to leave his possessions where they fell.

He set to his writing, working quietly, assiduously. The blog posted, he rose and began to make coffee. He'd hardly rinsed the coffee pot when Madeleine appeared from behind, her arms encircling him.

'Morning,' he said, turning.

'Mmm... morning,' Madeleine said, eyes half closed and a satisfied smile on her lips.

'Would you like breakfast in bed?'

She kissed him. 'You spoil me.'

Ten minutes later, Alex brought breakfast to the bed, where Madeleine was now snuggled, reading the news on her iPad. He balanced the two cups of coffee and two bowls of yoghurt muesli, on top of the doona, using a couple of large picture books as makeshift trays. Madeleine rubbed her foot slowly against his calf as she nibbled. Before long, coffees and muesli were cast aside and the bed became a sensuous tangle of limbs and sheets.

Afterwards, their mood languid, they spooned what remained of the breakfast into each other's mouths.

'Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do this more often?' Madeleine said.

Alex didn't know how to respond. It hadn't occurred to him it wasn't often enough. He searched her eyes for clues.

'There's a nice apartment for sale around the corner.'

'Don't know if I could afford it, and anyway, I like this place.'

'Oh, Alex, it's so crappy. Even you must see that.'

Alex's didn't agree about his apartment, but he did think about having sex more than once or twice a week. Immediately, he regretted the thought. How could he be so shallow? Madeleine was much more than just sex for him. For years, now, she'd been his partner, his life companion. They did pretty much everything together. Suddenly, his mind was filled with images of he and Madeleine in their most familiar tableaux. Watching television side by side on the sofa; walking Pippa by the beach; shopping for groceries on a Saturday; eating out at their favourite haunts. It was a bit of an ingrained routine. Were they falling into a rut? *Predictable* wasn't a quality of which he was overly fond. Thinking it over, lately they were a bit like an old married couple, reserving sex for the weekend. More nights together would help. Still, he had reservations.

Her fingers played with the doona seam. 'I mean, we're both working; it would be a good investment.'

The easy mood of their conversation vanished, and Alex felt like he was in an oral exam facing a diabolical grilling.

Madeleine's expression was expectant, pleading. Her rosy lips were set in a questioning pout that made Alex want to kiss her and forget about the conversation. That would be one way to silence her. But the furrowing of her

brow hinted that she wouldn't be easily put off. They had good times together. Madeleine was as earnest as they came. And organised. Their lives would run with the precision of a Swiss watch.

But a mortgage needed repayments. Would the pressure of having to keep a steady flow of paycheques smother him? He needn't worry; Madeleine was the steady one. She loved teaching, and he knew she would cling to the security of that job. If he left teaching, there would be other work. They would be okay, and in the short term, one full time salary would keep the finances bubbling along.

He looked into Madeleine's long-lashed eyes and momentarily forgot his anxiety. When he was with her, he felt good. Wasn't that the most important thing? He reached out to touch her face. Her cheeks glowed, and her hair was still mussed from the tangle and heat.

'So, what do you think?' she said, lowering her gaze. It was as though she could hardly stand to look at him while he decided.

He could think of worse ways to spend his life.

'We could look at a few places,' he said. In an instant, Madeleine threw herself at him, covering his face with kisses, her arms a vice around his neck.

Alex felt suffocated. It was all happening too soon. His future life flashed before his eyes. Joint bank accounts, mortgage repayments, frilly bedcovers, girly things all over his bathroom, and never being able to do his own thing just for the hell of it. Short of going back on his word, he needed some space to let the newness sink in. He grabbed at the first excuse that came into his mind.

He gently prised Madeleine's hands away. He kissed her, then swung his legs out of bed. 'Did I tell you I was planning to help out with Felicity's ReWARD program this morning?'

\* \* \*

The clock read twenty minutes to nine. Jess let out a long breath, realising how tense her shoulders were. 'Aren't we going to be late?'

‘Gone are the days of fretting about being punctual for everything,’ Aunt Flick said, sweeping her hand in front of her as though she were shoving aside something cumbersome and useless. ‘We will get there, and there will be time to spare. The whole point of the program is not to make it feel like a fucking time-keeping exercise. That’s the last thing these kids need.’ Flick smiled and took another bite of the chocolate croissant. ‘It’s Saturday morning. Relax, Jess.’ She held out the plate to her niece. ‘Want another?’

Jess shook her head. ‘Three were quite enough, thanks.’

‘Okay, then, I’ll just clear up...’

They were just words, Jess told herself. Just words. Yet those very words were so soothing. She had no idea how her aunt could do *reassuring* so well. Jess watched her in awe as she moved around the kitchen like a cleaning machine. No doubt about it, Aunt Flick was a rock. The next moment she was in the hallway, taking her coat from the hallstand. She flashed a gentle smile. ‘Come on, then, love. Don’t want to be late.’

‘Coming.’

As Aunt Flick pulled away from the curb, she turned on the radio. The Bee Gees whined in harmony about tragedy. Jess let out an audible sigh, and began doing her breathing exercises. Breath in. Hold. Breathe out. Slowly. Breathe in again...

Aunt Flick’s music was not helping her to concentrate. For some reason, oldies were under the impression that playing depressing, dated music could somehow change one’s mood. She took out her iPhone and pushed the plugs firmly into her ears. Shuffling down in the seat with scowl in place, Jess selected something to block out the oozy schmaltz coming from the radio. Then she resumed her breathing drill.

\* \* \*

Felicity welcomed the interlude. Car time was always planning time. Without needing to converse with Jess, she could turn her thoughts to the morning’s session.

The drive between Federation and St Margaret was only twenty or so minutes, but the two suburbs were worlds apart. In real estate terms, Felicity's street was location with a capital L. House prices in Federation were continually on an upward trend, and had been for decades. Every now and then, when checking real estate prices in the local paper or when she received the biennial council update to the valuation of the property, she saw that by doing nothing but sitting in a location she virtually lucked upon, her value had gone up another hundred grand.

In general, Felicity tended to be discreet about her relative privilege, and never more than when immersed in the world of Beauvista Primary. On the weekend, she could escape to any number of urban, middle-class haunts with her friends, sampling antipasti and fine wines, and think nothing of spending a hundred dollars in an afternoon. She could browse new titles in trendy little bookshops that professed to have some kind of a social conscience, and trial boutique eateries featured in the Epicure section of *The Age*. But during the week, working in St Margaret was a pressing reminder of how the other half lived.

Ten minutes on, and they were driving into the epicentre of the shabbiest area of St Margaret. Except for the somewhat more salubrious strip flanking the beach, the majority of the suburb was a symbol of forlorn hope.

Jess must have shared her thoughts, coming out of her silence to say, 'What's it like teaching here, Aunt Flick? It looks kind of depressing. Are the kids difficult?'

'It's not easy, Jess, but it's very rewarding.'

'Is that how you came up with the name of your program?'

'Not really, but it fits.'

Jess was quiet for a while longer. She turned her head this way and that as Felicity turned off Vicars Street into Magnolia Boulevard. As the car pulled up in the school car park, Jess sat up, yanking the remaining plug out of her ear.

Felicity put her hand on her niece's arm. 'Shall we go in?'

'I don't know...' Jess said. Then, in a quiet voice, 'Teaching isn't what I thought it would be.'

Felicity looked across the oval to her school. The place she'd spent that last twenty years, watching as each new wave of migration brought a different flavour to the place, colouring the experience of both teachers and students and changing her forever.

'When you're a passenger enjoying the view, or even helping a bit to navigate, it's not the same as being the one steering the course. It's easy to get lost.' She slid her hand down to Jess's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Feeling lost?'

Jess's chin wobbled ever so slightly. 'I'm okay. I'm just not sure how long I can keep on doing it, even though I thought I'd be at it my entire life like you.'

'Try to enjoy the ride, Jess. Before you know it, you *will* be my age.'

Jess straightened, packing up her iPod into a silk purse inside her bag. She peered into the mirror under the sun flap. Not to fix her make up, since Jess rarely wore any, or to smooth her hair, but, Felicity thought, perhaps just to check she was still there. She became still, the anxiety evaporating as she smiled more assuredly. 'Okay, I'm ready.'

They walked in stoic silence into the school, past the ceramic mural near the front entrance. Hundreds of tiny ceramic faces stared back at them; a static manifesto to the arts' importance at Beauvista. Felicity placed a hand on Jess's shoulder, hoping to melt some of the ice.

\* \* \*

Madeleine had kissed him so many times that morning that Alex looked upon the ReWARd program as an opportunity to draw breath. When Madeleine announced she wanted to come along, he held up a hand. 'It's a no-kissing zone.'

'I know that, silly. From now on, we'll be spending so much more time together that I won't have to stock up on kisses the few times I see you.'

Alex smiled weakly. He marked the moment with a mental asterisk.

When they arrived, Felicity was nowhere to be seen, but there were at least five young volunteers in the hall, each working with a different group. A

small sound system in the corner of the hall piped instrumental guitar music into the space.

Alex counted about fifty kids. As he and Madeleine made their way around to the different groups, several more students arrived, some brought by parents, others on their own. One side of the hall was devoted to visual art, with groups doing clay models, collage, and papier mâché.

At the other end, the younger kids were knee-deep in dress-ups. A large cardboard box was upended, with garments of all kinds: suit jackets, lab coats, sequined gowns and gypsy-style, flowing garments strewn on the floor. Kids were picking through the garments as they pieced together outfits, parading in front of the mirror before rejecting or amending their selections. There was a group unpacking percussion instruments from a locked cabinet. The young volunteer supervised as kids piled glockenspiels, maracas, castanets and tambourines into plastic tubs.

‘Right, everyone,’ she said. ‘We’re going to carry these tubs into the open space between rooms eleven and twelve. Can I have some help?’ Three kids stepped forward. The volunteer looked up and saw Alex watching. She smiled. ‘Are you here to help?’

‘It’s my first day, so not sure what Felicity wants me to do.’ He picked up a maraca and shook it. ‘Where did all this come from?’

The young woman laughed. ‘It was all living under a cloak of dust in the storeroom at the back of the office. There’s ukuleles and recorders as well.’

Alex wondered why he never saw these resources used in the day-to-day running of the school. Had Felicity purchased them to use exclusively in her program? As the group left with their instruments, Felicity appeared at the door in the company of a small, young woman he didn’t know. Immediately, he noticed Madeleine striding across the room to greet her, and soon the two were chatting animatedly. Madeleine looked for Alex, waving at him to join them.

‘Alex, this is Jess. She works at my school.’

Alex shook Jess’s hand. It was small and fine-boned, but the grip was surprisingly firm. Jess looked too young to be a graduate, already running a class of her own. Her skin was smooth and translucent. The delicate features

reminded Alex of an exquisite young deer; smooth brown hair and dark eyes he found captivatingly intense.

‘Are you another of Felicity’s recruits, Jess?’

‘You could say that,’ Jess said.

Felicity had been standing to one side, listening, and now joined them. ‘Jess is my niece, Alex.’ She turned to him. ‘I didn’t know your girlfriend worked at Federation.’

Alex nodded, colour warming his face. ‘Small world.’

‘But very different, here, if we are to compare ourselves to Federation, that is. I thought Jess should get a look beyond the confines of her own, finite realm.’

Alex was at a loss for words. Felicity had that effect on him. To mask his awkwardness, he scanned the room. At nearby tables, he spotted Bridie and Amir. Bridie smiled, jiggling about in her seat as Alex returned the smile. On the next table, Amir was drawing a picture with pastels, switching from colour to colour, and not bothering to put the sticks back in the box as he went.

Jess and Madeleine began to talk about work, and so Alex excused himself.

He approached the two tables. Amir’s drawing was a bit of a mess, but it was clearly recognisable as some kind of flying contraption. There wasn’t much space left on the sheet, so he guessed Amir was just about done. Suddenly, Amir scribbled vigorously across the page, obliterating the image with thick, black strokes. Alex watched in silence for a few seconds, curious as to what Amir would do next.

Amir looked up, jaw tense, his face a portrait of fury.

‘Mate, I was about to ask if I could hang that picture in the reading corner,’ Alex said. Then, trying to diffuse the situation, he turned on his heels to face Bridie. ‘What are you working on?’

Before she had a chance to answer, Amir swept his arm across the table, flinging the ruined sheet and all the pastels into the air. He then stood, knocking over his chair, and pushed Bridie in the middle of the back with such force that her head landed in the tub of Clag in front of her.

And then Amir bolted towards the open doorway. The volunteer in charge of the drawing group went after him. The kids sitting nearby stared in silent bewilderment. Bridie straightened, and for a moment appeared disoriented, looking around at her stunned witnesses, her chubby hands in the air and her curls dripping with Clag.

Jess rushed to Bridie's aid. Her mouth was frozen in a soundless howl; a momentary volume malfunction before her shriek pierced the air.

## Chapter 8 – A time old recipe

The next time Alex saw Bridie was as she skipped beside him the following Monday before school. She was her usual cheerful self, and so Alex didn't bring up the incident with Amir.

'Can I help you do some stuff in the room?' she said.

Bridie was almost always Alex's earliest arrival. He looked at her eager, smiley face. Always helpful, but often a bit of a lost soul in the playground. Rules were rules, however, and the one about no kids in the classroom before 8.45AM was set in stone at Beauvista.

'Thanks, Bridie, but you know kids aren't allowed in the classrooms before the bell. You can put your bag in if you want, but then you have to go out. I'm busy.'

Bridie's face crumpled. 'Okay.' She dragged her dirty, yellow backpack up the classroom steps. 'Then can I help you at lunchtime?'

She sounded particularly dejected, and Alex almost relented. Who would know or care if he let one kid in? 'I'm sorry, Bridie. Maybe another day.' Vivian had emailed yesterday to change their usual planning meeting to lunchtime. Which meant he would go straight from yard duty to the meeting, with no time for lunch. Again.

Bridie carried her backpack into the bag room, taking her time fussing with the contents before hanging it on a hook.

'Come on, then, Bridie, move it along. I've got stuff to do.'

The thought of telling her she could walk with him while he did his lunchtime yard duty popped into his head, but he held back from making the offer. Bridie really should be playing with her friends at lunchtime, not walking around with a teacher.

With Bridie back outside, he put down his laptop and looked about the room. There was stuff everywhere. The mess would have to be tidied before the day started. He'd forgotten to remind the kids to put their chairs up on the desks last Friday. Now he'd have to tidy the room *and* set up his literacy groups in the time that remained. He went around the room, straightening, tidying, picking up; feeling harried and grumpy. Where had the weekend gone? Between the ReWARd program, scouting for real estate online, and attending open-for-inspections, two days had vaporised.

While returning strewn books to the book corner, Alex's came upon the kids' Conor Reynolds shrine. Dazzling Conor smiles beamed back at him from an assortment of pictures cut out of magazines and Blu-Tacked to the wall. Some of the photos showed Conor without a shirt, and Alex grudgingly admired the star's physique. He pinched the flesh around his belt line. He'd have to make more time to exercise during the week. With the hunt for real estate officially on, weekends would now be a write-off.

He thought about a typical Conor day. Right this minute, the star was probably at an exclusive day spa, getting a massage, or doing something amazing like hot-air ballooning over the Grand Canyon. Certainly not thinking about a week's worth of reading and writing activities. He would not be dealing with Bridie's demands and Amir's tantrums. Nor would he be mopping up spills and crumbs and picking up bloody junk food wrappers like a fucking nanny.

Before moving on, Alex took one photo of Conor off the wall. It was one where the star was reclined on a hammock, one leg slightly bent. The setting was tropical. Conor was pictured wearing a pair of Hawaiian print board shorts and a completely open, white linen shirt, sleeves rolled up to reveal sinewy forearms. The bend in the hammock made the skin on Conor's lean stomach crease neatly like folds of satin.

Alex studied the photo for a while before he doubled it and slid it behind the credit card section of his wallet.

\* \* \*

*That* ringtone again.

Would the man stop phoning? Conor jerked his head up. 'What?'

'Good morning El Capitan,' came back Vince's cheery response.

'What's up now?'

'Just thought I'd let you know what engagements have been confirmed in Melbourne.'

Conor rubbed his temples. He didn't know what to blame for the ache: his sudden movement to grab the phone after a fourth Scotch, or Vince's tedious nattering. 'Can you just email it through?'

After a few beats of silence, Vince said, 'Done. And *do* have a look at it *before* we land in Melbourne.'

'Fine. Gotta go. See you later.'

'See you *tomorrow*, remember?'

Conor clicked off and returned to the sofa, where he fell into a drug-addled stupor.

A few hours later, when he opened Vince's email, the past rushed at him in a headlong blast. In the garble of engagements Vince had booked, only one stood out. *Beauvista*.

That creep, Conor thought. But despite the fog clouding his mind, he knew he couldn't blame it all on Vince. He'd given him *carte blanche*, and Vince, ever the pragmatist, had used it. The worst thing Conor could do in his position was to break an engagement. The negative ripples it generated had the power to fracture his career.

*Beauvista*. It wasn't just a place on a map. That school was ensconced in a long lost corner of his body, mind and heart. That life seemed so far away now that he could hardly believe it was real and that he was the man who once played the role of teacher to all those kids. It wasn't just a job, and it wasn't just

about education. Working in a school meant stepping into family and community. There was no way to do that work without getting involved in ways that were sometimes uncomfortable and irreversible. Those people would never forget you. But he'd tried to forget them. Back then all he wanted was to escape. Ever since, thinking of the school and the people in it, especially one person, was so painful he'd long made it into a careful study of avoidance.

And now this. There was no way around it. He'd have to go back.

\* \* \*

Jess opened her classroom door and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Before her, parents watched their magnificent offspring setting off into the land of education with the reverence befitting a royal pageant.

The men were nearly all wearing suits and ties, except for one dad in expensive running gear. The mothers, many of them stay-at-home mums, were less formal. A few, clad in stylish suits and Italian shoes, would make a dash to their professional jobs once their little darlings were safely ushered into the classroom. The rest, decked out in designer fitness wear, would be off for a skinny latte at any one of Federation's trendy cafes.

Madeleine was at the other end of the quadrangle, ushering in her own class. One of the mothers was yapping in her ear as the kids filed in. Even at a distance, Jess could see Madeleine's brow was creased in earnest consideration of the parent's message. Her arms formed a barricade across her body.

Jess breathed in. She held the breath for a few seconds then let it out slowly. She filled her lungs again.

A parent's voice broke into her thoughts.

'Jess, could I have a word with you after school today?'

'Of course, Valerie,' Jess said. 'What is it about?'

'Obviously there isn't time to talk about it now, hence the need for an appointment. In a nutshell, it's about how to best meet Beatrice's needs.'

‘Sure, I understand.’ Jess knew now was not the time nor place, but she desperately wanted to know more, if only to alleviate the coil of anxiety suddenly tightening around her chest.

‘As you know, Beatrice is a very sensitive child.’

Jess nodded. The last of the students walked past her, and she now called out to the group, ‘Please hang your bags and sit on the mat ready to start.’

‘It’s just that she has been coming home a bit crestfallen lately.’

‘Really?’

Valerie seemed to be warming to her topic, forgetting the time constraint. The volume of the children talking and milling about inside the classroom was rising.

‘She’s a sensitive child, and so she needs to use her creative side. I was wondering if it would be possible to include some creative arts component into the project. I’m well aware it’s a literacy project, and I understand you *are* combining drama. But I do think the other arts are being neglected.’

Essentially, the project involved writing about a favourite book. It was not much more than a collection of book-reviews that would eventually be bound together and put in the classroom library for students to read. If Jess managed to find time to put a picture on the front cover, she’d nominate herself for teacher of the year.

‘Look, I think incorporating arts into our lessons is a fine idea, but we have so little time, we have such a full program with literacy and numeracy, and we have specialist—’

‘I just don’t think one hour a week of art, and one hour a week of music is good enough. We need to nurture these young souls, we need to let them develop and express themselves. There’s a whole lot of research into this, around creativity, around how learning music helps students to do better in maths...’

With one ear on the classroom, Jess responded. ‘Good idea we talk about this after school. Excuse me, but I have to go, now.’

Valerie’s phone rang. She took the call, mouthing a mute dismissal at Jess.

\* \* \*

At recess, Jess saw Madeleine coming out of her room, and waited for her. 'How's your morning been?' she said.

'Hectic. I had a parent tell me before the day even started that she thinks I'm not meeting the needs of her gifted child. I mean, the kid is really smart, but... short of kicking out all the other students, he's just not going to get constant one-on-one time with me.'

Jess shook her head. 'I had a tricky request myself. She's coming back to push the point home after school. Not enough arts in the program, apparently. We have a performing arts teacher *and* a visual art teacher. I don't know where to find room for one more thing in my day.'

'Everything is so tightly packed. You've seen Beauvista. If they want to include the arts, they have to do it on a Saturday.'

'I mean, I get it that the arts matter, but if they are so important, why aren't we doing them first thing each morning?'

Madeleine rolled her eyes. 'Because they're *not* as important, Jess. Kids need to be able to read and write before they can draw. What kind of jobs will they get if they can't write or add up to save themselves?'

Jess didn't agree, but didn't want any tension between her and Madeleine, the closest friend she had at work. Though she felt both passionate and sad about the issue, her rejoinder was a watery, 'I guess...'

\* \* \*

A sudden gust of wind blew open Alex's jacket. He stopped for a moment to do up the zip. The few deciduous trees in the playground were almost bare under a threatening sky.

He resumed walking, more briskly now to ward off the chill. Scanning the playground for potential trouble, he noticed Bridie standing with a couple of girls from the class, Amber and Thuy. Alex was relieved that Bridie was with some

nice friends. He watched them talking animatedly for a short while. Soon, Maddisson, from Vivian's class joined them. In the space of a few seconds, Bridie's demeanour changed. Her head drooped, and she retreated from the group.

A few minutes later, Bridie appeared beside him. Her friends were nowhere in sight. 'Hi Alex,' she said, as she scurried to keep pace with his long strides. 'Can I walk with you?' She slipped her small hand inside his. It was like little ice block. Alex looked down at her round face and rosy cheeks. She reminded him of a little apple. Suddenly, he felt like a heel. He'd been so self-centred that morning. Obviously, Bridie was feeling a bit fragile and wasn't looking for a formal invitation to spend half of her lunch with Alex. It was now his job to find out what was bothering her.

He squeezed her hand. 'Okay, tumbleweed. Let's see what's going on out here today. You never know, we might find you someone to play with.'

'I don't want to play with anyone today. I just want to walk with you.'

'Okay, we'll see,' he said, scanning the yard for Bridie's friends. Soon enough, he spotted them in the distance. 'Shall we go and say hi to Amber and Thuy?'

'No. I don't want to.' Bridie gripped his hand and clung to his side. He tried to peel away, but she stuck by him with increased tenacity.

'Why? You sit with the girls in class.'

Bridie shook her head. 'Maddisson doesn't want to play with me.'

Maddisson stood out from the other Year Two students in both size and temerity. Whenever he'd spoken to her while on yard duty, she'd responded with barely contained defiance. Alex often took issue with the tone of their exchanges, yet was at a loss to find something concrete on which to object. The kid was a skilled acrobat in the precarious art of legitimate irreverence. Vivian had complained in their team meetings that she was troubled, displaying some odd behaviours. Her mother was notoriously problematic to deal with.

Today she looked to be getting on quite well with the two other girls. Yet Bridie was obviously on the outer. The situation warranted further investigation. Alex glanced at his watch. It was only another ten minutes to the end of his yard

duty, and he didn't think he could muster the energy to deal with it before the planning meeting, so he decided to shelve the task for now.

'That's okay, you don't have to play with them if you don't want to. Let's keep going, shall we?'

Bridie nodded, relaxing her grip.

'Why don't we see if everyone's playing nicely on the adventure playground? Maybe you can show me what you can do on the monkey bars.'

Bridie skipped silently next to him. Though the spring in her curls hinted at cheer, her sombre expression told a different story.

\* \* \*

When Alex entered Vivian's portable, Gus was already there. He and Vivian were sitting at one of the kids' tables, with their planning paperwork spread out before them.

'Nooo,' said Alex. 'Not the kids' tables! Think of my legs.' He winked at his colleagues, confident Gus would enjoy the stab at humour, but mostly hoping to mellow Vivian's stiffness.

She shot him a perfunctory glance. 'We're late getting started, Alex. And in case you hadn't noticed, my desk is the only higher table in the room.'

'I'll live,' he said as he lowered himself glumly into the tiny plastic seat. 'Sorry I'm late.'

The planning meeting followed the usual routine. Ideas were floated, which Vivian okayed or vetoed. What passed was uncompromisingly squeezed and formatted into the current literacy template. By the end of the session, the following week's program was locked in; every minute accounted for.

Most of the ideas they used, however, turned out to be Vivian's.

Once, Gus had come into Alex's room holding the following week's planner, which he'd gone through with different colour highlighters. Almost the entire A3 sheet was covered in yellow highlight – the colour he'd assigned to Vivian. Green and blue, which Gus had used for himself and for Alex, accounted for only three entries. Two for Alex and one for Gus.

'The cow hates me. Truly, mate.' He held up the sheet. 'Evidence.'

'Go easy, Gus. She is unbearably conscientious, but you can't argue she knows her stuff.'

'So do I,' Gus said, pointing a thumb to his chest. 'I've been around longer than she has.'

'I know,' Alex said. 'But she's more interested in this than you are, right?'

'Still... Doesn't make it right.'

Alex agreed. Being young and inexperienced meant Vivian ought to have entrusted him with more planning responsibility, not less. He had so much to learn. Not that she would approve of Alex's ideas; they tended to be on a larger scale than the pre-packaged learning he facilitated daily in his classroom.

He'd love to do a big film project, cover all the facets of the creative process, blend in the literacy and any other curriculum area he could squeeze in. How cool would that be? But he couldn't see how Vivian would get her head around it. He hadn't even thought up a tenth of what could conceivably be achieved. It could really be something. But he knew it wasn't worth mentioning.

Today there was little discussion or opposition. That was how their team worked. Alex and Gus made the odd suggestion, and Vivian took control.

They were almost finished when there was a thump at the door. Vivian's head shot up. Alex turned in time to see Zara Catumini, Maddisson's mother, burst through the door. She was small and wiry, and almost incandescent with rage. The way she slammed the door almost wrenched it off its hinges.

Alex stood. 'What's going on?'

'You stay out of it. It's her I want to talk to,' Zara said, her chin jutting out in defiance, thin lips devoid of colour.

Gus and Vivian rose next, he positioning himself in front of her. 'I think you should leave, Mrs Catumini,' Gus said.

Alex approached, hoping she'd heed the warning and retreat. Instead, she stepped forward and pushed him full in the chest. Alex faltered for a moment before regaining his footing. He lunged at her and grasped her firmly by the arm. He walked her towards the door. 'Please leave. Otherwise I'll have to call the principal.'

'Tell those bitches to leave my Maddisson alone, 'specially that fuckwit, Bridie.'

Alex couldn't believe his ears. 'Not another word. You are to leave the school grounds immediately. Do not hang about in the yard.' He guided her down the portable steps, then stood watching to ensure she followed his instructions. She walked off unsteadily.

'You haven't seen the last of me, you fucking cocksucker,' she said, giving Alex the finger.

Alex looked fretfully about him. None of the kids seemed to have noticed the disturbance.

'Charming,' Alex said once back inside. 'What's that woman on?'

'You name it, she's on it,' Gus said. 'Famous for it. She and her old man have been in and out of jail for the whole time Maddisson's been at the school. Zara hasn't been out longer than a couple of weeks, and look at her. Back to her old tricks.'

Vivian covered her mouth, still visibly shaken. 'While she was in jail and nanna was looking after Maddisson, she'd settled somewhat. Now that mum's out again, she's giving me hell.'

*And Bridie*, Alex thought to himself.

The planning meeting was immediately wound up. Gus walked with Vivian to the office, where he alerted Nick and Felicity to what had taken place. Felicity immediately offered to step in for Vivian's afternoon classes, while Nick telephoned the local police.

'The police advise you to report this,' he said to Vivian.

'She's harmless,' Vivian said. 'Truly. All bark and no bite.'

Alex couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'It felt way more like a bite than a bark when she shoved me in the chest. That woman's a maniac. You *have* to make a report.'

Vivian stiffened before addressing him. 'Actually, Alex, I think I know what I'm doing. You've been teaching for about two minutes, so I'd appreciate it if you kept your opinions to yourself.'

Alex absorbed the verbal blow without flinching. Perhaps Vivian was right.  
What did he know?

‘It’s your decision,’ Nick said. ‘But if it were me...’

Vivian picked up the cup of tea Alex had made her and brought it, trembling, to her lips. ‘It’s okay, Nick. Let it go.’

## Chapter 9 – What is precious

The following day, Felicity and Nick met to discuss the incident.

‘I agree with Alex,’ Felicity said. ‘I think Vivian’s mad not to make a report. That woman’s a loose cannon, and a danger to the whole school. The kids are particularly at risk.’

Nick scratched his head. ‘Reporting her won’t achieve much. What it will do is make her angrier. Probably not a bad idea to let it drop.’

Felicity hadn’t argued. He liked to play the role of the consultative people pleaser, but he was an autocrat at heart. At one point in the discussion, Felicity wondered if she should just get in her car and go the police station herself to make a report on behalf of the school. It was, after all, her duty of care to protect all the people to whom Zara was a danger. They tossed the issue around for a while without reaching a decision. Nick returned to his office mumbling to himself about the good old days.

Felicity looked out of her window and let her mind wander. Yesterday the wind had lashed everyone into a state of turmoil. There was a spike of accidents and arguments in the playground. The sick bay was overflowing. Glenys spent her day running between injured kids and the odd, tense exchange at reception. By the end of school, she looked ready to retire.

In comparison, today was gentle and quiet. The trees on the oval were hardly swaying. Though it was cool, the sky was a deep blue, and the sun shone bright and comforting, giving a warm glow to the trunks of the eucalypts.

The eucalypts.

Felicity remembered planting them. She and Craig spent every Friday afternoon after school for a month, breaking up the unforgiving soil, fertilising, planting and watering the saplings. They were missing out on Friday afternoon drinks, but they hardly cared. Being in each other's company was effortless. The hours flew.

She leant back in her chair, watching the tranquil patch of green, and letting her mind wander. What if she, too, had chosen a different life for herself? What could she have become? The decision to stay had been hers alone, and that had left her with no place or time for recriminations.

Now that a world of time had passed since Craig had taken off, she would be able to handle seeing him again. She had healed, and she was proud of the life she'd built for herself. Still, she couldn't credit herself with everything. Many of the choices she'd made – was still making – had been forged all those years ago by his presence in her life. And his subsequent absence.

Felicity wondered if Craig still remembered, or if he'd chosen to relinquish the memories as he'd done with his roots.

She became aware that her breathing had quickened.

Twenty years, and not one footstep back on home soil. That was quite a statement.

It would be okay, she told herself. She was different now. Seeing him, and talking to him again would be an abstract exercise, devoid of emotion.

It was a good thing he'd changed his name. Calling him Conor would turn him into the stranger he'd become.

\* \* \*

It was the middle of the morning session, and already Alex had misgivings about letting Amir loose on the playground. During independent reading time that morning, Amir had needled Bridie and Amber until Alex had to step in and move him. And then he'd had to move him another three times.

'Amir,' he said each time, 'I will have to put a sad face next to your name on the board if you keep this up.'

Amir obviously didn't care. He got up from where he was sitting, walked around the room though Alex told him repeatedly to return to his reading. At one point, Alex, trying his hardest to remain calm, thought he'd remind Amir of what he was supposed to be doing.

'Amir, have you selected a Just Right Book?'

Amir shook his head.

'Amir, do you know *how* to select a Just Right Book?'

Amir avoided Alex's gaze and kicked the trundle wheels that were balancing against the wall next to where he was standing. They fell with a crash. Heads turned. The room grew quiet. Alex ignored the mess at his feet. 'Now, hold up your hand, Amir. Do you remember how you work out what book is right for you to read?'

Amir's hands stayed firmly by his sides.

In desperation, Alex let Amir fiddle around on the computer while the other kids read. He knew he was rewarding bad behaviour, but after yesterday's jam-packed day, he was behind, and not likely to catch up. There was a stack of work samples waiting to be put into the student folders. Yesterday there had been no time to hear reading; he doubted there would be more time for it today. He really needed the kids to just get on with their work with no additional complications.

While he was updating the student folders, he noticed Bridie giggling with the girls at her table.

'Bridie, it's quiet reading time,' Alex said firmly. To drive the point home, he made a stern face. Bridie resumed her reading for the next few minutes. Then the bubble of chatter started once again. Alex barked in their general direction. 'Quiet! I'm sick of this noise. Others are trying to read.'

He looked around the room. Many of the kids were watching him from behind their Just-Right tomes.

Reading dragged on. The writing session started late.

Amir left the computer, pulling out the headphones as he went. The loud dialogue and jangly soundtrack of the program blasted into the room. Alex clenched his teeth, barely able to stop himself yelling. He walked over to the

computer and jabbed at buttons indiscriminately in his effort to subdue the noise.

‘Amir, come here,’ he said after he silenced the computer. Amir sauntered over. ‘Now...’ Alex said, trying to conjure an appropriate punishment. ‘I’m putting *ten* sad faces next to your name on the board. Right?’ He paused for a while, waiting for Amir to respond.

Silence.

‘And then... you can just go and sit in the corner and miss out on writing today.’

There was a shift in the little boy’s expression. For a moment, Alex thought Amir had been about to smirk. Eventually, he turned slowly and dragged his feet to where Alex was still pointing. For the next half hour, Amir proceeded to writhe and roll around on the ground; pull at displays that were pinned in his vicinity, tearing off strips; call out to his friends; stare at the ceiling as though in a catatonic state, and obsessively fasten and unfasten the Velcro straps on his shoes. The noise of this last action set Alex’s teeth on edge. He looked at the kid in exasperation.

And then it hit him.

What a complete and utter dickhead he’d been.

Amir had played him flawlessly. The kid hated writing and would do anything to avoid it.

Alex now looked at Amir sitting in the corner, happily wasting time fastening and unfastening his shoe strap with maniacal zeal. He never imagined he would be capable of formulating such a nasty thought, but he now found himself fantasising about giving Amir a good thump.

The bell went. Alex was so relieved he thought he might faint. ‘Everyone, just go out to play. Grab your snacks. We can pack this up when we come back in.’

Twentyseven small bodies pushed chairs aside and scrambled for the bag room. There, they fell upon each other, pushing and shoving in a mad scramble for snacks. Alex just watched, defeated, wishing he was miles away.

Soon, only three remained in the bag room. Bridie was still trying to get at her backpack, which Zayne was blocking as he muscled in to get his own bag. Manny was on the other side of the room, dealing, at his usual glacial pace, with his own bag.

And then, just as Zayne took off with snack in hand, Bridie managed to pull out her tub of yoghurt. Zayne knocked it out of her hand, where it hit the wall, popping on impact. Yoghurt flew in all directions, but mostly onto Alex's shirt.

Silence. Distant sounds of the playground floated through the open doorway. Zayne's eyes darted between Bridie and Alex. Manny looked up and froze.

Bridie was motionless at first. Then her hand shot up to her mouth, and she started to titter.

Alex looked down. His shirt was covered with dripping globs of vanilla yoghurt.

It was as though a red curtain descended, obscuring his sight.

'Jesus Christ!' he yelled. 'What the hell are you two numbskulls doing?'

Zayne and Bridie stared at him.

When no answer came his way, he said, 'Look at the mess you made, for god's sake.'

He wiped his hands on his shirt, further smearing the spill.

'Answer me. Why did you do that?' he said.

Zayne looked away. Alex turned on Bridie with a snarl. 'Well?'

Tears spilling down her cheeks, she blurted out, 'Because I'm little.'

## Chapter 10 – Joy at the centre

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### THE JOY PROJECT

*Posted March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

I ran from one end of St Margaret beach to the other tonight. Timed myself. Did a personal best. A tightly-packed shame sandwich tends to make one more hungry for success.

But no matter how far I run, I will never outrun my shame.

If I do nothing, I will never fix what I did today. And if I don't stop and change direction, I know I'll do it again. And then I'll become something I'll no longer recognise.

Nobody can be their best self without joy at the centre. Especially not me. And so the time has come.

The Joy Project begins.

It was a short post, but Alex could hardly write more. He was mortified he'd screamed at the kids in that way, in particular at Bridie, who'd done nothing except have an accident.

Alex now knew without a doubt that teaching was getting to him the same way it got to his colleagues. By humiliating the children, they humiliated themselves. Unlike his colleagues, Alex did not wish to develop a bizarre

insensitivity to humiliation. Some of them yelled at kids daily as though it was one of the primary functions of their jobs. Others took leave, or went part time to avoid going mad.

If he did it his way, maybe the questions would stop. Maybe he would find answers for the riff. He had to act.

\* \* \*

'Hi Alex,' said Bridie as he came in to work the next morning. He carried a shoebox he'd brought from home.

She skipped beside him as he made his way from the car park under a sparse canopy of gently swaying eucalypts. Rainbow lorikeets were already at it, screeching and squabbling their way into the day.

'Hey, Bridie. Good to see you.' It was good to see her. Alex swallowed his guilt like a bitter pill. Bridie's chirpy greeting in the face of his thoughtlessness made Alex feel an even greater heel than before. *Look at her, he thought. I neglected my duties as teacher and role model, and she couldn't be further from holding a grudge.* He had truly sunk to new lows.

'Bridie, I'm really sorry I yelled at you yesterday. I lost my cool. Grown-ups can be silly sometimes.'

She shot him a searching glance, then smiled, seemingly bemused at the apology.

'Can I help you with something?' she said.

Today was the official start of The Joy Project, and Alex was brimming with irreverence. 'I'd love some help.'

Her face lit up as she skipped along next to him, the loose sole of one of her runners slapping the asphalt as she went.

As they entered the classroom, Bridie looked about the room, as though she were expecting some trick was being played.

'How about you help me with these stories?' He walked to the filing cabinet. 'There are files for each of the kids. All you have to do is find the right name and drop them in.' He demonstrated with the first one.

Bridie's smile broadened. Apart from the obvious pleasure of being allowed in the classroom half an hour early, she beamed with self-importance. This was a task she'd seen Alex perform, and one with which she seemed chuffed to have been entrusted.

Minutes later, Zayne and Cody peered through the classroom window, and came quickly to the door to get a better look.

'Would you two like a job?' Alex said. When they nodded, he got Zayne to sort through the reader covers and add new fill-in sheets. He asked Cody if he would clean the whiteboard ready for the day. They both complied happily.

Alex looked around. With the kids now in charge of the jobs he would otherwise have been doing, he turned his attention to the classroom. On the chair next to his desk, there was a pile of collage images the kids had done in art. The art specialist was doing a unit on body image. The kids had cut out faces from magazines, and after pasting these on paper, they had used pastels to add the bodies. They looked kind of cute, and reminded Alex of the animated images from *Angela Anaconda*, a TV show from his childhood. He glanced at the clock. There was time.

He spent five minutes removing most of the anchor charts that were hung from lines strung across the classroom. Then, by pairing the collages back to back, he hung them in their place. By the time the bell rang for the start of school, the classroom was festooned with the kids' cheery representations, a reminder that this was a space where small humans spent their days. As far as Alex was concerned, anchor charts were for robots.

As the kids filed in, there were exclamations and squeals of delight at seeing their work displayed. Bags were flung in the general direction of the bag hooks. Every kid in the class checked where his picture was hung.

'Where's mine?' Manny said. 'It's not here.'

'Hang on a tick, Manny,' Alex said, checking the leftover pile, and glad to see Manny was standing on planet earth this morning. 'Here it is,' he said, holding it up. 'I'll hang it while you're all busy a bit later on.'

Manny smiled. 'Can I show my mum after school?'

‘Of course.’ Alex turned and addressed the class. ‘Okay, everyone, come and sit on the mat after you’ve tidied up the bag area.’ He sat, reaching behind him for the shoebox. In it were sea shells and other beach treasures. A dried sea horse, a few pieces of glass that had been worn smooth by the relentless lapping of waves over sand. There was a spinning top – one of those old fashioned ones that you had to wind, and would then release by pulling off the string. Neither old nor precious, but made by an old bloke who sold the fruits of his hobby at the craft market on the posh Federation foreshore.

Right down the bottom was his old puppet, Wily Wizard. As puppets went, Wily wasn’t very special. A two dollar shop purchase, he was nothing but a plastic head joined to a tube of flimsy synthetic fabric. Without the fire Alex breathed into him when he slipped his hand into the star-spangled costume, he was nothing. Alex glanced at the clock. Almost ten minutes past nine. He hadn’t even taken the roll yet. By now, he should be getting started on the instructional part of the literacy session, announcing the learning intention, explaining content, demonstrating, setting groups off to work, and then working with whatever guided reading group’s turn it was today. On the board, last week’s reading activities were neatly listed, the activity groups identified with different-coloured magnets.

What the hell, Alex thought recklessly. It wasn’t the first time he’d been insubordinate, and it wouldn’t be the last.

Memories of an old holiday job flashed into his mind. As a walking tour guide on the Mornington Peninsula, he was meant to stick to public areas only. But through sheer boredom, Alex had kept himself entertained by trespassing onto private beaches and gardens. If he could saunter through the manicured lawns of a cliff-top mansion in Portsea with a group of tourists in tow, waving to the baffled residents as he went without caring too much about losing his job, then he could dare a little here in this classroom.

But the game was slightly different now. Losing a holiday job wasn’t like losing his first professional appointment. And now there was the impending mortgage to consider. Alex’s chest tightened. He took a deep breath and tried

to be pragmatic. This wasn't a sackable offence. Worst case, he might get a slap on the wrist.

Big deal.

Classroom life was so utterly joyless. There was no need for it to be so dry, so relentlessly repetitive, so lacking in imagination. Alex really had no choice but to push ahead, consequences be damned.

He put the box on his lap. A few of the kids asked questions, but most sat quietly, watching.

Alex began. 'What would you like to do today?'

Silence. Kids looked at one another. A few hands shot up. A small voice, Thuy's, called out tentatively, 'Independent reading?'

'Maths?' said Zayne. Alex raised an eyebrow. Really? Could the narrow scope of their usual classroom routines have shrunk Zayne's imagination to that extent?

Bridie watched in silence with wide eyes. This morning, her world had changed the smallest smidgeon, and it was clear she was up for more. 'Alex, what's in the box?' she said.

Alex picked up the box and shook it. It emitted a muffled bump. The kids watched, spellbound. Faraway sounds coloured the silence; car tyres on asphalt, leaves rustling in the wind, the muffled growl of a lawn mower from a neighbouring house. Eventually, a voice broke the trance.

'Open it!' Cody yelled.

Alex lifted the lid. Kids scrambled to see, kneeling or standing, necks craned like baby turtles.

'Come on, now,' Alex said. 'Let's all sit back down, or Wily Wizard won't want to come out.'

He thought for a moment. 'Wow, that's a lot of Ws. Which words have I just used that start with a W?' He repeated the heavily alliterated phrase.

Several hands shot up. 'Wizard.'

'Which.'

'Words.'

'Willy'

Alex laughed. 'Wily, not Willy. Does anyone know what *wily* means?'

All eyes were on Wily as Alex lifted the bulbous head from the box, his body lying flat and lifeless inside the magic box. As expected, nobody knew the meaning of the word, *wily*, and so Alex explained. Then he lifted the puppet right out of the box and slipped his hand inside. He threaded his index finger into Wily's head, thumb and middle finger fitting snugly into Wily's sleeves. His fourth finger he used to make Wily's stomach bulge out.

'Now, I want you all to close your eyes, and only open them when Wily Wizard tells you to open them.'

Alex looked at the small faces before him. They were enthralled and focused in a way he hadn't seen before. Bridie's mouth was hanging open. She resembled a broken marionette, her bottom jaw somehow having lost the thread connecting it to the upper jaw. Her hands were balled under her chin and Alex had to stop himself from laughing at how utterly paralysed she was by the suspense.

Alex waved Wily about, making him fly, emitting strange noises to go with the actions. Kids were riveted. Alex smiled, lost in the moment. Later, his thoughts kept returning to that carefree instant of happiness. He'd felt weightless, pure, untethered. He wanted to feel that way again, though he knew it was not how he usually felt in the classroom.

The feeling was like a drug, and Alex wanted to get there again. If veering off the beaten path was the way to get there, then that's what he would do. Because he'd long known in his heart that was how teaching was *meant* to feel.

## Chapter 11 – Giving joy oxygen

‘Come on, now, Wily won’t want to talk until everyone closes their eyes.’ Alex curled Wily inwards so that the puppet’s face and limbs were completely hidden and all that could be seen was the back of his star-spangled tunic.

Once all the kids’ eyes were shut and he’d waited a second or two to make sure nobody was peeking, Alex let out a mighty roar, holding Wily high in the air. Several of the kids were startled. Bridie’s hands shot up to cover her ears.

That was the moment Alex decided The Joy Project would be a kind of game. Some of the rules he’d just defined. He wanted the kids to help with the rest.

‘What shall we do?’ said Alex, voicing Wily. ‘It can be anything you like.’

‘Play dress ups?’ someone called out.

‘We could do that,’ Alex said, nodding. He looked around, encouraging suggestions.

‘Can we play footy?’ Jake said, raising his hand as an afterthought. Alex wasn’t surprised. Jake lived and breathed football. Quite simply, if football wasn’t in the conversation, Jake would not be listening.

‘Remember to put up your hand, first, Jake. You are right. We do need to run around to stay healthy.’

He grabbed a white board marker and started a list. *Draw. Paint. Play dress-ups. Play more football.* When he turned his head, there were more than a dozen hands raised. After all the suggestion were recorded, he said, ‘Okay,

you've told me a few things. Now I'd like you to show me by doing. Until play time, you can do whatever you want.'

There was cheering, and kids began to scatter. In the first minutes, they just wandered around the room, seemingly at a loss. Alex watched, a knot forming in his stomach. What if Nick or Felicity walked in?

He willed himself to stay calm as he studied the chaos. Would the kids eventually find something productive to do and settle into it? Would they be able to commit to any one activity? If so, would they stay on task? Perhaps he would need to introduce more structure to the session. He fought the urge to intervene, willing himself to stay passive for a few minutes longer.

He had an overwhelming urge to clap a rhythm, his usual way of getting kids to listen up, and to quickly direct them to something more prescriptive. But instead, he fought the urge, and remained standing in the middle of the room, waiting and watching to see what would happen next. Part of him was utterly fascinated by the endless possibilities. Given free rein, what might the kids conjure up?

There were no free-range moments for kids nowadays; no room to just *be*. School life saw every second accounted for. He looked closely at individual kids. Some of them had days-old breakfast stains on their windcheaters. Others were only wearing half the uniform. His thoughts turned to what he'd seen when picking up Madeleine from class at Federation Primary. Even at the end of the day, the children looked crisp in perfectly pressed, full school uniform. There was not one faded windcheater, not a stain to be seen. Girls wore stiff navy satin ribbons in their hair, the boys, top brand runners on their feet.

The noise in the room brought Alex back to earth. At the back, some kids were throwing pieces of Lego at each other, using the book corner like a fort in a black and white western. Others walked around aimlessly. Alex watched with a growing sense of dread, but still he waited. He knew The Joy Project needed oxygen. He had to give the kids a chance to show him what was possible.

From the kids' own accounts of how they lived, often with both parents working long hours, or absent, Alex knew their lives at home were much less scripted than they were at school. Surely, if they were practiced at occupying

themselves at home, they would be able to show some imagination, some creativity here in the classroom. Was it such a crazy notion to let kids roam, set rules, and make decisions?

While he stood there, he felt small fingers touch his hand. He looked down. Bridie was looking up, her freckly face smiling and, dare he think it, *joyful?*

‘Alex, can we make our room all special?’

Alex knelt so he could look Bridie in the eyes. ‘Let’s see... Make the room special. Now how do you think we could do that?’

Bridie pointed a finger at the collage figures hanging above her head. ‘Can we make something with the silver paper in the store room?’

‘Sure we can.’ Here at last was an idea. He would bring out the silver paper, and perhaps more kids would join Bridie in decorating the room. But before he had a chance to walk to gather materials, the door opened.

Felicity stood there, her gaze sweeping the room. Alex saw the room through Felicity’s eyes. He knew she’d take it all in without missing the smallest detail. Down the back, the Lego battle had expanded into a full scale offensive. Amir picked up the Lego tub and hurled the entire thing Jake’s way. Several more boys had joined each side of the skirmish, and were firing imaginary bullets from Lego-built catapults. Others wandered around aimlessly, talking to their friends, or generally wasting time. A couple of girls had taken possession of the ball basket, and were now systematically emptying it by hurling balls at each other.

Before Alex had a chance to conjure an excuse for the mayhem, a ball hit Felicity on the side of the head.

\* \* \*

‘You did what?’ Madeleine said that evening while they were driving to the dog off-lead area.

Pippa had been whining in anticipation since they’d left home. The back window was lowered enough for her to stick her head out and let her ears flap

in the wind the way she liked, letting a salt and seaweed flavoured breeze into the car.

‘I just wanted to know what would happen if I let the kids do what they wanted. I mean, what’s the worst thing that could happen?’

Though he was staring straight ahead at the road, he could feel Madeleine’s eyes drilling into him. He’d seen that look on her many times before. She’d be staring, unblinking, as though the longer she concentrated her attention on him, the sooner he’d come up with the right answer.

‘Yes, I get what you’re saying. You wanted to see what they’d do if you didn’t direct them. Jesus, I don’t know what to think. I guess I’m actually not asking what you were doing, but what were you thinking? I mean, really, what was going through your head?’

Alex felt tension creeping into his shoulders. He took a deep breath and plunged head first into a white lie. If his foray into The Joy Project sounded less orchestrated, Madeleine might not be as harsh in her judgement. Packaged as a spur-of-the-moment event, it would perhaps come across as less negligent. Madeleine had a boundary-driven approach to the world. She would view something like The Joy Project as nutty.

‘I don’t know what I was thinking, exactly. It was just one of those moments, and rather than let it pass, I opened myself up to it. I was curious. I mean, how bad can it be letting kids have some free time every now and then? At uni they were always banging on about student-centred learning, inquiry—’

‘But that doesn’t mean throwing away the reins and letting the horse bolt. You need to actually guide the kids through all those types of learning experiences, not go offline into your own la-la land. What if someone got hurt?’

‘I was there, Madeleine. Nobody was going to get hurt.’

‘What about poor Felicity?’

‘Oh, she can handle it. I reckon she almost laughed. She just doesn’t know what to make of me. And anyway, it wasn’t *that* bad. It’s not like I left the school and went to the pub or anything like that. The kids were safe the whole time. It was just an experiment.’

‘Not a good experiment if you want to get your contract renewed next year. Or beyond that, if you want to be made ongoing. Anyway, what did she say?’

‘Not much. She’d come in to ask me something, so she asked it and left.’

‘What was it?’

‘Oh, nothing much, she just wondered if she could count on me as a regular with the ReWARd Program.’

Madeleine was pensive for a moment. ‘Are you sure she didn’t say anything about what was going on in the room? What about the ball?’

‘Not a thing.’

Madeleine sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be getting involved. It’s your life, your career. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.’

Alex couldn’t stand it when Madeleine got melodramatic. She well knew their lives were deeply intertwined, yet she carried on this pretence that they were free agents. He’d agreed to moving in together and buying real estate. What greater commitment was there?

No matter how insistent Madeleine’s rants could get, no matter how conservative her stance, Alex couldn’t keep working under stifling guidelines that took away his will to live. *His right to be*. In that sense, The Joy Project was more necessity than choice.

As he slowed to pull into a parking spot, Alex spoke in the robotic voice that usually made Madeleine laugh, ‘*In ten metres, you will have reached your destination.*’ He turned off the engine and faced her. ‘See, when you have me, you’ll never be lost.’

She smiled, though he could still see a deep crease etched between her brows. Pippa pawed the front seats and gave the most plaintive whine yet. ‘Come on, old girl.’ He rubbed her head vigorously, shaking her long ears about, then opened the car door. Pippa bounded out, too excited to know which direction to run. She turned a few wide circles before setting her course for a lanky Dalmatian. Madeleine emerged from the car, her smile now gone.

The strained conversation was not revisited while at the park. Alex was relieved. Times like these, their arguments just seemed to go around and

around in circles, and at the best of it, they would end the discomfort by agreeing to disagree, which was really no resolution at all.

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## **THE JOY PROJECT**

*Posted March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

You'd think I'd be stressed. You'd think I wouldn't like the pressure. But I do.

Sometimes you know something's not working, but it's hard to know exactly how and why that is. It bothers you, and you think about it, but you just can't put your finger on it. Even if it looks all shiny and perfect on the surface, you still know deep down in your gut that something's not.

When something's right, however, you don't need to put a detective on the job. It might look as shabby as hell from the outside, but you know with just one look, or by the faintest touch, when it's pure and good.

That's how it is with the kids and me right now. It might look like a mess, especially when your boss cops one on the head, or your girl thinks you're a dick.

None of that takes the shine off those little faces. Nothing. I've never seen my class look so alive. I've never felt so alive. That kind of joy has to come to something. It has to somehow lead into learning.

If not, then there will just be joy. At the very least we will have that.

And it will be enough.

## Chapter 12 – Jumping through hoops, ticking boxes

Quicker than expected, the school holidays landed. As for most teachers, Alex found they came not a moment too soon. It wasn't until the first Monday, when he found himself rattling aimlessly around the apartment, reading the papers and having too many cups of tea that he realised how exhausted he was. Now he understood why teachers referred to the term holidays with such reverence. He was one of them now, eagerly welcoming the hiatus in a life that was becoming increasingly complex. But the calm holiday atmosphere was short lived. Before Alex had a chance to decide how he would spend the two weeks, Madeleine put full throttle on their house hunting.

The idea of being in the market for a piece of real estate had in the beginning seemed to Alex more a marathon than a sprint. The reality proved different, as no sooner had the concept of home ownership taken hold, than they were plunged into a frenetic round of online scouting and attending open-for-inspections. It was a case of perfect timing, Madeleine reasoned. With two weeks of school holidays up their sleeves, and no vacation planned, what else was there to do?

Two properties emerged as definite possibilities, each fitting Madeleine's criteria in terms of size, location and price. Both were to be auctioned on the same day: the last Saturday of the school holidays.

At eleven fifteen precisely, the hammer went down on unit 4, 996 Vicars Road, to the highest bidder, Alex Kiernan.

Madeleine squealed with delight as the auctioneer exclaimed, 'Sold!' Cheeks aglow, she jumped up and down, then planted kisses all over Alex's

face. Behind them, the fast-paced drone of truck engines played a repetitive soundtrack. Gusts of air from passing vehicles lifted the auctioneer's toupee at a precarious angle as he strode towards the winning bidder to shake hands.

Alex wasn't sure how he'd managed to put in even one bid. His arm felt as though it was made of cardboard.

\* \* \*

In one way, it was good to be back at school. While Madeleine was kept busy poring over the details of their property contracts, setting up the conveyance and seeing to mortgage applications, Alex escaped back into The Joy Project.

The first Monday back, kids swarmed to the classroom as soon as they arrived at school. Alex was more than a little pleased to see them, and this gave him hope that he'd have the energy and vision to get The Project onto a more stable footing. He chatted for a while, asking the kids how they'd filled their two weeks. Then he helped them to unfurl three, two-metre lengths of brown paper they'd taped together before the holidays so they could be painted. Alex provided some loose supervision with pouring and mixing, and – though newspapers had been laid down – gave general advice about avoiding making an infernal mess.

In keeping with their Monday morning tradition, Gus appeared at the doorway just before quarter to nine.

'All I can say is, thank god we're not doing NAPLAN,' he announced as he entered.

Alex was sitting on the floor amongst the children. He watched in silence as Gus checked out the changed environment of the classroom. Before the holidays, Alex had removed anchor charts, replacing them with art displays. Gus ducked under long strands of paper seaweed as he walked to the centre of the room.

'Mate, what are you doing with kids inside at this time of the morning?'

'Bit of painting. Not sure where it's going, but the kids have a plan. We're going to do some writing about it later on, aren't we?' he said, addressing the kids.

Amber and Bridie nodded. Manny looked up blankly.

'Nice work,' Gus said.

'What were you saying about NAPLAN?' Alex said.

'Just walked in the Grade Three rooms. Man, are they stressing.

Apparently Nick told them yesterday that last year's data must improve. They've been practising questions for a few weeks, but now they wished they'd started drilling end of last year like they do at Federation.'

'Lucky,' Alex said. A look around the room confirmed it would be near impossible to nest The Joy Project in one of the NAPLAN years.

'Tell me about it. We have enough busy work, enough stress under the rule of thumb of *that* empire.' He pointed in the direction of Vivian's portable. 'Imagine if we had to do NAPLAN as well.'

Alex was relieved not to be constrained by the NAPLAN agenda. It ran counter to the freestyle teaching and learning arrangement to which he'd now committed himself. 'Yeah, a total pain in the butt.'

'There's enough assessment without NAPLAN. Why the hell do we need more?'

*Assessment.* The mere mention of the word always made Alex uneasy. Mostly, he pushed the concept and the work it entailed to one side as though he were intending to return to it later. But he never did. Now he wondered how assessment would fit into The Joy Project. The last few days' freewheeling had kind of worked, with kids pretty much choosing what they wanted to do. But like a disoriented explorer clinging to the top of an iceberg, Alex wondered if he wasn't on the cusp of something mysterious and potentially dangerous. Did he really understand The Joy Project beyond the germ of rebellion that inspired it? He looked at Gus discreetly checking out the room and considered confiding in him. Every now and then, he'd need to bounce ideas off someone who wouldn't go blabbing or judge him and make him feel like the fool that he probably was.

'Not sure I want to go in for any formal type of assessment.'

Gus grinned. 'Do tell.'

Alex checked the clock. A few more kids piled in the door. They took one look at the painting and threw their backpacks in the bag room. Soon they were amongst the paints and brushes, further crowding the space. 'In a nutshell,' Alex said, 'I've decided I'm going to do things differently.'

'I can see that. Why do assessment when you can set off a paint apocalypse?'

Alex looked at the painting, wondering where the hell he would set it aside to dry.

\* \* \*

Why was Alex behaving so strangely?

After the ball incident, Felicity watched him in the same way she watched students who took risks in the playground; with aloof circumspection. Torn between intervening and letting go, she wondered if Alex was a threat to the students.

When it came to her risk-loving students boldly trying new things, pushing themselves, beyond their limits into new territory, Felicity knew intervening too early could mean putting a stop to precious experimentation and productive risk-taking. If she stopped just one child from balancing on the high beam, would she forever damage her shimmering confidence? Would she cause her to stop developing new ideas? Would that child's friends watch and learn that risks are to be avoided, and consequently retreat to the more cautious domains of their lives? How far would the lesson go? Would it lead to an overly cautious adulthood where there would be no place to be bold or brave, or to dare something outrageous for oneself?

And so Felicity decided that for the time being, and from a relative distance, she would observe Alex quietly, patiently. For his good, and perhaps for the good of the school, she would allow events to unfold.

\* \* \*

The following Saturday, Alex fronted up at the ReWARd Program. There seemed to be a glut of preservice teacher volunteers in attendance, so he didn't understand why Felicity had asked him to come. Perhaps Aloysius couldn't make it, leaving her short of fully qualified staff.

Kids came sporadically through the door, and soon each table was full. Alex didn't wait for directions this time. He did a quick loop around the room, settling on a table of kids who looked to be struggling with wire frames for their papier mache. He helped one kid connect airplane wings to the body of his aircraft, and then gave suggestions to another about how to get his mushrooms to stop toppling over. Jason, the volunteer who came to join the group, placed a couple of iPads on the table and explained what the group was doing.

'The kids will take photos of the steps they've gone through and publish a how-to-papier-mache book for the art room.'

'I wouldn't mind a copy for my room,' Alex said.

'Once the kids are all finished with their creations, they're going to come up with a narrative that we will turn into a photographic comic book using the stills.'

Alex thought about the similarities between the ReWARd Program and The Joy Project, and felt suddenly deflated. If kids could access these kinds of activities during a Saturday program, was he just wasting their precious school time giving them more of the same? If rule-driven, bland as porridge Felicity could come up with this stuff, then why wasn't he offering something that went beyond, that was *more*? Conversely, why did he feel the need to turn the system upside down in the first place? Why were art activities and other fun stuff sidelined to weekend programs instead of holding their rightful place in the mainstream curriculum?

While his head was filled with thoughts of Felicity, she materialised in his line of sight. Jess stood by her side, wringing her hands and glancing around skittishly. Her wary brown eyes made Alex think of a frightened fawn. He approached the two women, suddenly and inexplicably filled with hope that

Felicity would pair him with Jess for the morning's work. Just the idea of tagging alongside one of those zealous volunteers rendered him listless.

'So. What's on for today?' Alex said.

'Last week you got to see how the program works. Today, and for the next few weeks, I'd like you to work with the volunteers to provide some pedagogical leadership.'

'Judging from what I've seen one volunteer doing, it looks as though the pedagogical leadership angle is pretty much covered.'

'The volunteers are doing a great job of working with the kids in providing arts-based activities. But I want those activities to connect to literacy, and I would like you to create a range of ideas for us to work with. Call it unit planning, if you like.'

'Sounds do-able,' Alex said. 'What do you think, Jess?'

Felicity studied him under furrowed brows. A few seconds of silence stretched between them. 'Jess can give you a hand, Alex. You might need it.'

'Do we have to fit in with the National Curriculum?' Jess said.

Felicity rubbed her niece's arm. 'You can do whatever you like. The program is about reading and writing through the arts. It's Saturday. We don't need to adhere to any framework in particular. But it's important that we improve these kids' literacy. That's the bottom line. The volunteers will follow your lead. They haven't graduated yet, so you two are their commanding officers, so to speak.' Felicity laughed briefly in a brittle monotone. That false laugh, and the way she kept glancing at Jess like a nervous mother monitoring illness made Alex think she was trying extra hard to lighten the mood. But why? Was Jess suffering from some mystery affliction?

'Okay, so we have carte blanche. Can you deal with that, Jess?'

'What if we don't get it right?'

Felicity smiled and said, 'Failure is not only impossible, it's inconceivable, Jess. You'll be right.' She patted her niece's shoulder, before walking off to join one of the groups. Alex and Jess stood in the middle of the hall. He wanted to speak, but his mouth was uncharacteristically dry.

Finally, he turned and said, 'Well?'

She shrugged, and gave a tentative smile. 'What the hell...' she said. 'The sooner we start, the sooner we finish.'

## Chapter 13 – The calling

Over the following weeks, Alex increasingly threw out his normal program, giving the kids more control. They were happy, at least at first. The joy he'd been hoping to inject into their school days seemed well within reach, if not already in their grasp.

Alex worked on the premise that the kids could do what they wanted, when they wanted. Unless it was physically impossible, as in the case of one activity being in direct opposition with another; you couldn't have some kids playing ball games outside while others were inside working on puzzles. There had to be a basic level of organisation or the project just wouldn't work.

Sometimes they needed help coming up with ideas. One day, after watching the kids run from one activity to another with no sustained concentration, Alex suggested they might sing some songs. On the hop, as usual, Alex sang from his own primary school repertoire – whatever came to mind – and the kids took to it with gusto.

Soon the students began to make their own suggestions, and these usually included hit songs currently in the charts. The morning session was soon like a dance party. Alex would take requests, look the songs up on YouTube, and play them on the interactive whiteboard for the kids to dance and sing to. It wasn't long before there were lyrics of each song pinned up somewhere in the room for students to follow if they wanted to sing.

The routine of his days changed dramatically too. Kids nominated what they wanted to do, and Alex generally facilitated the process. But Alex found it

increasingly hard to know how to capitalise on the chosen activity; how to tie it to learning in a way that was even remotely methodical or orderly. He yearned to add some structure to the sessions, wondered how to best support the kids in their personal learning quests, but didn't know how to do that without taking over completely. Which was against the principal ideology of the project.

Letting kids decide what they wanted to do each day had felt incredibly liberating at first. Those first sessions of games, drama, dancing, and so on, were filled with energy. But now he'd noticed the kids asking for the same thing over and over. It was beginning to become repetitive. A tone of dissolution descended upon the class.

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### **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO...**

*Posted April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

What the hell have I got myself into?

What the hell am I going to do from now on?

It would be so easy to walk away. Leave this caper to someone else who has the stomach and passion for it. I don't think I have. I don't think I can do it.

I am so bad at it.

But now I have responsibilities, I have to stay. I have to see this through. But Jesus, it's hard.

I could do it the easy way. I could do what the others do. Follow the prompts. Read the recipe. Do as instructed. I could do all that, and nobody would bat an eye. Everybody would be happy. I would be making my life so much easier.

Wait, that's not true. My life might be easier, but it would be unbearable. Just like my colleagues, each like a hamster at its

wheel. And the kids, oh, the kids. I'd be watching their little souls being smothered. I'd be preparing them for a boring, bleak, mechanistic future with no fun, joy and light.

Okay, Running Man, ease up. I'm getting a bit melodramatic here.

[take a moment to gather myself – laugh and call myself a wanker]

Point is, I'm in now, and not getting out any time soon. Anyway, I want to see how this ends. Train wreck or triumph, let's see where this thing takes me.

\* \* \*

One night the following week, as Alex and Madeleine were driving to the movies, he mentioned how his last few days had gone.

'Kids are still deciding how they want to spend their days, but I'm wondering how to introduce a bit of structure. You know, to add a bit of focus and to avoid large-scale time wasting.'

Madeleine listened in silence.

'I mean, the last thing I'd want to do would be to compromise the integrity of the project.'

Finally she spoke. 'What integrity? This sounds to me like a crackpot experiment. Sorry to burst your bubble, but the words integrity and project make what you're doing sound almost... professional.'

'Depends on how you look at it. I don't call what I see every other man and his dog doing in a school professional, either. I'd call it downright torture.'

'You did mention time wasting was a factor in the way you've chosen to run your classroom.'

'I said I wanted to avoid it.'

'Oh, just shut up,' she shrieked. 'Shut the fuck up with this bloody nonsense. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I thought you were a lot more responsible than this. And anyway, what are the parents saying about it? Surely their kids have told them about how you're running the class. Aren't they coming in to demand explanations about your approach?'

'Nup.'

'That'd be right,' Madeleine said, shaking her head. 'Parents in my class are in my face every day. They complain about everything and if they're not complaining, they question most things that happen. A couple of days ago, I had one mother come in not to complain that I told her child off for thumping one of the younger kids, but to inform me that in the process of speaking to her child about what he should not have done, I'd failed to consider or validate her little darling's feelings. So next time, she said, I should be more considerate of how awful I'd made her feel as a result of my negative feedback. And this doesn't even come close to all the grief they give me over educational stuff.'

'The parents at my school are not like that. I guess they're kind of old-fashioned in that way.'

'Uneducated, might be a more precise description. Let's face it, Alex. The majority of parents at your school are bogans. The rest are virtually illiterate.'

Alex couldn't argue. Some parents at Beauvista were poor, and a bit rough around the edges, and others were new to the country, but not speaking English well didn't make them illiterate. Her casual and offensive dismissal of what were for the most part, good people, made Alex's pulse quicken. A big chunk of the parents were just honest, working class people doing what they could to give their kids a good start in life despite the enormous barriers of disadvantage.

He tried not to let the anger he felt turn what he wanted to say into a sermon. 'They're not middle-class parents, sure. But that doesn't mean they're less worthy, less concerned about their kids' best interests than parents at your school.'

'But they *are* less interested and less concerned. Maybe they *should* question more. I mean, the parents at my school are just so involved they're

obnoxious, but your parents are on the opposite end of the scale. That's not good either. There has to be a middle ground.'

'I don't know. I think leaving a teacher to work out what's best in the classroom is not a bad thing. Professional autonomy and all that.' Alex knew he was side-stepping the argument, but he no longer cared.

'Yeah, but there are systems in place to make sure we're giving the kids the best education, and we aren't the ones who decide that.'

'Well, I guess I'm saying I do think that we are best placed to make these kinds of decisions, not policy makers nor politicians.'

Madeleine's voice was getting that thin, reedy tone that made Alex feel slightly ill. It could only get worse from here. 'Well then,' she added tersely, 'I guess I'm saying you sound a tad anarchist to me. You can't just make it up as you go, you know? Not work in with the school team; ignore the leadership's direction for the school. I mean, that's not ethical. What if this experiment of yours backfires? What about the kids in your class and their learning? Don't you care about them? That's why we have guidelines and curriculum, you dickhead.'

Alex bit his lip. He focused on the palm trees on the stretch of road hugging the bay. They were still ten minutes away from the cinema. Five more minutes of silence and then he'd broach a different subject. He'd had enough of Madeleine's ranting. In all fairness, they both needed to cool off.

But what was most surprising about the exchange, was that apart from mild irritation at being called a dickhead, Alex was surprised by how oddly secure he felt in his subversiveness, so delightfully snuggled in his ideology. His position hadn't been threatened by Madeleine's attack. Instead, he rather felt sorry for her, because she'd been so clearly swept up in the propaganda. In short, she didn't quite understand. She'd been blinded by the rhetoric, so blinkered, so brainwashed that she could only look straight ahead at the mainstream. For Madeleine there were no winding side roads to coax her into the kind of adventurous exploration to which Alex had been called.

It was a calling, there was no other way to describe it. He felt oddly spiritual, even religious, in his zeal.

\* \* \*

On Friday at five, Felicity had gathered up her briefcase and some papers, and was about to lock up her office, when she met Nick in the hallway. He was holding a piece of paper.

‘For you,’ he said, as he handed it to her.

Felicity grabbed the sheet with her spare hand. It was a printout of an email. She scanned it quickly, then read it once more.

She looked at Nick.

He was smiling like a fool.

Her feet suddenly felt leaden. She bent her knees and put a hand to the wall to steady herself. ‘So,’ she said to Nick.

‘So, indeed.’ He paused, rubbing his hands together. ‘We are going to be the envy of all the schools in the area. I can’t say I’m not enjoying it just a little bit in respect to how green Federation Primary is going to be.’

Felicity glanced at the email once more, making sure she wasn’t mistaken. Too dazed to turn on her internal censor, she said, ‘Oh, grow up, Nick. He’s just a bloke. A bloke who worked here a very long time ago. And let’s not forget this bloke’s name is Craig, not Conor.’

## Chapter 14 – Secret teachers' business

Parents tended to leave teachers alone at Beauvista. Every now and then, differences of opinion over punishment led to the occasional stoush. But apart from that, contact was fleeting at best: hand in a late permission slip, say hello at the start or the end of the school day, drop off a forgotten lunch.

For the most part, parents did not step into Alex's room. This brought him comfort. Few or no visitors meant even fewer questions; however unlikely the prospect of probing questions, given the clientele at the school. With report time looming, Alex knew there would soon be, if only momentarily, a stream of parents through his door. Still, it was nothing like what Madeleine experienced at Federation, with parents regularly calling teachers to account over the most piddling of details. Once she told him one of the parents met with her to work on a strategic academic options plan for university study for her Grade Two child. Which was just privileged Morse Code putting the teacher on notice for neglecting to adequately stimulate precious little Xavier's very remarkable brain cells.

Thankfully, the parents at Beauvista were not like that.

\* \* \*

One morning before the bell, Alex was standing on a chair, picking staples out of a notice board. He had yet to set his helpers to tasks, and so they had taken it upon themselves to find something to do. Their sense of purpose was, as

always, industrious and voluble. And so Alex didn't notice the silent presence next to him until he finished his job and looked down. He did not know how long Thuy's mother had been standing there. Mrs Tran's calmly dignified demeanour was in stark contrast with the rambunctious disorder of the classroom, which now swirled louder and more unbearable around her tiny frame.

One group of kids were hamming it up in the dress-ups box. Another group was systematically burying the plastic dinosaur collection in a mountain of play dough, with matching sound effects. Alex called out for some quiet. When the request was largely ignored, he asked the play dough group, 'What are you doing with those dinosaurs?'

'There was a tsunami,' Bridie said. 'They're dead, now.'

Alex dismounted, trying to compose himself. 'Mrs Tran... hello. Can I do something?'

'Good morning, Mr Kiernan. I can talk with you please?'

Alex looked about him, unsure how to find a quiet space amid the squabble and noise of so many small bodies.

'Listen up, everyone.'

Some heads turned. Others seemed oblivious. Jake and Zayne were jumping up and down on the spot like they had springs for feet. Alex noticed Thuy standing stock still in the far corner as she watched her mother, her arms straight and stiff by her sides.

'This morning, seeing as I have to speak to Thuy's mum, I think I'll only have six doing the morning helping.'

There was a collective moan. Alex quickly selected six kids that were reliably compliant, and waited as the others moped out of the room. When he turned back to Mrs Tran, she was waiting for him. Reading her expression was difficult. There was no smile on her face, but she didn't seem upset in any way. Nor did she seem to be hiding anything. Quite the opposite, in fact; everything about her was transparent, from the clean scrubbed face with not a trace of makeup to her immaculate, straight cut black hair. Her hands were neatly positioned on the worn handles of a Coles supermarket bag.

'Please, take a seat, Mrs Tran,' Alex said, gesturing towards one of the kids' tables. He sat down next to her. 'Everything okay?'

She smiled nervously before speaking. 'Thuy is very happy in your class, so I want to thank you for that. But when I ask her how she doing with maths and writing, she tell me you don't do much of that. She says there is a lot of art and music, fun and game play. Good, you know. She enjoy it. But I am worried, because maths important too.'

'Oh, you don't need to worry, Mrs Tran. I do teach through play and games. I think the kids like it, and learn more easily. We are doing maths and English, but the kids are so busy having fun they sometimes don't notice it.'

Mrs Tran was easily pacified. She smiled and did not push the issue further. She spoke respectfully, praising the colourful displays in the room. After what Alex sensed was an obligatory amount of small talk, she stood and excused herself.

Alex turned his attention to the six kids who had been quietly moving about the room, some playing at building the railway track and assembling trains, and the rest tidying the book corner and browsing through books.

It hadn't taken long to achieve his primary goal. They were happy.

Despite that knowledge, something was bothering Alex, though he had no clue as to figuring out what. Was The Joy Project counterproductive? Was Alex in fact trading joy for something vital that would be difficult or even impossible to compensate for later on? What about the maths, science and other valuable knowledge? Should he be listening to Vivian, Felicity and Ivana Hepner when it came to literacy education, or was it enough to teach it in his own way? Was Alex's particular brand of organic literacy, taught primarily through intuitive and feel-good strategies, enough? Was The Joy Project in fact wreaking irreparable damage to his students' education?

He glanced out the window, and saw Mrs Tran slip out of the school. Upright and composed, she appeared much larger than her tiny frame. She trusted him, and yet he'd behaved like a total arse, lying to her about the maths. If he'd been honest, he would have conceded that since starting The Joy Project he'd hardly given a thought to maths. Not because he'd been remiss,

but because he'd actually planned it that way. His primary goal was for the kids to be happy. When they didn't suggest maths, he did not impose it. At the outset, he'd reasoned that if the kids were happy at school, then all the rest would naturally follow. Somehow, if they were engaged and happy, they would seek out other knowledge, which in theory would balance out to encompass all curriculum areas. But that wasn't how it was panning out so far. In his decision to step back from control, thereby putting it firmly in the kids' hands, had he in fact assigned them to a rudderless ship?

What did Mrs Tran think of him? Like gazing down the lens of a telescope, he saw himself through her eyes; a small, faraway figure. Not the inspiring rule-breaker he'd imagined when he envisioned The Joy Project, but a lazy, incompetent liar.

\* \* \*

Two portables away, Vivian Pinkus was also seeing out a parent.

'Don't bother with After School Care, Fatima. I'll be here until five on Thursday. You just come by when you finish work, and Aysha will be here with me.'

'Thank you very much, Mrs Pinkus. You're very kind.' Fatima squeezed Vivian's hand before leaving.

Before going back inside, Vivian caught a glimpse of Zara Catumini leaning against Gus's portable. The two women had not spoken since the last altercation. Today, her hair was lank and dull from lack of washing. Old mascara was smudged under her eyes, adding years to her age. Between her fingers, she held a smouldering cigarette.

Though she wanted to avoid talking to Zara more than anything, Vivian knew she couldn't let it go. Turning on her heels, she marched down the portable steps.

'Good morning, Mrs Catumini,' she said, in a neutral but cordial tone.

The sound Zara emitted in response was more a grunt than a word. 'Don't give me that *Mrs* bullshit.'

Vivian preferred using formal titles with parents like Zara Catumini. However, she would call the woman anything she wanted if it would help smooth their relations. 'Okay, Zara. How are things?' She flashed a perfunctory smile.

Zara stuck out her chin. 'Crap, that's how,' she said, pulling at her cheap, tired clothing. She brought the cigarette to her lips with yellowed fingers and took a long drag. 'Anyway, what the fuck do you care?'

The words stung, but Vivian tried to appear unmoved.

'Just asking, Zara. However, I did come out just to let you know,' she pointed to the cigarette, 'there's no smoking in the school yard.'

'Fuck off,' Zara said, her face tense and grey. 'It's a public place, and I'm outside. You don't fuckin' tell me what to do . Just go back to your nice little classroom and give them kids the shits instead.'

'I don't think that's appropriate,' was all Vivian could stutter. Her pulse thudded in her ears. She wanted to come back at the bitch with a snappy retort, but her tongue felt sluggish. She'd dealt with difficult parents before, so what was it about this woman that so efficiently unpicked the stitches of her confidence?

The only thing Vivian could do was to hold her in a stare. In that smallest of battles, she would not be defeated. After a particularly deprecating look, Zara eventually turned away. Staring off in the direction of the oval, she took another long drag, then threw the cigarette on the ground and extinguished it with her shoe. As she walked away, she put her hand behind her and gave Vivian the finger.

Vivian swallowed. She picked up the butt and took it to her classroom where she placed it into the bin.

Then she squatted behind her desk where none of the parents could see her and began to cry.

## Chapter 15 – A genuine contribution

Jess started each day with a brick in her stomach. Breathing exercises lightened the pressure a little, but never managed to completely remove the weight.

First up was always independent reading, but this morning there was a delay. Angelina had a snakeskin to show the class. She'd come in that morning and thrust a sealed envelope in Jess's hand. The formal note from the especially bossy mother looked so authoritative that Jess didn't dare tell Angelina to shove the skin back in her school bag.

'Good morning Ms Tingwell, Good morning children,' Angelina began. Her voice droned on and on. Jess glanced repeatedly at the clock as minutes ticked painfully by.

That *Show and Tell* was not strictly allowed, or was frowned-upon, at least, was the primary thought going through Jess's mind. Eventually, there was a gap in the monologue and Jess dived in to quickly wind the child up. If they sat around talking about any random thing every morning, they'd never get through anything.

Soon Jess set the class off on independent reading while she worked with one group on guided reading. But so many who were meant to be reading independently were not. Instead, they were chatting, or walking around the room. Jess could not focus on her group.

It did not help that Jasper and Milo were having an arm wrestle at their table. Jess watched for a few seconds, then stood. 'Stop it,' she roared.

By now, Milo had the upper hand. 'I win, I win,' he shouted.

Jasper, rubbing his hand, looked ready to cry.

'Boys, that's enough,' Jess said. 'What should you be doing?' She couldn't believe her day was littered with so many banal questions.

Eventually, Jess coaxed the class back to their various tasks.

But by now, she was too distracted to focus on her guided reading group. Jess closed her eyes. Her head hummed with white noise. She filled her lungs with air and held her breath. One, two, three... She counted to ten, then slowly released the air. Breathe. Hold. Release. Breathe. Hold. Release.

She remembered one of her university lecturers once saying that a rich learning environment had a particular sound. *You walk in, and you know there's learning going on.* Apparently, it was a bit like a hum. Jess understood vaguely what her lecturer was referring to. Occasionally, she'd walked into some classrooms that had that vibe, though she would struggle to define it. All she knew was that her classroom didn't have it. If that fabled hum were a symphony, Jess's classroom had the sound of a washing machine. Doing its job, but not inspiring the pants off anyone.

Recess mercifully arrived. Jess checked her emails before heading to the staffroom. Her back stiffened as she saw not just one email from Veronica but three.

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**Sent: 6 May 2015, at 9.45 AM**

**From: Veronica Dundas**

**To: Jess Tingwell**

**Subject: Harriet**

*Hi Jess,*

*Hope you are well. Can I make a time to see you about Harriet's project. She is awfully stressed about it, and wants to express herself adequately. It's just that the sessions are so short that she is not able to get into the zone before you're asking everyone to pack up. Also, I wanted to discuss Harriet's reading. She tells me she has been put down a group, which I*

*can't understand, as we read so much at home. She actually reads the paper alongside me on Saturday mornings. I am free afternoons after 5.30. This week would be best, though, because time is of the essence. Looking forward to your reply.*

*Best,*

*Veronica*

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**Sent: 6 May 2015, at 9.47 AM**

**From: Veronica Dundas**

**To: Jess Tingwell**

**Subject: Harriet**

*Hi Jess,*

*Sorry, I forgot to mention it would really suit me to come and see you tonight. Nothing like the present, and all that.*

*Regards,*

*Veronica Dundas*

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**Sent: 6 May 2015, at 9.48 AM**

**From: Veronica Dundas**

**To: Jess Tingwell**

**Subject: Harriet**

*Jess, I hope you don't mind if I record our meeting tonight. It's just that I want to make sure I remember your advice.*

*Regards,*

*Veronica Dundas*

Jess's heart sank. Why on earth would the woman want to tape the meeting except to make trouble?

Jess quickly typed back a response, granting the request. As soon as she hit the send button, she felt defeated. The uber-parent always won. It wasn't

until she felt dizzy that she realised she'd been breathing too quickly. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Breathe. Hold. Release.

Half hour later, in the staffroom, Jess related the story to Madeleine.

'That woman!' said Madeleine. 'I had Harriet for Friday afternoon clubs last term, and that mother expected a full report. She's nuts, I tell you. I mean, who wants to quiz a teacher your child has for two hours a week? A lunatic, that's who.'

The lump in Jess's throat grew uncomfortably painful.

'You shouldn't have given her that meeting time,' Madeleine went on. 'Especially not tonight when you're not ready. And why did you agree to let her tape the meeting? What is this, ASIO, for god's sake?'

\* \* \*

The ReWARD Program was a good excuse for Alex to miss IKEA shopping that Saturday morning.

Madeleine was in high spirits, scribbling notes on her catalogue as they ate breakfast.

'What do you think of this wall unit?'

'Um... okay. Lots of storage.'

'But do you like the shape of it? Do you think it will fit in the lounge room against the wall near the window?'

It had been a month since they bought the unit, and Alex could no longer picture it clearly. 'I'm not really sure. I'll be happy with whatever you choose.'

'Okay, but no complaints later,' Madeleine warned as she gathered up the giant IKEA bag and fussed with her notes. 'Say hi to Jess, and say sorry I couldn't be there today.'

'I will. Say hi to your mum, and say sorry I couldn't be there.'

Madeleine pinched him a little too hard on the chest as she bent to kiss him. 'Don't pretend. I know the idea of shopping with me and Mum is like sticking pins in your eyes.'

'Oww,' Alex said. 'Gentle!'

Madeleine stood back. 'Okay, delicate flower. I'll see you later.'

Alex took a few seconds to absorb the pain. Just before Madeleine disappeared out the door, he said, 'I'm not a delicate flower. That bloody hurt.'

Madeleine regarded him with vague annoyance. 'Oh, Alex, grow up,' she said, before pulling the door shut.

Afterwards, in the silence of the room, Alex sorted through his catalogue of emotions. What he felt right now was at once familiar and remote. He took a few minutes to filter it. Then, it came. It always ended this way when one of his parents chastised him. He'd shoot a puerile response their way in order to have the last word.

When he was twelve.

\* \* \*

'Well, here we are again,' Alex said as he sidled up to Jess.

'We sure are.'

'How will we tackle this?'

They had their instructions from Felicity. Pedagogical leadership was their brief.

'It seems simple,' Jess said. 'The point of the program, like Felicity said, is to improve literacy skills through arts-based activities. The volunteers have some great ideas about the kinds of things they can do, so rather than us planning a whole lot of activities, why don't we ask them first?'

Alex agreed that was a good way to start. For the next hour, they separated, going around to each of the groups, asking the volunteers' opinions about what were their preferred ways of working with the kids. Afterwards, they sat down in the kitchen adjacent to the hall to compare notes and come up with a plan. Within the hour, they had brainstormed at least five ideas for each of the different groups, based on how the volunteers preferred to work and what interested them both in terms of literacy and arts styles and techniques.

In the corner of the kitchen, an urn bubbled away. Teabags and a tin of instant coffee were on a table nearby, as well as an opened packet of shortbread biscuits on a chipped plate.

'Ugh, that coffee,' Alex said. 'It'll have to be tea.' He opened the fridge and found an opened container of long-life milk. He sniffed it and shrugged. 'Hopefully it's not from last week. Even long-life has its use-by.'

They sat with their drinks and biscuits. Alex searched the bare room for inspiration. He was used to Madeleine filling every gap with her chatter, but Jess wasn't like that. When he was with her, he often found himself struggling to think of things to say. Strangely, it didn't make him one bit uncomfortable. Jess was gazing dreamily into her mug, her thin frame bulked up by a puffy jacket and stripey scarf. Then suddenly she sprang up, rearranged the mugs and the plate of biscuits before her, placing a blue glazed vase that had been sitting on top of the fridge in between. She took out her phone and snapped a picture, did a quick edit, and then uploaded it to Instagram.

Alex leant in so he could see what Jess was typing as a caption. She smelled of vanilla and soap. Warmth radiated from her small frame. She looked up with a shy smile and showed him the post.

Surprisingly, the image worked. Clever composition and the combination of colours made the cheap snack look like a gourmet treat. The caption read:

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jess\_t'well Yummy snack with new friend. Hard work makes no-name bikkies and tea taste delicious.

'Nice. Laminex and supermarket biscuits. Oh, and Styrofoam cups. Everyone will be jealous.'

'Stop it. I always post foodie stuff. It's an addiction. You're on Instagram, right?'

'Yeah, but I hardly use it. I started a blog a while ago. At this stage I'm just trying to sort out my thoughts.' He sat down opposite her once again and crossed his legs, studying the toe of his shoe to avoid making eye contact. 'It's sort of odd putting stuff out there. Every now and then I get a visitor or two, but

it's just people stumbling onto the site. You can tell they're just trying to find followers for their own blogs. I've had a few likes, nothing more. Not that I care. I write the blog for myself, not so anyone will actually read it.'

He flicked a glance her way and found her looking right back at him. Her gaze was bright, direct. 'I'd like to,' she said, smiling tentatively. Alex sensed the moment as more than just a nicety. Jess was taking a first shaky step in their dance of friendship. He liked the idea, but the notion of letting her into his thoughts made him feel raw and exposed. He wasn't sure he could say yes. 'That means I'd have to reveal my secret identity.'

'Only if you want to...'

'Let me think about it,' Alex said. The blog was hardly established, and he still didn't know where he was going with it. The last thing he wanted was for Jess to read a couple of inane ramblings. Someone who could make Styrofoam and a high school pottery project look that good would cringe at his half-baked attempt at erudition.

'They should do something more with this kitchen,' Jess said.

'Like?'

'Like when we come here, why don't we prepare some snacks for the kids? I can bring some stuff, and the kids could help with serving up. I mean, cooking isn't art, but it can be creative.' She thought for a moment. 'And we could write about it.' She turned her head swiftly, her face aglow with the possibility. Her hair fanned out, then settled smoothly on her shoulders.

Suddenly, Jess was like a firecracker. Alex hadn't seen her like this before. He watched her as she brought her fingers up to her chin, checking out the room for potential. 'Plus it will give me something to do that remotely resembles a genuine contribution.'

Later, as he drove home, Jess's words kept going around in his mind. A *genuine contribution*. He wondered if anything in his teaching resembled a genuine contribution.

## Chapter 16 – Searching

News of Conor Reynolds' visit to the school exploded like a Rio carnival in the usually austere grounds of Beauvista. While on yard duty, Alex noticed the kids talking of little else.

Without apparent orchestration, all the Conor Reynolds paraphernalia that had been building in each classroom somehow found its way into corridors and outdoor walkways. It seemed that everywhere Alex looked, he found Conor's suntanned face and million dollar grin staring back at him.

Nick called a special assembly right after recess on the day the news became official. He drew his shoulders back and spoke with the pride and solemnity befitting an international event.

'I am delighted to announce a historic occasion for our school. While filming his latest movie in Melbourne, Conor Reynolds will visit Beauvista Primary.'

Excitement tore through the assembly. Kids who had been motionless only a few seconds earlier were now jumping up and down, calling out and cheering. Teachers attempted in vain to control their group. Nick had to stop speaking until the students had settled somewhat and his voice could once again be heard over the loudspeaker.

'As you probably know, Conor used to work here at Beauvista. In fact, he was a teacher here when both Ms Ryan and I were on staff. He hasn't returned to Australia for many years, so this is quite a special occasion for our school.'

Alex glanced at Felicity, her expression neutral as she gazed into the distance.

\* \* \*

Later that day, Felicity sidled up to Alex in the staffroom. 'How are things?'

'What do you mean?' Alex said. He wasn't sure to which *things* Felicity might be referring. 'In terms of the big movie star paying a visit?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Oh, I couldn't care less about the big movie star. I'm interested in far more mundane, yet very important things.'

'Like...?'

'Like your teaching. How is it going? Kids seem to be having a... *nice* time in your class.'

'Oh, well, I think they are. I hope so, anyway.' A silence fell between them, and Alex was compelled to fill it with the first thing that came into his mind. 'Everything's fine,' he said, lying. Then he added a truth to counteract the lie. 'I'm really enjoying it,' he said, allowing himself to luxuriate in the relief of momentary absolution.

Felicity nodded and smiled, but her expression was deadly serious. 'That's great, Alex. I've come past from time to time, and I've had a bit of a look in. You've been too busy to notice me.'

Alex blinked. 'I have seen you.'

The smile did not leave her lips. 'Seems rather rowdy in there. How is that working for the students? I can't imagine it would be easy to get much done.'

Alex wasn't sure what to say. He suspected he now knew a little about how a mouse felt in the moment between staring into the unflinching green eyes of a cat and death.

\* \* \*

Jess unloaded three trays of muffins from her car. One was apple and rhubarb, the next chocolate chunk and the last blueberry. She'd stayed up until 1am

finishing up baking so that her stash would be ready for the morning. As she closed the boot of her car, she felt unusually light on her feet. Nor did she need to control her breathing. It seemed out of whack to be feeling this way upon entering a school, and Jess realised that it was the first time she'd felt joyful about the prospect of stepping onto school grounds and setting to work.

She was still standing there, grinning like an idiot, when she saw Alex pull into the car park. He got out and rushed to meet her.

'Here, let me take something.' He peeked under the foil and sniffed at the offerings. 'Man, what have you been up to?'

'I thought I'd start small. If we have some morning tea this time, I'll see how it goes.'

'I think it's a safe bet these'll be scoffed in two seconds flat.'

Jess smiled, a warm glow spreading in her chest. 'I'll talk to Felicity about getting the kids organised to do some cooking while they're here. It'll need funding. The kitchen is there pretty much in name only. If we're going to do this, the stove and oven will need to be overhauled, or serviced at the very least, and we'll need some pots and linen. Oh, and plates, of course.' She took a deep breath. 'Anyway, it can be done. And I think the kids would love it.'

Alex watched her with a wonky smile.

'What?'

'Nothing,' he said. 'Loving the enthusiasm, that's all.'

'Well, I'm sure I can justify it in an educational sense. I mean for one thing, it's experiential learning, and... and also constructivist. Have you read about Vygotsky?'

Alex scratched his head and grimaced. 'There was a lot of talk of Vygotsky and Gardner at uni. Couldn't really say whether I've read much beyond Googling the references for my assignments.' He shrugged. 'Sorry. That was a bit of a confession, wasn't it?'

'It's okay,' Jess said. 'Nice to know someone who doesn't need a theoretical justification for everything.'

He leant against the side of the car. 'Don't know much about theory. I tend to follow my gut.'

‘Yeah? How’s that?’

He looked down at his feet, appearing to study the circular patterns he was making with his shoes on the asphalt. ‘I have a project going in my class. It’s based on a few ideas I’ve been tossing around since I started teaching.’ He met her gaze only briefly before squinting into the distance.

‘Tell me about it,’ Jess said, and squeezed his arm. ‘I’m sure it’s a fabulous project. I’ve seen the way you work with these kids here on Saturdays. You’re an amazing teacher.’

Alex seemed to swell with pride at her words, and as they walked into the building, he shared something of the project he was conducting in his classroom. Jess made encouraging sounds and when their duties demanded they stop talking, she made him promise to come back to it later.

At the end of morning tea, after the muffins were devoured and Alex was washing up, Jess found Felicity and brought her back to the kitchen. She blurted out the spiel she’d been rehearsing in her head, her words tumbling out in a rush. She bit her lip as she waited for Felicity’s response.

Felicity laughed. ‘Relax, Jess. I think introducing food makes the ReWARD Program more like home. That’s exactly how I want the kids to feel when they come here.’

Jess beamed at the praise. She glanced at Alex and smiled. He’d been quietly listening as he worked, and looked as nervous as she felt.

Later in the car park, he said, ‘Let me know if there’s anything I can do. That’s a lot of work you’ve taken on.’

‘Will you be here next Saturday?’

‘Of course.’

‘That’s all I need then.’

They said goodbye standing next to the mesh wire fence. Jess felt so happy with the day she almost stepped forward to hug him. Partly to thank him for being so supportive and so nice, but also just because she was so utterly thrilled to be feeling something other than despair. But to embrace Alex would have been awkward, of course, and so she bundled the baking trays into the

back seat and drove away. When she glanced in her rear-view mirror, she saw he hadn't moved a smidge.

\* \* \*

Later that night, unable to sleep, Alex got up and penned a post.

---

## **THEORY**

*Posted May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

*Theory. Theory, for fuck's sake.*

My new friend just helped me make a connection. Vygotsky and Gardner came rushing back at me like ghosts from a distant past. It hasn't been that long since I had to think about them, and others, but in the time since finishing my course, I've just pushed all that stuff to the most remote filing cabinets of my mind. Maybe that's not a good thing. Maybe my friend has a point.

As I struggled with implementing The Joy Project, it hadn't occurred to me to look for inspiration, or validation, outside of what was clearly my own, narrow-minded focus.

Maybe this is where I will find some answers. *Maybe.*

I've been lost, and this is a good place to start finding my way.

He shut down his laptop and wandered back to bed. Maddie's warmth was appealing, and he considered snuggling up to her. But he was afraid he'd wake her, and so he kept to his side of the bed and drifted into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 17 – Daring to imagine a different landscape

Jess woke up early on Sunday. She travelled to the market and bought six eggplants, some gourmet mozzarella, and a couple of kilograms of ripe tomatoes. She wandered around the delicatessen stalls, her peckish stomach getting the better of her. When she got home, she made Eggplant Parmigiana and put it in the oven.

A fully-stocked fridge always made Jess cheerful, and today she felt euphoric. She had the makings of an impressive antipasto to go with the main course. Then she remembered the bottle of Moët Aunt Flick gave her at graduation. She'd been saving it for a special occasion. The return of sunshine in her life was as good an excuse for that as any.

But it was a whole bottle, and there was too much food. Jess's thoughts flew instinctively to the one person she'd like to share the meal with – Alex. But Alex had Madeleine in his life, and she couldn't invite him over, no matter how innocent the get-together, without it seeming like she was making a move on him. If she was honest, her intentions weren't totally innocent. She would have to invite Madeleine. Jess thought it over for a minute. The aroma of the eggplant Parmigiana drifted into her small sitting room.

Before she lost her nerve, she dialled Madeleine's number.

She arranged the antipasto on a wooden serving board. She took a few snaps, did some editing and uploaded one to Instagram.

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jess\_t'well Lunch with friends. Happy days.

\* \* \*

Out of the blue, they were a threesome.

Alex heard Madeleine take Jess's phone call, and within an hour they were all sitting around Jess's kitchen table, drinking Moët and picking at delicious delicatessen tidbits on a thick chunk of wood he guessed was meant to be a cross between a platter and a chopping board.

Alex hadn't been to many fancy restaurants, but one look around Jess's very basic apartment and it was easy to tell she wore her heart in her kitchen. Sitting there, sipping champagne, surrounded by the delectable aroma of the eggplant dish, Alex noticed that every pot, every dish, and every cooking utensil looked either expensive, commercial grade, or both. In comparison, the living room was Spartan. An old sofa covered with a blue and white striped cotton throw, some cushions, the ubiquitous ten dollar IKEA table, and a stack of shelves bursting with mainly cookbooks.

'Absolutely delicious,' Madeleine said, raising the last bite of Parmigiana to her lips. 'I had no idea.'

'Jess is going to give Felicity's ReWARD program a food makeover,' Alex said.

'And I'm not stopping there.'

'Yeah?' Alex said.

'Forget the ReWARD program. I'm giving my life a food makeover.'

There was an air of expectancy in the air. Alex wanted to bombard Jess with questions, but he thought Madeleine might think it weird, and so he held back.

Jess finished off her champagne. She held up the bottle. 'Gone. Should I open something else?' I feel an announcement coming on.'

'We brought a bottle of Pinot Grigio. We can open that.'

‘Oh, god, I forgot. Sorry.’ Jess rushed to retrieve the bottle from the fridge. Alex glanced at Madeleine. Their eyes met. She was sitting there quietly studying him, her hands folded across her lap.

After pouring the wine, Jess held her glass up and spoke. ‘I think I’d like to open a café.’ She paused, choosing her words carefully. ‘I’m not sure why I chose teaching, but every day I feel more strongly that it’s not for me, and way harder than running a café. At least I think so.’ She laughed. ‘I’ve never actually run a café before. Though I can now safely say I’ve run a classroom, and I don’t think I’m very good at that.’

‘I don’t think that’s true,’ Alex said.

‘But you’ve got an ongoing position,’ Madeleine said, incredulous. ‘Obviously you’ll ask for a year off without pay and then reconsider?’

Jess smiled. ‘Nup. At the end of this year, when I’ve saved up enough money to get my venture off the ground, I’m getting out. Once and for all.’ Jess set her glass aside and put both her palms on the table. ‘I’ve thought about it. I’m not changing my mind.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ Disbelief aside, Madeleine was so wedded to being a teacher she couldn’t understand why anyone could so casually toss the whole thing away.

‘There are other things in life besides teaching, Madeleine,’ Alex blurted out.

Madeleine turned, her mouth agape. ‘I know, but after all that training?’

Alex turned The Joy Project around in his mind. What good had his training been to him, when he was now ignoring most of what he’d been indoctrinated to do and to believe? Sometimes he wished the world were as black and white to him as it was to Madeleine. It would be easier that way. But then, just looking at the glow in Jess’s cheeks reminded him that a million shades of colour beat black and white any day.

Madeleine’s laugh came out a bit shrill. ‘I’m glad you’re not thinking of a new career, Alex. We’ll have quite a bit of responsibility soon.’

‘You make it sound like we’re having a baby.’ Alex fiddled with his napkin. ‘It’s just a mortgage.’ In truth, the apartment and all it entailed felt as big a

responsibility as a baby, but better to slay the dragon with words than let the fear invade him.

Madeleine opened her mouth, then closed it.

'When do you take possession?' Jess asked. 'Must be exciting.'

Alex was flooded with relief that the conversation was taking a different turn.

'It is *really* exciting,' said Madeleine. 'I can't wait to move out of my parents'. Not that I'm there all that much, I mostly stay at Alex's. But still. It's a big step, and I can't wait to decorate my own home.

The women kept the conversation going while Alex retreated into his thoughts. Lately he seemed to be doing that a lot.

\* \* \*

Alex was relieved when Madeleine said she'd leave him to his Sunday night planning. She'd been quiet in the car on the way home from Jess's, though her goodbye was affectionate. He suspected she was giving him the silent treatment. Right now it suited him.

Never mind that he never did any planning any more.

He'd tell her, soon. Really, he would.

He made himself a coffee, powered up his laptop and entered *Educational Theory* into Google.

As a starting point, he clicked on the first entry: Wikipedia.

## Chapter 18 – The ordinariness of creativity

Wikipedia was just the start. Over the following two weeks Alex devoured a regular diet of educational theory, hopping from one source to the next with the voraciousness of a jaguar. He couldn't quite believe how painless it was proving to be. He was almost enjoying it. Theory had been dead boring in university. Maybe it was the way the lecturers packaged the information, or perhaps it was a case of it all being out of context. Now he was up to his ears in context, and struggling to keep from drowning.

A simple truth emerged rapidly: the success of The Joy Project depended on him. The more he read about different theories and wrapped his head around the concepts, the more he felt he was being thrown a lifeline.

He logged onto Running Man and began a new post.

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### THE ROADMAP

*Posted June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015*

Could theory be a roadmap for The Joy Project? Weeks of trialling stuff has had me going around in circles. Kids are happy most of the time, and the class is loads of fun, but there are questions.

1. Why am I doing this?
2. What's my theory of education?

3. What should inform my work as an educator? That is, what is it that leads teachers to do what they do?

I began The Joy Project by instinct. Kind of embarrassed to say, but at the time I started, I wasn't thinking theory or structure. I just wanted the kids to be kids. I wanted them to discover, to learn, and above all, to find joy in what they did.

And I wanted to find joy for myself.

Turns out, I think that a few theorists are pointing the same way I've been heading. But even better, they're shining the headlights on the road, allowing me to get there more directly, with a more reliable and faster vehicle.

Been through some classic theorists, and have now moved on to more recent stuff. Great stuff about shaking up education. Watched a few Ken Robinson videos. The man is speaking my language. That stuff about creativity is literally blowing my mind.

\* \* \*

Theories weren't the only thing Alex discovered in his reading. There were loads of accounts, in articles and in textbooks, of teachers just like him. Dissatisfaction was rife. Teachers everywhere were disillusioned, stressed, burnt out and angry. Like him, they were weighed down by the institutional and political quagmire of neo-liberal education. Now, there was a term. Alex had heard it tossed around at uni but had never stopped to consider its meaning. Now it was a label that not only made sense, but that explained so much of what was happening in education and in the world.

But what Alex found most alarming about what had been happening in schools for the last twenty or more years was that nobody seemed to be listening. Not the leaders of schools, not the education department, and not the

politicians who controlled education at the highest levels. Parents, rather than fighting for their children's rights to be less stringently measured, were instead running in mad circles around the private-public debate. In trying to secure the best schools they were completely missing vital gems that, like paving stones, lined the well-worn path under their feet.

The Joy Project had opened his eyes. Without it, he would never have gone digging for answers. Now that he'd a tasted a little wedge of that forbidden apple, he could never be the same. He could never do what the others did, day in, day out, without questioning, deadening themselves a little more each day, and deadening their students to how wonderful it was to be alive and to be learning.

In time, he would spread the news.

\* \* \*

Alex and Madeleine were driving to her parents' for dinner. Madeleine was in a chatty mood, babbling on about their move to Vicars Road. She said they would combine their furniture to set up the new place. A quick trip to IKEA for anything else. They would need to contact the bank to ensure the settlement date was lining up with release of funds from the mortgage.

Alex nodded and murmured his assent. Then he took a deep breath and began.

The first thing he mentioned was that he'd been trying a new teaching strategy centred on the concept of self-fulfilment and optimism. He quoted Seligman's *The Optimistic Child* to make the project sound more legit, because at this stage, he didn't think mentioning the word *joy* would help him much. He had in fact read up a bit on Seligman's book, and he'd ordered it online, but still hadn't received it. So he mumbled something about building kids' lifelong resilience, and the prevention of depression.

Madeleine listened in silence.

Then Alex gave a severely edited snapshot of his last few days, not mentioning the chaos and the noise. Instead he presented a version of The Joy

Project as it lived in his imagination. Instead of the harsh truth, he sugar-coated the account by saying the kids were still deciding on the learning direction, that he was introducing a bit of structure for focus and to avoid large-scale time wasting.

Madeleine continued to be silent.

To make the account more believable, to show Madeleine he didn't have his head completely in the clouds, he threw in an obstacle that he would later show to be easily surmountable. 'Some of the parents were concerned,' he said, turning Mrs Tran from a singular individual, to an indistinct group of mild objectors. 'One of them was a bit worried about maths not being given enough time, but I took care of it.'

'What do you mean, you took care of it? What exactly did you do? Are you actually devoting enough time to maths?'

Alex shifted uncomfortably in his car seat. 'Well, sure. Though I could always be doing more... That's why I'm doing my research. I want to teach deliberately, not passively. I want to believe and understand what I'm doing, not follow blindly like a sheep.'

Madeleine put her hands on her temples, cradling her head as though it might at any moment snap off her neck and go rolling into her lap. 'Sheep aren't blind, Alex, but I think you might be. They stick together because nature has designed it that way. Much of what has to happen on a large scale, like education, is best carried out in an organised, regulated manner.'

'I can't believe you're saying teachers should be like sheep.'

'And I can't believe you think you can just go off half-cocked with this hare-brained scheme.'

'It's not hare-brained if it has a sound theoretical basis.'

She sighed loudly. 'Theory is fine in uni, Alex. It gets you through. But tell me if you've ever met one teacher in your school who talks or thinks theory. You might need to spout theory to get yourself into a job, but in order to keep that job, you're best to throw theory right out the window where it belongs and focus on what works on the ground. Or in the trenches, more like it. We're soldiers, Alex,

nothing more. Jesus, one year out of uni, and you think you ought to be a general.'

Alex wanted to bite back; the reference to war had made him think in combative terms. But they were nearly at their destination, and Madeleine's tone was so belligerent he doubted she could pull it together for the sedate pre-dinner chit-chat with her folks. Perspiration made his fresh T-shirt stick to his chest. He tugged at the fabric, fanning himself. 'It's one for another day,' he said, attempting to diffuse the argument.

'I think you are getting into really dangerous territory. Dangerous, but above all, ridiculous. I still don't understand what the point of all this is.'

There was a point. Alex knew that in his heart. But it was all still a bit cloudy. In its present form, he doubted he could explain The Joy Project any way Madeleine would understand.

Jess was the only one who got it.

'I don't know how you find the time. I've been drowning in reports for weeks now. I haven't seen you doing any at home. Where are you finding the time?'

Alex felt himself reddening, and was glad it was dark. 'Oh, I've just been doing one or so a day after school. I'm just about done.' He hadn't yet made a start, and now wondered how quickly reports could be written.

Mercifully, they arrived at the Kilpatricks', where the immediate need for civility put an end to the tirade.

\* \* \*

Sixteen hours flight time, and Conor would be standing on Australian soil for the first time in twenty years.

'Honey, hand me my bag, will you?' Kym said, leaning forward in the back of the limo.

He grabbed the bag. It weighed a ton. 'What have you got in there, rocks?'

Kym blew him a kiss, before rustling around in the depths of the bag. Eventually, she retrieved a compact and a lipstick and reapplied her make-up.

Conor couldn't quite understand why. The make-up on her face was already like a mask.

He shook his head and sighed.

A small crease appeared between Kym's brows. 'Honey! I want to make you proud.'

'You always look good, baby. And, there's no need, we'll be on the jet soon.'

'But that's just it,' she said, pouting into the mirror. 'There's bound to be press, and I want to make sure I look my best.' She put her face next to his as she struck a pose and took a selfie.

God, Conor thought. Why am I with her? He missed Charisse. She was the closest thing to a real person he had known since coming to Hollywood. But wasn't that the reason he'd started playing around? To have someone more glamorous, younger, and more exciting on his arm?

He knew Kym didn't love him. He didn't love her. If Charisse was sitting across from him, now, it would be a whole other conversation.

'What are we doing when we get to Melbourne?' Kym said, pronouncing his home town in the way all Americans did, by emphasising the second syllable.

'Not much,' he said. 'Just visiting a primary school.'

'Really? Why?'

'I used to work there.'

Kym laughed. 'Really? Were you the janitor?'

Conor thought of his days at Beauvista, so far away and so foreign to him now, yet still so vivid. He remembered Felicity's throaty laugh, the way she threw her head back at his lame jokes. He'd meant to keep in touch. He hadn't, of course.

It was all back to front. The life he thought would be exhilarating and stimulating was nothing but an anaesthetised carousel ride. In contrast, memories of his old life were like a virtual reality tour. Every sound, image, smell and feeling seemed hyper real. Yet it was all an illusion. If he stepped forward to touch it, he would fall headlong into the void.

The limo glided onto the tarmac towards bay 27, where the private jet was waiting.

‘I wasn’t the cleaner,’ Conor said. ‘I used to teach.’

\* \* \*

Alex couldn’t wait for the ReWARd Program. Dinner at the Kilpatricks’ the night before had been excruciating. Conversation had seesawed between décor for the new apartment and thinly veiled references to nuptials.

He needed a sounding board for The Joy Project. Madeleine was out. Gus was a possibility, but he could never be more than an interested bystander. He didn’t have the stamina to contribute more than an occasional pat on the back.

Jess would listen.

By declaring her intent to leave education, she was a free agent; no longer shackled to the constraints and obligations of the job.

When he arrived, Jess was already there, popping the lid on a large tub of PVA glue and pouring a small amount into several small containers. Today they were responsible for supervising the building of a cubby house made out of egg cartons.

Jess smiled as he approached. Her hair was tied back, a few loose strands were falling over her eyes. She pushed them aside with her forearm. ‘Here at last. Can you grab the kids’ art smocks?’

Alex did so as Jess greeted the kids who joined the group. She began to explain how the cubby would be built, asking the kids about dimensions, shape and the features they’d like the structure to have. Alex watched, thinking he’d not seen Jess so relaxed and happy since they’d met. Had her decision to leave teaching loosened the tension? Perhaps their friendship had something to do with it.

Alex set down the smocks, and children scrambled to grab one. Once Jess had them working on laying the cartons in brick-like rows, she said, ‘I’ve been looking at your blog. Lots of activity lately.’

‘Yeah? What did you think?’

'I like it.'

'Really?'

Jess smiled. 'Yes, really.' She tried to brush her hair away from her eyes once more. Several strands were glued together in chunks. 'Alex Kiernan, what are you plotting?'

'Still working it out, Jess. But I reckon two heads might be better than one.'

## Chapter 19 – How to be a good teacher

The morning hadn't gone well. The kids, now accustomed to wandering into the room and doing what they pleased, hadn't seemed thrilled when he suggested they were going to spend some time reading and writing. There were some kids who, since the beginning of The Joy Project, had virtually done no reading or writing at all. He'd noticed this at the time, but had decided that it would all sort itself out as the weeks passed. It was a theory he'd heard about once.

Apparently, if children were allowed to eat what they liked, they would initially binge on lollies but eventually self-select a balanced diet. Alex reasoned children would eventually be hungry for the right kind of knowledge. But what was that? Who said English and maths were better than the arts or sport?

Some theory could be a load of crap. He was more than a little alarmed that Amir and Manny hadn't opened a book, or read anything beyond gaming instructions on the computer or iPad since The Joy Project began.

Today, he resolved that once he had the kids working, he'd go around and hear everybody read and take notes on their progress. However small the effort, it would give him something tangible on which to base his reports. But Amir had different plans.

'I don't want to,' he screamed when Alex continued to insist he select a text from the book corner.

Alex took a breath. He counted to five. 'All right, suit yourself.'

Amir shrugged and wandered off morosely, trailing a piece of yellow ribbon behind him.

The rest of the class was similarly disengaged. Bridie was in the book corner with Thuy, but neither of them was looking at a book. Alex crossed his arms and searched the room for inspiration.

After making a few unpopular suggestions, and starting to perspire, Alex peeled off his jumper. Impulsively, he announced, 'I'll be looking for the best reader this morning, and there will be a prize.' What the prize might be he had no idea about. He would figure that out once everyone was settled on a task.

Settling on *any* task did not eventuate. A small group of about five students, Bridie included, sat in the book corner and read fairly happily, though chatting more than Alex thought was appropriate if reading anything longer than a few sentences. The rest wandered around the room as they'd been accustomed to doing since the beginning of The Joy Project, flitting from one task to the next, not accomplishing much.

Now that he thought about it, the times when he'd felt the kids were at their most happy and productive was when he'd set the direction and had assigned tasks. Like when they were making their painted mural that now decorated the back wall. Each panel was assigned to a group of kids, with a monitor who would check in with Alex as to the progress.

But how would he get them to work productively in a sustained way without micro-managing their every move? That wasn't in the spirit of The Joy Project.

It was then that he saw Felicity at the window. Their eyes met, her gaze inscrutable. She lingered for a moment before walking off. Alex wondered how long she'd been standing there.

\* \* \*

Alone for the night, Alex logged onto Jess's Instagram and checked for any recent posts. The last was of a tray of Florentines. He rang her number. When it went to voicemail, he hung up.

An hour later, she returned his call.

'Sorry, I left my phone at home. I went running.'

‘Where?’

Jess paused before answering. ‘Along the beach.’

‘You shouldn’t be out past dark without your phone.’

She paused again, then laughed softly. ‘I’m a big girl.’

The thought of Jess out there alone was deeply troubling to Alex. Any person with malicious intent would snap her like a twig. But he also knew it wasn’t his place to act like her defender.

‘I’ve been reading your blog,’ she said. ‘It’s like a serial adventure. Can’t wait to see what happens next.’

Thankful for the change of conversation, Alex swelled with pride at the words.

‘Well, I’m just putting questions out there. Not sure if I’m finding the answers, though.’

‘Alex, we’re all in the same boat.’

‘All?’

‘I mean everyone. Everyone’s got questions. We’re all searching.’

‘Some more than others.’

‘Look at my aunt Flick. She looks like she has it all together, but I’m sure she’s got questions. There have to be.’

On impulse, Alex said, ‘Do you want to come over? I’ve got coffee, chocolate... a night cap?’ then quickly felt himself redden. He laughed a bit too loudly, glad for the empty apartment. ‘No pressure.’ The fire in his cheeks intensified. Not many people could make worse what he’d just proposed, but he’d somehow managed.

‘Another time. I’m already in my PJs.’

The ticking of Pippa’s toenails sounded across the floorboards of the hallway. Alex wished he could be smooth and cool, instead of awkward and a cheat. No matter how innocent the intent, it wasn’t fair to Madeleine to have Jess over at this time of night. If he was really honest with himself, he couldn’t fully attest to his own innocence.

‘I admire what you’re doing, Alex. I’d join you, but at my school you couldn’t sneak a peanut past leadership.’

‘Some critical feedback would help. I’m not just after a pat on the back.’

‘Deal. I’ll be excruciatingly honest, since I’m getting out and have nothing to lose.’ She let out a little squeal of excitement. ‘Only six months to go.’

After he hung up, Alex thought about that timeline. Six months. At the end of it, Jess would be out of teaching and starting her culinary career. The Joy Project would be at an end.

He was still clueless about what that would mean in terms of rerouting his compass.

\* \* \*

‘Thanks for letting me join your meeting today,’ Felicity said. Alex, Vivian and Gus were perched on the little chairs in Vivian’s room.

‘It’s a pleasure,’ Vivian said, smiling. Alex liked to see Vivian smile. He noticed she did it a lot with Felicity and Nick. And for parents, to whom she always displayed the most impeccably cordial behaviour.

‘As you know, we have a lot going on in our school at the moment,’ Felicity said. ‘There’s that ex teacher’s visit, for one.’

Alex caught Gus’s wink. It was the first time Conor Reynolds had been referred to so irreverently.

‘What was Conor Reynolds like?’ Gus said, interrupting.

Felicity features hardened. ‘For one thing,’ she said, ‘his name is Craig. Craig Reynolds. Not Conor.’ No sooner had she spoken the words than a change came over her, and she became soft and wistful in a way Alex could never imagine Felicity could be. ‘He was a fine teacher. Really. He was kind to the kids. He cared about them, you know? Had a little no-interest loan scheme going with some of the hard-up parents. But he was a smooth operator in the classroom, too.’ Her shoulders drooped. ‘I guess he lost his mojo at some point.’

Gus laughed. ‘A couple of million bucks might have played a part. His mojo gets to sun its buns in St Tropez now. Tough call.’ He held imaginary

weights in his hands, balancing them like they were on scales. 'Beauvista... St Tropez... Beauvista...'

'We're digressing,' Vivian said, shooting a terse look at Gus.

Felicity returned to her former demeanour. 'Yes, lots going on. We've just heard that we've been assigned a literacy coach. Ivana Hepner, who we're all familiar with, will work at our school a couple of mornings a week for the rest of the year, starting Monday.'

'Wonderful,' Vivian said. 'How is she going to be utilised in the school?'

'The focus will be literacy pedagogy and assessment. Ivana will work with people individually, modelling best practice during class time and then on a one-on-one basis, to discuss teaching and assessment strategies. I want her to work with the junior school as a matter of priority. So she will come to your team first, and Vivian can decide how she gets rotated.'

'We certainly can do with more support with assessment,' Vivian said, glancing Alex's way.

He gripped his chin with thumb and forefinger, hoping the posture gave him an air of authority.

'How are the reports coming along?' Felicity said.

'Very well at my end, and I'm sure Gus and Alex are making good progress, too.'

Both Gus and Alex nodded.

'Excellent, I look forward to receiving them by Friday for my weekend reading.'

Alex did a quick calculation of the number of students divided by the remaining days. It was doable, if only because in the absence of assessment data, the reports would be a purely creative writing exercise.

\* \* \*

The flight had seemed interminable, but here they were at last, resting in their Collins Street hotel suite, relatively unscathed after a virtual mobbing at Melbourne airport. Didn't those women know he was over fifty, for fuck's sake?

'Honey, it's Vince,' Kym said as she handed him his mobile.

'What's it like to be back in your hometown?' Vince said.

Conor fought the surge of emotion the question had unexpectedly aroused. 'Once a shithole...'

'Glad to hear you're in a good mood. This won't take long. I just wanted to remind you that I'm resending your schedule by email and copying the PR team.'

After the call ended, Conor reclined on one of the leather chairs next to the floor to ceiling window, surveying the Melbourne skyline and the relentless stream of traffic far below. He'd lied to Vince. Being back was oddly comforting in a way he was unable to define. The person who'd left Melbourne twenty years earlier was almost unrecognisable to him. He'd left Melbourne on a budget flight to Los Angeles with three thousand dollars in his wallet and the proceeds from the sale of his house sitting in his bank account; a gutsy investment in the future Conor Reynolds corporation. He'd had no real prospects. With nothing but brazen hope pinned to his leather jacket, he'd decided he'd never be back. Certainly never as a failure.

Now he was back, triumphant. It didn't feel the way he might have imagined it would have, back then.

He reached for his iPad, logged onto the hotel's Wifi and opened the email from Vince. The list of engagements seemed manageable. Beauvista was among the first.

Instinctively, he thought of Felicity. Surely she was no longer at Beauvista after all these years. Curiosity got the better of him. He googled the school. A cheerful banner shot up; an unfamiliar school emblem; a new colour scheme. The school was certainly re-branded but a re-invention was yet to be verified.

He clicked on the *Staff* tab and a new page loaded. The first photo in view was of Nick. He was almost unrecognisable. At least twenty kilos heavier and thinning on top. But his eyes were still Nick. Teaching hadn't dampened that sparkle. He wondered if he still worked those worry beads as he walked about the place.

He scrolled down, his stomach aflutter.

Felicity. She was still there. And still very much Felicity. There were wrinkles now, and a softening of the beautiful lines of her face. Her slender neck was covered by a loosely draped scarf. His chest tightened. Memories flooded in. There were so many projects. Building and painting where maintenance had been overlooked, or could not be afforded. Planting up that corner of the oval. Their corner. Team teaching. So much enthusiasm. They'd poured their hearts into every lesson. And that clumsy encounter in the dark at the back of the cricket club at the Christmas function after a few too many beers. He remembered his part of the excruciating exchange the following Monday; full of apologies for what he'd called a mistake. Felicity had just blushed and looked past him as she walked out. The subject wasn't broached again. He'd been so inept. But man, he'd sure been alive back then.

He inhaled deeply and felt his limbs loosening. Tears welled and the skyline beyond the immense sheet of glass became indistinct.

For the first time in he knew not how long, he opened those hidden gates and let sadness flood in.

## Chapter 20 – Walk this way

The start of another working week. Mostly, Alex got out of bed first, took a shower, and sat in the kitchen with his muesli-yoghurt mix and coffee, reading The Age on his iPad. Madeleine woke later, complained about having to make the bed, and then got in the shower first. She took a lot longer getting ready, so Alex was more than willing to give her a head start. It only took him five minutes to leave the apartment from the time he got under the water.

This particular Monday morning, Alex clicked on one of the Education features, and read the entire article.

Another puzzle piece fell into place.

\* \* \*

Gus popped in for his Monday visit. A few kids were fiddling about in Alex's room; some playing in the Lego tub, others drawing; a couple huddled at the computers.

'Mate, good weekend?'

'Busy,' Alex said. 'We're moving next Saturday, so we had to have a lot of our stuff packed. No time during the week. What about you?'

'Freaked out.'

'Are your reports done?'

'Course. Piece of cake. What about yours?'

‘Done and dusted.’ This was not a lie. It had only taken Alex a few hours to fabricate his twenty seven reports on observation and gut feeling. Strangely, he did not feel as guilty as he imagined he ought.

‘Then is it about the literacy coach?’

‘Mate, I couldn’t give a shit about that fucking dominatrix, Ivana whatshername.’

Alex laughed. ‘What is it, then?’

‘Bloody Olivia. Came home last Friday saying she’s not going to finish uni, because she’s had – wait for this – an epiphany. An epiphany for god’s sake. I didn’t know words like that at her age. Spent most of my time walking around scratching my arse.’ He stopped to look at Alex for a beat before continuing. ‘Okay, so you’re not really getting this, because you’re not much older than Olivia. But let me tell you. All this fucking soul searching that you young ones load yourselves up with, let me tell you, it’s just a fucking complication. Things are a lot more straightforward when you think less and do a whole lot fucking more.’

Alex glanced around to see if any of the kids could hear their conversation. He put a finger to his lips. ‘It’s not easy, Gus. There are so many choices out there,’ Alex said.

‘Jesus, mate, you *are* one of them. She’s fucking twenty one. Now she’s probably not going to be working until she’s at least twenty five. Which means I’ll have to work another four years.’

Alex thought he’d change the subject. He didn’t really understand why Gus was so uptight, and it was clear he wasn’t about to broach alternative points of view. Deep down, Alex identified with Olivia. For Chrissakes, what was one supposed to do? It wasn’t like the old days, when people just picked a job, and did it ad nauseam for the rest of their lives. That was mind-bending shit, and thank god it was no longer forced upon you. But he did understand it was hard for Gus. Wanting to retire, but not being able to because he was still funding Olivia’s Gen Y lifestyle.

‘So, what do you reckon about having a literacy coach, then?’

Gus shook his head. 'Don't worry about her, mate. I'll just nod my head, say, *That's interesting*, a whole lot, and then once she walks out of my room and the door's shut, I'll just do what I fucking well please. I mean, really... what do they expect? I've been teaching nearly forty years. I'm not the one who should worry.' He gave Alex a pointed look.

'I'm not worried, either,' Alex said with a shrug. Forming the words and hearing them spoken out loud served to give him a level of courage he otherwise did not feel. 'They're determined to shove professional learning down our throats whether we like it or not. But if I could choose, I'd rather those boring sessions in the library than someone poking their nose in my classroom.'

'I can't stand any of it,' Gus said with a sneer. 'Fuck the fucking PL in the library. Fuck the Scotch Finger biscuits and fuck the Styrofoam cups filled with disgusting International Roast. Fuck it all.'

Alex had never heard Gus swearing this much. The pressure was obviously getting to him.

'I read an article this morning about literacy coaches in schools. The department is determined to streamline classroom practices.'

Gus shook his head. 'Good luck. I mean, what can they do if we refuse to be led like sheep?'

Sheep. If only Madeleine were a fly on the wall. 'The heat will be on.'

'Mate, with what you've got going on in here, there'll be a flame thrower up your arse. You'll need a dam the size of the oval to keep the water bombs up to them.' Gus laughed, clearly enjoying himself. 'You'll be right,' he said, patting Alex on the back. 'If you've got an alternative career in mind. If not, maybe you and Olivia can put your heads together to figure something out.'

Shortly after Gus left, the bell went, signalling the start of a new week. As Alex stood in the epicentre of his own little pit of anarchy, he wondered how he would take control without being controlling. How would he teach and lead these kids without conforming to a mechanistic, overloaded schedule?

There was something missing from The Joy Project that he hadn't quite figured out. Like KFC's secret blend of eleven herbs and spices, the main

elements still eluded him. He knew in essence what he was trying to achieve, but was no closer to working out how he'd get there.

If joy was a the centre of The Project, then coercing even one of his students into being in a space they found constricting and joyless would be tantamount to failure. Some students would easily float into a joyful space no matter how he directed their learning, but others, like Amir and Manny, would descend into recalcitrance at the first mention of tasks with which they'd struggled in the past. He could push and coerce, and make their lives miserable, but would they thank him in the end? Would he only succeed in alienating them completely? The role of teacher seemed inherently contrary to The Joy Project.

Alex looked at Amir and Manny. The first was commando-crawling on the floor, holding on to a Lego-made assault rifle, adding his own, remarkably realistic sound effects. The second was sitting in the book corner, rocking gently to and fro, his eyes fixed on some indeterminate point.

Alex clenched his jaw as he pondered. Was joy a basic human right or nothing but a lofty, impractical ideal? Had Madeleine been right all along? Indeed, if the pursuit of joy led to nothing much besides literacy incompetence, was that not condemning students to a life of disadvantage? For kids like Amir and Manny, was the cost of joy too high?

'Alex?' He looked down. Bridie tugged at his sleeve, her face quizzical. 'What are we doing today?'

'Not sure, yet. How about we start with a song?'

Bridie shrugged and went to sit on the mat. For the first time, Alex felt he was losing her.

\* \* \*

Felicity welcomed Ivana into her office for a de-brief before the coaching sessions began.

Ivana sauntered in with the sass of a stripper about to begin her routine. She wore black leather and a dash of crimson lipstick that deflected attention from her imperfect features. All that was missing was a whip.

Early promotion opportunities had led Ivana to principal class before she was thirty. After only three years in the job, she took on a consultancy in New York, working with a team of other, single-minded leaders who swept in and reshaped the teaching of literacy in poor-performing schools. Retirement followed after only ten years.

Boredom had brought her back, but her approach was far from half-hearted. Ivana was not back to ease into retirement, but to bring her unique kind of turbo-charged vitality to the job. She knew her content inside out; she was adept at getting staff to take up her initiatives and toe the line. In Ivana's hands, Felicity had seen even the most hardened, opinionated teacher turn to putty.

'How do you want me to move through the school, Felicity?'

'I think start with the three junior grades. There's a bit of an odd dynamic going on there. Vivian, the team leader, is wonderful. Really organised, doing great work. Not sure how she's managing, or monitoring, let's say, the two blokes in her team. One – Gus – is our age and totally burnt out. The other – Alex – is a graduate with what I can see might be some rather bizarre techniques. I've given him some room to experiment in terms of his classroom. I'm keeping an eye on him through my ReWARD program on Saturdays.'

'Okay, so you want me to sus him out.'

'Let's just say I'd like your opinion.'

'In terms of what I do in the classroom, it's easy. I have a formula. I share it. Hopefully some of it rubs off. I don't know why some of them are so resistant.'

'Change is hard for everyone, Ivana. The younger generation included.'

'I know how hard it is. I was one of them, once. Remember me? I was the one who arrived at school as the bell rang, who would be skidding into the car park in my glorious red Alfa? Back then, we planned and taught what we wanted, and the hierarchy, for the most part, trusted us.'

'Too true.'

'Mind you, there were some who didn't deserve that trust.'

Felicity laughed. 'I'll never know how those bozos got their teaching degrees, but there they were, day in, day out, supposedly teaching.'

'That teaching didn't always lead to learning. I guess it's a subjective thing, measuring students' learning. Back then, we weren't measuring much.'

'So you'll let me know what you think of Alex?'

'I'll sort him out. Free-range teaching's had its day.'

\* \* \*

The following Saturday the removalist's truck arrived at the unit at a quarter to nine. Madeleine had been carting her belongings from her parents' house all week and stacking them in the living room. Alex reasoned it was lucky they were both at work during the day, as there was hardly any room to sit or move about comfortably.

By lunchtime they'd taken possession of Vicars Road. Amid the stacks of boxes now filling their new living room, they ate the sandwiches Madeleine had packed earlier. Alex thought about the ReWARd program, and wondered how Jess had got on. He wanted to talk to her about the literacy coach coming into his class. Felicity had told him it would be this week on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He glanced at Madeleine, eating her sandwich as she leafed through a magazine, smiling to herself. He didn't want to spoil her special day by voicing his qualms about being coached. Plus he already knew what she'd say.

Alex got up and went to stand on the little balcony that jutted out from the living room. Pippa followed him, whining at the strangeness of the new place. Underneath, traffic roared by. The fumes assaulted Alex's nostrils. He stretched his gaze all the way down Vicars Road in the direction of the beach, which was not visible from this vantage point. While it was good to get a toe-hold into the property market, the thought of his old rental unit only a few blocks from the water gave him a fresh pang of nostalgia. Sure, he was closer to work, but was that really a bonus?

'Hey there,' Madeleine called. She tilted her head to one side. 'What are you thinking?'

'Just daydreaming,' Alex said.

## Chapter 21 – So many choices, so little space

At ten past nine on Tuesday morning, Ivana burst into Alex's classroom like an outlaw entering a saloon. Though kids were engaged in their usual banter and play, it took only moments for them to notice the black-clad character before them. The room became instantly quiet.

Alex swallowed. Gus's description floated into his mind. *Dominatrix*.

Ivana said hello to Alex and introduced herself to the students. 'Just carry on as you normally would,' she said before finding a chair at the back of the room.

The kids stared. Alex tried to collect his thoughts.

'Can we finish our skeletons?' Amir said.

'Um... not right now, it's literacy time first.'

'Can we do them after?'

'Well, then it'll be maths time,' Alex said. Not true, but it was the right answer.

Amir slumped, his face dark. 'Man!'

'Amir, manners,' Alex said weakly.

Alex took his place at the front of the room and summoned the class. Most of them ignored him. Having lost interest in Ivana, they'd returned to their previous tasks. He took a deep breath. 'Everyone!' he bellowed. 'Put everything down and come and sit with me on the mat.' Painful seconds ticked by as the kids made their roundabout way to the mat. Eventually most kids were sitting

cross-legged in front of Alex. Amir was rolling on the floor at the back of the group, but Alex, tense under Ivana's scrutiny, chose to ignore it.

'Today's learning intention is...'

Uttering the first line of the familiar script, Alex pushed on as two dozen pairs of eyes glazed over. The routine was imprinted in their minds from earlier that year, and so the group was largely compliant.

Alex had heard Vivian prattle on about text organisation, and so he improvised.

'Can anyone tell me how the text is organised on this page?' He held his breath as the kids studied the big book Alex had just shoved onto the book stand. It was about marine creatures. The page Alex had opened had some images of sea horses and jellyfish and a table showing what species of sea life could be found in the waters around Australia.

'There's big letters,' Amber said.

'Yes, that's the title, isn't it?' Alex said. He looked at Ivana. It was as though her eyes were boring a hole in the middle of his forehead.

Manny put up his hand. Alex pointed to him.

'Alex, can we do the *Looby Looby* song?'

*That bloody kid.* Alex thought he was kind of on the right track with his questions. The big book thing was working. Ivana would approve; if only Manny would shut up. He hardly spoke two words together at the best of times, and he was choosing this moment to become verbose?

'What about the *Looby* song?' Manny repeated.

'Not now, Manny. We're right in the middle of our literacy work.'

Manny's shoulders slumped. He folded himself forward, resting his chin on his knees. Alex appealed to the other kids, jollyng them along with a smile. Glum faces stared back at him.

He managed another two pages before Ivana stood.

'May I step in?' she said.

'Sure.'

She strode to the front, assured and quick, like he was bleeding to death right in front of them all, and she was about to save his life. Alex wracked his

brain to think what he could have missed, the sour taste of dejection seeping into him. It was two heads thinking around the same lesson, after all; there were a million ways to do it. Up until this morning, he thought he had no fear, he thought he didn't care, and now he was reduced to this pathetic, trembling thing. He made himself sick.

'Right,' Ivana said. 'Well done for identifying one type of text organisation, which was...'

'The title,' someone called out.

'You must put up your hand before speaking, got that?' Ivana said. 'Right. The title. What else can we identify on this page?' She pointed to the image of the jellyfish.

'A crab?' Thuy called out. Ivana turned and hit her with the most pointed of glares. Kids looked on, wide-eyed, as though Ivana was a volcano about to erupt. Thuy sucked in her lips and slowly raised her hand.

\* \* \*

That night, Alex's blog was more like a rant.

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### **WHAT WOULD DEWEY DO?**

*Posted June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Is this what Dewey had in mind when he said,

*'I believe that much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do*

*not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative...*

*'...The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.'*

And yet, when a literacy coach enters a classroom, it is in direct opposition to the idea of school as a community. If Dewey's idea of a teacher is of a person who should not impose certain ideas or form certain habits in the child, but is there to assist the child in responding to influences, then what the hell are we doing with this climate of imposition? Not only are students restricted, but so are their teachers. Why do we not have a sharing of great ideas, and leave teachers free to trial what approaches appeal to them without coercion or prescription?

\* \* \*

The following Saturday morning, Alex announced his intention to resume his volunteering at the ReWARd program. Madeleine stomped around the apartment. 'We still have so much unpacking to do.'

'I know, but Felicity needs the help, and it's only a couple of hours. I'll do the shopping on my way home.'

'Is Jess still turning up?'

Alex hesitated before answering. 'Felicity has us working on the pedagogical side of things. She thinks we know more than the volunteers.' He detected a faint tremor in his own voice. There was no reason for him to feel nervous, but somehow Madeleine's question and his deflection of it, made him uneasy. He wasn't cheating on Madeleine, but there was an element of time spent with Jess that felt like an emotional affair.

Before he left the unit, Madeleine came out of the bedroom holding the clipping of Conor that Alex had stashed away in his bedside drawer at the old place.

‘Starting a scrap book?’ Her lips were pressed into a wry smile.

‘One of the kids must have given it to me. They’re all going hyper. It’s not long until he visits the school.’ He scrambled around for his stuff, and promptly left the apartment, closing the door before Madeleine had the chance to taunt him further.

As he turned the key in the ignition, he felt suddenly listless. He’d never thought of himself as a liar, but that was what he was now becoming. For someone up to his neck in a project that was meant to generate joy, Alex didn’t feel very joyful.

At Beauvista that morning, Felicity greeted him curtly, before detailing the morning’s work.

‘Jess is busy working with the clay models group. When the students are finished with their pieces, she will be modelling how to teach procedural texts with her volunteer. The students will be producing a *How To* manual on the clay work they’ve been doing. Could you work out some writing task that the group working on the Mr Reynolds mural could do? Daisy and Aloysius have got a group of their students working on that over there. It needs to be tailored to upper primary students, obviously.’ She pointed towards the back of the hall, where about a dozen students were walking around several large pieces of calico. Daisy and Aloysius were standing off to the side, deep in conversation.

‘Aren’t Daisy and Aloysius going to work with their students?’

Felicity blinked. ‘I just explained—’

‘Of course. I just don’t want to be stepping on their toes.’

‘Alex, Daisy and Aloysius are just here to make the mural. They’re not here for the literacy, which is one of our primary purposes. Literacy through the arts, remember? So my advice is, don’t worry about stepping on any toes. If they facilitate the mural, that will leave you more space to develop something challenging and appropriate literacy-wise.’

As Alex walked over to the mural group, he made a detour past Jess's clay workshop and said hello.

'Hello, you,' she said, beaming. 'Are you joining us?'

'Felicity wants me on the mural over there.' He shrugged. 'We're obviously trouble when we're together.'

'Will you give me a hand with the food at morning tea?'

'Course,' Alex said, brightening. An entire morning side-stepping around Daisy and Aloysius was only palatable if he knew Jess was waiting at the end.

\* \* \*

Jess had made tomato and basil bruschetta, goat's cheese mini-pizzas, cheese twists, and curry samosas, all funded by a new account Felicity had managed to get Nick to set up for the program. Once the delicacies had been distributed, she and Alex set about tidying the kitchen.

'I read your last post,' Jess said, her back turned to Alex as she wiped the bench. She knew he wanted to hear what she thought about it, but she was nervous about telling it like it was. Some of the post was on the right track, but a large part of it was just idealistic claptrap. It could never work in a normal school setting with all the pressures teachers were under daily.

'What did you think?' Alex said.

'It's an interesting idea, teachers being responsible for their own professional learning.'

'Isn't that what teachers are meant to do?'

Jess turned to face him. 'I guess we are, in an ideal world. But I'm thinking of all those unmotivated teachers in schools. I'm just speaking for myself, but it seems to me that some of them are incapable of coming up with a high quality program. They need the literacy coaches and other staff in the school to lay it out for them so they can just follow.'

'But that's so limiting.'

'Yes, but at least it provides a good quality framework, a safety net, if you like, to ensure that all teachers are at least following something solid. I guess

those who want to extend themselves beyond that framework, are entitled to do so.'

'The point I'm trying to make is I don't think they are enabled or entitled.'

'It's a valid point. I just don't think it's that black and white.'

'Aren't you bothered by the idea of this person coming into your class imposing a rigid set of teaching techniques?'

'I used to be.' Jess let her mind wander to the harrowing days of being new, and having the literacy coach shoved in her face. 'But realising I was getting out has taken the weight off my shoulders. Now it doesn't matter what happens, because I know every day brings me closer to leaving.'

'The Joy Project hasn't been as smooth as I would have liked.'

'Your kids are happy, aren't they? If you were aiming for joy, then you've achieved your goal.'

'Yes, but my hypothesis was that with joy would come learning, in a natural way that wasn't contrived. I can't say that's happened. And the only way I know to inject some learning into The Project is to do all the things I vowed I would no longer do.'

'Hello you two,' Felicity came into the room, and planted a kiss on Jess's head. 'The food was spectacular. You must have got up at the crack of dawn.'

Alex straightened and quickly busied himself with the washing up.

'On the contrary,' Jess said, 'I was organised last night, with everything cut up and all the sauces made, so it wasn't a lot of trouble this morning to assemble it. Having the oven here makes it all so easy to serve up hot food.'

'You are amazing. The program is so much better like this. Thank you.'

'Told you,' Jess said in a teasing tone.

'Nick's committed to a weekly budget, so I think we're fine.'

With Alex in the room providing some diffusion, Jess realised this was the time to tell Aunt Flick about her decision. 'Each week I'm going to try something different so that when I start my café I have a range of tried and true recipes to work with. You can call this my market research.'

Felicity laughed. 'You'd be world famous, I'm sure. That is, if your mind wasn't taken up with the educational needs of twenty something little people for most of your waking hours.'

Jess squeezed out the cleaning cloth and folded it on the edge of the sink. She turned to Felicity, wringing her hands. The fear of disappointing her was so great she could hardly breathe. 'Aunt Flick, I meant what I said. I'm going to quit teaching because I want to cook for a living.'

'Very funny.' Felicity chuckled nervously, her gaze flitting between Jess and Alex.

Alex had stopped fiddling with the taps and was now facing them.

Jess summoned her strength. There was no backing out of the moment now, so she reached for whatever shred of courage she had left. 'Aunt Flick, you know teaching hasn't been working for me. I'm giving it till the end of the year, and then I'm out.'

'Jesus, Jess. You can't be serious.'

'I am.' Jess fought the compulsion to look away. She wanted so badly to be taken seriously.

'You'll change your mind. Everyone goes through difficulties at the beginning.'

'Well, that might be, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm not happy.' Jess took a step forward and reached for Felicity's hands. 'Aunt Flick, thanks for helping me, but really... teaching is not what I want to do.' She pointed towards the trays and the other cooking utensils. 'That is. Thanks for helping me to find it.'

Felicity went white, then turned without speaking and left the room. Jess thought she noticed a tremor in her chin, though her Aunt's gaze remained stoic. She couldn't say whether Aunt Flick was upset, or just needed some time to work out her feelings.

The really amazing thing was that despite dreading this moment to the point of paralysis, Jess now felt giddy with excitement. The burden was lifted. She was weightless and free. Like a great crane had picked her up and lifted her over a great wall, she now found herself on the other side, revelling in a

newfound freedom. It had been easy enough, after all. Never again would she hold back from going after what she wanted. Never again would she bow to other people's better judgement. They did not know her.

Jess now smiled at Alex and filled her lungs with air, feeling powerful and brave. It had taken too long perhaps, but she was so grateful that she had found herself at last.

## Chapter 22 – Where the playing field is level

Virginia Carruthers was waiting for Jess when she arrived at Federation. She didn't have an appointment, but Jess nonetheless ushered her into the room.

'Everything okay, Virginia?' Jess said.

'Actually, I am concerned about Oscar's progress.'

'Can you explain?'

Virginia shifted uncomfortably in her seat, before she spoke. 'He doesn't feel as though he has any goals. He has always achieved at the highest level, and we have had him assessed for giftedness.'

'Oh, sure,' Jess said. Oscar was a bright student, but did not seem to stand out particularly in the assessment data. 'What was the outcome?'

'Well, he wasn't quite in the gifted range, but I and his father feel that he is capable of more. It's just that he's not being stimulated, or extended.'

Jess knew where this was going. It would come down to the hopelessness of her teaching.

'Mrs Carruthers, how do you feel I can help?' She picked up her iPad and opened *Notes*, remembering how these types of encounters used to destroy her. Like a miracle, the debilitating weight of fear that usually constricted her chest was lifted. Breathing exercises were now redundant. What a joy. Jess squared her shoulders and met Virginia's gaze, confident in the knowledge the meeting would not spin out of control. If this were a card game, she'd been transformed from the sweaty, nervous loser, to a shark holding all the aces.

It was as if Virginia sensed the change. Her voice wavered. Perched uneasily on the edge of her seat, she began outlining her case.

\* \* \*

At Beauvista that morning, Alex met Bridie and her mother as he came into school. They'd been waiting for him at the classroom steps. Bec's eyes were swollen and red-rimmed.

'Hi Bridie. Good morning, Bec.' He shook her hand.

'Bridie, go off and play love. I need a word with Alex.' She patted Bridie on the bottom, and the little girl skipped off, glancing back warily as she went.

'You look upset, Bec. What's up?'

She focused on the tatty carpet under her feet as she spoke, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. 'Adam and I got busted. We have to face the Sunshine Magistrates Court.'

'God, when is that?'

'Not sure. If we get done, we'll probably go back in. Just thought I'd tell you. Bridie and the boys will have to go and live with my mother.'

Alex's mind went into a spin. Bridie leave his class? For a mad moment, he considered telling Bec she could stay at his place. But there were Bridie's two brothers to consider. And there was Madeleine... Despite the turmoil inside, he made an effort to appear neutral. 'Anything I can do to help?'

Bec shook her head. 'Just look out for Bridie. She got a hell of a fright when the Police came in last night. She really likes you, so...'. Her eyes became glassy, and she stopped speaking.

Alex put his hand on Bec's shoulder. 'I'll look after her, don't worry. Hopefully it won't come to that.'

After Bec was gone, when the kids began to stream into the classroom, Alex looked for Bridie. She, too, was looking at him, some kind of understanding passing between them. He knew her so well now, it felt like she was part of his family. He now realised that since beginning to teach his class, he'd been

building relationships that went beyond school. He was in these kids' lives, and their parents knew it.

If Bridie had to change schools, he knew there would be a protracted period of no school while she and her brothers got settled into the new arrangement with granny. Though Alex hadn't been maniacal about measuring learning, and despite his relaxed approach, he knew there had been growth. Any gains in Bridie's learning would inevitably slide backwards. He thought about Ivana's learn-by-numbers strategies, wondering if she had a pedagogical intervention for this particular type of educational crisis.

\* \* \*

At recess on Ivana's second day with the junior school team, Felicity saw Gus stomping towards her office. His face was flushed and hair stuck to his forehead like a man who'd spent an hour doing strenuous exercise. Which she knew he hadn't, because Gus was the lucky recipient of Ivana's literacy coaching this particular morning. Felicity also knew Gus was Gus: he never did anything strenuously or quickly.

'Do you have a minute?' he said, walking straight in and sitting down before Felicity could respond.

She'd been looking forward to a quiet moment, but instead put aside her doughnut and tea and joined him.

'I want a word about the literacy coach.'

The man was so flushed Felicity was worried he would collapse in front of her. 'Okay, but calm down first, Gus.'

'Don't tell me to bloody calm down. Instead tell *her* not to barge into people's classrooms and shove her ways down everybody's throats.'

Felicity composed her face into a serene expression hoping that would dilute Gus's craziness. 'Okay, tell me what happened. But first, take a breath.'

Gus put both hands on his chest as though his heart might leap out of it. He took a few breaths. 'First, we could start with you telling me what the point is of this government-sanctioned Gestapo coming through my class, giving me a

rap on the knuckles, and forcing me to dumb down my teaching. Boring the kids senseless in the process, I might add.'

'It's all about improving practice, Gus.'

'Who decided my practice needed improving?'

'There's research into what creates better learning, visible learning, and truth is, most of our staff aren't doing it.' Felicity deliberately let some seconds tick by, hoping to quell Gus's fury. 'Teachers need to move into 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching practices. I'm not saying this applies to you, but we can't go around singling people out. It has to be a transparent and methodical approach. Some teachers are still using techniques their teachers used on them thirty or forty years ago, and which perhaps were handed to those teachers by their predecessors. We know too much to keep things the same, Gus. It would be negligent practice to disregard what the research tells us, deliberately ignoring departmental recommendations.'

Gus balled his fists and placed them on his knees.

Felicity softened her tone. 'Remember the old curriculum principle, *Respect for Evidence*? Well, I think we need to respect what the evidence shows about best practice. Ivana isn't here as a punitive measure. She's here to help everyone improve their teaching.'

'I don't know how to say this,' Gus said, 'because you'll say I don't have *evidence*, but what's evidence, if not twenty years in the classroom working, thinking, listening to kids, and trialling new stuff? My evidence, if that's what you want to call it, is not the government-controlled edu-babble you guys carry on with. It's solid, and based on what I know. But you send Ivana into my room, supposedly to improve my teaching, and she doesn't see what I do. All she does is look at the board and say, "Where's your learning intention?" I'll tell you something, Felicity. My learning intentions are what I discuss with the kids. We live and breathe learning intentions and learning outcomes. I don't write them on the board because I don't see the point.'

Felicity wanted to disagree, but held back. Gus looked about to have a seizure. This was a moment for diplomacy, not straight shooting. 'I would never

say your experience doesn't count, Gus. Bringing in a coach is not a slight on our staff, it demonstrates we're investing in them as professionals.'

Gus stood. 'Bullshit,' he said, and promptly walked out.

Returning to her doughnut and tea, Felicity reflected on Gus's visit. She felt for him. But in the current, hyper-vigilant and results-driven climate, solid experience wasn't enough. Teaching was a far more demanding profession nowadays. The pressure was on teachers, and it was driven primarily by parents. Felicity could see it in her own neighbourhood. Kids being whisked away in Mercs and Beemers to god-only-knew-what after-school activities designed to make them more competitive, and better prepared for the adult world of which they had little interest at this stage of their lives.

At the last Christmas party in her street, she'd been part of a conversation with two couples whose kids were still at primary school. It never ceased to amaze Felicity how parents nowadays thought everyone would find the subject of their progeny such riveting conversation when it was nothing but egocentrism dressed up as small talk. The list of after-school activities these little tackers were shackled to was so exhaustive, the ferrying arrangements so complex when coupled with working parents' busy schedules that it drained her just to listen.

Kumon was popular, along with other maths and literacy extension programs. Then there were cultural pursuits. A few of the kids – probably those with left-wing, hippie parents – were enrolled in art and craft classes where they made sculptures out of pipe cleaners, or learned to crochet pieces they then wrapped around trees in the local shopping centre. There were martial arts classes of a few different persuasions. Then there were the more bizarre after school activities. Felicity thought they should just call a spade a spade, and tell the kids they were in therapy. Why else put them in a class called *Calming the Angry Beast?*

Felicity had been in the game long enough to know how to translate parents' edu-speak into *this-is-what-will-give-my-child-the-edge-over-other-kids*. Why else subject kids to this mad schedule? Why else systematically kill off

children's leisure time? Why else make them crazily anxious with test upon test upon test?

She knew all these after school activities, pre-school reading and maths, extra tutoring and study tours to overseas countries were actually markers in an elaborate game in which the ultimate Holy Grail was the venerable VCE score. God forbid if a student didn't want to pursue an academic path. Whatever happened to trades as a viable option? No wonder plumbers and electricians could charge pretty much what they liked.

Her thoughts turned to Jess and for the first time since finding out her news did not get a sinking feeling in her stomach. Perhaps it wasn't really so bad that she no longer wanted to be part of this insane merry-go-round.

\* \* \*

Alex was standing outside his room remonstrating with a couple of kids off for dropping rubbish when he saw Gus striding towards the classroom at an uncommonly energetic pace. He looked more ruffled than usual, one flap of his shirt hanging out of his trousers.

'Mate, is the school on fire?'

Gus shook his head. 'I know I said I wouldn't let that fucking dominatrix get to me, but Jesus, I can't stand it.'

Alex laughed. 'She got to me first. I know what you mean.'

'I completely lost my cool. I went off half-cocked at Felicity. What the hell will that achieve? Nothing that's what. They'll just think I'm more hopeless than before. They'll tighten the screws and make my last years here a misery.'

'They won't,' Alex said with little conviction, thinking of the mutiny he was surreptitiously wreaking upon the school. And he had nobody or nothing to blame for his insurgency. Not Ivana, not any of his colleagues, and certainly not stress from longevity in the job. Once he was found out, the blame could only come to rest squarely on his own two shoulders.

'I guess I'll live,' Gus said, straightening and tossing his head back, the trace of a smile beginning to appear.

Suddenly, they heard shrieking from Vivian's portable. Next thing, Vivian burst out of the door. 'Outside, Mrs Catumini,' she said. In an instant, Zara Catumini followed, arms waving, her face contorted in anger, and spewing foul language at anyone who dared look her way.

'Stop it. This is not appropriate. Please, let's talk in the office,' Vivian said, remarkably calm under duress.

Gus immediately went to stand by her. Alex followed. 'Stop,' Gus said to Zara. 'Kids are watching.'

'I don't give a fuck about the kids. Like this cunt don't give a fuck about my kid.' She lunged forward and poked Vivian in the chest.

Though shaken, Vivian looked around, seemingly concerned about kids who might be witnessing the incident.

'That's enough,' Alex said, taking Zara by the arm. 'You have a choice. Either come calmly to the staffroom so we can discuss this in a civil manner, or leave.'

Zara twisted her arm out of Alex's grip and made for the gate, her gait unsteady.

'Jesus,' said Gus. 'We really have to do something about her.'

'She's harmless,' said Vivian. 'Look at her, she can hardly walk a straight line.'

Alex just stared after Zara, filled with sadness at what Maddisson must see and hear daily.

\* \* \*

The following day, Gus took stress leave. He was gone for a week. Long enough for Felicity's favourite relief teacher, Eve McEvoy to be put in charge of Gus's class. Long enough for Felicity to instruct Eve, a willing disciple, to make Gus's room comply with educational standards.

The product of all Gus's genius art lessons; all the giant leaves and vines that kids had made out of papier mache, lovingly painted and trailing all the way to the ground, all the posters of poems, stories and songs, their edges framed

with collage, paper chains, feathers, pipe cleaners; all the micro cities and dioramas, all the wonderful and quirky spiders hanging from the net that was strung across the room, all was gone.

Gone in one fell swoop that took less than one school day. Taken to the dumpster, or taken down and sent home in twenty eight small backpacks: every classroom's mobile garbage disposal system.

By the time Gus returned to school a week later, his room was fully compliant with education department policy. The walls were clean and bare. Eve had been so kind as to produce some anchor charts that now stood as the only decoration in place of Gus's unruly jungle. On the board was a list of learning intentions neatly slotted under days of the week.

Gus's reaction at the desecration of his classroom was at first mute shock. He walked around the room for a few minutes, running his eyes over the charts without reading any of the words; looking behind furniture, expecting to find the missing art work. He could put it all back; it wouldn't take too long. But there was nothing there. It was all gone.

For the second time that term, Gus marched to Felicity's office, his brow damp with perspiration, his soul restless with rage.

Just like the first time, he was resoundingly defeated. There was nothing he could do or say in opposition to Felicity's iron-clad resolve on the subject.

She spoke to him in the calm, condescending tone she might have used with a wayward child. 'Education has changed, and so must you.'

He wished he could argue theory and ideology with her, but he hadn't kept up with the changing jargon and rhetoric of his profession. He knew she would crush him at every turn. In his mind, he wanted to tell her she needed a good fuck. Instead he settled for, 'Why don't you just go and get fucked?' before storming out.

It took days for the rage to subside. Eventually, he became accustomed to the new order of his classroom and resumed counting the days to retirement.

\* \* \*

The bay was the colour of pewter. Angry white caps dotted the waves. Alex ran faster against a biting wind as he worked his way back from the turning point to where he'd parked his car. It was after five now, and daylight was fast dimming.

He hardly noticed a fellow runner going in the opposite direction. The person waved going past, then he heard a familiar voice call, 'Alex!'

He turned and saw that the small woman, smiling and recognisable now, was Jess. 'Sorry, I didn't see you,' he said.

'Neither did I, until I'd almost gone past.' They stood there for a moment, smiling. Alex started to jog on the spot. 'Bitter out here. We should keep moving.'

'Sure, I'll see you Sat—'

'Why don't we run together? It'll be dark soon, and I can give you a lift home.'

Jess took a moment to consider the offer, before falling in next to Alex and continuing along the foreshore. They didn't speak for much of the twenty minutes except for bits of small talk.

'How can people live like that?' Jess said, pointing to one particularly colossal beachfront home. 'It's like living life on The Truman Show. Everyone can see every little thing you're doing.'

Alex pointed to the row of Norfolk Island pines flanking the beach. 'The trees make up for the ghastly houses. It's like we're not somewhere ordinary like St Margaret.'

'It's not ordinary,' Jess replied. 'I love this place. Industrial end, beach end, ugly freeway and shops end. You name any end, and I can honestly say I love it. I want to open my café somewhere in St Margaret.'

When they reached Alex's car, next to the Beachside Shack, Jess remarked on how cosy the café looked. A few patrons sat near the front window, cocooned in the warm glow of the interior, cupping hot drinks with their hands. It was like a beacon reaching out to the wild dark sea, calling forlorn sailors to the safety and comfort of its embrace.

'I want to check out the opposition,' she said. 'Let's stop for a coffee.'

Alex locked the car, and they dashed in, taking seats at the big window facing the water, now an endless black expanse punctuated by the odd, slow-moving light from a vessel or ship.

Appetites sharpened by the exercises, they found the menu irresistible. Coffee and a Cubano sandwich for Alex. Freshly squeezed orange juice and quinoa and pumpkin salad for Jess.

'So much for dinner,' Jess said, and Alex felt a pang of guilt at the thought of Madeleine and her dinner preparations. His mobile phone was still in the car where he'd left it while running, and so he had a half legitimate excuse not to call.

But he well knew it was a dud excuse.

He looked at Jess, wrapping her running jacket firmly around herself and rubbing her arms to generate some warmth, and felt suddenly empty. He longed to envelop her in his arms, to make her warm all over. Desire, rather than a tantalising glow, settled into his bones as a dull, heavy ache. How he longed to protect her, to make her his. But he couldn't, of course. With both feet in another relationship, fettered by obligations and financial entanglements, he was utterly immobilised.

He was a cheater, of sorts. To be fair, what man didn't have these kinds of thoughts about other women from time to time? He wasn't cheating in a physical sense; it was only on an emotional level, and technically above board. Regardless, their connection was real. He knew it as a solid entity rather than a vague one-sided imagining; something that could be seen and touched. How could Jess not feel it too?

The Cubano came. Two chunks of crusty bread either side of a slab of roasted pork dripping with grainy mustard. *Goodbye dinner*. He didn't touch it until Jess got her salad, and then they were tucking in, talking, and time vanished like fine sea spray in the wind.

He dropped Jess off at her apartment. He wanted to reach across and kiss her, but something held him back. Madeleine's presence hovered over them like a stern governess; all reproach and disapproval. It was inescapable. Alex could see it in the way Jess's eyes darted about, avoiding lingering too long on his.

He saw it in her rush to enact a clinical exit from the car, in the way she pawed at the unfamiliar door to find the lever.

Aware the moment must end, but not wanting it to, Alex said, 'I really enjoyed tonight.'

He held out his hand, and Jess took it.

'Me too.' She squeezed his hand gently in return before withdrawing from him. And then she was gone.

On his phone were seven missed calls. Driving home, Alex girded himself for the questions Madeleine would inevitably fire his way.

\* \* \*

'Where have you been? I was worried sick about you. Is your phone flat?'

He couldn't tell one more lie. 'No, sorry, I saw you'd called, but I was nearly home by then, and so I thought there was no point calling back.'

'Except to relieve me of my fear you'd died or something.'

He went into the bedroom to change. 'I went running, and bumped into Jess. We got talking, and ended up having a bite to eat at the Beachside Shack.'

Madeleine came quietly to stand at the bedroom door.

'Yeah, sorry, time got away.'

'So you've eaten.'

'Yes, I said that. Sorry, I won't have dinner... obviously.'

When he turned to look at Madeleine, he saw she was crying.

'Madeleine, I said I'm sorry. I know I should have called. I didn't think.'

'Why wouldn't you just ring to ask me to join you?' Madeleine said in between sobs. 'I feel so left out.'

'It was nothing. We didn't talk about anything important. Just about work stuff. You know, I was talking about the sorts of stuff kids read nowadays, and then we both talked about what we were reading at the same age, and the kinds of books that engage kids...'

Madeleine wandered over to the bed. She sat down heavily, her head in her hands.

'It was nothing,' he said, trying to sound patient despite his growing irritation. The lie spread like a drop of poison on his tongue. 'It was completely innocent, I swear. I mean, I told you what we talked about. Not exactly adulterous stuff.'

Madeleine looked at him without speaking. Her mouth was a thin, downturned line. 'You are a clueless, heartless bastard. What you call a harmless conversation just made me feel worse than if you'd slept with her.'

## Chapter 23 – Freedom and control

The following day, Alex decided to try something inspired by what he and Jess had talked about the previous night.

‘Morning, everyone,’ he said as the kids gathered around him. ‘Come sit on the mat.’

‘I don’t want to,’ said Amir.

‘I want to go on the computer,’ said Cody.

‘You always get the computer. It’s not fair,’ said Amber.

Alex broke in, making his voice deep and serious. ‘Sorry kids. This morning we’re doing this. No choice. Come and sit down.’

The kids were oddly quiet as Alex took the roll and sent off the lunch order monitors.

Then he took out a copy of Esio Trot and started reading the first page.

*Mr Hoppy lived in a small flat high up in a tall concrete building. He lived alone. He had always been a lonely man and now that he was retired from work he was more lonely than ever.*

*There were two loves in Mr Hoppy’s life. One was the flowers that he grew on his balcony. They grew in pots and tubs and baskets, and in summer the little balcony became a riot of colour.*

*Mr Hoppy’s second love was a secret he kept entirely to himself.*

‘Now that,’ he said, looking at the intent group of faces staring back at him, ‘is the first page of one of my favourite books. It was written by Roald Dahl the year I was born, so I guess it’s pretty old now.’ He pulled a face, which elicited a few giggles. Zayne seemed to be enjoying stretching the comedy, laughing loudly and too long with his group of friends at the back. Alex let it go a few seconds, before he read on:

*The balcony immediately below Mr Hoppy’s jutted out a good bit further from the building than his own, so Mr Hoppy always had a fine view of what was going on down there. This balcony belonged to an attractive middle-aged lady called Mrs Silver. Mrs Silver was a widow who also lived alone. And although she didn’t know it, it was she who was the object of Mr Hoppy’s secret love.*

The kids broke out in a chorus of giggles. Love was clearly a humorous concept for seven year olds. When he read out the next part, they fell about, hysterical with laughter. Bridie was giggling, all the while covering her mouth with her little fingers.

*He had loved her from his balcony for many years, but he was a very shy man and he had never been able to bring himself to give her even the smallest hint of his love.*

Alex read to the end of the first chapter. There were lots of pictures, and Alex dwelt on these, discussing the details of the images as they related to the narrative. Alex asked the kids to describe how the pictures helped the author to tell the story, and also to point out, if they could, some things they guessed were going to happen based on what was in the images rather than what was in the text. He read the next chapter following a similar routine.

Half an hour flew. He then said to the class, ‘As I just said, this book is one of my favourites. Tomorrow, I would like to know about *your* favourite books. That means I want you to either bring in a book from home, or tell me the name

of a book you love. Or if you can't think of anything, then bring a list of things you like to do, and we'll go on the hunt for a book you'll like.'

Zayne called out, 'I don't like reading.'

'I get that,' Alex said. That's the whole point of this project. We are all going to be detectives on the hunt for our favourite books. When we've found them, I'll tell you what happens next.'

The remark generated a great deal of chatter amongst the kids, and Alex looked around with pride at how enthused they seemed to be by the prospect. Even Manny was looking more animated than usual, chatting with Amir and Ben.

'What are we doing now, Alex?' Bridie asked.

'Great question, Bridie. Now we are going to paint something that has to do with the story. Once we're finished, we'll do some writing.'

The kids were quickly on their feet, heading to the wet area where the paints and easels were kept. There had been a fair bit of painting in the room over the past few months, and the kids now fussed expertly with paper and easels.

He felt someone pull at his sleeve, and looked down. Bridie was standing there.

'What is it? Why aren't you getting organised?'

'I don't have any books at home. We had some, but now we have to move to Nanny's, so mum chucked them out.'

Bridie's chin was trembling, and Alex was quick to reassure.

'Not a problem, when we go to the library we'll find something.' He waited for Bridie to respond, but she just stood there.

He was about to walk off, when he realised what he was doing. How could he be so thoughtless? Bridie was leaving, and she was giving him an opening for connection. He knelt so he could look her straight in the eyes.

'When are you moving to your Nan's?'

She shrugged. 'Will and Dylan don't want to go.'

'But you have to, right?'

She shrugged again.

'It'll be exciting,' Alex said, his voice as cheerful as an automated phone message. He smiled in an effort to jolly up a situation that had no spark of jollity in it whatsoever. When Bridie didn't brighten, he thought it best to change tack. 'Help me with the art smocks?'

Bridie nodded, reaching for Alex's hand. When they reached the smock box, he gently extricated his hand from hers and gave her shoulder a pat.

He left her and stood in the middle of the room, observing the activity all around him, becoming aware of the hum it generated. Was this the sound his lecturer had described? He let it swirl around him like he were the centre of a powerful vortex. It wasn't so much a sound but a feeling. A concoction in equal parts hum, colour and vibration; easy flowing and as delicious and comforting as chocolate sauce.

\* \* \*

That night, Alex listened to Madeleine knocking about in the bathroom getting ready for bed. He knew she was still grumpy with him over their spat, despite behaving as though nothing was amiss. Talking about it would achieve nothing, and so Alex decided to take his mind off the tension by burying his mind in a new post. He was buzzing, too alert for sleep. Not being able to share this with Madeleine filled him with sadness.

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**CLASSROOM NORMS:**

*Posted June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

Seems I had it all wrong.

Today I stumbled upon the very representation of what's real, solid and authentic about teaching and learning. WOW. It's got as much to do with my own practices as a teacher as it does with how the students are learning.

I've been reading Anna Craft on creativity and things are starting to make more sense.

Even though The Joy Project started in a fog, in hindsight it's easy to see I'd plunged the kids right in the middle of the creative zone. But it wasn't just about the students being creative. They couldn't be creative without me being creative in my own teaching practices.

Funny that creativity thrives on structure...

But structure doesn't have to be constricting. There should be room for kids to be autonomous learners, to chill and to enjoy every single moment of every day.

It is now a time of readjustment. My objectives will be realigned. Everything I do from now on will stem from, or be guided by *The Joy Principle*.

*Craft wrote about this in 'Creativity across the primary curriculum: framing and developing practice'! (pp.36-37).*

*\*Mentoring enables someone with greater expertise to help someone with less expertise in any given domain. It is a similar idea to Vygotsky's notion of an expert 'scaffolding' the learning of a novice. Mentoring creativity means providing a role-model, as well as direct support, for the learner. In other words, mentoring is one of the strategies which brings together the three aspects of creativity, the person, the process and the domain.'*

*Eisner did too, in 'Arts and the creation of mind'! (pp.73-74).*

*\*In some classrooms students are not to leave their seats without having asked for and received permission. In other classrooms, especially art rooms, looking at fellow students'*

*work is not only permitted, but encouraged; it's a way to learn. Furthermore, student work is not only looked at, but discussed by both students and teachers. In this setting classroom norms encourage cooperation, autonomy, and community – students can look at the work of their peers and at the same time become increasingly independent.*

Without realising it, I was trying to create an art studio in my classroom. But there were no guidelines. Did I really expect it to come out of thin air?

Now I realise it's my job to guide kids towards this state of being. I am their mentor, and it's my job to show them the way.

Alex uploaded the post with greater confidence than he'd felt since he started *Running Man*. Let anyone read it and dare to post a challenge, he thought. I can defend this.

## Chapter 24 – Star dust

Anticipation of Conor Reynolds' visit had a transformational effect on the downhearted identity of Beauvista. No renovations had taken place, and yet the school seemed imbued with a never-before-seen sense of optimism. It was as though Beauvista had come of age, at last comfortable and self-assured at the no-frills end of St Margaret. It was a subtle difference; difficult to define, yet tangible. It was as though the school had long been sagging and someone had only just noticed; rushing to pump it full of air. The only thing Alex could credit for the change of mindset was the Conor effect. The school now had something to be proud of. Something other schools, despite greater privilege, could not surpass.

Another result of the Conor effect was that his number one fan seemed at least ten centimetres taller than she'd been at the start of the year. Girls tended to shoot up at this age, but there was more to Yasemin's growth than simple biology. The intricacies of instigating all this Hollywood razzle dazzle had truly changed her. Though always a confident kid, she was now the consummate diplomat, more poised and self-assured than ever before. Yasemin had become a true ambassador of the school, and the maturity that role had thrust upon her shoulders showed. When Alex saw her chatting with fellow students and teachers with such easy grace, he couldn't feel anything but the deepest pride.

Alex bumped into Yasemin the day before Conor's venerated feet were scheduled to hit the asphalt at Beauvista.

'Oh, Mr Kiernan, I am so excited. This is too cool for words.' She flicked her voluminous hair over one shoulder.

'You've done a great job,' Alex said. 'You're a leader.'

'Everyone's been so awesome.'

Alex had to agree. Every classroom held a Conor shrine of some sort. With the younger kids, it was just pictures. Sometimes a Conor collage. But the older kids had really gone to town with it. Yasemin's class had an interactive display, where students could click on links from the smartboard to clips from Conor's movies, to trailers, or to interviews he'd done on everything from Oprah, to Graham Norton, to Jimmy Fallon. Following Yasemin's lead, all the middle and senior grades had created similar shrines to the golden expatriate. But in the staffroom, when teachers discussed their lessons, there was never any talk of how the Conor hysteria might fit into the overall learning context of the school. Alex found it strange they didn't realise how much the kids were learning, and how much more could be done to capitalise on the wave of passion, however momentary it might be.

Tomorrow would be the last day of Term Two. School reports were finalised and would be handed out to students at the end of the day. But in anticipation of the school being anointed in Hollywood sparkle, reports were low priority in the minds of even the keenest teachers. Alex, whose draft reports had miraculously incurred no thorny questions from Felicity, felt like he'd dodged a bullet. In preparation for the following day's gala reception, the school's tired besa block buildings had been festooned in posters, silver foil garlands and large, multi-coloured lettering the size of a small truck.

A huge inscription inside the main courtyard read *We love you Conor!* At the front of the school, *Conor Reynolds, welcome back to Beauvista* was an incongruous backdrop to the weedy lawn and the scraggly plantation of native trees. The last letter had lost whatever grip was holding it to the wall, and was now tilted at an ungainly angle, giving the sign a genuine Beauvista touch. *Not quite straight, and not quite right.*

Inside the corridors, televisions had been set up to play snippets of Conor's films, which had been edited by the grade three and four students.

These were running on a loop, and had become a constant soundtrack to the daily comings and goings of the student horde.

The whole Conor Reynolds-generated confusion had, however, generated one positive side effect. During what was a crazy busy week in every classroom, Ivana had somehow taken a hike, and Alex was thus able to continue working with his class on mentoring towards arts and literacy, with a bit of maths and everything else thrown in the mix. Admittedly, he was being a great deal more managerial than at the start of The Joy Project. Instead of robbing the children of joy, Alex found that gentle guidance translated to learning without stress. Out went forced timelines and rigid schedules that meant one thing must be dropped in order for another to start exactly on time. Without those pressures, learning went on in quite a natural and democratic way. Under Alex's watchful direction, real discussions took place, kids listened to each other, took turns, and shared their learning.

While the rest of the school surrendered to full blown Conor Reynolds madness, the kids in Alex's class brought favourite books from home and wrote book reviews, which they displayed on posters and presented to the class. They used reading apps on the iPad, playing games that helped with spelling, phonics, punctuation and comprehension. Alex didn't take any of the apps too seriously, but he did like the one that used songs to improve reading ability. With Alex's help, the kids searched the school library catalogue. He showed them how to log onto the local municipal library site to expand their searches.

Without making a big show of it, and when the weather allowed, Alex made a point of taking his class down to The Park at least twice a week, where they sat, talked, drew, made clay models, or just read their growing stash of favourite books.

Even Amir, who supposedly hated reading was now (thanks to a loan of Alex's mobile enabled iPad) swiping his way through motorbike websites like *Adventure Bike Rider*. Despite his challenges with reading, Alex was pleasantly surprised to see him so intent to nibble at the small slabs of text.

Days passed quickly, the learning in one joining seamlessly to the learning of the next, and Conor's visit was soon upon them. Bridie's latest favourite

picture book, *Emily's Blue Period*, was written up as a play by her group. They were ready to perform it in costume tomorrow if Conor Reynolds should pop his head through their door. Alex watched Bridie practising her part. Her face was so animated, the little rosebud lips curling around the dialogue, her nose wrinkling up when she delivered the trickier lines. Despite the whole class's general air of nonchalance, he knew they had all, especially Bridie, been sprinkled with a generous and beneficial dose of Hollywood magic.

\* \* \*

Kym was lying on the bed, her mouth agape. Conor walked up to check if she was still breathing. He nudged her. She moaned, and then opened her eyes a crack. 'Baby,' she said, smiling languorously. 'What you doing here?'

'We're in Melbourne. In the hotel. Tomorrow I'm going out to do a gig, and then I'll see you later on.'

'Which gig?' she said, slurring her words.

'The primary school. You don't want to go there.' He meant it as, *Don't ask me to explain, it's too long a story*, but Kym took exception.

'Whaddaya mean, I don't want to go there? Who are you to tell me what I should do, or where I should go? If I wanna go to the school, then I'm the hell going.' She rolled over, her tone more mellow, now. 'Don't be an asshole, okay?'

Conor rubbed his temples. The headache again. They'd only been in Melbourne a few weeks, and Kym had already found a dealer. He knew it wasn't a difficult thing to organise, but Jesus, she could hold back a little in his home town.

What if his mother made contact? He could hardly introduce her to Kym. He could imagine what his mother would say. *You could have found a junkie a stone's throw away from home. Why go to America?*

He hadn't heard from his mother for at least twelve years. His sister gave him regular updates on her health, and so Conor knew that she still lived in the same fibro cement house where he grew up in Sunshine. Years ago, he'd

bought a big new house for her in Toorak. She refused to move. 'Keep your fancy house,' she'd told him. 'Am I not good enough for you, now? I don't need anybody's handouts, and I certainly won't take yours. Your father and I worked for decades to pay off that mortgage, and this is where I'm staying till I die. Real people live around here. Not your kind.'

Every effort to contact her after that point had failed.

Kym had sunk back into her drug-addled stupor, and Conor opened the sealed plastic bag that contained his costume. He did this often when travelling. His people were good at providing ordinary street wear. They'd trawl the second hand shops and find him a cheap brand of jeans, a polyester polo shirt and a battered fleece jacket. The look was completed with some ordinary running shoes and a peaked cap with some nondescript commercial logo. Wherever they were in the world, this stuff was always an easy find. Dark glasses completed the look. He looked in the mirror. Just an ordinary bloke about to go for a stroll.

*Who do you think you are, calling yourself that ridiculous name?* his mother told him when he landed his first acting job. *Craig is what I named you, and Craig is what you'll always be. And don't you forget it, Mr High'n'Mighty.*

Well, here he was, twenty years later, going down thirty two floors to street level to walk around his old city the way he used to when nobody knew him. This afternoon he would be Craig. Craig Reynolds from Sunshine.

Tomorrow, he'd revert to the role of Conor and resume the pantomime.

## Chapter 25 – A different life

The day had finally arrived. Felicity woke at five after a fitful night. There was no point trying to return to sleep, and so she got up and padded around her house in the dark, thinking about Craig.

She'd bought this house while he was still at Beauvista. Felicity remembered him standing by her side as she bid for it, and though neither of them had broached the subject, in her heart there was a scintilla of hope that he would one day share it with her.

When the auctioneer brought down the hammer on the last bid and the house was hers, she threw herself into Craig's arms, and they kissed right in front of the gathered crowd. There were cheers and wolf whistles, and to this day, Felicity still reddened at the thought of that public display of affection. It wasn't like her. But maybe it was a portent of things to come for Craig.

Now, standing in the doorway of the lounge room, the outline of the furniture silhouetted in the glow from the street light, she remembered Craig helping her move in, all the hours spent in this very room, downing red wine, reading books, and catching up on last-minute planning for school the next day.

It was in this room, curled in front of the fire, that Craig had first shared his plans to travel to the US. He hadn't mentioned acting. At the time, all Felicity wanted was an invitation to join him. She would have put her house on the market at the first hint of a shared life. She would have gone anywhere just to be by his side.

Perhaps he had not dared to expect she'd drop everything to follow him into the unknown. He hadn't dared to ask her to give everything up with nothing to offer in return. Six months later, she read in the paper that he'd been cast in a supporting role in a blockbuster movie. The die was cast. Craig reinvented himself; no longer the primary school teacher from the land of the ordinary, but Conor Reynolds, a soon-to-be Hollywood megastar.

She wondered what today would bring.

After her shower, she stood in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom, trying to decide what to wear. She looked at her legs, now lumpy and veined, and felt ashamed. The women she'd seen snapped in the company of Conor Reynolds did not have legs like these. Then, there was the matter of her face. The lines, the inevitable sagging that were part of being over fifty, could not be hidden. She put on her reading glasses and peered at herself in the better light of the bathroom. Nothing that a facelift couldn't fix.

But she was who she was, and today she would dress and put on make-up as she'd done for the last thirty years of her teaching life. Steadfast and ordinary.

Later that morning, Felicity arrived at school amid a flurry of activity. Several local channels' vans were parked in along the school boundary, with cameramen setting up their equipment. A pretty reporter in a too-small suit was already filming an intro. On a day's leave from Federation, Jess arrived soon after, car full of cupcakes, slices and other delicacies.

Felicity retreated to her office to settle her fluttering heart. She had on her charcoal suit; dependable attire for more formal days. A pair of silver earrings. Plain stockings. Black heels. Nothing special for Craig.

She sat in her office, glancing out the window far too often.

Soon, he would be here. Soon.

\* \* \*

Like an impatient child fixated on a promise, Alex studied the movement of parents and press at the school periphery. *Is he here yet?*

At ten minutes to ten, Alex had a surge of adrenalin as he spied a cortege of black cars pulling up in front of the school. There were two plain black Mercedes. The third vehicle was a limousine.

Not long after, Nick's voice came over the loudspeaker.

'Attention everyone. I am very pleased to announce that Conor Reynolds has arrived at the school, and will soon be entering from the main office into the quadrangle. All teachers, please escort the students to their usual assembly positions, and be ready to welcome Mr Reynolds.'

Mayhem broke out. Kids who just seconds ago had sat frozen, taking in Nick's every word, now morphed into a riotous mob, darting in different directions around the classroom with no particular purpose, squealing and bumping chairs as they went.

'If you want to see Conor Reynolds,' Alex shouted above the din, 'let's get organised.'

As if under a magical spell, twenty seven little bodies quickly formed two perfect lines at the door. Minutes later, Alex's kids were standing raggle-taggle in their designated assembly spot. He gave up trying to maintain order as he did on Monday mornings. The quadrangle buzzed with restless energy. The air was electric. Like a benevolent virus, Hollywood razzle dazzle had infected everything, including the weather. Though it was full winter, overnight rain had washed the school clean, and a deep blue sky now rendered every surface more sharp and colourful than seemed possible given the school hadn't had a lick of paint in at least a decade.

Four Grade Six assembly monitors were checking the sound system as they did on Monday morning, making sure all cables were tucked out of the way for safety.

The mural Aloysius and Daisy's kids had been working on was proudly exhibited on the wall directly behind the microphone. It featured an image of Conor that was more caricature than realist. But all in all, it wasn't a half bad effort. The mural had a thick border decorated with the titles of Conor's movies and some well chosen icons. *Arsenal* was followed by a picture of a bomb, *Midnight 2099* was represented by a moon with an evil grin. The lectern was

completely swathed in silver foil. A long strip of red carpet whose provenance Alex had no clue about, led from the office door all the way down the steps and right up to the spot where the guest of honour would stand. On that spot the kids had put a rug made of leopard print paper edged with gold, and which sparkled all over with randomly glued plastic gemstones. Alex laughed inwardly at the cheap staging and over-the-top theatricals of the day. Conor would need his sunglasses for this gig. Ugliness aside, it was cheerful and uplifting. Joy was in the air.

At the door of the staffroom, he spied Jess, her hair tied back and wearing a flour-dusted apron. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were imbued with a rosy glow. When their eyes met, her smile intensified. She compressed her shoulders, then unfurled herself with a little jump, hands waving. He'd never seen her look so happy, and his heart swelled at the sight. It was hard to believe that the tiny, nervous girl with the haunted eyes he'd met at the ReWARD Program only a few months ago was now larger-than-life and full of so much confidence. He was so happy for her.

Yet Alex's happiness for Jess was tinged with something sombre and difficult to define. He couldn't be sure if it was sadness or regret. Or both. Like Jess, Alex wished he had something that fired him up in quite the same way. Once Jess left teaching, she'd be out of his life. No more Saturday chats at the ReWARD program. And save for the odd, accidental meeting when out running, there'd be no more Jess. Sadness, he could understand. Regret was harder to process. A part of him wanted to join Jess in her adventure, though he couldn't see how that would work, as he had no interest in food except to eat it.

With the star guest still nowhere to be seen, a hush settled over the crowd. Alex was relieved to turn his thoughts elsewhere. Then the door from the main office opened and Nick came through with Felicity in tow. They approached the microphone.

After a dramatic pause, Nick cleared his throat and began.

'Ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, I am thrilled to be standing here on such a momentous occasion. Today, we welcome back someone who is part of the wider Beauvista family to which you all belong. Since leaving our school

twenty years ago, we have all followed the trajectory of his stellar film career, never forgetting he is one of us.' Nick smiled and puffed out his chest. 'I am very proud to introduce you to... Well, some of us older folk have already been introduced, right Felicity?'

He stuck out his elbow, poking Felicity in the side. Felicity flinched, gave a strained smile. The microphone caught her whisper. 'Speak for yourself, Nick.' Her face flooded with colour.

'With no further ado, give it up for Conor Reynolds,' Nick waved his arm in the direction of the office doors, which sprang open as if by magic. In the moments before the quadrangle was engulfed in ear-splitting screams, Alex felt a shiver of embarrassment for Nick.

And then the unmistakable figure of Conor Reynolds appeared in the doorway. With perfect timing, he held back for a few seconds before taking the first step into the brilliance of the day, cool and inscrutable, behind a pair of black sunglasses.

\* \* \*

Everything in the staffroom kitchen was ready and waiting. Jess's eyes felt grainy. She'd meant to go to bed early the previous night so she'd be bright and alert for today, but just when she thought she was finally finished, she would think of something else that needed doing. She was done by quarter to five that morning, but by then there didn't seem much point in going to bed. If she allowed herself to close her eyes she might never open them for hours. Imagine waking up at midday! She'd have to kill herself if she did that, so best not lie down at all.

Standing on the staffroom steps looking at the packed quadrangle, soaking in the carnival atmosphere, Jess could not remember feeling so alive. She could stay awake for a whole week at this rate.

There was Alex, standing with his kids, their smiles bright as twinkling stars. Her heart did a flip when her eyes met his, and her body convulsed just a little from the sheer pleasure of being in his proximity. Her heart sank.

Madeleine was his girl. They had commitments. Big commitments. Still, there was friendship, which would have to do. Now she had Alex in her life, she couldn't imagine a life without him, no matter what part he played in it.

And then Conor Reynolds was before them like a modern-day religious apparition, strange and real all at the same in a way that only the truly famous can be. The quadrangle seemed to vibrate with his energy, and the whole school erupted like a ginormous volcano. Jess wanted to laugh out loud at the ridiculousness of the whole thing, but instead, she turned on her heels and hurried inside to get the reception under way.

She had prepared no less than thirty trays of finger food. Everything from mini sausage rolls, to samosas, to buffalo mozzarella and prosciutto wraps. As soon as the assembly was over, Yasemin and her crew of helpers were going to join her in the staffroom, where they would don aprons and place the food onto plastic serving platters that Jess had lined with white, fine linen tea towels from her mum's kitchen. Just because the event was in a school staffroom didn't mean it couldn't have the flavour of a five star do. There were sauces to put into bowls, toothpicks and napkins to place on the platters of hot or messy finger foods, and there were lots of drinks to pour. For a moment, it was hard to believe she was responsible for all this. But she had done it. And she would do it again and again, getting better and better at it, once she had her own place. She would not drown in anxiety and stress like she'd done with teaching.

She stopped and looked around the empty staffroom.

What she saw was not a reception for a famous person. No, it was something much grander than that. No longer a pipe dream, it was tangible evidence of her new life.

## Chapter 26 – The perils of teaching

How could he have stayed away so long?

Conor had been guest of honour at countless functions over the years, yet he'd be hard pushed to recall even a dozen of them. He would not forget this one.

Nick was still his old self. A bit lumpier around the middle, and with less hair, but still Nick. There was Gus, grinning like he always did when they shared a joke, though he looked a lot more grey and weary nowadays. Hardly surprising, given the passage of time.

He searched the crowd anxiously. There she was. His breath caught in his throat. Felicity was still very much Felicity.

The years fell away and he was unexpectedly flooded with despair. How could he have been away so long without making contact? He glanced in the direction of the little garden they'd planted together, working tirelessly for weeks to get it done before the end of the year. The planting was still there, and had grown into a decent little forest.

And then Nick gave him the nicest, daggiest introduction; words that cushioned him in a heartfelt embrace. It was like being swept up in a time machine back to the days when he'd be waiting his turn to deliver the sports report.

Nick stepped aside so Conor could take his place at the microphone.

‘It’s nice to be back,’ he said after the cheers and screaming died down. An unreal sensation of nostalgia tingled in his limbs as he heard his voice echoing across the quadrangle.

‘I missed you, guys.’

Hundreds of piercing screams scrambled his train of thought.

He paused to gather himself. His tongue seemed to have lost its ability to curl itself around words. And yet the location, the very act of standing at the microphone, addressing the assembled school community as he’d done on so many occasions in his previous life, was embedded in his DNA. The excited little faces looking at him were different to the ones he remembered. It was as though someone had taken the previous duopoly of Vietnamese and Turkish heritage and spliced in a dozen more cultural flavours. One aspect remained the same. You could come up with a thousand different versions of working class, but they all had the same feel. A lumpy mix of hope, boldness and dejection. In many ways, they were the same as everyone else. In particular ways, they were set apart, incongruous; an impenetrable bubble hovering uncertainly at the whim of every sudden gust of wind.

‘I... I am going to keep this short,’ Conor said. Gasps and shouts emanated from the audience. Close to the front, a spindly, exotic-looking girl with long, glossy hair tied back into a pony tail brought her hand up to her mouth, her eyebrows creased into a frown. She tugged at her teacher’s sleeve and whispered something.

‘What I meant...’ Conor said as he fought the uncharacteristic loss of words. ‘What I meant was that I’d really like to spend some time with each class. After I say hello to your teachers in the staffroom, that is.’ Applause broke out. ‘And if it’s okay with the teachers, of course,’ he added.

But by then, it was impossible for anyone to be heard over the din.

At the end of the formalities, Conor was whisked away from the assembly, and escorted to the staffroom. The long room – despite the passage of twenty years – was in essence still very much unchanged. A vague reshuffling of furniture had taken place, but the kitchen was still the same 1970s Laminex – dark brown, wood-grain finish – god only knew why they hadn’t renovated. The

dishwasher was new, but the shelf above it still held a motley collection of coffee mugs.

Nick came over. He squeezed his arm. 'Mate, it's good to have you here. You know we all appreciate you making the time. Your schedule must be hell.'

Conor gave no clue that the visit was due to an organisational blunder. 'It's a pleasure. Now that I'm here, I'm sorry it's been so long. Is it okay if I go around and talk to the kids in their classrooms?'

'Of course. I'm not sure you'll have time—'

'I have all the time in the world, Nick. And if I don't, I'll make it.'

They chatted for a while, Conor finding out what Nick had done to fill in the past twenty years. There was no need to fill Nick in on what Conor had been doing. Nick seemed to have done his research, and had apparently watched each one of Conor's films. Several times.

As Nick spoke, Conor searched the room for Felicity. He saw her, standing at the far end of the room, helping with the food. Girding himself, he made excuses and walked over to greet her.

\* \* \*

Felicity saw Craig break away from his conversation with Nick and start heading towards her. His presence in the room was so overpowering she felt as though she'd have sensed his movements with her eyes shut. After a lifetime, they were about to meet again. She felt heat rise in her cheeks, and prayed to someone or something that she'd not blush. But it was too late. Conor was now only a few steps away, and her face felt incandescent.

'Felicity,' he said, taking her hands in his. 'What can I say?'

She studied his face. It was unnaturally smooth for someone his age. His physique was still toned, as it had been back then, though he was now more muscled. An easy life was gentle on one's body. More time spent resting, working out, eating well, and the best skincare treatments money could buy were all in evidence. But there was another edge to the person who stood

before her now. Cosmetic surgery or something else had changed him so dramatically that Felicity could no longer think of him as Craig.

‘Conor,’ she said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

He pulled her close and enveloped her in a tight hug. Felicity stiffened. How dare he, after all this time, and right here in the staffroom filled with her colleagues and students? She disentangled herself, intensely annoyed.

Backing away, she brushed the sleeves of her jacket as though removing any traces of his hands. ‘I wish you well,’ she said, ‘but you can’t do this, here. You just can’t. Not now. Not ever.’

\* \* \*

Jess watched the awkward exchange between Conor and Aunt Flick in mute dismay. What was the man doing? Had he forgotten this was a school staffroom, not a movie set? As Aunt Flick broke out of the vice-like embrace, Jess was thankful Conor hadn’t planted one of those cringe-worthy Hollywood kisses on her. For a moment she thought he might.

And then Aunt Flick walked off, and Conor was left standing there, with those nearby edging ever closer in seemingly incidental, yet deliberate attempts to snare a moment with the star.

Without over-thinking it, Jess scooped up a platter that Yasemin had just finished arranging, and walked over to him. Movie star or used-to-be teacher, honoured guest or not, Jess decided to look upon Conor as just another mouth to feed; someone she was here to serve. And she was determined she’d do a fine job of it.

She nudged her way through the small, but annoyingly resistant mob, and stood right in front of Conor, smiling. ‘Hi, I’m Jess. I teach at Federation Primary. Just for today I’m in charge of the catering. Would you like to try one of my treats? They’re all meticulously and deliciously home made.’

Conor looked right through her. Then he focused on the tray.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ he said, selecting a wafer topped with avocado, chive and smoked salmon and downing it in one gulp. ‘Mmm, nice,’ he said. ‘I’ll take

another.’ He selected a rice paper roll, dipped it in the sauce dish and Jess watched with delight as he tossed his head back and groaned in appreciation.

Jess could hardly believe how loose and confident she felt. If Conor Reynolds had walked into her classroom she would practically have been frozen with apprehension. But holding a tray of food was like having a protective shield. Her ability to chat – flirt, even – seemed to have grown a thousand fold.

‘Come on, take another,’ she said.

Conor promptly obeyed. ‘What are you doing wasting your talents teaching?’

‘Well... funny you should say that,’ Jess began, and gave Conor an abbreviated version of her plans to leave teaching and start her own café.

\* \* \*

‘Zara, I’m sorry, but I really have to get over to the staffroom.’

‘That’s right, off you go, brown-nosing that famous wanker. Forget your job, why don’t ya, which is see parents when they need to talk to ya.’

Vivian had noticed Zara hanging around in the periphery during the assembly, the ubiquitous fag hanging off her lip. Zara’s issue today was that Fleur was supposedly bullying Maddisson. Knowing both children, Vivian was sure Zara’s accusation was a physical and psychological impossibility. If anything it was the other way around. The argument volleyed back and forth for a good ten minutes in the middle of the deserted quadrangle without resolution.

As Zara ranted, Vivian inched closer to the staffroom door. Not only because she wanted to join Conor Reynold’s reception, but also as a safety measure. If Zara lunged, she wouldn’t have far to run.

‘Zara, I do have to go, but I will talk to Fleur and Maddisson separately so we can work out what’s going on.’

‘No you don’t. No-one’s talking to Maddisson like she’s in police lock-up. You want to question her, you’d better make sure I’m there, or I’ll sue.’

Vivian indulged her. ‘Sure, of course, Zara. Let me talk to Fleur first, and I can organise a time to sit with you and Maddisson to discuss it further.’

'That fucking little bitch. I want her there, too.'

'No, I'm afraid that's not possible.'

'Why fucking not?'

'Zara, your language.'

'Go fuck yourself,' Zara yelled, and walked off. Though tight as a steel spring, Vivian was relieved the encounter had come to a natural end without the need to have Zara forcibly evicted from the school, and thankfully without the usual shoving.

She stepped gratefully into the sanctuary of the corridor, closing the heavy doors behind her. The action put a solid barrier between her and the toxicity of Zara, and Vivian was awash with relief. A delicious aroma had wafted into the hallway from the staffroom, and she breathed it deep into her lungs as she walked towards the sound of chatter. There, she was greeted by a couple of Grade Six girls bearing platters filled with delicious-looking titbits. She accepted a curry samosa and sank her teeth into the soft pastry, her tastebuds awakening to the tantalizing flavours. 'Thanks, girls. Yummy,' she said, her mouth still half full.

The atmosphere in the room was at once convivial and relaxed. The guest of honour was standing off to one side talking to Felicity, and Vivian spied that niece of hers, Jess, managing the food. As other trays came her way and she sampled more goodies, the pungent odour of Zara's fag breath began to recede from her memory. Why did the woman always have to stand so close?

Mingling with her colleagues, Vivian felt the knot in her shoulders unravel.

\* \* \*

'He's coming! Everyone sit down,' Alex said. Kids scrambled to the mat. The day had started off as a bit of a joke, but after seeing Conor at assembly, Alex understood had some understanding of the X factor. The guy had such a presence that Alex was ready to sign up for a lifetime fan membership.

Alex and the kids were composed into a perfect little classroom tableau when Nick came into the room. 'Everyone ready?' he said, before ushering the guest of honour into the room.

The kids, usually verbose to the point of mayhem, just stared at the door like deer in headlights.

Conor Reynolds stepped into the classroom to a minor vocal eruption. Nick gestured towards Alex's chair, and Conor took his place at the front of the classroom.

Alex was about to raise his voice and tell the kids to quieten down, when Conor spoke.

'Hey, everyone, how's it going?'

They all talked at once, and Conor held his hands up and waited for the talking to subside.

'Okay, I take it that means you're all super,' Conor said. 'That's grand. Now, let me see... How about the first one of you to sit down and put your hand up gets to ask the first question?'

In all of three seconds, all the kids were sitting with their backs as straight as rulers, watching Conor. Three hands went up.

Conor pointed to Zayne.

'I like the movie where you save the world.'

'Hey, mate, that's not a question,' Conor said. 'But thank you. And which movie was that? I save the world in a lot of my movies.' He laughed, and the kids fell about like it was the funniest thing in the world.

More questions followed. Conor answered them all without missing a beat.

'How old are you?'

'A hundred and two.'

'How much money do you have?'

Conor patted his back pocket and squinted with concentration. 'Exactly twelve dollars and fifteen cents.'

'Do you have a big house?'

'Takes a lot of cleaning, which is really annoying.'

'Have you got a girlfriend?'

Conor seemed to consider his words carefully before answering that question. 'I did. But I wasn't very nice to her, so she's not talking to me right now. Does that happen with you and your friends sometimes?' And do you think I should say sorry?'

Most kids uttered a drawn out, 'Yes,' except for Manny, who said no. Alex surmised he was either trying to be a rebel, or just plain confused.

Conor laughed. 'I *will* say sorry. Everyone should say sorry when they've been a bit naughty, true?'

And then, Amir asked the last question. 'Can you be our teacher?'

Bridie gave a swift response. 'Movie stars can't be teachers, silly! They do acting and live in big houses. They can't talk to normal people.'

'But he's talking to us,' Amir said. 'I'm normal.'

Zayne laughed out loud. Alex fought the urge to laugh with him. The kid was quick. The quip had gone over the rest of the kids' heads.

Bridie stuck her chin out. 'And they have to get plastic surgery.'

Alex wished the floor would open up and swallow him.

Conor rubbed his chin, disguising his amusement with a melodramatic air of gravity. 'Mmm... let's see. Well, I'd like to be your teacher, of course, 'cause I loved being a teacher when I was here a long time ago. Did you know,' he said, pausing for a moment, 'that this room of yours is very special to me? I'll tell you something I haven't told any of the other kids. This can be your bit of news, if you want to tell it.'

The kids craned their heads.

'This room used to be *my* classroom. So I feel like I could just pick up where I left off.'

Bridie's mouth formed a perfect circle, her hands clasped tightly under her chin.

'But,' Conor went on, 'I'd never take over Alex's class because he's the best teacher for you guys. I haven't been back to my old school for a long time, but now that I have I'd like very much to visit again sometime.' Conor smiled, and the kids looked at one another, giggling at the prospect of his return.

Wrapping up the session, Conor shook Alex's hand. 'What a cool bunch of kids,' he said. 'You're doing a great job.'

'You don't know the half of it,' Alex said, not sure from where the blind trust was coming from. Somehow, he just felt he could speak his mind. 'I've been trying some new techniques, and I'm not sure it's all coming together. Let's just say I have a few people breathing down my neck.'

'Mate, look at your room.' Conor gestured towards the art work, the kids' writing displayed around the room, and the comfy corner spilling over with well-thumbed books. 'I can tell at a glance this is a solid learning environment. And your kids are bright sparks. They're interested, you know? Trust me, they're soaking it all in like little sponges.'

'Well, I hope so.'

'Just one word of advice. Not that you've asked for it, but here goes. Mate, remember to do two things: first, *breathe* and second, *listen to your gut*. I try to do that myself, though I can't say I'm that good at taking my own advice.'

Alex nodded. Listening to his gut came easily. Breathing, he'd have to work on.

In the next minute, Conor and his small entourage had disappeared down the hallway. Alex and the kids looked at each other like they'd all just woken from a magnificent and preposterous dream.

\* \* \*

It was another half hour before the crowd had almost completely dissipated. Kids had come out of their classrooms claspng their reports in large white envelopes bearing the school logo. There were only a few parents left in the school yard when Alex heard the sound of raised voices in the distance. At first, he thought an unfavourable report might have caused an altercation between a teacher and a parent. When he came out of his portable, Alex saw it was just Vivian, caught in yet another standoff with Zara Catumini. At the same time, Jess emerged from the office carrying a stack of trays and plastic containers.

Alex started running.

By the time he got near the three women, Zara, spewing foul language, had pushed Vivian in the chest so hard she staggered back and fell onto her bottom. Jess stepped forward, gripping the trays.

'Hey, that's not okay,' Jess said to Zara. 'Leave, please.'

'I'm gonna fucking smash that bitch's face in,' Zara said, looking at Vivian, who was now beginning to stand.

'No, you won't,' Jess said. She positioned herself between Zara and Vivian, and, using her load as a physical barrier, she guided her towards the gate. Zara had no choice but to step back through the gate. Her gait was unsteady and delayed, which meant Jess easily blocked her path every time Zara tried to get around her to get at Vivian.

Alex reached the gate at the very instant that Zara, propelled by her own loss of balance, lunged at Jess, toppling the stack of trays and boxes in her arms.

'No,' Alex shouted, as Jess absorbed the knock and began to fall.

The scene unfolded as if in slow motion. Alex saw Jess tip gently back, her small form listing momentarily before she buckled. The trays and boxes travelled in an arc and for a long instant seemed weightless, hovering in the space between them. And then everything imploded. Afterwards, Alex could not reliably recall the sequence. What he could not banish from his mind, despite wishing he could, was the way Jess looked at him as she made contact with the footpath. She looked vaguely bewildered, as though about to speak, but robbed of her voice. Alex's ears buzzed with a static hum. Everything faded to black. A sickening crack he knew could only be Jess's head bashing against the curb.

When he could see again, the objects were still. Jess lay on the ground, serene and still like a sleeping Madonna. Trays and boxes were arranged gracefully around her in a strange halo of chaos.

## Chapter 27 – When the universe shifts

Inside the limousine, Conor thought about the stash of cocaine in the small locked cabinet under the opposite seat. Before arriving, he'd promised himself a reward if he got through the day without incident. He should have been in the mood for a couple of lines. But he wasn't.

Though Beauvista had changed (how could it not have in so long?) the place still had that sunny, *nothing-could-go-wrong* feeling. He wondered how much more uncomplicated his life could have been if he'd never left. His encounter with Felicity was the only black spot in the day. He deserved her scorn. He had behaved like a total dick. She'd let him know it, too. There was so much he wished he could have said but, strangely for a man who'd made his fortune in a world of illusion, he could not pull something out of the air to ease the awkwardness.

He would have to try again before filming wrapped up.

Before then, he had some tasks ahead of him, one of which would take place as soon as he got to the hotel. Which was why cocaine would not be a good idea at this moment.

When he got back to the suite, Kym wasn't there. He picked up a magazine and leafed mindlessly through it until she returned.

'Hi Hon, how was your day?' she said breezing in to the suite, her eyes shielded by oversized sunglasses and wearing earrings so big he wondered how she could move her neck from side to side. In her hands were several shopping bags from the high end stores in Collins Street.

'It was a truly great day,' Conor said.

Kym didn't seem to be listening. She took off the shades and began to sort through her shopping haul, laying each item on the sofa. 'Versace was having a sale, so I thought, oh well...' She looked up, smiling. Conor didn't return the smile.

'What's wrong?' she said, then looked at the shopping bags. 'Too much?'

Conor walked over to where she was sitting and took her hands in his. 'We need to talk.'

Within the hour, Kym had packed her things and moved to another suite. He told her she could stay in Melbourne as long as she wanted while he was filming, and that he would take care of her expenses moving out of his homes and finding a place to live. She was remarkably dry-eyed about the whole thing, perking up when Conor said he would offer her a living allowance for the coming year. Just to help her get on her feet, he'd explained. She thanked him. She kissed him. She asked if he wanted her to stay for one more night.

He said, thanks, but no thanks.

When she was gone, he checked the time in LA. It was the early hours of the morning, and not a good time to ring Charisse. He'd ring her later.

He had no idea why it had taken him so long to realise.

\* \* \*

Alex's heart thumped against his chest as he looked at the figure of Jess lying among her utensils. Zara Catumini stood nearby, uncharacteristically speechless. This time, Alex had no need to chase her away. She took in the reactions of those around her, and staggered off down the road with Maddisson in tow.

Vivian, got to her feet. 'Is she all right? Should we call an ambulance?'

Jess opened her eyes and blinked several times. She rolled on to her side and propped herself up on one elbow. 'Jesus, lucky she didn't do this when I was on my way *in*.' Rubbing the side of her head, she said, 'Owww. What the bloody hell got into her?' A purple lump on Jess's temple was growing before

Alex's eyes. She kneeled for a while, then used her hands to push herself up. All colour had drained from her face, and she wobbled in an attempt to remain standing. Alex was sure she was about to fall.

He held his hand out to her. 'Just sit for a bit. I'm not sure you're all right, yet.'

She did not take his hand, seemingly determined to stand on her own. 'No, I think I'm fine.'

'I should have reported her that first time,' Vivian said. 'Alex, can you stay with Jess, and I'll go and let Felicity know about this.'

'Don't tell Aunt Flick, she'll worry.'

Alex chuckled. 'Sorry, but you've got no choice. She's not just your auntie here, she's our boss.' Aside from the nasty bump, Jess looked and sounded unhurt. Alex felt light with relief. Jess smiled, looked down at her clothes, brushing some loose earth off her black skirt.

'Thank god,' Alex said. 'You're tougher than you look.' He began to pick up her things, but he had only started on a small stack of containers when he heard a soft moan. He turned and saw that Jess had sat down again. Her head was in her hands. Immediately, he was at her side. 'Jess, okay?' She put a hand on the ground to steady herself. When she looked up, her eyes had a glazed, unfocused quality. He sat next to her and held her.

Felicity ran out of the staffroom with Vivian close behind. Her face was a mask of fear. She barked an order at Vivian to call an ambulance, then overtook Vivian to do it faster herself. She called to Alex over her shoulder, 'Keep her still.'

Alex supported Jess's weight, letting her fold against the crook of his shoulder. Her forehead was clammy against his neck; her breathing came in short, shallow bursts. He looked about him for something, anything, he might use to make her better, but he had no clue as to what could be done beyond what he was doing right now. So he kept talking. Talking and asking Jess about which of her recipes had been the most successful; how her head felt; if she could read the writing on the school sign only a few metres away. He waved his fingers in front of her eyes and asked if they looked blurry. He had a sense that

she had to be kept talking, because in the growing silence, he could feel her slipping away. Jess murmured her responses, and at one point said in a teasing tone, 'Jesus, Alex, I'm okay. Give it a rest, will you?'

The ambulance seemed to take forever. Afterwards, someone said it only took ten minutes to get to Beauvista. By the time Jess was loaded up into the back, her lips were blue and her eyes were closed. He climbed in and sat next to her. Felicity joined him. As the ambulance drove off with siren blaring, Alex squeezed Jess's hand. Though faint, he felt her fingers pressing into his palm.

\* \* \*

At the hospital, Alex found himself on the sidelines as Felicity claimed next-of-kinship, and was allowed through to admissions. Vivian arrived, and so they sat together and waited, not really knowing what to say, or what they should do except to go over and over the incident. It was the longest time Alex recalled ever spending with Vivian engaging in any kind of conversation.

A short time later, Jess's parents burst through the door, grim-faced with alarm, and were ushered straight in by the nurses. Felicity came out and sat, dejected, by Alex's side.

'She's in a coma,' was all she said.

Alex knew not to ask for more information. Felicity seemed brittle; only just managing to hold herself together. She might fall apart at the gentlest touch.

Much later, Alex remembered to call Madeleine to let her know where he was. She arrived shortly after.

'You should go home, Alex and Vivian,' Felicity said. 'No point waiting here. They told me there aren't likely to be any changes in the first few days. I'll keep you both posted.'

Vivian was first to leave. Then Alex, sensing Madeleine's discomfort, also bid Felicity goodbye.

'You can leave your car here,' Madeleine said in the hospital car park. 'I'll give you a lift.'

'I didn't drive.'

'How did you get here?'

'I rode in the ambulance with Jess and Felicity.'

Madeleine stopped walking. Then, slowly and deliberately, she started moving once more.

'We can get your car tomorrow, then. Looks like you've been through quite a lot today.'

\* \* \*

Nick phoned first thing the following morning to tell Alex Jess died during the night.

Alex's brain went into a spin. He put his hand out to stop himself falling. He heard a faraway howl and realised the sound was coming out of him. His pulse thudded in his ears. *This can't be real. Make it not be real.*

From what seemed a faraway place, he heard Nick speaking. 'I'm so sorry, Alex.'

'But... Felicity said...' Alex tried to still himself as Nick's words echoed in his mind. He was determined to nail the misunderstanding. Surely, he was missing something. But Nick's message had been too short and unequivocal; a grief-stricken utterance that could not be false.

'I'm sorry. There was nothing they could do.'

Alex slid onto the ground, his mind clouded by disbelief.

*It must be wrong.* He must not have heard properly. Felicity said there weren't going to be any changes for days... *How could Jess be dead?* It was just a bump. Zara hadn't even meant it. *It must be wrong.*

'Alex, are you there? ...Alex?'

He emitted a guttural sound in response.

'I'm sorry.' Nick's voice was barely a whisper. 'Apparently, Jess's condition deteriorated during the night, and there was nothing that could be done.'

'But how? It's not...'

'I know, Alex.' He paused. 'I'm so sorry. For her, for Felicity, for you. For everyone. I will organise some counselling for the staff and students once Term Three starts.'

Alex hung up. How could he be okay? Today – one day – was not the problem. What of the thousands of days ahead?

He walked to the bed, laid himself face down, screaming into the pillow.

Madeleine was in the shower. She came out draped in a towel. 'What's going on?'

And then she was by his side, holding him. Alex was grateful for that small mercy.

## Chapter 28 – Death

He stood at the edge of the road in a soft autumn rain as the coffin was loaded into the hearse, his arms limp and empty by his sides.

Felicity had not spoken to him since they were in the hospital with Jess's heart still beating. Now they hovered near each other as the mourners filed into the church, and Alex felt the gentle pressure of Felicity's hand against the small of his back. And then she took her place at her sister's side in the front pew. Aunt and mother: two women united in grief. Nick said Jess was the closest thing to a daughter to Felicity. As he watched the sisters, heads bent in silent solidarity, Alex saw not one, but two mothers who had lost a daughter.

Alex lowered himself into the nearest seat, not noticing those around him. Madeleine nudged him gently. 'It's for the other family members,' she said, then guided him towards the back rows. Alex did not care. He did not feel a thing. He did not hear. His grief was so thick, so cruelly debilitating, that he could barely see.

The service began, utterances and music washing over him like a series of waves on the beach. He was like sand, fragmented into a million specks one moment, reconfigured into a compacted, distorted entity as the next swell of realisation hit him, over and over again until he felt he would spew. He held Madeleine's hand, warm and dry on her lap; the only fixed point in a raging sea of grief.

\* \* \*

Alex returned to work the first Monday of Term Three. They said Felicity would be gone another week, though how she would manage that was anyone's guess. The gossip was understated. Polite. How would she cope? Would she go mad? Would she resign? What had she to live for, after all? These whispers he heard in the staffroom, and he silently concurred. He did not know how Felicity would get through it.

He heard Zara Catumini was in custody, awaiting trial. It would take months for the case to be heard. Maddisson had somehow vanished from the school, was in someone else's care. Alex did not ask for details. He did not want to be reminded of the infernal damage wrought so mindlessly that day. Neither Nick, nor any of the others filled him in. It was easy enough to lay blame, but as witness to the moment when Jess was taken away, Alex understood that it was no more Zara's intent to harm than it was catastrophic bad luck that Jess would be standing at the receiving end. Jess, on whom Zara Catumini had never laid eyes before that moment.

And so, in order to keep afloat and not become submerged in a black river of anguish, Alex threw himself into The Joy Project with more vigour and determination than he'd thought possible.

He held himself together as much for the kids as for himself.

If he stayed focused on them, he reasoned, he would not come undone. And so, he became more jovial, more generous with his time, more patient, more affectionate, and more indulgent than he'd ever been. No task was too bothersome, no lesson too trivial. He poured every speck of energy into the hours he spent in his classroom. At meetings, he sat, anesthetised and largely unresponsive; a state his colleagues did not question. From time to time, he caught a few sideways glances, and understood that was what people did around death. They tiptoed. They spoke carefully. They laughed less, or stopped mid-laugh when you entered the room. They offered small kindnesses: stepping in to do your yard duty shift, giving you more planning time by sacrificing their own, offering to manage your class's permission slips and money for the next excursion.

It did not really help. Creating time for Alex meant more space for sadness. More time to think of what he did not want to remember.

They brought soup at lunchtime to share. Home-made soup, warmed on the stove, not in the microwave. Hearty vegetable soups. Pumpkin, potato and leek. Sometimes with some curry powder stirred in. They must have figured putting something warm inside you would eventually thaw you out.

Alex smiled, and gave thanks. He complimented the cooks. He ate the soups, dipped the crusty, white bread rolls in the thick liquid, and used the last pieces to mop up the bowl. On the outside, he looked satiated, replete. His colleagues seemed heartened by his appreciation. To himself, Alex knew it was all to no avail, for inside he felt only cold. Inside he was dead. No amount of warming could raise the temperature in a place devoid of any sustained combustion. A place that was as frozen as a tomb.

To keep from becoming paralysed, Alex kept moving. At school, he did not stop. At home, he devoured theory at an ever-increasing pace.

In his sleep, he travelled the world with Jess. Fitful travels that jerked them from continent to continent, city to city, and village to dismal village. There were mishaps: ferry trips that were hampered by foul weather, cities where the streets ran with mud after deluges, car accidents, thefts on trains, angry waiters, dirty hotel rooms, protracted bouts of diarrhea and vomiting.

Sometimes he would lose sight of her in a crowded street market, and he would push past people, knock over stands filled with tinkling ornaments and cheap jewellery trying to find her. He would become more and more frantic as she eluded him. He would thrash about in the bed, and wake in panic, startling Madeleine, as the appalling realisation dawned on him again and again, dream after dream; an interminable and agonising succession of dashed hopes.

Each time, realising anew that Jess was lost to him forever was a pain that could not have been more damaging and unbearable than coiling rusted barbed wire around his heart.

\* \* \*

Every afternoon after school, Alex went for a long run along the foreshore and returned home after dusk. He did not notice the scenery as he ran past. He did not take in the beauty of the bay, the sun dipping into the horizon like a giant, blazing orange, the angry whitecaps on waves as they hit the sand. Not did he get pleasure from seeing adolescents cavorting in their wetsuits as they took part in their wind surfing lessons. For the first time in Alex's life, running was less about exercise and contemplation, and more about shortening the long, awkward evenings with Madeleine. Making conversation while avoiding so many points of difference was simply too taxing. After dinner, Alex trawled through Amazon and The Book Depository, ordering books on educational theory, classroom management, literacy and the arts. The deliveries began to arrive.

Madeleine came into the lounge room one evening, holding their bank statement. 'What's all this about? Why do you need all these books?'

'I'm getting an education.'

'I thought you already had one of those.'

'No, I mean, a *real* education. I didn't know anything before.'

'Well, I think it might be a good idea if we discuss this from a budgeting angle,' Madeleine said. 'To spend four hundred one week, a hundred and eighty five the next, and then two hundred the following two is not helping us get ahead.' She looked at the statement, doing a calculation under her breath. 'That's over a thousand dollars in one month. An irresponsible amount to spend without consulting me. I mean, it's half our monthly mortgage repayment.'

Alex stared at Madeleine. 'Okay. We can discuss it.'

Madeleine just shook her head and walked out of the room.

When she left him alone, he usually turned to the blog for company.

Tonight, he looked at his laptop and knew the end had come. He logged on and tapped out his last post.

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## **THE END OF JOY:**

*Posted July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015*

What to do when meaning is lost?

What to do when you don't know where to run?

The project failed. The time has now come to stop running and to start walking. Walking through life at a pace slow enough to notice the detail, and slow enough to act if acting is necessary. In all my running, I have not so much headed in a particular direction, as I have simply been on the move. I did not have a destination in mind. I have just put one foot in front of the other, and I have moved quickly past anything that got in my path. I ran mindlessly towards something indistinct, running more to get away from something I didn't want than running towards a goal. But in running to get away, I got lost.

Now I need to walk so I can retrace my steps and find my way once more. I will never run again until I know that destination. Once I have it in my sights, once I know it as home, I will then run with all my might towards that place.

But first I must stop.

No more running for now.

\* \* \*

Alex read everything he could get his hands on. From Bruner to Eisner, to Stenhouse, to Greene to Barton, using his classroom as a sampling ground for ideas. After school, he trawled YouTube for any Ken Robinson clips he hadn't yet half memorised. He developed such an obsession for Freire that in his mind, he referred to him as Paulo. Alex felt such an affinity with his theories that it was as though he'd known him in a past life. But it went beyond that. Alex *got* the psyche of Freire. In its later stages, Alex was confident Paulo would have approved of The Joy Project. It was hard to fathom how he'd even thought it up without first reading Freire. As he reflected on what he now knew about one of

the most influential and revolutionary educational theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed inconceivable that back at uni, he'd dismissed him as just another bearded relic.

In light of Alex's discoveries, The Joy Project had some legitimate credibility. Lately, Vivian seemed more inclined to offer he and Gus the opportunity to contribute ideas to the team's planning. When they did, she listened with what looked like genuine interest.

That afternoon while on his run, Alex toyed with the logistics of going public with The Joy Project. Without too much internal debate, he decided it was doable.

After dinner, against his better judgement, he asked Madeleine's opinion.

'Alex, please stop. Vivian will never go for it. What's more, if Felicity finds out, she'll hit the roof. And even in a parallel universe where the leadership of a school might approve, how to find time?'

'There is time. I organise my day, so why wouldn't I be able to do it?'

Madeleine sighed, clearly exasperated with the conversation even before it had properly got started. 'I realise you're an island, Alex, but seriously, I don't get this joy bullshit. When will you find time for assessment? For planning? For organising your resources?'

Planning and organising resources were a breeze. But *assessment*... He'd have to get on to that. It was important, but so easy to forget in the flow of the day.

'Hey, don't listen to me,' Madeleine said with a sigh. 'Those books you're reading hold the answers to all the riddles of education, apparently. Who am I to give advice?'

Alex glanced behind him. The double IKEA bookshelf in the corner of the lounge room groaned under the weight of his new texts on education.

Alex felt his shoulders tense. His heart was already darkened. Now anger was seeping in. 'I'm asking your advice because I want to know what you think,' he said, his voice wavering.

'For a change,' Madeleine said, rolling her eyes.

He modulated his voice, trying to keep from shouting in exasperation.  
'Madeleine, I'm floundering here. Can't you get involved?'

'Apparently not.' She walked out of the room.

Soon after, Alex heard music coming from the bedroom. Over the past weeks, Madeleine retreated often to the bedroom, creating an alternative living space in the small apartment. Whenever Alex walked in, she would give him a quizzical stare, like he had to justify his presence in his own bedroom. Most nights, now, he waited until Madeleine was asleep before sliding between the sheets.

## Chapter 29 – Pay it forward

Vivian had done it all in her fifteen years of teaching.

The last decade seemed like a protracted battle in which she'd limped on, blood-shod, through the enervating trenches of school life. Punch drunk from an endless merry-go-round of staff, curriculum and planning meetings, yard duty, term reports, NAPLAN, Professional Learning, school council, online assessment, and whatever other curriculum or administrative curve balls came her way, Vivian started each day feeling unmotivated and listless.

She dressed herself in nice teacher clothes; neat serviceable blouses that would not be spoiled if stained by grubby hands, elastic waisted pants that would not cut into her if she put on a few kilos, and sensible shoes fit for nursing. At school she was ever constant and patient, sometimes to people who deserved no such privileges.

The day before that terrible day when everything changed, she didn't know she would never, ever, be that amenable, beige person, ever again.

The movie star's visit would forever mark the end of one world and the beginning of another for Vivian. Aside from his presence, it was a day like any other in the classroom. Literacy in the morning, then maths, followed by the unbearable tedium of yard duty.

Yard duty. Alex was two minutes late to relieve her, and that was the reason she got caught up in the argument between Fleur and Maddison.

'She hit me, she hit me,' Fleur shouted as she ran to keep ahead of Maddison. Vivian checked her watch once more and steeled herself. When her

mind was set, Maddisson's rage was unswervingly virulent. Whoever caused her grief would pay.

'Okay, girls. One at a time,' Vivian said. It was a tried-and-true way to calm down both sides and get them talking reasonably. Most times, Vivian would succeed in getting both parties back to some kind of harmony.

Maddisson spoke first, eyes narrowed, avoiding Vivian's gaze. 'I did not! She's lying.'

Vivian listened. The two stories were full of tangents. Nothing made sense. Two minutes turned to five and then eight, and still that blockhead, Alex, hadn't shown his face in the yard. Vivian shot an impatient look in the direction of the staffroom. It was then, in that moment when she took her eyes off the girls, that Fleur kicked Maddisson on the shin. Maddisson doubled over in pain, a grand, theatrical gesture worthy of a sneak like her. To be fair, a kick like that would hurt, and Vivian could understand Maddisson wanting to get good mileage out of the incident.

And so, much as she should have known better; much as she should *not* have lost her cool; much as she should have just waited for Alex to make it out the staffroom door, which he eventually would have, she decided to light her already incandescent fuse and let it burn all the way to schoolyard hell.

'Right, you two. Come with me.' She spoke in the authoritative, no-bullshit tone that used to be standard in schools when she first started teaching. She grabbed both children firmly by an arm, and marched them off at adults' pace to the staffroom. She was vaguely aware the girls were struggling to keep up. No matter, Vivian held those arms in a vice-like grip. She powered into the building, past the staffroom, and towards the time-out room, where she heaved both girls through the doorway with vengeful force. 'Now stay there,' she told them, stabbing a finger in the air.

In the corridor, she met Alex, who was only now coming out of the staffroom, chomping on a sandwich. He gave an embarrassed smile. 'Sorry, Vivian. I was...'

*Too busy stuffing your face.* Unable to keep the brittle edge out of her voice, she said, 'When you finish yard duty, I've got two customers for you in the time-out room.'

In the staffroom, Vivian discovered her lunch was not in the fridge. She must have left her favourite casserole sitting on the kitchen table that morning. Another cross against this shitful day.

But it would get worse.

As soon as she let her class out at the end of the school day, Maddisson ran to her mother. Vivian did the usual round of greetings, issued reminders about returning the take home books, and smiled at the parents who didn't speak English well enough to make conversation. All the while, she kept glancing over to where Maddisson and Zara were standing, just inside the school fence.

Maddisson would have given her mother her version of the event. *Fleur hit me. The teacher yelled and hurt my arm.* It would have been that simple.

And because she'd had a bad day, instead of waiting for Zara to cross the yard to spew forth her vitriol, Vivian rushed back inside, grabbed her things and made a swift exit to the car park. She revved her car into life, beating the students and parents out of the school.

That was the reason Zara came back the next day to get her due. It wasn't meant to end the way it did. Jess inadvertently got in the way.

In the mayhem that followed, Vivian didn't have the heart to tell anyone it should have been her, not Jess, laid out in that ambulance.

When she thought of how Alex looked when he was holding Jess: ashen, his eyes hollowed out like he'd taken the blow himself, she could hardly stop herself bawling her eyes out. Vivian had never invested any time to get to know him. Only now she saw what a decent person he was, and the knowledge liquefied her.

That was why she could never tell anyone what happened. She could never reveal that, like a weasel, she'd run away from Zara and left the woman to unleash her viciousness on a stranger. Someone completely unsuspecting and innocent; someone who did not even work at Beauvista.

What could she say in her own defence? That she got angry because Alex was late for yard duty? If she did, Alex would only blame himself. It was nobody but Vivian who should have stood up to Zara that afternoon. It was Vivian who long ago should have reported Zara to police. If she had done what was right, Jess would this moment still be working in her safe and privileged haven at Federation Primary.

And so Vivian made a secret vow to herself. She would work with Alex on his Joy Project. It wasn't much, but it was the only compensation she could offer.

\* \* \*

A legitimate version of The Joy Project began in earnest the following week. Alex and Gus assembled the three classes and made the announcement, which was greeted by cheers, chatter, and a general sense of excitement. Vivian stood to one side, letting Alex and Gus take the lead.

'What we really need from you now,' Alex said to the mass of students, 'is to find out the sorts of things you'd like to do. Then we need to work out how we will all work together to make it happen.'

'Any ideas at this stage?' Alex stood with whiteboard marker poised, ready to capture the brainstorm.

Thuy propped her chin with her hand, her brow furrowed in concentration. Several hands shot up.

'Can it be anything?' said Zayne.

'Yes. And sometimes we will read and write about it, or learn about maths, and other important things,' Alex said.

'Drawing?'

'Okay, tell me more.'

'Like our house, or something... ' said Manny.

'Great start,' said Alex. 'Manny, what would you draw about where you live?'

Manny peered into a faraway space and then said, 'What our house looks like?'

'Sure, and what else could you think about?' Alex said.

'Mmm...' Manny paused, seemingly wracking his brain for an answer. Alex fought the urge to fill the silence. Kids started to fidget. Eventually, Manny said, 'I forget.'

'That's okay,' Alex said, amazed that Manny had even put forward a suggestion. It wasn't a bad topic. They could come back to it later once Manny had some time to process his own thoughts. 'Well done. Anyone else?'

'Can we do acting?' said Bridie.

'Video games,' said Cody.

'Play football,' said Jake. 'But not the girls, just the boys,' he added as an afterthought.

'The girls might have other ideas about that,' Gus said.

'Can we do stuff with the iPads?' said Amber.

'I want to paint,' said Amir.

Alex stopped and gave Amir a searching look. The little boy squirmed at the unwelcome attention. 'Well done Amir,' Alex said. 'What a good suggestion. I think we all need to do tons of painting. And when we fill our classroom with our work, maybe we can keep going and splash our colour all over the school. What do you think?'

Amir shrugged and gave Zayne a half-hearted shove. The hint of a smile was forming on his lips despite a laboured effort to stay cool.

'Hey!' Zayne protested, pushing Amir back with a bit more force.

'Boys, come on,' said Alex, but he had no energy to reprimand either boy further, so he diffused the tension with some direct questions about the brainstorming.

After all suggestions had been exhausted, Gus printed off a list and gave one to each pair. 'We don't have to do all these things. They're just an idea. But pick at least three.'

It didn't take long for news to spread. In the staffroom, Alolysius said to Alex, 'So what's this I hear about a Joy Project with your Grade Twos? What is it, exactly?'

Before Alex had a chance to answer, Gus said, 'Who told you?'

'There's a kid grapevine, in case you hadn't heard,' Aloysius said, 'and naturally, Yasemin is right at the epicentre.'

'Basically, it works on something I call The Joy Principle,' Alex said. 'The theory is that better learning will spring from joy than from tedium. If we can do it with grade Twos, why couldn't you do it with your big kids?'

'Who's got the time? I don't know how you're fitting it in.'

Vivian, who up until that point had been sitting behind Alex, now spoke up. 'We're fitting it in, Aloysius, and what's more, I think it'll be a smash.' Alex turned around, unaware she'd been listening in. He saw the steel in her eyes, and laughed inwardly. Who would have guessed?

The following week, Alolysius and Daisy came by Alex's room to ask questions about how the project was going to run. A few days later, when Alex walked past their rooms, he saw the configuration of furniture had been changed dramatically. Tables and chairs had been pushed closer together at one end of the double room. A couple of parents were helping to move some old sofas and armchairs to the other end of the space. Alex wondered what they were planning, but did not ask just yet.

\* \* \*

Felicity stepped tentatively across the school threshold. Nick and Glenys met her at the door and fussed about, trying to take something off her to lighten her load. They were trying to be helpful, busying themselves with trivialities. Anything to mask the inescapable truth that their lives were forever changed. *Let me take your briefcase, your laptop. Would you like a cuppa? Sorry, I need to take this piñata out of your way here, the kids have been making them with Alex...* Glenys stiffened as the *Alex* word spilled from Nick's lips. They all froze for a moment, static and awkward, wondering how to circumvent the elephant in

the room. Then Felicity bent to pick up the piñata, a pink, four-legged thing that looked more like a donkey than the pony she guessed it was meant to be. 'Oh, how cute. The kids will love this.' She caught Glenys and Nick exchanging glances.

She would never recover from this. This she knew. She was here, now, because at home, dark thoughts prayed on her and once not so long ago, she had found herself going through her medicine cabinet to see if she had the makings of a deadly cocktail.

She had returned because she knew that if anything could rescue her, the school might be just the thing. Here she hoped, not with any conviction but through a kind of practice-based faith, that she would find meaning again. Because this was a place where she could do good for others. In that, there would be a healing of sorts.

Once inside her office, and with Nick and Glenys assured for the umpteenth time that she did not need anything, Felicity closed the door and sat at her desk. She swivelled her chair around and gazed out at the oval, letting her eyes rest on the thicket of trees in that faraway corner. Letting the green, quivering leaves soothe and restore.

Ten minutes after the bell went, a few classes wandered onto the oval in an untidy fashion. Felicity could make out Gus, and then Alex followed, walking with Vivian. There were tubs, which the kids swarmed over, and soon the teachers could be seen organising the students.

Felicity watched, completely still, for a few minutes more. From her vantage point, it looked as though a miniature theatre group had descended upon Beauvista. At different spots on the far end of the oval, Felicity could see several scenes being enacted. Some of the children were filming on their iPads.

Intrigued, she walked out of the building towards the students and their teachers. She thought back to her encounters with Alex, his unusual teaching style. Now she was back she needed a project, and there was no time like the present to make a start on it. Alex would do. She could coach him, support him to become a better teacher. As she approached, Alex seemed lost in his own world, oblivious to the kids chortling and playing out their scenes around him.

He had a hollowed-out look, like he hadn't slept in days. It was a look more at home on Gus, twice Alex's age, and burnt out by decades of teaching. But even Gus did not look as downcast as Alex did now.

Alex looked up. 'Felicity,' he said, brightening somewhat. He smiled fleetingly, a watery effort that didn't make it all the way to his eyes.

'Sorry to intrude, but I wonder if I could meet with you sometime today?'

'After school?'

'That's fine. Can you bring your assessment data? I'd like to go through what you've been doing.'

\* \* \*

*Assessment.* Fuck.

Alex could think of little else as the filming session wound up. At lunchtime, he looked around his room, wondering what he could conjure up at short notice to show Felicity. The filing cabinet held a motley collection of work samples, but not every student had a file. In many ways, The Joy Project had worked in direct opposition to formal and standardised testing, and as such, Alex had relied heavily on intuition.

All he had aside from the patchy collection of work samples were a few anecdotal jottings scribbled on scrap paper.

Fronting Felicity with what he had would look worse than having nothing to show. And so, instead of pretending, Alex decided to turn up empty-handed and come clean. He had no energy with which to carry out an elaborate pretence.

When he got to her office, he saw Nick was there too. They sat him in the meeting area. Comfortable chairs that made him sink, small and bent, to new depths. A jug of water and two glasses were on the coffee table. While Alex explained himself, Felicity threw knowing glances at Nick. They were prepared.

'Alex, I know I've given you a lot of leeway, but this is outrageous.'

He crossed his arms. 'I didn't lie. I know what you must think of me, and I know this won't make you feel better, but those reports weren't based on nothing. I know those kids, I know what they can do.'

Felicity shook her head. 'Oh, Alex, don't you know how that sounds? Our parents want more concrete evidence than a notion of how their kids are going that you just plucked out of thin air. What evidence did you have to demonstrate progression? How do you know what skills can each child perform? How could you comment accurately on every curriculum area for every child? Without well-maintained records, I don't see how you could have.'

'Really, Alex,' echoed Nick. 'We needed to give the parents something more concrete. Not all of them understand what they're reading, but we owe it to them to uphold standards. They deserve better.'

Alex sat there dumbly. In his head, he had the makings of an argument, but no energy with which to mount it. He'd read enough over the last few months that he was able to justify knowing each student without cookie cutter tests and measures. He could articulate why he didn't agree with overt standardised or formal testing. But he could tell from the dour expressions on both Nick's and Felicity's faces that the argument wasn't worth broaching.

There were other things in his way. His ability to mount a defence was hampered by layers of emotions he hadn't had a chance to identify, let alone sort through. Grief was easy to recognise, but there were other, more complex emotions, that he hadn't even begun to identify. He would need time to unpack those; so heavy now, they threatened to smother him. Still, what was worse than the pressure of appearing normal, worse than the weight of Madeleine's expectations of their life together, and worse than the burden of a mortgage on an apartment that had never really felt like home, was the raw withering of his heart.

'Now that we've started the dialogue,' Felicity said, 'there are other issues. Your teaching strategies, for one. Ivana has reported that in your classroom there are none of the systems in place that are advocated by the department.'

Alex knew this to be true, and though his intention had been to eschew the system, he had to admit in the beginning there hadn't been a lot of method to his madness.

He swallowed. 'Is that a bad thing?'

'Is that a bad thing?' Felicity mimicked. 'Jesus, Alex. What planet are you on?' A mottled flush was spreading on her neck.

'I know what I'm doing.'

'Really?' She tapped her nails on the table; the subtle and steady timing mechanism of a grenade.

Alex's tongue felt thick in his mouth.

'There's more to this caper than thinking up fun projects. You have to connect to curriculum. There has to be a *point* to what you do, which, since you've been here, has never been overtly apparent. I'll admit you're great with the kids. They're happy in your class, always doing interesting and creative things, and this comes through when you work in the ReWARd program...'

Upon uttering the words, Felicity seemed to falter. It was like a curtain descended. Her next words were spoken robotically. 'I'm sorry, but you have not done justice to the task with which you were entrusted this year. It's not enough to keep the kids happy. Any run-of-the-mill babysitter can do that.'

Alex had so much to say, but all he could manage was a feeble justification. 'I thought *joy* could be the starting point.'

'It might have been a starting point,' Felicity said, 'but it's not enough. You need a roadmap, Alex. To us, it looks like you have none. Or worse, that you're just going around in circles.'

'I'm not. I know what I'm doing.'

Felicity shook her head. 'Face it, Alex, you're rudderless.'

\* \* \*

Later that night, Alex received an email from Nick inviting him to a meeting the following afternoon. He tossed and turned for a while in bed, before Madeleine complained, and sent him to camp out on the couch. He was showered and out the door before Madeleine woke. Before getting to school, he stopped the car in front of the café where he'd had dinner with Jess what seemed like a lifetime ago. He bought a doughnut and a coffee but couldn't face sitting there on his

own, so he retreated to the car. From there he watched the early morning surfers playing catch with the waves under threatening black clouds.

The day went quickly, kids kept him mindlessly busy until the final bell.

Ten minutes later, he walked into the meeting. Felicity was already there, sitting to one side sorting through papers, and studiously avoiding his gaze.

Nick began, his face ashen.

'Alex, I'm afraid that as a consequence of what you've done, we need to act, and we need to be swift. We're going to have to suspend your contract and bring in someone more experienced so your students don't fall further behind.'

Alex swallowed the lump in his throat. 'You're getting rid of me.'

'I wouldn't quite put it that way,' Nick said. 'We have a responsibility to the students and the parents.'

Alex looked at Felicity. 'How would you put it, then?'

She looked him straight in the eyes and said. 'If Nick won't say it, I will. We're letting you go, Alex.'

'So, what do I do now?' It was hard to wrap his head around the concept. 'Do I just walk out?'

'I think that is best,' Felicity said. 'Stability and productivity need to be at the forefront here. You can collect your things on the weekend. I'll be here.'

'What about the ReWARd program?'

'I think we'll be okay. We have lots of bodies on deck.'

Alex walked out of the meeting, his head in a fog. Too bamboozled to go to his room, he drove home directly.

Walking out of teaching didn't feel as liberating as he would have thought.

\* \* \*

Alex was taciturn during dinner. Madeleine had prepared a Madras curry that reminded him of one he'd seen on Jess's Instagram. He supposed it was tasty, but his mood had soured his appetite, and though he tried his best to praise the meal, he could tell Madeleine wasn't buying it.

'You know you're allowed to cook, too, Alex. That way you get to pick whatever recipe takes your fancy.' Madeleine spooned another portion of rice onto her own plate. 'If you came home straight from school instead of going running, you'd have plenty of time.' She took a bite, watching Alex as she chewed.

The mouthful of curry and rice stuck in Alex's throat. He worked to swallow it before speaking. 'I could do that.'

'I'll help you. We can plan out a weekly menu and shop for it on the weekend. That way everything will be ready to go as soon as we get home from work.'

*Work.* When would he tell Madeleine he'd lost his job? Would he pretend he still had a job tomorrow? In the morning, he'd have to get up, get dressed, leave the house, then fill in an entire day before returning as though nothing had changed.

He'd have to tell her, and if he didn't do it now, he'd lose his nerve.

'Madeleine, we need to talk.'

Madeleine's fork fell onto the floor. She did not bend to pick it up. In all the time he'd known her, he'd never seen her look so desolate.

## Chapter 30 - Banishment

Twenty four hours after he'd been summoned to Felicity's office, Alex was out of a job and moving out of the apartment.

Snippets of the previous night's conversation with Madeleine intruded into his mind at odd moments of the day.

'Why do you never think of anyone but yourself?'

'I was thinking of the kids. I wanted to make their school life better.'

'Bullshit. You were thinking of yourself. You're just lazy and self-serving, and you didn't stop to consider how I figured in all this. You just went ahead with this stupid, half-arsed attempt at a project you didn't even have any clear goals about, and now look.'

'It's probably not a good idea to talk about this now,' he'd said, and started gathering up the plates. He dumped his half-eaten leftovers in the bin and started packing the dishwasher. Though Alex understood Madeleine's disappointment, it was hard to forgive the venom in her tone. She was like a stranger to him, now. All these years together, and yet he did not really know her.

Madeleine followed him into the kitchen like a terrier on the scent. 'When would be a good time, then? Like, when *are* we actually going to talk about it? When the next mortgage payment is due? Have you thought about that, Einstein?'

At that last remark, Alex spun around. 'Stop inferring I'm stupid. I have a right to an opinion.'

‘Having an opinion is fine, as long as it doesn’t impact on others. Did you consider for one second, when flushing this job down the toilet, that one income won’t make ends meet?’

He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘Not exactly. I don’t work like that. I figure that something will always turn up. It’s not a matter of being stupid. I’m just not like *you*.’

Madeleine held up her hands. ‘Okay, maybe stupid is the wrong context. How about we go with *irresponsible*.’

Alex thought for a moment. Madeleine was right. He hadn’t given his responsibilities much thought because he didn’t think Felicity would get rid of him so quickly. He’d gambled and lost. *Stupidly*, as it turned out. Maybe Madeleine had a point – with both words. ‘I’m sorry. You’re right, I didn’t consider you.’

She leaned against the door frame, her expression softening. ‘What are we going to do?’

He came over to her and held her. ‘I’m not like you, Madeleine. The longer we go on, the more I realise I can never be like you. I wish I could do something about it, but I can’t. I’m sorry.’

Madeleine put her head on his shoulder and began to cry. They stood, clinging to each other without a word in the middle of what was once their kitchen. Now it was just a room that once belonged to somebody Alex used to know.

\* \* \*

The roar of trucks on Vicars Road woke Alex just after five the next morning. He winced at the stiffness in his back as he swung his legs out from under the lumpy doona. The sofa wasn’t a forgiving place to bunk down for more than a few nights running. When Madeleine wandered into the kitchen, she avoided his gaze. Alex couldn’t stomach breakfast, so he stayed out of the kitchen while she fiddled about. He went to kiss her as she left for work, but she turned away and his peck landed on her ear.

Once alone, he ran the shower and stood under the piercing jets until his skin was red. Enclosed in the glass cubicle, made invisible by the steam, Alex let out his grief. He wept for the loss of Jess. Nothing else was as precious or as irreplaceable. Everything else could be recovered, or reinvented. The water was soothing on his skin. Alex imagined it washing away his pain. He wished it were dirt on the outside of his body, not embedded into a deep wound that could not heal.

With his back against the tiled wall, he slid down to a sitting position. Shuddering, clamping his legs close to his chest, and wrapping himself into a ball, he held on tenaciously; a man on the jolting deck of a ship. He would not be washed into the blackness below. Jess would not like it that way.

Jess, who in such a short time had come to know him better than he knew himself. Jess, whose sunny nature was so well hidden inside the circumspect exterior that its discovery had been like stumbling on a precious stone amid the common plastic baubles in a thrift shop. Jess, whose future he knew he would share in some shape or form.

So many hopes, so much possibility, and now nothing.

Without work, there would be no escaping the ugly, senseless fact that Jess was not coming back. Images of her flashed through his mind like on a warped merry-go-round. Jess at the ReWARd program, teaching kids, a smear of paint on her face, then feeding him warm muffins. His heart ached at the thought. Though he tried to banish them, the worst images would not go away: Jess lying in his arms on the footpath, then strapped into the ambulance stretcher, trying to smile despite the slow ebbing of life. And then there was the guilt; a blunt-edged weapon that would not stop its relentless attack. He'd failed Madeleine. No matter that he no longer wished for it, there was still the loss of their shared life. How could he not feel haunted by the futility, by the wonky alignment of their universe?

Eventually, he turned off the water and shivered against the tiles.

Pippa whined on the other side of the door, reminding him of his duty; a call back to life and to purpose, however utilitarian. He was needed, and so he got up, dried himself, and took the dog out for a walk.

Afterwards, he began to pack.

## Chapter 31 – Turning the tide

When the kids were settled at her feet, Felicity spoke. 'I'm here to be your teacher for the next few days.'

'Where's Alex?' Bridie said. 'When is he coming back?'

Felicity filled her lungs. She steeled herself, attempting to smile. 'Alex is not coming back. He had to go to another job.' The lie pressed like a brick on Felicity's heart. There was no other way to go about it. The kids wouldn't understand the real reason Alex had to be uprooted from their world. 'He was sorry to leave.'

'But where did he go?' Cody said. Zayne echoed the question with a, 'Yeah.'

Felicity held up her hands. 'That's all I have, I'm sorry. Alex might come back and see you at some point, but I'm not sure when that will be.'

*Good one, Felicity.* The first was a necessary white lie intended to lessen the hurt. The second was a senseless whopper that would raise the children's hopes for no reason at all. In truth, Felicity's wish was that Alex would not set foot in the school again. He was too much of a liability. She looked at the bunch of concerned little faces before her and resolved to stop telling lies.

After the roll was taken and lunch orders were dealt with, Felicity began. 'Today's learning intention is to understand the function of nouns. I am going to read, *The Very Best of Friends*, by Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas—'

At that moment, Gus appeared at the door. He saw Felicity and stopped short. 'Where's Alex?' he said.

The kids burst out in a collective free-for-all of explanations. The furrows on Gus's brow deepened. 'What's this about?' he said, looking at Felicity.

'Not a good time. I'll explain later.'

'But we're ready to go. Vivian's waiting too.' Gus looked more bewildered than normal, his hair sticking out at a crazy angle.

The kids began to wriggle and chatter.

'Shhhh, settle, everyone.' She stood up to face him, hands on hips. 'We're not going to join you today, Gus. These kids have had enough disruptions to their learning. We'll talk about this later.'

For a moment, Gus looked as if he was about to speak. Then he turned and walked out, letting the door bang shut as he went.

'Right,' Felicity said, holding up the picture book. 'Eyes on me, please.' She checked her watch, calculating how much time she had left for the book's introduction.

\* \* \*

After school, Felicity was straightening the room when she heard footsteps at the door.

A woman she'd never met before stepped in, followed by Bridie. She was small, hunched forward, with limbs thin to the point of malnutrition. Her face was covered in fine lines, and her hair, though coloured a vivid shade of magenta, had grey regrowth at least an inch long.

Felicity stepped forward. 'Hello, what can I do for you? I'm Felicity, the assistant principal. I'm standing in for Bridie's teacher—'

'I just come to tell ya I'm taking Bridie and her brothers to live with me out at Coopersfield.'

'Are you Bridie's grandmother?'

'yes, I'm her nan. Robyn. You know, Bridie's parents, me daughter Bec and her loser husband got themselves nicked, and now they're doing a bit of time.' She shrugged. 'Happens. Anyway, I'm taking the kids for them.'

Felicity looked down. Bridie was holding her nan's hand. She appeared stoic, except for her teeth being firmly clamped on her bottom lip.

'Oh, I didn't know about any of this.'

'Well, now ya do.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. We've loved having Bridie here. Hopefully you'll come back to us.' Bridie seemed to be studying the trailing laces of one of her runners. 'You'll need to fill out a form at the office,' Felicity said.

'Fair enough,' Robyn said. 'But I'm in a rush. I have to get down to the IGA before five to get some things for tea.'

Felicity turned to Bridie. 'Sweetie, I'm sorry, I didn't know about this. Did Alex know?'

Bridie nodded, snuggling into her nan's side.

*Bloody Alex*, Felicity thought. This terrible upheaval in Bridie's life, and he'd kept it all to himself. There could have been something the school could have done to support the family.

Once Felicity had seen Robyn to the office, she was approached by a small group of parents.

One of the mothers spoke. 'Good afternoon, Mrs Ryan.' Felicity recognised her as Thuy's mother, though she didn't know her by name.

'How can I assist, Mrs Tran?'

'We were wondering what happened to Mr Kiernan. The kids are saying he is leaving.'

Felicity addressed the group. 'That's correct. There will be a notice about it soon. Once we find a new teacher for the kids.'

'What happened? Mr Kiernan was so nice.'

'I'm sorry, I can't say. He just won't be back, that's all. We will do what we can to find a teacher who will stay for the remainder of the year.'

'Didn't he want to stay?' said another mother. 'Jake loved him. A bit strange for him to just go off with no explanation.'

Felicity started walking away. 'There will be more information forthcoming. Again, my apologies.'

She was a little distance away when their whispers floated in the air, perfectly audible.

‘Look at her. Thinks we’re dickheads.’

‘She can smile at us all she likes, but that doesn’t change the fact she’s got no respect.’

Felicity kept walking, pretending not to hear.

\* \* \*

Confrontations weren’t Vivian’s style. Lately she seemed to be doing a lot of things that were not her style. She paused a moment to collect herself before knocking on the door of Felicity’s office.

When summoned, she entered.

Felicity was sitting at her desk, and her face heavy with tiredness. Vivian guessed this was probably not a good moment, but if she didn’t do it now she’d lose her nerve. ‘I came to have a chat about The Joy Project.’

‘No need for concern,’ Felicity said, her tone sharp. ‘I’m just reorganising Alex’s class.’

‘Why? What’s going on?’

Felicity sighed. She got up and walked to the sitting area, gesturing to Vivian to join her. ‘Nick and I will talk to the staff individually, but I will tell you first, as his team leader, that yesterday, we asked Alex to leave.’

‘What?’

‘You heard,’ Felicity said. She straightened, regaining her usual queenly air. ‘I’m sure you’ve noticed the hopeless mess he’s made of his class.’

‘I know he’s not conventional, but...’

‘That’s the least of it. Really, Vivian, I’m surprised at you. I would have thought you’d keep better tabs on your team members. But when I think about Gus, I guess, perhaps not.’

Vivian felt a wave of fear rising. It pulsed and expanded, morphing to black tentacles of anger. How dare Felicity be so supercilious?

‘Why didn’t you keep a closer eye on what he was doing?’

Vivian fought the debilitating urge to lash out. She couldn't remember ever feeling this volatile. 'Felicity, as you know, I've been teaching a long time, and I didn't get a sense that the situation was as drastic as you—'

'Really, Vivian, how drastic did it have to get? The guy was virtually coming to school and playing with the kids all day. I mean, where was the teaching? Where was the learning? Didn't you discuss his assessment strategies? How could you not check his data?'

'I'm sure there was learning. There's always—'

Felicity stood. 'I expected better from you. I expected that if you had the smallest suspicion everything was not as it should be, you would have *ensured* it would be fixed. I expected you wouldn't base everything on guesswork and supposition.'

Vivian closed her eyes and tried to quell her rage. 'I actually came in to discuss The Joy Project.'

'Oh, you mean the project that was started by that charlatan, and which now has almost the whole school in its grip. Fine. What did you want to say about it?'

'I just wanted to check that we could keep going with it tomorrow – the three grades in my team – alongside the rest in the school.'

'Only if you can justify it.' She stood and walked to the door, opening it for Vivian. 'Since your team instigated the project, you can be the one to put a proposal to me in writing. This is another issue that can be brought to the attention of the staff.'

'But what about tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow, you and Gus can busy yourselves with your regular program. God knows the kids need it.'

Vivian watched as Felicity returned to her desk and went about her tasks, ignoring her. She took a deep breath and walked out of the open door.

## Chapter 32 – Step by step

Felicity showed Eve into Alex's classroom.

'Thanks for stepping in at such short notice.'

Eve looked around. 'Wow, so much colour.'

'Yes, there is a lot of colour. Not so much other stuff, which is why you're here.'

Eve smiled. 'Okay, I'll work my way through this as you asked.'

'There are a few files with kids' work samples in here. But there are a lot of holes. You'll virtually have to start from scratch.'

'Not a problem. I'll get to it straight away. I'll have them all assessed and with a learning plan within a few weeks.'

'I can let the parents know your reports will be a week or so late, if you like.'

'No need. I'm onto it.'

Felicity smiled as she left. Eve was a smooth operator. With eighteen years' teaching under her belt, many of them working with Felicity, they were on the same page about most teaching and learning issues. She'd get the assessment done, and start catching the kids up on what they'd missed in the last seven months.

\* \* \*

Bridie stood on tiptoe at the classroom window, spying on the new teacher. A few of the kids tried to go in before the bell, but she told them about the rule. She said Alex should not have been letting them all in before school, and that she wasn't going to do it.

So the mornings would be long from now on, Bridie thought. She went down the portable steps and left her backpack leaning against the wall. For something to do, she found a stone to kick around. A few of the other kids came and tried to go in too. One by one, the new teacher sent them away like she'd done with Bridie. At least she was fair, Bridie thought. After a really long, long time, the bell went, and everyone ran to line up.

Inside, everyone was unusually quiet putting away their bags and coming to sit on the mat. They regarded the new teacher with wary, watchful eyes. 'Good morning, class. I am going to be your teacher for the rest of the year. My name is Eve. Eve McEvoy.'

She was pretty, with bright pink lipstick and really shiny black hair. But her eyes looked old, with lots of little tiny lines all around the edges when she smiled.

'You can call me Eve, how does that sound?' The teacher smiled again, and Bridie heard some of the kids laughing, which made her shush everyone. Just like Felicity used to do all day when she was teaching them. Bridie wished Alex was back, with Wily Wizard helping him, because he used to get everyone quiet by being silly, and it was fun. Not a bit like being shushed.

'It's lovely to be here. I look forward to meeting you all and getting to know you. Today, when we're doing our work, I'm going to come around and you can show me how clever you are with some of your school work, how does that sound?'

Bridie's tummy felt kind of squishy and sickly at the thought. Showing people you were clever wasn't a lot of fun. Mostly, you tried really hard, and got all wobbly, and your work wasn't so good, and in the end, you just got sad that people thought you were not that clever after all, so why bother in the first place?

Eve read a picture book about a spinning top that was looking for friends, and she talked about the characters sort of like Alex did, except that Alex did it a bit differently. But it was still sort of the same, and easy to understand, and everything, and in the end, the story was nice, so you didn't mind answering the questions either way. Then Eve said, 'Right, everyone, now we're going to write a character description. Just choose one character you liked out of the story, and quickly draw a little picture at the top of your page. Underneath I'd like you to tell me these things about the character.'

She pulled out this sheet and gave it to everyone. On it were instructions about creating a character; how he looked, where he came from, and how he fitted into the story. They had to write how the character said things, what he wanted from other characters and what he wanted for himself. They had to write all the things he did to get what he wanted. All the kids took a sheet, and then sat down to draw their favourite characters. Bridie sighed and set to work. It didn't matter if she was clever or if she wasn't. Soon, she was going to a new school.

\* \* \*

A week after his conversation with Madeleine, Alex was out of the apartment and back living with his parents. The apartment was listed for sale, and in the meantime, Madeleine's cousin had moved in to share the rent.

Most of Alex's stuff was stashed hastily into his parents' garage. Some adjustments were made in the yard to accommodate Pippa, but Alex found his old room untouched, preserved like a shrine to some martyred medieval saint. It was complete with relics: Alex's old gym bag filled with vintage runners, a few pairs of shorts and T-shirts, all neatly folded and ready to go as if simply stepping back into the room and putting on the clothes would transform him into his eighteen year old self.

'What will you do now?' his father said at the breakfast table the following morning. 'You know, Alex, if you want to go back to uni, do something a bit more challenging, something you can get your teeth into... You know, your

mother and I will gladly support you. What's another three or four years at uni? I reckon you'd make a great civil engineer. Remember all those constructions you used to make with balsa wood?'

'When I was twelve.'

'You know, love,' said his mother, 'you need to have some kind of passion to make any job interesting. I just never saw that passion for teaching in you. Never.'

'Not sure about studying something different. I'll think about it.'

A year ago, before he started at Beauvista, Alex would have agreed he lacked the passion. Certainly back then, he was yet to taste it. Now he knew he cared about this job like he'd never cared about any other endeavour. It had taken Jess to awaken the love for education he suspected had been there all along. Otherwise why drift towards teaching in the first place? In the aftermath of his disgrace, it was hard to tell whether the bitterness weighing him down was to do with being a failure to himself or to the students.

With no income, stuck at home again, it was like he'd regressed fifteen years. He couldn't be an adult while living in his parents' house. His mother had returned too easily to her old parenting groove. The minute he put a jumper or a coat on the back of a chair, she'd nag about putting stuff away. She'd also started complaining if he played music too loudly in his room. Since he'd left home, his parents had quickly settled into a comfortable, empty nesters' groove, and he was now messing with it. Though they were eager to help, they were clearly not enjoying having him back. They seemed to be getting more pleasure out of Pippa's company than his. He had to get the hell out of there before he lost his sanity.

'You know, Alex, there's always a job for you at the agency,' Trevor said. 'Just while you find something else.'

Real estate had never appealed to Alex but the job offer was touching. 'I'd feel funny coming to work for my dad. What will your other employees think?'

Trevor laughed. 'Don't worry about that. I'll make it a shitty enough job that nobody will give a toss.'

\* \* \*

To fill the days, Alex ran. He took Pippa along on the shorter runs. In between, he'd return home, have a shower, eat, and generally waste time until the running cycle began anew. The evening runs were particularly useful in avoiding the frequent, *What-are-you-going-to-do-with-your-life-now?* conversations with his parents.

Alex ran as though his life depended on it. Zipping along the water, his breathing in perfect rhythm with his steps, he inhaled the salt-imbued air like a doctor-prescribed tonic. Sometimes he brought a wetsuit, and at the end of his run, he dived into the icy water and swam a kilometre, going backwards and forwards several times between the buoys. To acclimatise to the chill, he'd take on the swell like it was a giant and relentless opponent, giving his all in the battle to stay warm, arms and legs pumping to the limit of his strength. When emerging from the water, his extremities numb with cold, Alex was at his most foolhardy. If he couldn't feel his hands and feet, he reasoned he could think of Jess without the usual distress. He would conjure up memories of her as he stood near those favourite places of hers: the running track, the beachside café. But each time, those thoughts brought no relief. Instead, they came swathed in pain; a necessary penance for the loss of her. Sometimes he dared to lash out at himself, to wish out loud he'd never met Jess.

But in the instant the words were spoken, he knew they were a lie. In such a short time, Jess had made his life richer than it had ever been. Every day, despite her physical absence, Jess grew more pivotal in Alex's life scheme. She would remain in his consciousness, the image of her being felled at the outskirts of the school forever singed in his memory. There was so much more to Jess than that miserable end. For Alex, Jess would forever symbolise a way of being, of seeing the world; she represented the purest, distilled truth.

After two weeks of keeping up his mindless running, Alex was leaner and fitter than he'd been for years. He was also at more of a loose end. Aimlessly surfing the net one day, he stumbled upon *Peninsula Walking Tours*, for whom he'd done some work a couple some years back. When he clicked on the *Our*

*Staff* tab, his old boss, Frank Dellaci's photo flashed up. On a whim, he decided to give him a call, see if there were any openings. Spring was upon them, and it would soon be peak holiday time on the Peninsula.

'Alex! How the hell are ya?' Frank barked at the sound of Alex's voice.

It was a short conversation. Alex asked for work. Frank said, 'Sure, you're always welcome back.'

'Do you know of anyone renting a room? It'd be easier if I was closer to you.'

Frank laughed. 'Not sure about a room, but there's always the caravan in my backyard at Flinders.'

It was a done deal. After packing a few things, Alex took Pippa for a long walk, before phoning his parents to ask if they wouldn't mind adopting Pippa for a while.

## Chapter 33 – New horizons

Alex walked to the top of the cliff overlooking the Sorrento back beach. The ocean was peppered with angry white caps, and the wind was dogged in its effort to whip every loose item off each member of Alex's walking group.

'Can we go inside and get a coffee?' said one woman in a whiny mid-western US accent. She held her hat onto her head with one hand, large hoop earrings flapping like wings and gold bangles jangling at her wrists. With her free hand, she pointed off to the left. 'There's a café down there.'

They'd hardly been standing at the top for a minute. Alex would have thought the group would be more interested in the local sights. A few took out their cameras and posed, but it was an obligatory effort. Dressed inappropriately, they held themselves together by clutching at loose clothing and bags against the wind's onslaught. After a few more calls for the shelter of the café, Alex led the group down the snaking path.

The view from the dining area was almost as spectacular as the unimpeded landscape from the top of the cliff. The group was far more jovial in the warmth and comfort of the wood panelled interior.

'It's not a very nice day, is it? What are we doing next?' said a middle-aged gentleman of wide berth.

'The beach is interesting down there. Lots of rock pools with native sea fauna. I thought we might explore.'

'It's a long way down. How do we get back up afterwards? It's still blowing a gale out there. Does the weather report indicate a change?'

Alex didn't know which question to tackle first. Lack of a crystal ball was a problem. 'Well, there's no lift, and so we will walk back up the steps. As far as the weather, I'm not sure whether the wind will lessen. It's always windy on the ocean side of the peninsula.'

'Can we go back into town?'

'We can, I guess... The group did sign on for the ocean walk, and so this is what we're doing.'

Save me, Alex thought.

The group agreed to change the itinerary, and so Alex directed the bus driver to drop them off on the bay side of Sorrento where the beach was sheltered, and where there were many more cafés. They ambled along the beach, Alex doing nothing more than keeping the group company.

When he got back to the caravan, he tendered his resignation.

\* \* \*

It was the end of another long day. Felicity had checked the clock so many times she felt as though she'd urged the hands to keep moving through sheer force of will.

School days had never felt this long. The one constant throughout her career had always been that once she stepped onto school premises, time flew. Her days were always filled with a million and one little tasks, each leading onto another in a continuous flow until the final bell. Every day almost without fail she'd never accomplish what she set out to do. There were just not enough hours in the work day. And that was why, since her earliest days in teaching, she got in the habit of taking work home.

But lately, there *were* enough hours. Perhaps because after Jess died and everyone started feeling sorry for her, jobs seemed to disappear. Felicity suspected it was because tasks that would normally have come her way were now being snatched up by others. Then there were the jobs she would have gone looking for. Now she had no appetite, no passion to follow her nose into projects big enough to drown in.

The ReWARD Program had been one such project. Now it had a life of its own, and could run autonomously. After Jess died, she'd been inundated with so many offers of assistance with it that her presence there was made redundant. That was okay. She had no desire to be there after all. That empty kitchen, and the absence of delectable cooking smells as morning recess approached just made her miss Jess all the more. It was better to stay away.

She'd packed her things and was about to head out when Eve knocked on the open door and ventured tentatively in, 'Can I see you for a few minutes?'

Felicity attempted a smile, conscious of the effort it took to make her lips curve upwards. She'd practiced this in the mirror in the days before returning to work. She thought she managed a fair effort, except that no matter how much she grinned, her eyes always looked dead.

'What can I do for you, Eve?'

'I wanted to share the class's provisional assessment data. I thought you may want to know before I got further into it.'

'Sure, take a seat.'

They settled on the comfy chairs in the corner of the room, and Eve laid her printed spreadsheets out on the coffee table between them. Felicity braced herself for the worst. Her mind was already racing ahead to what they could do to assuage the situation. What would they tell the parents? When Eve had arranged her papers, she sat back and crossed her arms like she was ready for battle. Felicity looked at her and waited.

'Well,' Eve began, 'before I start, let me tell you that I repeated some of these assessments on the students just to be sure.'

'I appreciate your thoroughness, Eve. I always have.'

'In some of the repeated assessments, I actually used different methods to gather the data. I'm not sure how to put this, exactly, but I had to kind of create my own assessments to fit what the students knew or did not know, and could or could not do.'

'Like?'

'Like I soon realised the students didn't respond to the standard literacy language used in classrooms. Terms like recount, or, say... persuasive text,

were lost on them. At the beginning I thought they were at least a couple of levels behind. But then I noticed the standard of their work was actually pretty good. Better than I would expect for children this age at this stage of the year.'

'So, what are you actually telling me, Eve?'

'I'm telling you,' Eve pointed to the columns of figures in her spreadsheets, 'that these kids are performing well. Very well, actually, all around. They may not know what a recount is, but they know how to write one. They may not know how to name the grammatical elements in a sentence, but they know when a sentence doesn't work, because they are able to offer up suggestions on how to make it work. I'd say it would be pretty easy, given what the children know and can do, to introduce those terms now as a way of *labelling*, of giving them a vocabulary around their working practice.'

'Really?' Felicity glanced at the spreadsheets, giving herself some time to check the headings of the rows and columns. Numbers swam before her eyes. She looked at Eve. 'Really?' she said again.

'Yes, really. Similar story for maths. So I came to tell you that it's good news. You don't need to worry about a thing. The reports will virtually write themselves.'

Felicity leaned her weight against the back of the chair, anchoring herself while her world pivoted around her.

'Jesus, what have I done?'

Eve smiled. 'I thought you might have said that.'

'I sent him away in disgrace.'

'I gathered that. You know, I'm semi-retired, and free as a butterfly. And I have a lot of old friends like you who'll take pity on me. I don't have to be here, and I know twentyseven little people who would love to see someone else turning up next Monday.'

Felicity felt tears pricking her eyes.

'So feel free to move me on and bring him back.'

Felicity stepped forward and wrapped herself around her dear friend. Then she stood and looked over the spreadsheets one more time. 'Thank you,' she said, before excusing herself. 'I think I have a phone call to make.'

\* \* \*

The phone vibrated in Alex's pocket. He saw it was Felicity and considered letting it ring out. But then he thought of Jess. She loved her Aunt Flick, and so he would do this for Jess. He would be kind.

'Alex, I don't know where to begin,' she said. 'Let me start with a huge apology. I haven't been myself with everything... Well, you know.'

He knew.

Surprisingly, Felicity did not sound angry. Her tone was so smooth, so conciliatory, that Alex found it strangely therapeutic listening to her voice. Alex checked the time on the large display before him, and set down his bags. He had time. He would listen.

'I was impulsive, and I behaved badly.' She went on, outlining what happened in his class since he'd been gone. How Eve had found the kids really weren't as messed up as she'd made out when she and Nick sacked him. She said she would help out with report writing. She would give him a hand with assessment.

Alex took a breath. He looked at the boarding times. Half an hour to go. He could still turn back. In the far recesses of his mind, the kids called to him. Bridie's face came into sharp focus.

He toyed with the idea, thinking out loud. 'Thanks for your kind words, Felicity. I appreciate being asked back, but you see, I can't teach if I have to treat it like a paint-by-numbers exercise.'

'Some of the job is paint-by-numbers, I'm afraid. None of us can get away from that.'

'Okay, but that being the case, it's not a job for me.'

'Alex, you can't freestyle teach in every respect. You need assessment, and all the accountability that goes with that. Can you imagine if teachers weren't somehow regulated?'

'I'm not suggesting ditching assessment. I just don't want to do it their way.'

‘Whose way, Alex?’ Felicity said. He imagined that crooked grin he’d seen on her face when she spoke to Jess. The motherly chiding of a wilful child.

‘You know... the system’s way. I don’t want to march to that tune.’

‘So you won’t come back? What will you do instead?’

‘Afraid not. Not the way things stand. Actually about to get on a plane to Vietnam. One way ticket, at least for the first leg. I have some thinking to do, and places to see. For the first time in my life, I’m going to give myself the space I need to figure things out.’

‘So I can’t change your mind?’

He sighed. ‘Thanks, Felicity, but no thanks. Not at this stage, anyway. Not while the dance steps are so finite. Not while a teacher can take a few days off and find his room ransacked by the joy censors. And certainly not while joy is something that we turn on and off like a tap to suit the curriculum.’

‘Alex, I don’t know what to say. I wish you would reconsider. The kids will miss you. I’m sorry it turned out this way.’

‘I’ll miss them. Tell them I said hi.’

‘I will.’ She hesitated. ‘Except for Bridie, who’s gone to another school, of course.’

Alex winced. The justice system didn’t deal lightly with repeat offenders. His chest felt as though a large weight were pressing down on it. It was the end of an era in so many ways.

In this moment, more than ever, Alex knew he was doing the right thing. His days in teaching were done. Just like Jess, his resolve was now solid as a mountain. A mountain he’d built, stone by stone, through trial and error in the classroom, through failure, exhilaration, and bouncing ideas off others. And through knowing her. Jess, who helped him define joy, and who gave him the tools to go after it again, one day.

He now knew too much about all the wonderful incarnations of a teacher, the different kinds of roles and dances that could be performed in education, to confine his life to marching in a straight line in a suit of military beige.

He picked up his backpack and marched steadfastly towards the boarding gate.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my father-in-law, Colin Thorpe, for supporting my writing efforts while my daughters were little. Every week, he was my steadfast tin soldier, looking after the girls while I raced off to my writing class. With his support, I was able to indulge in my passion and nourish myself, which not only made me happier, but contributed to the happiness and wellbeing of my family. Those weekly classes set me on the road to a writing life, and for that I owe him a debt of gratitude.

My husband Stephen Thorpe, and my daughters, Julia, Christina, and Annalisa Pelosi-Thorpe, are the epicentre of my world. I give heartfelt thanks to each of them for valuing the work I do, and for believing I can do it.

This novel grew out of interviews with a small group of teachers who generously shared their time and stories. I thank them wholeheartedly for entrusting me with their whisperings.

To my dear supervisors, Mark Vicars and Marcelle Cacciattolo, your gentle guidance, wisdom and friendship during this project has been an immense joy. I am deeply grateful for the intelligent and scholarly leadership you provided, and for your respectful and thoughtful approach throughout the journey. Thank you also for your wit and your humour. I have learned so much. You lead by example and truly embody the notion of teaching as an act of love.

# Exegesis

# Introduction

It was a critical moment for me, when time stood still for a moment within the mêlée and I understood the danger of the performative push. It resulted in my resolve to champion, research and develop the role of creativity in education, across the curriculum and across provision. For it struck me that whilst creativity does occur at the ‘edge’ of understandings, habits and traditions, shifting, developing and transforming these, it is also at the heart of what it means to be human – to imagine the possible. And the contrast of ‘science’ as ‘sensible’ and as competing with ‘the arts’ which were ‘edgy’ seemed misplaced, for creativity is inherent to humanity, as it is inherent in everything we engage with, science included (Craft 2011, p. 26).

This study is presented as a creative project – a novel and exegesis. I begin the exegesis by invoking the notion of creativity as expressed above by Anna Craft. Creativity is a central theme in this study; its inherent pedagogy opens up opportunities for teaching and learning practices that both enable and facilitate meaningful student learning (Craft 2011). In this investigation, I have sought to understand the presence of creativity. More particularly, this exploration has examined creativity’s utility in pedagogy and how, as a resource, teachers of literacy make, juggle and confront the space of neoliberal classrooms.

I chose writing fiction as a methodology in order to experience the *writerly* immediacy of my project through words, and in order to illustrate more evocatively how teachers experience particular situations. I chose fiction writing to ‘call as is’ the state of education in our current times. My intent here was to speak back a truth to the powerful organisations and systems that control teachers’ and students’ lives. I wrote to make public and to investigate more deeply the big issues close to teachers’ hearts. Just as Cixous (1976) refers to male writing as being dominated by a typically masculine and political economy,

writing about education and about the experience of teaching similarly comes to us through policy-makers, politicians, and educational textbooks. Teachers have little or no voice unless they dare to challenge the tidal cacophony of public purpose (Goodson 2007). Without a way to express and share these stories, a sense of solidarity and camaraderie is lost. Teachers consequently become a kind of unknown enemy to one other; simultaneously caught in a set of conditions of which they do not approve, yet unable to join forces in opposition. My writing was an attempt to make public an issue that is widespread, yet still suffers from an *underground* mentality. There is a sense that fighting *the system* is futile, and so teachers endure. The discourse is covert. Apart from largely private and isolated conversations, there is little subversive action. In writing the novel, I hoped to raise the issue above ground, and thus legitimise it as a threat to teachers, students and education in general.

It has been argued that the contemporaneous landscape of teaching has become increasingly fraught with specific sets of challenges for both students and educators. This is largely due to an ever-changing mandated curriculum (Ewing 2013) that has led to the development of discipline-specific pedagogies (Costello 2012). Consequently, creative practices in schools have been siloed within specific subject areas. In recent years, the high-stakes knowledge culture that values metric-driven assessment procedures (Caldwell & Vaughan 2012; Gable & Lingard 2015; Huddleston & Rockwell 2015; Karp 2004; Madaus, Russell & Higgins 2009) has produced an increase in mechanistic approaches to teaching and learning.

The global shift towards metrics that centralise assessment (SATs [Student Assessment Tests] in the UK, NAPLAN [National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy] in Australia, and the NCLB [No Child Left Behind] policy in the US) suggests the necessity of putting to work a critical understanding of the field of education. It is this understanding that speaks out to and confronts the corporatisation and commodification of labour in educational domains. Students and teachers are being increasingly positioned against each other in

international benchmarking mechanisms that assess and rank the impact of teaching and learning processes (PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment], TIMSS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science], and PIRLS [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study]). Such high-stakes benchmarking emphasises the notion of education as an economically-driven process. Consequently, schooling has become a politically nuanced field in which curriculum and pedagogy are reproduced to maximise more favourable statistical outcomes (Lundgren 2011; Pereyra, Kotthoff & Cowen 2011). Robert (2015) has found that such testing regimes can be detrimental to teaching and learning and are counterproductive to the principles of authentic education. In thinking through Cohen's (2011) notion of moral panic, it is possible to argue how contemporary schooling has become positioned around product and outcomes versus process and engagement. The convergence of paradigms is markedly profound in the highly-contested domain of literacy (Snyder 2008). These paradigmatic differences have both framed and polarised debate on approaches to teaching and learning that best produce results in a high-stakes testing discourse. In Australia, this discourse has rapidly advanced and has reinforced the notion that education is a highway with a singular destination that is both narrow and exclusive. In the UK, the Cambridge Primary Review report (Warwick Commission 2015) was particularly definitive in its criticism of the introduction of overly scripted and mechanistic approaches to literacy pedagogy, examining how such approaches have undermined teacher professionalism. As Moss (2010, p. 147) stated:

The uniform prescription that lays down guided and shared reading, or interactive whole class teaching conducted at pace, limits understanding of any more varied ways of organising teaching and learning, and constricts more than it benefits both teachers and pupils.

When teaching and learning is prioritised in this way, it becomes increasingly difficult to engage in philosophical conversations about the meaning and value of education (Gunzenhauser 2003). The nature of teachers' work has radically

shifted with the rigid structuring of curriculum, scripting of pedagogy, and narrow teaching practices that are necessitated by a strong focus on standardised testing. This has, I suggest, resulted in an educational landscape in which professional and personal growth has become constrained. A consequence of this is high rates of teacher dissatisfaction with increasing numbers of educators leaving the profession.

## **Why the topic?**

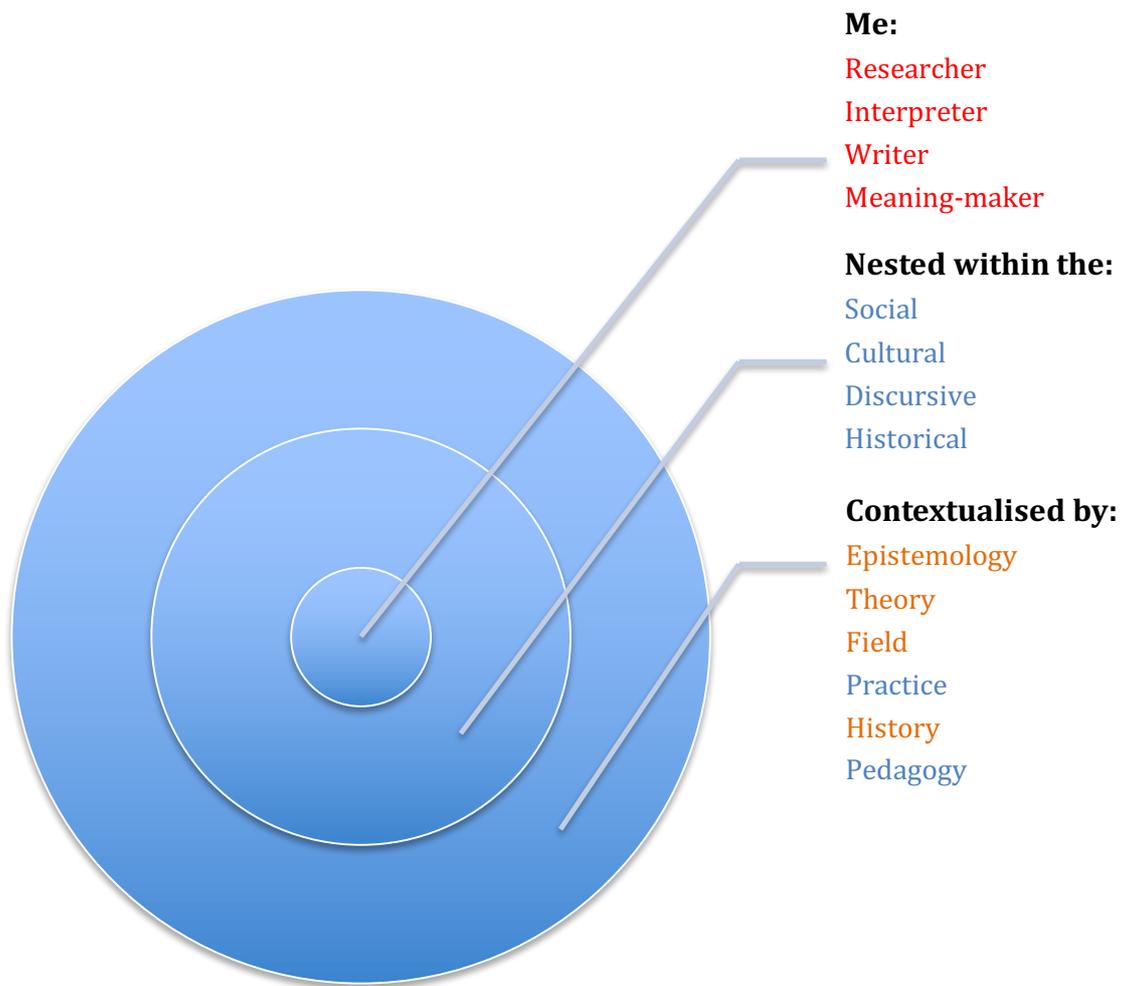
When I set out to do this research, I felt daunted on several levels. My experience as a researcher was limited and there was a sense that I was 'making it up as I went'. This was despite having given the topic a lot of thought and scoured the literature extensively at the outset. The investigation was initially conceived and informed by my experiences of working in primary schools as a creative arts teacher and, more recently, as a teacher educator with a literacy focus in tertiary settings. I thought about how best to investigate the ways in which creative, arts-based pedagogies had the potential to impact upon students' literacy learning. My thinking was also framed by how the increased measurement of student achievement narrowed the curriculum, leading to a silencing of the inner creative voice. Anderson (2002) examined the wider socio-cultural context in which pedagogy and ideological forces play out when there is movement towards mechanical pedagogy. This writer expressed regret for a lost art of teaching that demands more than technical prowess. Kalantzis and Cope (2012) also lamented the shift to a simplified dialogue in relation to the teaching and learning of literacy. We see this in their reflections below:

Sometimes, when reading education textbooks, you may be excused for getting the feeling that habits of talking down to children have translated into a discourse that talks down to teachers. Many such books are, to put it bluntly, pitched at a patronisingly low level (Kalantzis & Cope 2012, p. 14).

In this light, it could be argued that teachers are aware of the simplification and mechanisation of their work, particularly as the professional and the personal elements of their lived experience intersect, each giving the other context and meaning.

Boxall (1995, p. 118) articulated the notion of speaking a truth to power for teachers and noted: 'If challenged to think about classrooms as they have known them in the light of new options, the process accompanying reflective thought might, indeed, accelerate different forms of action and interaction'. In this study, reflection on classroom practice was a primary component of encouraging criticality amongst the participants. The conversations that followed echoed experiential and embodied understandings of how teachers' work is shaped within and by wider epistemic landscapes. One of the primary aims of this research was to (re)present experiential articulations of teachers' working lives and account for the impact of such work on the participants' understanding of what it means to be a professional educator. Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 71) noted how: 'Professional work cannot and should not be divorced from the lives of professionals'. I have subsequently come to realise how giving a voice to personal beliefs takes courage. It cannot be done without reference to personal experience, which is shaped in, by and through wider social, cultural and discursive landscapes.

Teachers' lives are deeply impacted by educational reforms (Darder 2011) and, in coming to understand these implications, I have had to peel back the layers of my knowledge formation and my participants' ways of knowing. My ontological standpoint is illustrated in the following diagram:



**Diagram 1:** Ontological standpoint of the researcher

Through the interviews with study participants it became apparent that as teachers they saw the value of engaging in reflection on their everyday practices. Schon (1983, p. 49) drew attention to the efficacy of reflection on practice, claiming, 'Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is *in* our action'. I suggest reflection *in* action can be a technology of care (Foucault 1986, 1988): a way to be honest about how personal insecurities form a significant presence in a professional dialogue. I felt a personal discomfort in yielding to a process that had an uncertain conclusion and while I was aware that all research has uncertainties, at times I sensed an equal discomfort with the process in some of my participants. The field text I collected was not only about words but also about the feelings that emerged

from the conversations with the study participants. The affective dimension contextualised the stories that were told, and much of what the participants related to could not be easily separated into personal or professional. It became clear from the participants' narratives that teaching is a profession closely tied to identity. The participants' beliefs and passions were underwriting the practices of reflecting on teaching. Significantly, the personal infused the professional and vice versa.

Teachers' identities are shaped by the stories they tell; these stories (re)present their kaleidoscopic experiences in ways that are highly individualised. This is in stark contrast with the generic narrative of the public face of education, which homogenises and diminishes collective understandings of teachers and teaching. When a narrative is entrenched, disruption and provocation are required (Goodson & Gill 2011). Schooling has such a narrative; a public, all-pervasive mantra that makes its way around the world, touching even the smallest school. As the worker bees of the education system, teachers own a different narrative; a view informed not only by government policy, but by their day-to-day involvement in classroom life. Teachers live the rhetoric and the spin on a daily basis. They are the ones who administer tests, measure results and evaluate students against one another in a fiercely hierarchical curriculum model. Consequently, teachers want to have their accounts and points of view represented (Clandinin & Connelly 1998; Forrest, Keener & Harkins 2010; Goodson 2006a). Darder (2011, p. 338) offered a strikingly visual portrait of the constraints that test-driven pedagogical methods have on teachers and students:

Teachers, whose bodies are similarly restricted, alienated, and domesticated by their workplace, are often under enormous pressure to follow strict policies and procedures for classroom conduct. In many cases, they are similarly expected to dispense prepackaged curriculum instead of employing more creative and critical approaches grounded in the actual needs of students. Given the impact of

disembodied practices, teachers generally experience an uphill battle in meeting standardised mandates, which systematically extricate students' bodies from the equation of learning.

Despite continued scholarship on the importance of artful and creative practices in educational settings, teachers continue to struggle to embed and conceptualise creativity into their work (Dinham 2011; Roy, Baker & Hamilton 2015). Eisner (2002, p. 159) questioned the void that evolves when teaching and learning approaches are fuelled by a 'null curriculum' framed by the glaring loss of learning opportunities of particular disciplines: 'When the arts are absent or taught so poorly that they might as well be, students pay a price. Acts of omission can be as significant as acts of commission'. Starko (2010) added to Eisner's contention, arguing that creative approaches require greater pedagogical definition than those that are mechanistic and dull. These approaches, he argues, leave little room for spontaneity and joy, awe and wonderment.

When student achievement outcomes are routinely defined by a prescribed nomenclature of *metrics*, *data* and *league tables*, teaching becomes characterised by pie charts and statistical algorithms (Petrosky 2003). By default, students and teachers become the instruments of government-led initiatives to improve learning outcomes. Achieving the desired results has become a no-costs-spared exercise that counts the arts and other seemingly non-essential curriculum areas amongst its casualties. A results-driven system is contrary to one in which teachers enter the profession because they want to make a difference in students' lives. Such teachers approach their work from a position of care for students and a passion for teaching and learning. They practise their 'commitment to public education, to teaching children of all classes and races, to teaching as a moral craft' (Goodson 2006a, p. 259). Such teachers do more than teach and inspire students to become lifelong learners. They are motivated and committed to provide mentoring and leadership to younger teachers in ways that promote professional growth and agency.

It is from these understandings that I now consider a wider, politicised landscape of arts, literacy and creativity in school curriculum.

# Literature review: the story behind the story

## Education in neoliberal times

Reforms to education aimed at raising teachers' performance are implicitly connected to improving educational outcomes for students. Petrosky (2003, p.60) identified an emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability as 'a move towards severe capitalistic notions of production and a firm resituation of class distinctions in terms of who is responsible to whom'. It is no coincidence therefore that terms such as *mechanistic* and *production line* have been used to describe a type of education that evokes industrial era ideals and systems of manufacture.

Mackenzie (2007) identified several factors that impact teacher morale. These include the pace of bureaucratic change, as well as time and workload pressures. More than 90% of the participants in that study suggested that leadership both at the school and system level impacted significantly on teacher morale. Teachers who do not have a substantial degree of autonomy are more likely to leave the profession or tolerate the resulting 'painful ideological dissonance' (Sikes 1999, p. 420). Orland-Barak and Maskit (2011, p.439) used the term *shady corners* to describe 'hostile and adverse sides of teaching, and surfacing novices' sense of impotence in their capacity to act'. This is an apt description of teaching conditions where didactic, mechanistic and metric-driven education practices are normalised, and into which young teachers are systematically trained and inducted.

The *shady corners* are defined as the places where teachers' vision of teaching and learning are incompatible with the neoliberal reality of current educative practices. Goodson (2007) noted that there has been a dramatic shift in teachers' working lives when compared to those of previous generations. For teachers, these changes are manifested in schools, where perceived shortcomings of the system are *fixed* through change and reform. Goodson wrote (2007, p. 137):

The assumption is held that the clear enunciation of objectives, backed by a battery of tests, accompanied by accountability strategies, and confirmed by a range of financial incentives and payments by results, will inevitably raise school standards. The teacher is positioned as a key part of this delivery system, but the technical aspects of teacher professionalism are stressed, rather than the *professional biography* – the personal missions and commitments that underpin the teacher's sense of vocationalism and caring professionalism.

Implicit in these directives and reforms to the education system is a belief that teachers are not professionally capable of making pedagogical and curriculum-related decisions and must not be allowed to compromise students' learning outcomes. Terms such as *success criteria*, *learning intentions*, and the creation of *student success coordinator* positions in schools reinforce an ideology of prioritising results above all else. This ideology situates knowledge and skills as binary opposites. As this research took shape, it became apparent that a critique of neoliberal principles as discussed by Darder (2015) and Freire (1992) were central to this work. Principles such as *conscientisation* (Darder 2015), provided a focus for framing the participants' stories into the narrative of my novel. For the participant teachers, conscientisation involved an awakening to a theoretical understanding and an adoption of a praxis standpoint, articulating that creativity is about the freedom for learners to experiment and explore. Such freedoms do not imply learning without rigour and structure but invoke principles of deep learning (Marton & Saaljo 1976a, 1976b). Freire's concept of conscientisation, 'points to an understanding of critical awareness and the formation of social consciousness' (Darder 2015, p. 82). Conscientisation is the embodiment of the belief that education is always a political act as are the human qualities of hope, love and joy. This understanding permeated the field text and became the basis for the novel. The *joy* that comes from teaching strengthens the critique of hegemonic schooling where teachers deliver one-size-fits-all programs. Mechanistic pedagogies are the opposite of pedagogies

of love, where students and teachers assert the value of their humanity through a struggle for liberation. In this space, learning involves criticality and integrating new knowledge into existing understandings in order to generate new meanings. For the participant teachers, understanding the value and nature of creative processes translated to a greater professional autonomy, growth and wellbeing. Developing imagination of students was seen not as an ad hoc activity, but a structured and deliberate practice; one that enhanced creative skills and different ways of knowing.

Educational domains that put creative practice at the centre of student learning equip young people to be independent metacognitive thinkers who can rise to the challenges of a rapidly changing world (Claire 2005; Craft 2011; Eckhoff & Urbach 2008; Eisner 1990; Loveless 2005; Robinson 2001, 2015). Though Claire (2005) does not advocate 'anarchy in the classroom' (p.57), she argues that, 'creativity becomes fundamental to citizenship, whether at the radical or the conservative end of the continuum, or at points in between. Participative, active citizens of all political persuasions will need the ability to construe problems and consider creative solutions' (p.56). However, creative practices in the classroom require a level of understanding and studied deliberation on the part of teachers. Doing creativity well in the classroom requires informed and conscious fostering of specific skills, knowledge and experiences. An ad hoc approach can be problematic. In regard to the early learning curriculum, Craft (2005, pp.9-10) has expressed some concerns with the application of principles of creativity:

First, it is implied that creativity involves specific parts of the curriculum and certain forms of learning, only. And yet problem-finding and –solving using imagination and posing 'what if?' questions could (and do) occur within a whole range of domains.

Secondly, conceiving of creativity as something which may be 'developed' implies that there is a ceiling, or a static end-state,

and that, given the appropriate immediate learning environment, children will 'develop'. Both presuppositions are problematic.

Thirdly, the implication is that play and creativity are the same. As already suggested, they are not. Play may be, but is not necessarily, creative. For example, 'Snakes and Ladders', being dependent upon a mix of chance and a set structure, is not creative, but 'Hide and Seek' may well be. Similarly, imaginative play may be imitative but it may equally be highly creative.

Scholarship that has focused on the creative process across curriculum and in pedagogical practices has stated, 'teaching students explicitly about creativity...includes teaching about the lives of creative individuals, the nature of the creative process, and strategies that can be used to generate creative ideas' (Starko 2010, p. 120). For teachers, understanding the value and nature of creative processes, especially in regard to enacting pedagogies that foster such processes in classrooms, is not one for the faint-hearted. Nor is it one for the teacher whose idea of education is to standardise, and thus reduce every educational transaction to a recipe-like procedure. The difficulties encountered in the struggle for conscientisation are not insignificant. Restoration of humanity requires deep engagement and creativity, for no two students are alike, and each class brings many challenges. Teaching is thus framed not as an all-knowing position, but one in which creativity and vulnerability are in a constant dialectic.

Brown (2012) contended that having the courage to reveal one's fears and expose vulnerability enables one to find purpose and meaning. It can be argued that making a commitment to creative practices in the classroom promises similar rewards. There are risks involved. The first is in the danger of rebelling against school reform directives from leadership, which can introduce stress into teachers' professional lives and damage careers. The second is the inherent fear of failure that comes with the uncertainty of creative choices. Adhering to prescriptive, tried and tested teaching approaches may be safe and

predictable for a time. However, it can be argued that it cannot yield the kind of rich and unique learning outcomes possible through creative approaches.

## **Re-creating creativity in contemporary classrooms**

The arts as a stand-alone curriculum area, and the application of arts-based methods across the curriculum, have been matters of contention in recent decades (Caldwell & Vaughan 2012; Dinham 2011; Roy, Baker & Hamilton 2015). Teachers who choose creative approaches must be aware of the benefits of those approaches as well as be creative thinkers themselves (Geist & Hohn 2009). However, creative classroom approaches can suggest an apparent lack of boundaries, which poses an unacceptable level of risk to learning outcomes (Anderson 2002; Caldwell & Vaughan 2012; Goodson 2006a; Gunzenhauser 2003). A rethinking of how creativity is legitimised and taught in schools is, I suggest, an imperative that is directly attributable to shifting priorities in education. Teese (2013, p. 236) wrote that, 'Curriculum structure is a translation of social structure', with subjects being prioritised and valued according to their importance in the nation's economy. It is a fact widely understood and tacitly acknowledged that arts subjects have been positioned at the bottom of the curriculum ladder of prestige. However, in recent times, there has been a shift towards subjects that were previously thought of as *vocational*, and which were undertaken by low achievers, by more successful students (Teese & Polesel 2003).

Arguing the worth and advocating for the inclusion of creative, arts-based practices in the curriculum can therefore be a tenuous undertaking. Practices such as participation in drama productions, which can involve a range of complex learning experiences spanning the depth and breadth of the curriculum, cannot be measured through large-scale, standardised means. Involvement in these undertakings are an act of faith on the part of the experienced teacher who understands the value of investing in childhood. For arts educators, the advantages of adopting creative practices are too compelling to ignore, despite the apparent lack of *deliverables*. McKenna (2013,

p. 83) makes note of the benefits of having teachers model creativity in their learning spaces:

Art making draws on the unconscious materials of the mind that burst forth from fantasy and speculation. At times the students can seem to be engaged in nothing. The gestation of ideas that will become the basis of the products and processes of artful practice can take time. Some students struggle with deep emotional needs while others are easily captivated by their art making. There may be moments when artful engagements question conformity. Some students might use the art practice as a form of rebellion or a place to find their own way to creatively question and deconstruct established truths and find unexpected solutions to their lifeworld problems. What is crucial is the belief that the teacher has in modelling acceptance of the students' various new ways of approaching their lifeworlds. The opportunity to experiment and to be creative, happy and satisfied is required for innovation to be forthcoming.

Creative, arts-based practices have long been associated with wellbeing and student engagement. Scholars have espoused the value of maintaining and increasing the arts' prominence in education or have bemoaned that the balance between the arts and other curriculum areas is askew (Caldwell & Vaughan 2012; Craft 2000, 2011; Dinham 2011; Eisner 2002; Gibson & Ewing 2011; Warwick Commission 2015). Equally worrisome is that inclusion of the arts on the education agenda is dependent on the value of other curriculum areas that are deemed more important.

Reimagining creativity in the curriculum is vital work and Greene (1995) stressed the critical role of imagination in the lives of teachers, precisely because they are modelling those practices to students. In doing so, she is critical of the limited opportunities children are given to stretch their creative wings, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are in

greatest need of developing autonomous, creative ways of being. She wrote (Green, 1995, p. 41):

Far too seldom are such young people looked upon as beings capable of imagining, of choosing, and of acting from their own vantage points on perceived possibility. Instead, they are subjected to outside pressures, manipulations, and predictions. The supporting structures that exist are not used to sustain a sense of agency among those they shelter; instead, they legitimate treatment, remediation, control – anything but difference and release.

Imagination, possibility and choice on the part of students is hereby set against the culture of measurement and control that pervades many schools. It is a damning indictment of a school system that instead of liberating its youth to become agentic, critical and creative thinkers puts its energies into subjugation and control.

Webb (2009, p. 746) discussed a need for learners to develop a utopian imagination that can 'provide hope, counter despair, inculcate a sense that change is possible, stir the imagination and mobilise action'. A utopian imagination allows students to 'refuse to accept the completeness of the present, believe that different forms of human association are possible, possess a profound confidence in their capacities as political agents, and strive to shape their own future' (Webb, 2009, p. 752). Within the paradigm of this kind of utopian thinking, and through participation in more creative, imaginative and play-based pedagogies, teachers and students become agents of humanistic change. But, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997, p. 8) warned: 'we must not be misled that all creative spaces benefit the individual to be a better person. These *humanistic* dimensions must always be in close communion with rigorous and systematic attention to the details of social reality and human experience' if they are to benefit learners socially, ethically and morally.

As this research took shape and the creative project was conceptualised, it became apparent in listening to the participants' stories how teaching and learning of literacy has undergone a significant epistemic reframing. The pedagogical shifts connected to the teaching of literacy have become a battleground of polarised paradigms, and political ideologies (Snyder 2008). The performative push, in terms of assessment driven teaching and learning has led to children being increasingly taught isolated reading and writing skills that are valued above meaning-making, authentic learning experiences. Rarely intended to inspire passion for literature or scaffold a joy of being a reader and writer, the changes to literacy education have meant that the role of arts in teaching children about language and literature have now almost been excised. Time-pressed reading and writing programs have eliminated the complementary and symbiotic relationship of being real readers and writers. As scripted approaches to teaching literacy have become normalised it could be claimed many literacy teachers are not aware that there are other options that have the potential for agentic, creative practices in the language and literacy curriculum areas.

### **Literacy and creativity: a road less taken**

In past decades, literacy has been increasingly subject to policy controls and pedagogic prescription; a mechanistic approach in which the teaching and learning of reading and writing has been organised around analytic and synthetic phonics. The introduction of literacy hours has meant there has been a dramatic shift away from the affective, creative and arts-based methods that underpin early childhood and primary based approaches. Far more rigid skills-and-drills rote learning approaches are now favoured. In 2017, Australian schools will consider the introduction of synthetic phonetics to baseline test year one students in the *National Year One Literacy and Numeracy Check* (Martyn-Jones 2017). This marks not only a departure from perceived understandings of best practice in primary domains, but can be read as a policy intervention connected to the increasing imperative of benchmarking and testing throughout

primary and secondary phases of education, with teachers being positioned as assessors, recorders and administrators of learning.

Whereas literacy scholars have argued for natural and organic processes through which children come to communicate with the world and gain mastery over written language, the schooling of literacy is irreducibly connected to biological developments. What follows are stages of readiness (Singer & Revenson 1996), which frame becoming a reader and writer as gaining mastery over self. Seldom is literacy understood and conceptualised as being about becoming a human subject in all its complexities and messiness. As children learn to speak, so too do they *become*. As Freire (1996) noted, becoming literate is not just a reading of the word, but a reading of the world. The centrality of life to text connections is understood by literacy educators as being the foundation from which to develop skills and knowledge about how language works. Becoming a reader and writer in 21<sup>st</sup> century communicative practices increasingly involves meaning-making. Children learn to read because they want to participate and produce, not because they want to decipher symbols to sounds and then words.

In examining the nature of childhood from a posthuman stance, Murriss (2016) explored the epistemic nature of children as they are positioned in educational settings. Children's sense of *knowing* is often disregarded in favour of adults', or teachers' knowing. This is almost always in line with the ideals of educational institutions. Children's work, if not aesthetically pleasing, is not displayed. This gives children a clear message about what is acceptable and, more alarmingly, about how to conform. The author makes the point that children's creative work, rather than seen as evidence of completion or mastery, should document emergent learning. Likewise, in-class discussions tend to follow a narrative that centres on teachers' accepted knowledge. This does not allow for true inquiry on the part of the child. Instead, teachers are listening for confirmation of what they already know, only interested in obtaining proof of their successful *herding* of children towards predetermined paths of knowledge. Such manipulations of

children's ways of being in the world and their ways of knowing are seen as epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007).

## **Teachers' lives**

Teachers' stories matter (Hayler & Williams 2016). They matter for those who do the telling, as well as for those who, through listening, make connections to their own experiences. Through these connections, understandings are made more profound, and changed practice is made possible for those still working in the system under the constraints of a neoliberal, performative agenda. Teacher activism does not take place in isolation. Where there exists an intention to standardise teaching practices and impose high-stakes assessment methods, there must also be possibilities for teachers to commune so as to express their professional ideologies. The act of acknowledging the lived experience is an enabling factor in developing an educational ideology, which leads to the development of teacher identity.

Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 59) articulated how understanding 'teachers' work and life histories were central to a reconceptualization of educational study and professional development'. Teaching careers demand ongoing professional learning. Much of this is provided by schools and is informed by government-led movements in educative practices. This type of professional development supports teachers' work by providing explicit guidelines for curriculum and pedagogy. And yet such guidelines place constraints on the development of the profession by limiting teachers' autonomy and creativity. Several crises face educators working in neoliberal times. One is a perceived lowering of standards in curriculum areas like literacy frequently being blamed on teacher quality (Snyder 2008). The high attrition rate of beginning teacher numbers can, in part, be attributed to the stress caused by this blame. Another crisis springs from the frustration brought by limited opportunities for innovation and the too demanding administrative workloads (Ewing & Manuel 2005; Gallant & Riley 2014; Goddard, O'Brien & Goddard 2006; Harfitt 2014; Hong 2012).

In praising the value that good teachers add to students' lives, and in lamenting the loss of such teachers to the profession, Clark (2016) drew on the experience of one teacher. Despite her heartfelt reluctance, Margolis felt compelled to leave the profession, citing disillusionment and a loss of *joy*. In a FaceBook post that went viral, later picked up by the Queensland *Courier Mail* (Vonow & Tin 2016), Margolis' wrote a letter highlighting the many challenges faced during her 30 years in schools. Here is an excerpt:

Our young teaching graduates enter the profession bright eyed and bushy tailed, energetic and enthusiastic, ready to make a difference. So why I ask are they only staying for an average of 5 years? Of course that question is rhetorical. I know the answer. They are burnt out and disillusioned. Older teachers like me have seen better days in the classroom so in a way it's harder for us to see all the joy slowly being sucked out of learning. But we also have a wealth of experience to draw from and we know which hoops you don't necessarily need to jump through. We occasionally speak out. We are not as easy to "control". But we are tired and also burning out with disillusionment (Vonow & Tin 2016).

In a similar vein, Stroud (2016) wrote a wrenching personal memoir of the reasons for leaving teaching. Highlighting that teachers are buckling under the weight of rigid, mandated assessment and pedagogical requirements, Stroud wrote:

I was burnt out because successive Australian governments – both left and right – have locked Australian education into the original model of schooling first established during the industrial revolution. Each decision made keeps us stuck in an archaic learn-to-work model, now complete with ongoing mandatory assessment of our student's likely productivity and economic potential.

Fundamental to this model is the idea of standardising.

Standards, standardising and standardisation.

Making every kid the same.

Making every teacher the same.

If I was successful in my job, that's what would happen.

Based on that, I don't want the job any more (Stroud 2016).

For teachers, Stroud's account puts into sharp focus the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student cohort. It highlights the problems inherent in a homogenising model of education that not only fails to recognise, but disadvantages individuality. By mandating an approach to all students that is positioned within a framework of standardisation, it is impossible not to reduce every teacher to a dreary level of uniformity. Such regimentation of teaching and learning practices limits autonomy and detrimentally impacts on teacher retention. Encountering classroom management issues that are not supported by leadership and having a salary that is adequate but not on par with other professional work, are additional factors that lead to teachers abandoning the profession (Buchanan 2010, 2012). According to Sohlberg, Lindblad and Lindblad (2011, p. 60), while teachers in Finland, Ireland and Sweden experience 'relative professional autonomy', they still feel at a considerable distance from the more significant decision-making in their workplace. This suggests a level of discontent on par with teachers in Australian schools.

A study by Gallant and Riley (2014) detailed beginning teachers' protracted progression towards leaving the profession. The participants in the study expressed an initial idealism in wanting to become teachers, which fuelled their desire to become agents of change in students' lives. However, their aspirations were soon crushed by the reality of school life. Factors that played a role in early career teachers becoming disillusioned and leaving the profession included: i) difficult classes; ii) unrealistic expectations of the ability to undertake heavy workloads; and iii) lack of emotional support, which created feelings of loneliness and isolation. Most significantly, teachers' decisions to leave the profession were related to conflict surrounding their ontological professional stance. We see this captured in the quote below:

The participants' self-positioning as change agents was generally associated with developing new pedagogies and learning environments underpinned by creativity and innovation. Others mentioned how their developing creativity or innovation was arrested. This was a common experience across the narratives, leaving all feeling obstructed and unsuccessful in their work with children (Gallant & Riley 2014, p. 572).

This passage articulates teachers' desires to claim an autonomous, agented role in their professional lives. Highlighted within that autonomy is the connection between teachers' personal and professional creativity. Most importantly, it identifies a threat to students' learning as a flow-on effect of this reductive practice. The ability to engage in reasonable risk and to be open to unpredictability are defining qualities for teachers who want to be creative, and who in turn want their students to develop creative skills (Morais & Azevedo 2011).

In his study of the life and work histories of professionals, Goodson (2007) noted that there has been a dramatic shift in teachers' working lives when compared to those of previous generations. This 'crisis of personal meaning and collective, public purpose at the heart of western life' (Goodson, 2007, p. 133), has come about in response to an increasingly individualistic focus in both public life and communities. The crisis has been driven by the push for commercialisation and privatisation that has taken hold of the western world. It is understandable, then, that two decades of narratives (Clandinin & Connelly 1998; Goodson 1995, 2006a) that hoped to empower teachers and add context and value to their experiences have been challenged by government mandated changes to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In the face of this onslaught, it is more relevant than ever for teachers to engage in sharing their experiences, and for students to be included in the discourse. Experienced teachers who have experimented with and seen what works with students are surely more

likely to participate in sharing their stories. Those newer to the profession can also be encouraged to take part. Teacher educators can encourage such participation (Blake & Blake 2012), as shaping the future involves telling and understanding the past in order to create a meaningful context in which to move forward.

## **Transformative teachers**

In articulating a Freirean view of education, McInerney (2004, p. 66) maintained that 'To engage in critical pedagogy means treating contemporary practices and structures of teaching problematically; excavating beneath the surface realities of institutionalised practices; and, working collectively for more emancipatory (or empowering) courses of action'. On the same subject, Freire (1998, p. 15) noted that as teachers, 'we all have the privilege and the duty to fight for the right to be ourselves, to opt, to decide, and to unveil truths'. In line with Freire's assertion that teachers must have a thorough knowledge of their subject matter and strive for rigour, this statement also identifies teacher agency as a primary goal of educators. McInerney (2004, p. 65) wrote: 'Children are not taught or empowered through love alone; instead, teaching demands intellectual rigour, a capacity to work for social justice and a willingness to act politically'. Teachers who are well-versed in their subject matter and who are empowered by critical pedagogy are then able to more fully interpret curriculum and to understand how it can be used as a political instrument. Reform for social justice necessitates a critical examination of curriculum, of the power structures that have put it in place and that stand to benefit and accordingly become self-perpetuating through its unquestioning implementation.

The pursuit of liberation for the oppressed was a key goal for the authors discussed in this section. Above all, Freire highlighted the importance of teachers being lifelong learners. If they are to demonstrate love for their students, he argues, teachers must demonstrate absolute commitment to a deep understanding of their chosen content area. This need for continuous learning on the part of teachers is not framed as a static, memorisation exercise, but as creative and generative action. The act of studying is therefore

identified by Freire (1998) as vital to a critical education for both students and teachers. Equally significant is the link Freire makes to literacy as a conducive element of critical thinking and ‘an intellectual, difficult, demanding operation’ (Freire, 1998, p. 19). A connection between reading the *word* and reading the *world* is examined, which focuses on the need for students to experience and perceive the world in various ways. It is only when these understandings and familiarities are brought to the reading and writing that occurs in school that students and teachers are able to engage more deeply with their world and become active agents within it (Freire 1998).

Darder (2015) referred to schools as ‘economic engines’ (p. 144), and used terms like *social change*, *transformation*, *reinventing*, and *progressive* to advocate for and envision a new educational landscape. The language she uses is that of generative, creative practice. It is not the language of staid and stagnant schooling where students are institutionalised and oppressed into believing themselves to be *lesser than*. Teachers cannot lose sight of their own visions of how schooling ought to be for the good of their students, but also for themselves. Darder (2015, p. 113) wrote, ‘In order to support the emancipatory dreams of others, we must believe in the possibility of our own dreams and cultivate a deeply embodied sense of how to move with an evolving consciousness of freedom through our lives’. Teachers must therefore fight for the right to be creative, transformative teachers not only for themselves, but for their students. Young children depend on their teacher to set the scene, pace and tone for learning. Consequently, it can be argued that the failure or success of any classroom is dependent on the teacher. Good teachers adapt their practices to meet students’ needs while at the same time complying with educational mandates. Metcalfe and Game (2006, p. 54) argued:

Good teachers, then, do not simply ignore institutional demands. They must know the set curriculum outcomes, but suspend the desire for these during class discussions. In this way they allow the outcomes to be rediscovered through an enquiry based on a love of learning. If teachers can’t put love

of learning as a goal, they can nevertheless inspire it by sharing their own love.

But when teachers' focus is turned primarily to improving measurable outcomes, the resulting effect – a lowering of standards – can only be seen as ironic. And it is doubly ironic that since the introduction of PISA in 2000, the reading scores of Australian students have consistently declined (except for a slight rise in 2009) (OECD 2014, 2016). According to Freire, teaching is always a political and social act. This view of learning is in direct opposition to neoliberal educational ideologies that focus purely on the lifting of results and standardised testing. Where poverty and disadvantage is a factor in low achievement rates (Cacciattolo 2013; Giroux 2011) socially-just teachers are needed to bridge the class divide. Early criticism of the NCLB legislation focused on notions of inequality as significant factors in low learning rates. Addressing the gap in resources that cause disadvantage is one way to improve learning outcomes. But to speak only of learning outcomes negates the notion of the whole child; the qualities necessary for growth into an adult who is socially, intellectually and emotionally capable are squashed. Regrettably, standardised testing as a predominant measure of learning has alarming implications for the wellbeing of children. Karp (2004, p. 58) echoed these sentiments:

Tests alone do very little to increase the capacity of schools to deliver better educational services. They can also provide a kind of counterfeit accountability that sorts and labels kids on the basis of multiple-choice questions as a substitute for the much more difficult and more costly process of real school improvement. The keys to school improvement are not standards and tests, but teachers and students. And while teachers and students need a complicated mix of support, resources, motivation, pressure, leadership, and professional skills to succeed, the idea that this mixture can be provided by

test-driven sanctions is simply wrong and is not supported by any educational research or real world experience.

Indeed, if the keys to school improvement are teachers and students, it is short-sighted at best, and negligent at worst, to continue to uphold a system that many educational leaders consider to be broken (Hutton 2014).

## Methodology

From the beginning of the fieldwork, my own theoretical positioning was aligned with Leavy's (2013b) work on fiction as research and Goodson and Sikes' (2001) work on life history narratives. Guided by these principles, I have endeavoured to (re)present the participants' lived experience by positioning their stories in a historical context. In doing this, I utilised not only the stories they told me, but artefacts they brought along to the interviews, which provided valuable insights into their lifeworlds, values and beliefs. As a research methodology, fiction can achieve a more holistic (re)presentation of lived experiences. Fiction is a creative medium, which enables other ways of knowing and has the power to convey understandings in deep and meaningful ways. The narratives I created were articulated through an ongoing process of reflection, analysis, and making meaning. That acknowledgement meant stepping out of the shadow cast by the accusation of unreliability, and to work with/in nuanced and at times contradictory landscapes. Whenever the participants' responses veered in a somewhat unexpected direction and the interviews took their surprising twists and turns, I was aware that knowledge reproduction is not as an innocent practice, but a (re)presentation generated uniquely as a result of my particular positioning and personal history in the world. In line with this understanding, I made a conscious effort to remain neutral, to not oppose participants' viewpoints that may have differed from mine. I must declare that I did come to the research with quite definite views about what effective teaching looks like in the creative arts space; my experience in schools teaching literacy through the arts had been overwhelmingly positive. Any kind of story, whether oral, interview transcript, factual or fictitious, will always be pushed and pulled by the forces of singular or multiple interpretations. It has been recognised that bias is unavoidable (Denzin 2014).

Vasudevan (2011, p. 1161) voiced the need to legitimise and accept the unknown as a valid way of understanding and knowing and noted that absolute knowledge that might once have been perceived as a strength or advantage in scientific fields is not an appropriate or reliable approach in arts-based realms:

How do we attend to the unmeasurable? Whose lived realities do we seek out to confirm our convictions? In doing so, do we become complacent in our stance of inquiry? Have we already written the answers to questions we have yet to ask, or do we maintain intellectual instability and remain unsettled? (Would it be wrong to find delight in such unsettling?)’.

Consciously choosing to steer away from accepting perceived methodological certainties allowed me to question the intersections of subjectivity and rigour. Denzin’s (2009) description of the interview as interpretive practice was closely aligned with how I saw my role throughout the interview process: a writer of the world through my (re)presentation of the participants’ stories. As Denzin (2009, p.217) wrote, ‘The interview is a way of writing the world, a way of bringing the world into play’. At the outset of the fieldwork, I informed the participants that I was planning to use the interviews as a platform for the writing of a performative product. Quoting again from Denzin (2009, p.216), the interview in the latest moment of qualitative inquiry can be reread ‘not as a method of gathering information but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society’. He noted:

The present moment is defined by a performative sensibility, by a willingness to experiment with different ways of presenting an interview text. The performative sensibility turns interviews into performance texts, into poetic monologues. It turns interviewees into performers, into persons whose words and narratives are then performed by others. As Richardson argues, in the postexperimental period no discourse has a privileged place, no method or theory has a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge (pp. 216-217).

Thus, travelling beyond the boundaries of conventional methods, I set out to write a novel in pursuit of what has been termed performative social science (Jones 2006), which depends on processes of creativity for its success. In

pursuing a creative product, 'Arts based research extends beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable' (Barone & Eisner 2012, p. 1), and the interviews, following a 'life story approach within the narrative tradition' (King & Horrocks 2010) resisted an arboreal logic in (re)presentation. As Denzin (2009, p. 217) has stated, I regarded the material of the interviews as of being a simulacrum, 'a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right'. This miniature is not the same as the world it represents, but may in some aspects be more truthful. I now think about the interviewing process as a fictional construct. In itself, it can be seen as 'an active text, a site where meaning is created and performed. When performed, the interview text creates the world, giving the world its situated meaningfulness' (ibid, p. 218). In the interviews, I was not privileged to see and understand the entire person, their history, their world. However, what was granted were selective glimpses from which to recreate a story. These glimpses did not represent the entirety of the personal and professional life story. Alone, they cannot. What they allowed me to do was to provide a story within a particular context. It is but one aspect of the person; one aspect of the story and as part of a 'performance-based, dramaturgical culture' (ibid, p. 218). The interview then provides a platform for both interviewer and participant to lay down a story and make it come alive as subjective (re)presentation. Subjectivity is not only present on the part of the interviewer, but also from the participant's location.

From a historical point of view, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have documented the sequential developments in qualitative inquiry, declaring it a field of inquiry in its own right. The 1960s were a time when qualitative and quantitative camps engaged in energetic debate about validity; when both camps struggled in attempts to understand the nature of their differences. Eight moments in the development of qualitative inquiry can be termed *epiphanic* in recognition of their heralding in new understandings. Relevant to this study, the fourth moment was *The Crisis of Representation*, which was triggered by postmodernism and is embedded in a post-structuralist aesthetic. When

reflecting on this crisis of representation, which has the potential to undermine the very essence of creative narrative research, I found it helpful to frame my conceptualisation of the project rhizomatically. I encountered many problematic elements in the doing of creative, arts-based narrative research. Whether attempting to faithfully represent the 'other' or trying to neutralise the researcher's position of privilege and power, I turned to the work of creative narrative for guidance. Like those writers before me, I learned that I must keep foremost in my mind the struggle of interpreting and (re)presenting the lives of others (Lincoln & Denzin 2000).

According to Denzin (1997), the crisis of representation is made up of three crises that confront qualitative researchers: representation, legitimation and praxis. In essence, the crisis is about a clash of paradigms (paradigm wars). This moment called into question how, by whom, and for whom knowledge was constructed. The validity of text was examined, and questions were raised about how to change the world, if society was in fact just a series of texts. The moment called for new interpretations, definitions, and methods of capturing truth, or *truthfulness*, and was a crisis centred on the realignment of previously accepted issues such as validity and objectivity. Established modes of knowing and meaning were challenged with new approaches to understanding. In this crisis, Richardson (2000b) explored the notion of writing itself being a form of inquiry separate from the actual fieldwork that may precede it.

*Postexperimental Inquiry*, the sixth moment, spanned from 1995 to 2000. New ways of expressing knowledge and understandings included literary, poetic, and performative (re)presentations as part of an exciting and generative phase when new authors and new interpretations entered the fold. The success of these publishing undertakings led to the seventh moment, *The Methodologically Contested Present*, which, despite previous achievements, has been characterised by tension and conflict. The eighth moment is still unfolding. It is the moment in which this project has been enabled and exists. It does so in a continuing atmosphere of scrutiny, challenge, and opposition in its

fight to define itself, and claim validity and legitimacy. This research project thus utilises the substance and insight of the work in the field to date, and steps further into unexplored territory.

I started to consider how this work aligned with the paradigm of a post-qualitative moment in research, which Lather (2013, p. 635) has questioned in this way: 'What opens up if we position alternative methodology as non-totalisable, sometimes fugitive, also aggregate, innumerable, resisting stasis and capture, hierarchy and totality, what Deleuze might call "a thousand tiny methodologies"?' Definitions can be problematic when considering research as a continuously evolving practice. Hence Lather (2014, p. 8) wrote that rather than dwell on what the post-qualitative might mean, 'the task is to move beyond the capture of a narrow scientism where qualitative research is reduced to an instrumentalism that meets the demands of audit culture, to move, rather, toward inventing practices that do not yet exist'. My task in this study then was to engage in a processual deconstruction of field text, a challenge of what constitutes data and an interrogation of epistemology in dialectic with ontology. As Sikes and Goodson (2003, p. 34) noted:

Research practice cannot be disembodied. It is impossible to take the researcher out of any type of research or of any stage of the research process. The person of the researcher is always there, whether they be cast as 'villain', contaminating research design, data collection, analysis and reporting; as 'hero', whose intimate and influential involvement is an essential and fundamental constituent of the research; or as something in between.

What resulted from the interviews was not a faithful copy or rendition, but something new. There was resonance and resemblance, but not in a linear, corresponding, sense. The novel as a (re)presentation and as a creation springing from the interviews becomes its own object that is as much related to the interviews for its difference as for its similarity.

## **Telling tales: life stories/life histories**

For Tierney (2000, p. 539), life history is,

a term that has meant many things to many people ... [a] 'taxonomic biographical structure, and its emphasis is on the interactions between the researcher and the researched and on the researched's relationships to others. Life history is a culturally produced artefact in one light and an interpretive document in another.

The distinction I make between life story and life history is primarily about context. According to Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 62), life story is an individual's narration that utilises an inner dialogue and is a practice they have named a 'reflexive project of selves'. In contrast, a life history is located in particular historical contexts that are situated amongst and puts into conversation cultural realms of power and meaning. A life history is often framed by the places and artefacts that individuals place meaning upon and can provide a context for re-reading and interpreting events and people. Primarily, life history relies on the factors of relative distance, perspective and (re)presentation of the researcher. Making the shift from life story to life history can potentially be 'a dangerous move, for it offers the researcher considerable "colonising" power to "locate" the life story with all its inevitable selections, shifts and silences' (Goodson & Sikes 2001, p. 17). Clandinin and Connelly (1998, p. 150) defined their narrative research as seeing 'teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history as storied life compositions. These stories, these narratives of experience, are both personal – they reflect a person's life history – and social – they reflect the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live'. Thus, a life history approach aims to create a deeper, multi-faceted perspective of a person's lived experience. However, shifting from life story into life history is not an easy feat.

Participants were asked to bring artefacts into their interviews that represented a personal connection with creativity and the arts, literacy or their life journeys.

Artefacts are complementary to a process that involves knowledge sharing and collaboration between both researcher and participant based on a foundation of mutual trust. In the interviews, artefacts were used as a talking point. Their significance was seen in terms of how they represented participants' life experiences, understandings of teaching and learning, and philosophy of education. The artefacts brought along by participants were diverse and included self-created pieces of art to personal items such as photographs, books, toys or ornaments. Artefacts, it has been claimed, have a high level of emotional power (Pahl & Rowsell 2010). A seemingly small and insignificant object can encapsulate important memories that define an individual's identity. Alongside other communicative practices such as drawings and speech, artefacts can carry powerful symbolic meaning and are stories in themselves (Pahl 2004). Clandinin (2013) has also written about the usefulness of artefacts in narrative research as they are used as part of the *field text*, or to serve as a trigger for the story telling in which participants engage.

What can be learned from life history is that personal experience of system or educational reforms rarely matches the rhetoric and spin that is used to promote it. Personal experience and subjectivity varies, and without conversations couched in the safe and liberating space of a life history interview, these stories would be isolated, existing only in the mind space of those who have lived through it. Though in hindsight I should have expected it, I was nonetheless surprised that my participants' stories were so different. The difference did not, however, render their stories incongruous to one another's. The stories did in fact – because of the differences, not despite them – contribute to a much richer whole. Each participant's story acted as both anchor and counterpoint to the others, and vice versa. There were infinite resonances between the stories while at the same time their contrasting elements provided a synoptic method for comparison. There was a definite sense that the participants enjoyed unburdening themselves, as it seemed that their stories were of the underground variety; over the years a lot of bottling up of negative sentiments had been a negative force in their lives. As Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 108)

noted, 'People frequently comment that they enjoyed the chance to talk about themselves and the opportunity to reflect on experiences'. They do, however, caution that there are a few participants for whom the process of being interviewed about their life can elicit painful emotions. And even when painless, the interview process may lead to the participants re-evaluating their life and making small, or sometimes significant changes.

There is an aspect of doing life history interviews that refuses to be subdued and controlled by the interviewer. I do not in any way suggest that the researcher necessarily would like to exercise this type of dominance over the participants. However, interviews are generally planned with a set of questions, a chronology, as discussed by Tierney (2000), which may not always play out the way it was planned. My interviews often went off on tangents, as participants related events of relevance that were not technically within the scope of the study. It was often left to me as interviewer to either pull back and try to steer the conversation back on topic, or to make a judgement about whether the digression was in fact adding to the project. Sometimes it was not until I was listening more closely while transcribing that connections that previously seemed tenuous emerged as significant.

The writing of a life history text, like other texts, is co-constructed. Authors are situated, and for the sake of truthful (re)presentation, it is crucial that that positioning, or bias, is declared. But there may be many factors affecting the final version, a written account of which even the researcher may not be fully aware. How then to be aware of these perspectives and positions if, 'A text is always created not simply by the speaker of the narrative and the individual who owns the tape recorder, but also by the multiple editorial decision makers who oversee the story's production' (Tierney 2000, p. 543)? While I may think I have been aware of, and have been transparent in regard to my positioning and biases, I am also cognisant of the subliminal nature of some factors that may affect the final writing. Tierney and Lincoln (1997) convey being suspicious of those who insist they have the final word on methodology theory. Similarly, they

express suspicion of discourses that either privilege or silence, and of genre wars within the academic field. In line with this thinking, and in the awareness of the subliminal factors that affect life history (re)presentations, it could be argued that a suspicion of oneself is warranted. How can one not be at least partly suspicious of the effect that those parts of oneself of which one is unaware may be having on the (re)presentation of research? It is an unsettling suspicion, centring as it does on silences that may or may not exist; those silences that we may potentially yet inadvertently have inserted into the work merely through our presence in a project. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman (1986) utilised personal reminiscence to build an account of gender and poverty, and Tierney (2000) referred to this work to draw attention to texts that operate in the spaces between memory and history. Memory is not always reliable, and in this sense, the silences and gaps that our memories almost certainly guarantee are built into the final product as tangible signs of a lived life. Our recollections can never be as pristine as the lived events, but the memories, however flawed, are evidence we were there, and are evidence of our imperfection, our *being human*. Indeed, Steedman (1986, p. 6) observed, 'the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture'. If one of the tools we use to interpret the past is history, then we must mitigate the incongruity between that history and our own, blemished memories. As Tierney (2000, p. 546) stated, the researcher's work:

needs to be more than the stimulation of memory that reaches for easy reminiscence, for if all the researcher is doing is evoking a nostalgia for the past irrespective of ideology, then he or she has stripped the work of any possibility for change. Thus the site for a researcher's work is between memory and history, lost in the interstices.

A way forward with this uncertainty and the fallibility of human memory might be through collaboration. As such, I would hope the novel I have written is not taken as a singular view of the issues my participants spoke about, but as one

piece of a larger and complex whole. Sikes and Goodson (2003, p. 33) wrote that, 'the personal is political, and that individual perceptions, decisions and experiences can come to have wider significance and implications for other people'. In light of that statement, I hold hope that my input into this discourse will contribute to a collective memory, and hence a shared body of knowledge.

### **Writing fiction**

At the outset of the fieldwork I did not conceive I would write a novel to (re)present the field text. Instead, I had envisaged a collection of short stories for the project. It was only once I started writing the stories that it became clear that one story had the potential to contain all themes and consequently had more scope than a collection of short stories. Writing cannot be separated from the self (Richardson & Adams St Pierre 2008). Accordingly, narratives that connect with one's subjective and unique experience of the world have found a methodological home in creativity and have been contextualised against the changing nature of history and culture (Barone & Eisner 2012). Richardson (1997) acknowledged the possibility of writing narrative research in a variety of ways, including *combination genres*, such as fictional stories with components of field notes and ethnographic recount. Other researchers like Leavy (2011, 2013a) and Tierney (1997) have couched their findings in novels and short stories, but the extent to which fiction writing can be used as a methodological pathway is limited only by the imagination.

The sociology around the development of fiction writing as research, however, dates back to the early 20th century writings of Florian Znaniecki (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1988) and his work within the explorations of the Chicago School. Similarly, the writing of Zora Neale Hurston explored the African American experience and racial division of the time (Jones 2013). Pajak (2012) has examined the work of Willard Waller, who wrote about the sociological aspects of teaching and how these affected both teachers and students. In *The Sociology of Teaching* (1932), Waller described various factors shaping teacher identity that he linked directly to behavioural and cultural expectations of teachers and students. These accounts of the teaching experience were

instrumental in representing what teaching was like through the use of literary realism. His writing 'provided teachers with a cognitive understanding of the social realities of the classroom' (Pajak 2012, p. 1185). *The Good High School* (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983) is another example in this tradition, as is Cutuly's (1993) narrative on the daily grind and juggling act of making learning meaningful for students. As a work of fiction, the novel is firmly grounded within this tradition, continuing to explore and unpack accounts of how teaching and learning is experienced on a personal level.

It is in this coming to deeper understandings that writing emerges as a highly individualised and personal process. In a meta-conversation about writing about the same experience, with very different results, Richardson and Lockridge (2002) concluded that styles of narrative (and perspectives) can vary enormously. Regardless of whether the narrator is wearing the hat of the sociologist (as was Richardson), or of the novelist (as was Lockridge), the story need not be compromised. The two accounts in fact fleshed out a more complete picture of the same experience, bringing to life the characters that existed within it. The notion of portraying different characters without losing their distinctive voices is possible both in sociological (factual ethnographic) writing as it is in fiction. According to Richardson (1997), writing from the point of view of participants, whether in factual or fictional accounts, never willingly renders the narrator unreliable. 'Writing', said Richardson (1997, p. 108), 'always involves ideological, aesthetic, and ethical decisions. There is no innocent writing, including this'. Indeed, if there is no *innocent writing*, then why cannot the writer/artist dive into the aesthetic to bring a point – or multiple points, for that matter – to the fore? If all writing – scientific and literary – is positioned, then the process of using fiction as a methodological approach is necessary as part of a balanced and ever-developing continuum of knowledge. For me, it was through the writing of the novel that the themes that emerged from the field text coalesced and took on greater meaning. The novel was not innocent writing. It was generated from the interviews with participants. I did not approach the retelling of their accounts as a process of duplication. Rather, the participants'

stories eventually became inscribed in the novel's characters, their motivations, and the events that gave shape and meaning to the narrative.

Richardson and Adams St Pierre (2008) have in this way framed writing as a way of knowing, of inquiring. Through writing, we connect what we know to what we are seeking to understand. In the process, we toss around ideas, explore possibilities, and sometimes stumble upon unexpected discoveries. In a reference to Barthes' (1974) *writerly* texts, Richardson and Adams St Pierre (2008, p. 481) described the writing of stories in this way:

They offer critical reflexivity about the writing self in different contexts as valuable creative analytical practice. They evoke new questions about the self and the subject; remind us that our work is grounded, contextual, and rhizomatic; and demystify the research/writing process and help others to do the same.

The term *creative analytical practice*, is key in giving weight to the creative aspect of analysis. It is interesting to note that while they define writing as a complex process of seeking out and constructing knowledge, there is no mention of its ability to *demystify* research. Rather than framing the act of writing as a somewhat lonely, solitary pursuit, their notion bestows it with a hopeful, inclusive note that suggests possibilities for networking and collaboration. Learning is inherent in the kind of writing process that encourages collaboration and the active creation of knowledge (Gibbs 2015; Richardson 2000b). Improvisation, creativity, and the discoveries they yield enable a reframing of the world in analysis, exploration and reflection. Richardson (2000b, p. 924) contended that if we are in doubt, writing can introduce clarity: 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it'. Similarly, Maxine Greene (1995) recalled that as a child, reading to learn was not enough. In order to understand, to make sense, she needed to write. 'It was essential for me to make my own

sense of what I read, to incarnate it, to *learn* what it had to tell me' (Greene, 1995, p. 105).

To write is to put oneself into others' shoes, so to speak. Through that understanding we come to know others better, and ultimately ourselves. As I wrote the novel, my understanding of the participants' accounts of experience increased. Writing added a new dimension to the field text. It came alive in a way that was not possible through the interviews, the subsequent replaying of the recordings and the process of transcription. Writing creatively added an extra edge, a level of inquiry and of knowing with such resonance that it was like entering into a new dimension. It was not enough to listen to my participants as they were interviewed, or to transcribe the interviews, to read through them, coding the field text, watching themes emerging. As I engaged in these activities, I agonised about how I would retain the integrity of the field text while aware I had to protect my participants' anonymity. The field text was rich, and the stories begged to be told as untouched narratives. I pushed this concern aside, not knowing at the outset how I would tackle it, but also trusting in the process. The answer did come, but not always by way of me nutting it out consciously. Often, it came to me surreptitiously, subliminally, and surprisingly. Mostly this happened once I began writing the stories. In attempting to define writing stories as a non-linear, creative endeavour, I return to Deleuze and Guattari's (1998) theories of the rhizome. There is a strong element of the unpredictable, of the organic, and the hidden in the rhizome. When writing, there are moments of pure inspiration, when it is difficult to know where ideas come from, how they became formed and were subsequently expressed in a particular way. Deleuze and Guattari (1998, p. 3) presented writing as something indefinable, intangible, and freeform:

Literature is an assemblage. It has nothing to do with ideology. There is no ideology and never has been. All we talk about are multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities, machinic assemblages and their various types, bodies without organs and their construction and selection, the

plane of consistency, and in each case the units of measure ...  
Not only do these constitute a quantification of writing, but they  
define writing as always the measure of something else.  
Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with  
surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.

If writing, as Barthes (1974) contended, is an exploit that equates to dynamic and participatory action, it can contribute to *living* and *sensing* an experience. He argued that the texts that we read are *readerly*, and only those in which we directly participate, those that we have a hand in creating, are *writerly*. 'The writerly text', he said, 'is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*' (Barthes 1974, p. 5). If indeed the value of writerly texts is in *ourselves writing*, it is expressed by Barthes very much in the spirit of *doing* and of *in the moment*. A necessary challenge in understanding why Barthes put the *writerly* above the *readerly* is to be able to define why the *writerly* is so empowering, so important, and therefore so necessary. Why does the writing of something bring us closer to understanding, and to formulating our own truths? Without the thought processes that are involved in the formulation of text, Barthes contends that it is impossible to get inside an idea, and to fully understand it.

My commitment to creative arts-based spaces was a driving force for embarking on a novel with an exegesis. To eschew the type of dense academic writing that has a severely limited audience, Richardson (2000b, p. 924) advocated for a conscious shift away from such writing: 'It seems foolish at best, and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst, to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a difference to anything but the author's career'. Jones (2007) justified his move towards a more performative social science as a way of enticing new audiences with engaging and meaningful narratives that will not languish in the vaults of academic journals. Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) referred to the need to merge the realms of art and science so as to make research more

representative of the various nuances of perception and understanding. They advocated in this way: 'in an effort to speak about things that resist reductionism and abstraction, in an effort to challenge the tyranny of the academy, and in an effort to build bridges between theory and practice, research and action' (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997, p. 7).

However, while writing the novel, I found it difficult to disengage from the smear that fiction is nothing more than a fabrication, that it is lightweight and does not represent truth. Time after time, I returned to the question of how such an artful and imaginative product can find a solid place to call its own in the research sphere. Something that helped me deal with this question was to approach the issue of validity, or verisimilitude, in fiction as research by *letting go* of validity. Sparkes (2002) suggested that the world of literature, or of literary criticism, might yield more interpretations than seeking straight-out evidence of validity in fictional tales. The truth can instead be found in the works' 'aesthetic standards, by their emotive force, by their capacity to engage readers emotionally, by their verisimilitude, and by their authenticity or integrity' (Sparkes 2002, p. 204). Indeed, without pretending to be an authentic account of any individual or group, fiction has the artistic freedom to portray, to hold a mirror to life. Sometimes the reflected image may be closer to the truth than the original version, whose truths were multilayered and ambiguously positioned to begin with. As Baudrillard (1994, p. 171) wrote, 'This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence'. Fiction makes no claim of literal transcription. After I had collected and analysed the field text, the time came to delve into imagination and creativity. My primary aim was to create a story with resonance that would be more positioned interpretation than identical simulation.

Eisner (2001) has stated that no matter how inventively research is presented, the primary concern must be clarity. When the medium of (re)presentation is fiction, clarity and truth become ever more crucial elements. While fiction is

‘true in the way it displays the universal in the particular, there is a sense in which fiction is not true. It is not true in the literal sense’ (Eisner 2001, p. 140). Hence it was the meaning inherent in my work of fiction, which was driven by themes emerging from the field text, that was the foremost consideration. In writing the novel, I sought to elicit a visceral response to truth from readers. This kind of visceral knowing is aligned with personal affirmations and to knowing on the deepest of levels without need for bureaucratic validations, certificates or documents. We know the good or the bad in people without needing to read a report. Fiction writing puts across those truths through the creation of lifeworlds and characters that rely on personal understanding of the common language of human relationships, circumstance, and emotional connection. In choosing fiction, I sought to take advantage of its popular appeal. Unlike academic writing, fiction is readily accessible to readers who thirst for the escapism that it promises. In reaching a wider audience, I hoped my novel could be instrumental in facilitating change (Leavy 2009). I saw my fiction writing as social research, ‘a process aimed at knowledge-building and meaning-making; at accessing, expressing, and negotiating truths and then effectively communicating those “truths” to relevant audiences’ (Leavy 2013b, p. 21).

In my acceptance of the fact/fiction dichotomy (Leavy 2013b) I had to acknowledge there is much about fact that is not real or reliable whilst vast truths can be found in fiction (Eisner 2001). I was aware that cast iron memories can be challenged, particularly when they rely on subjective perceptions or interpretations. The acceptance of subjectivity has led to the recognition of the value of the told story, of narrative, even as we accept that the reader’s perceptions are as important as the writer’s, and that ‘any understanding is perceived as a mere discourse from a particular angle at a particular moment within a particular sociocultural and political context’ (Gill 2014, p. 22). Musing on writing in academic life, Richardson (1997) commented on the fact/fiction divide, stating that all ethnographic writing is fiction, coming as it does, from the point of view of the writer as interpreter of ‘facts’.

We cannot, however, write from inside the heads of anyone but ourselves, without losing credibility as ethnographers. We can only write “accounts.” And, maybe that’s why we’re experimenting so much with our writing: We know from our own lived experience that life as subjectively experienced is the key to understanding the cultural and the sociological. And we want to write that (Richardson 1997, p. 67).

So why did I *want to write that? That*, as in the subjective lived experience. Conveying subjectivity; declaring it, so that bias was not a factor, or rather was identified, was a delicate task for me. Despite attempts at creating some distance, a researcher’s positioning will undoubtedly be a presence in the final product (Denzin 2009).

The use of fiction as a research methodology is relatively new and increasingly gaining recognition. Like other forms of narrative used to understand the world, it has been much examined (Barone & Eisner 2012; Bruner 1986, 2002; Goodson & Gill 2014; Richardson 1997; Sparkes 2002). But what is more significant about fiction as research is that it is not simply *new*. What we have, in essence, is a critical research methodology that is in step with 21<sup>st</sup> century ways of perceiving and expressing lived experience. It is all at once constantly evolving, dynamic, responsive, and adaptable to various contexts in a manner that is immensely bespoke. Harry Wolcott (2002), Kip Jones (2006) and Leavy (2011, 2013a, 2015) used the power of narratives to define and explore the human experience. New understandings of the experience of teaching in these times demand to be heard in ways that engage and transform. Arts-based methodologies are about engagement, transformation and reframing, and are therefore conducive to this task. Leavy (2013b) maintained that qualitative social research is the place where fiction writing fits best while recognising that an essentially creative and imaginative approach to research is not without critics.

Fiction, more than any other research practice, directly challenges the fact/fiction dichotomy and forces us to

renegotiate the boundaries between the two (Leavy 2013b, p. 21).

As well as recreating a tangible feel of place, Sikes (2012, p. 569) ascribed fictionalising with the ability to 'evoke the richness and complexity of life and invite readers to identify and empathise with the experiences and perspectives described'. Jones (2015, p. 87) encouraged a 'new "emotive" participatory approach to our encounters with others', a new 'emotivity', so to speak. This approach is generated from a desire to express more accurately our knowledge of the world. It seeks to define the human experience in terms of honour and acknowledgement rather than through measurement substantiated by the obligatory facts and figures. Knowledge that comes through stories is not disconnected from emotion and the connected *ephemera* of people's lives. In keeping with this belief, participants' retelling of their world can be made more evocative through the inclusion of artefacts. Questions such as, 'Other than dry academic reports, how can we retell these stories in sensitive and ethical ways to wider audiences? How do the stories themselves inspire creativity in retelling them?' (Jones 2015, p. 89) were considerations as I conceptualised my study. I wanted to do justice to my participants' lives and their experiences as teachers. Enshrining their experiences in the themes of a novel seemed to me to be the most pertinent and fitting way to personify the project.

However, the expressive and affective nature of fiction as research raised some questions for me: Why do some researchers particularly choose to steer away from realist tales to delve into the realm of fiction, and why is it important to do so? If the reason we engage in research is to contribute to a body of knowledge, is fictional narrative an unstable and unreliable method of sensing and understanding the world? It was not until I had written a first draft of the novel that I realised the characters had come to life in my head, and I was thinking of them as real people. Their struggles and dilemmas, as well as their joys, were representative of my own and my participants' experiences in schools.

My participants' narratives testified to the many challenges that result from the reforms and demands brought upon education in recent decades. My choice of fiction writing to document these narratives aligned with Leavy's (2013b) argument that fictional representations of people's lived experiences can be more holistic than other types of written research. She considers the fiction writer's strategies of verisimilitude, getting at particulars (telling detail), introspection and the narrator's voice as tools that are more convincing and effective in fleshing out a story. For me, fiction writing reflects the known world back to the reader. It also has the ability to take the reader to unknown places, to experience situations, emotions and knowledge different to those with which the reader is acquainted. Verisimilitude is created in fiction through extensive research, attention to detail and to the creation of authentic settings, plots and characters, in ways that are similar to social science practices like ethnography (Leavy 2013b). In creating the fictional world of Beauvista Primary School, I was seeking to create the kind of lifeworld with which readers would identify. The creation of an artistic object demands exhibition. Audience perception, which can sometimes be participatory and hence transformative, intensifies the impact of the critical creative work. By developing the novel's scenario, I was hoping readers would connect with familiar elements, reflect, and hopefully come away with new insights.

Robinson (2001, 2015) defined creativity as coming up with ideas that have value and imagination as integral in the process. Imagination was central to writing the novel. However, there is more to the creative process than imagining. Barone and Eisner (2012) point to the construction of a fictional account as following the same process and using the same methods as when collecting information in social science research, through such methods as observation, or interviews with participants. The stories and exegesis were written concurrently in a deeply interwoven process. The stories fed the analytical commentary, and vice versa. Therefore, much as the review of the literature and the participants' input provided a direction for the fictional

narratives, the creation of the novel also played a significant role in the formation of the exegesis – the rationale and analysis of the process and of the topic. Understandings are revisited, and what is known becomes more deeply embedded, or alternatively, I as a writer became the embodiment of that knowledge. Writing, therefore, needs to sit at the centre of the thinking involved in understanding and analysing *why this work*.

### **Why the novel and exegesis?**

Ricoeur's (1985) work on narrative traced the development of the modern novel from Aristotelian times. Numerous transmutations of the purpose, structure and emphases of narrative since those ancient days have not substantially altered the ability of stories, in their various guises, to form a solid basis for philosophising. Legendary characters were replaced by ordinary people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century manifestation of the novel. This opened up endless possibilities for the novel, and narrative in general, to analyse and reflect upon the complexities and nuances of human experience. A focus on deepening character through increasing episodic complexity led to the development of stream-of-consciousness narratives where the notion of plot seemed lost, or at least substantially obfuscated. However, this development was more a blending of character and plot, leading to greater insights into character agency and influence. The novel works very much along the later lines of narrative development, with character determining plot and representing themes.

This creative project (the novel) is framed within the study as a way to speak back to the constraints faced by many teachers. On one hand, it operates as story. But like any story, it has pedagogical moments that demonstrate something about the conditions they depict. Through that 'telling', the story becomes sociological and pedagogical and as Kundera (1990) asserts, the novel provides opportunities to explore philosophical themes: meaning rather than truth and existence versus reality. This notion supports the novel as a method to examine, question, and potentially disrupt commonly accepted perceptions of culture and society where they may infringe individuals' rights to freedom and equality. Such power imbalances can be perpetrated by society

upon its people through the operation of social institutions like schools. The methodological novel has many permutations, all with the potential to frame research in specific, yet wide-ranging ways, and is a particularly effective tool for analysis and reflection. Kundera (1990, p.78) stated:

The moment it becomes part of a novel, reflection changes its essence. Outside the novel, we're in the realm of affirmation: everyone is sure of his statements: the politician, the philosopher, the concierge. Within the universe of the novel, however, no one affirms: it is the realm of play and of hypotheses. In the novel, then, reflection is essentially inquiring, hypothetical.

In keeping with these ideas, my novel is theoretically framed to envision a type of education that is relevant and connected to life rather than primarily geared towards academic achievement. The themes of the novel are set within a context of critical theory a concept originating from the Frankfurt School of Sociology and influenced by the work of Karl Marx (Goodson & Gill 2014). The novel explores public scholarship as an example of criticality. In doing so, it articulates the need for 'a refashioned dream of education based on wholeness, consonance, social justice, and liberation' (Rendon 2009, p. 146), and attempts to (re)present the themes arising from the interviews in several ways. One is to create in its central characters, figures with whom the reader can identify; their struggles are our struggles. To protect anonymity, however, I made a conscious effort to create characters who did not mimic the viewpoints, names or life circumstances of the participants.

In reconstructing the field text within a creative approach, this study is part ethnographic fiction, and part fiction writing as research. In this permutation, it re-imagines and creates a *What If?* scenario that speaks back to the reality of current practices in education. Boler and Zembylas (2003, p. 108) have termed 'A pedagogy of discomfort' as 'an educational approach to understanding the production of norms and differences' that requires teachers and students to

move outside of their comfort zones. Further, it 'recognises and problematizes the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony' (p. 108). A pedagogy of discomfort is apparent both in the novel – for the characters live it – and in the research project, which dares to ask questions that may have multiple, inconclusive, or contradictory answers. This lack of definition, this search for answers, provided the tension that is needed in a work of fiction that hooks the reader. By adopting a pedagogy of discomfort, both teacher and student are compelled to move outside of their comfort zones in order to recognise the deeply embedded systems and beliefs that dictate how schools are run, and that compel all players to behave in regulated and unimaginative ways. It is only when individuals dare to act differently that a universe of possibilities can be enacted. There is creativity in difference. In fact, creativity relies on difference, as every creative act is reliant upon the discovery of something new, an untested alternative. But within the difference that creativity demands, there is discomfort and messiness. This is a necessary discomfort, however, as it is only through this disquiet and dis-ease that new awakenings can be conceptualised and made possible.

The process of writing the novel fully embodies this notion of discomforting discovery that leads to the creation of something new; something that has meaning, and which has the ability to touch readers in surprising ways. The discomfort and messiness that is a necessary part of creativity also created what seemed like an insurmountable hurdle. Thoughts of abandoning the project did pass through my head. However, plotting and planning in the conception stage sustained me through my initial uncertainty. Writing the initial piece where Alex leaves the professional learning session, and realising this idea was a good premise for a novel, I embarked on the first draft and crafted the narrative with the model of public scholarship in mind. With each successive draft, the writing got sharper and tighter.

## **(Re)presenting truth**

Richardson (1997, p. 26) expressed the notion that knowledge is social construct that is intrinsically tied to language: 'Writing is not simply a "true" (re)presentation of an objective "reality"; instead, language creates a particular view of reality'. She makes particular reference to how we come to perceive and know what we write ourselves, as well as how others perceive and know the same material through their own filtering. Now that the pressure of being the all-knowing, omniscient narrator is off, we as writers are allowed, liberated, even, to *put it out there* for others to perceive, judge, know, opine and contest in their own multitudinous ways. At the core of the postmodern tradition lies a distrust of general or wide-sweeping claims to truth. This is expressed in terms of their inherent potential to render invisible, or further any particular cultural or political issues. Postmodernism is founded on doubt, and this is a liberating force for writers. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 21) wrote:

Poststructuralists and postmodernists have contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed. Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions: all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they have done and why. No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in ongoing human experience. Consequently, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied.

A positivist view of a novel as (re)presentation of research might question validity, positioning, reliability and rigour but the concept of validity can be extended (Lather 1993). According to Lather (2013, p. 638), we have been

moving towards research methodologies that are 'less Cartesian and, perhaps, more Deleuzean', as qualitative research has evolved towards inquiry that is done in different ways, produces different kinds of knowledge, and cannot be neatly described in *how-to* textbook style. Still, Lather noted the loss of prominence of less conventional qualitative methods such as performance and critical ethnography, and concludes that 'it appears there is room at the table for qualitative research as long as it behaves itself' (p. 638). In describing one collaborative approach to deconstructive analysis of qualitative data, Lather (2013) used evocative and emotive language. Phrases such as "Making love to" one's data becomes thinkable as a kind of ethics', 'the in-between places of pleasure and pain', and 'a field of production of desire' (p. 639) are used to define research that is less clinical and more human, with all the physical and emotional messiness that kind of work entails. We have been moving to a point in qualitative research where 'analysis moves way beyond interpretation' (p. 639). By deliberately using language of the experimental and the unproven, Lather (2013, p. 634) warned against allowing qualitative methods to stagnate:

In my reading of the tea leaves, what appears to be amassing is a widespread recognition that to do less than a kind of performing forward, an enactment of the "after" of neo-liberalism, is to court not just a narrowed science but a narrowed future.

Indeed, Lather (2012) welcomed the contention that science is influenced by the political and the cultural, a view that is in opposition to the ideologies of quantitative reductionism. She stated that in continuing to define our understandings of subjectivity, there has been a 'shift from an epistemology of human consciousness to a focus on the limits of our knowing, with an emphasis on an affective turn' (p. 1024). As we move in conservative, neoliberal times, it is necessary to keep in mind that 'the fluid, post-subject is necessary in moving toward something in excess of meaning, signification, representation, narration, something not containable, something that attends to how affective capacities are modulated, manipulated as quasi-causality' (p. 1024). In exploring issues of

truth and validity, Lather (2000a, p. 301) acknowledged the difficulties inherent in 'the necessary failure of bearing witness to the original', yet maintains that researchers should be present in their work. 'Becoming visible as an intermediary, the task becomes to empty out the channel while still foregrounding the productive and distorting effects of the channel, a kind of presence, and absence, and presence again' (p. 302). This statement demonstrates the intuitive and responsive nature of this type of research. Whether playing the role of witness, translator, messenger, or intermediary, the role of the qualitative researcher working with narrative texts can be a delicate and problematic undertaking.

It is a problematic endeavour, then, to try to pin down irrefutable evidence of truth in research whose strengths are the affective, the subjective, the performative, all based within an arts framework. If, as Denzin (2014, p. 70) suggested, the work has verisimilitude if it draws the reader into the lifeworld of the characters, 'The goal is not to produce a standard social science article. The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action'. Banks (2008, p. 155) defended literary fiction as a 'productive, even revelatory, practice for communicating scholarship', and contended that 'such fiction writing should be taught, used, and appreciated as a form of research reporting' (p. 155). He expands this notion to question the conventional research report practices of data collection, analysis and findings not as more exact methods of research, but as subjective and interpretive process that are heavily influenced by the researcher's positioning. But when fiction is used, it must be done in a way that advances our understandings of the world, not obfuscates it. Banks (2008, p. 162) wrote:

The practical reality of writing scholarly fiction is that the leap must be total and transparent. The natural history of conventional social science is that of a real world being articulated in imagined details; the natural history of fiction is that of an imaginary world being articulated in real details. The

former helps us understand what people are, while the latter helps us understand who people can be.

The above quotation must still be taken in the context of the utterly depictive nature of the written word. Both reading and writing are (re)presentational experiences. 'No matter how much we think we are reading a voice, we are reading a text. Acts of transcription have taken place. Editorial decisions have been made. The text is never free of the contamination of language' (Lather 2000b, p. 155). Writing the novel was for me a (re)presentational act. All the while, I was aware that in reading the work, others would attach their own meanings to the text, and that these meanings would be based on their own experiences and knowledge of the world.

### **Responsibility**

In quoting Denzin, Brearley (2008, p. 5) affirmed that "seventh moment scholars" work in congruent ways with the cultures of their communities. They are committed to not just describing the world but to changing it'. In so changing the world, issues of authority, legitimacy, responsibility and power come into play. Writing stories to represent people's lived experience carries the responsibility to be ethical and truthful in those (re)presentations. As I heard the participants' stories, I was at all times conscious of the heavy burden of responsibility that being entrusted with these stories carried. The stories were told to me, yet I was the narrator. As such, to whom did the stories belong? The resulting novel can no longer be separated into either participants' stories, or those stories coloured by my own perception. It is a creative product that carries an inherent duality. It is no longer a case of a story with separate entities, but a new, blended whole. It is therefore important to be clear about one's purpose. Why carry out such research? Who reaps its benefits? A sense of sharing the knowledge for the purpose of common good rather than for ownership must be observed.

It is also important to be clear about how the creative work is framed. In order for research to be ethical, to do no harm, it must be presented in an honest and

transparent way. In this exegesis, I have endeavoured to detail how the novel was created. A central element of this project, aside from the field text that was generated as a result of interviews with participants, is how the creative product – the novel – is framed, how it interprets and represents the field text. Sikes (2012, p. 571) noted:

I think that readers picking up something which makes claims to be social science should be told exactly what they are reading, whether that be fiction, mixed genre work or writing which aims to provide objective, realist reporting. Failure to make this declaration or to show the processes of analysis and how writings have been constructed on the basis of the data, is, to my mind, unethical and disrespectful of readers.

In keeping with this idea, I have not attempted to represent this creative work as anything other than a fictional (re)presentation of the field text. Though the novel does not pretend to be a literal account of the participants' lived experience, it nonetheless honours their lives. As a life history study situated in the latter moments of qualitative research, it must adhere to scrutiny. It must be able to inhabit the creative research space by moving deftly and respectfully between the following three tensions (Brearley 2008):

- ✚ Knowing the rules AND challenging assumptions
- ✚ Being creative AND maintaining rigour
- ✚ Honouring content AND exploring form

Each of these tensions necessitates delicacy and ongoing awareness of not letting one of the elements slip. Like a juggler keeping many balls in the air, if one element is neglected or forgotten, the balance is lost; all other elements suffer.

As a final consideration, an important responsibility for those who choose fiction as a research methodology is to ensure their writing skills are not just adequate,

but will honour the project. Both Leavy (2013b) and Sikes (2012) recommended would-be writer/researchers make a commitment to becoming a writing professional:

those who decide to use creative approaches should take classes and/or join writers' groups or poetry circles in order to develop their skills. Bad fiction and poetry do no service to their author or to the acceptance of them as legitimate forms of social science re-presentation (Sikes 2012, p. 572).

I could not have undertaken this project without years of learning about writing both formally and informally, including engagement in writing groups and with other writers.

## Method

The project was conceived as a small-scale study that would have as its primary data source the elicitation of narratives of professional practices from six primary school teachers. In her work with Connelly, Clandinin has preferred to use the term *field text* rather than *data* to 'signal that the texts we compose in narrative inquiry are experiential, intersubjective texts rather than objective texts' (Clandinin 2013, p. 46). From this understanding, I have chosen to use the term *field text* in keeping with what narrative inquirers 'do' (Clandinin 2006), and when referring to the empirical material generated from semi-structured interviews. These were guided by the following research question:

- ✚ What role do creativity and the arts play in the personal growth and wellbeing of teachers and students?

I decided to employ a purposive and a snowball sampling technique and initially contacted people from my professional network who had an interest or teaching experience in the creative arts. I recruited four participants who were well-known to me and were teachers who had worked in primary schools from the 1980s. In choosing participants I knew well, and who had all been teaching at a time I had also been in schools, I was concerned that their responses might align too closely with my own expectations and understandings of how schools operated and the kind of curriculum and pedagogical pressures that had begun to build during those years. Therefore, I was mindful to select a sample that included a range of professional experiences that would add a variety of perspectives. I subsequently asked one of the participants to suggest some younger teachers whose experience of the classroom would potentially be markedly different. Three of the participants were still working in primary schools at the time of the fieldwork. One had over twenty years' experience in the classroom and was in her fifties. Two were in their twenties and had only been teaching for four years. The remaining three were no longer working in schools, with two working in their fifties and sixties in the tertiary sector. The last

of the three participants had a long hiatus from teaching and is now a published novelist.

My choice of a small sample of participants was central to the design of the study as I wanted to work with the *rich, thick descriptions* (Geertz 1973) of classroom practice and to utilise what Schensul and LeCompte (2013) referred to as *key informants* or *cultural experts*. A total of 24 semi-structured one hour interviews were conducted with the six participants between August and December 2013 in a neutral and mutually accessible space.

The semi-structured, conversational interviews initially prompted by the research question afforded the participants an opportunity to start to reflect on past and/or current practices. They had a life history focused orientation. The participants were asked about their experiences of being creative as teachers, fostering creativity in students, teaching the arts and teaching literacy. These themes were further pursued via narrative-based conversations scaffolded by the following ancillary questions, used more as conversational prompts:

- ✚ How does nesting the teaching and learning of literacy within a creative arts framework help students and teachers to meaningfully connect to their social and cultural domains of practice?
- ✚ What factors influence teachers' critical judgement and decision-making processes around creative, arts-based practices?
- ✚ What is the nature of teachers' experiences of curriculum and pedagogy when using creative, arts-based practices?

The interviews were reflection and relationship-driven, relying on a shared understanding and the sharing of experiential knowledge, what Herda (1999) termed the dynamic of developing an intersubjective bridge. Those participants whom I knew very well (and some I had been friends with for decades), revealed the most and I was confident they were speaking honestly, at times opening up about personal issues. The element of friendship (Tillmann-Healy 2003) was certainly a factor in mining depth of experience and sentiments, and

this was played out in the interviews. The two participants I had not known before the interviews were the most guarded. One was especially reticent and answered in as few words as possible. As the interviews progressed, participants were asked to give their professional opinion of the current or past landscape of literacy education, and to make connections to the issue of creativity and lifelong learning outside the classroom as it impacts upon both students and educators. The stories that emerged whilst characterised by diversity, shared a sense of common values and understanding of what it means to be a 'good' teacher.

Each interview was voice recorded and manually transcribed before the next, to allow follow up with the participants on each articulated experience. In transcribing, I found I was discovering nuances and meanings that had escaped me during the actual interviews. Through repeated listening I was able to hear particular inflections in the participants' voices, which assisted me in remembering gestures and expressions (not just in *what* was said, but in *how* it was said) that added meaning to the transcripts. In this sense, the experience became embodied and started to be countered by more than the words that were eventually laid down on the page. The transcriptions carried with them my knowledge of having been present, they held the weight of the participants' expression and emotion and were contextualised by the close listening experience that is necessary when personally transcribing a recording. What I may have missed during the process of interviewing was subsequently crystallised and amplified as I pored over the participants' words. It was in these multiple replays that I started to extricate significances that may have slipped past me at the time of the interview.

Once all the interviews were transcribed and printed, I read them back in conjunction with the session recording. I was, at this juncture, able to make detailed notes about particular inflections, significant pauses and how the gaps in the recordings spoke volumes. I started to identify themes and these were captured in obvious repetition of topics and proffered perspectives. When

talking about arts practices in childhood, and family memories of such times, the participants identified common experiences and these unifying themes were easily identifiable. The meaning the arts held in the lives of the participants was remarkably similar despite the difference of exposure to particular realms of arts-based practices in the home and community. Therefore, the process of identifying a theme was at the beginning not more than feelings of recognition: *we have been here before... someone else mentioned something like this... this reminds me of...* The more I read, the more I was able to recognise recurring and dominant themes with confidence. Familiarity with the field text made me more able to see clearly how particular topics fed particular themes, and how these themes subsequently formed categories into which minor themes could be nested.

The term *method* implies predictability, dependability, constancy; in short, a reliable series of steps that can be followed to reach a desired end, but methodology, as I found, is a much messier affair. Throughout the field work there seemed to be a lot of grey areas across the process of interviewing, analysing, coding interpretation, and in the generating of a performative text. Consequently, it was reassuring to remember there are no rights or wrongs, nor lines of demarcation between what can and should be interpreted and/or represented. Coming from a culture and a positivist tradition that is permeated by the concept of right or wrong answers, correct and incorrect ways of interviewing and research writing, there were times when the process felt decidedly disconcerting. It was not until I considered and reflected upon my own inexperience as an interviewer that I started to understand that interviewing is something that cannot be learned about wholly from reading. It is a skill that, like teaching, relies on good preparation and experience in the field (Plummer 2001). Primarily, I understood my role to be that of a listener of the participants' story telling (Hollway & Jefferson 2013).

My study did not follow linear progressions. It was in the meandering, in the making sense of the confusion, in the loss of the familiar and predictable, that I

found myself wondering. According to Schensul and LeCompte (2013), in-depth and open-ended interviewing can be technically complex. These types of interviews are intended to explore a topic in great detail, thereby deepening the researcher's knowledge. At the same time, they allow for a broad range of responses that may yield surprising conclusions. It has been noted how 'There are no correct answers, and the interviewee is not asked to select from a series of alternative choices' (Schensul & LeCompte 2013, p. 121). This kind of open-ended approach can facilitate the discovery of unexpected knowledge and ways of knowing that in part emerge from the development of positive relationships between researchers and participants.

There were many times when I was drawn into the interview as a conversation and some of these moments involved the participants sharing how the schooling system as contemporaneously experienced made it difficult for them to be the 'best' teachers they could be. They spoke about how they felt hindered rather than facilitated in their work. Those participants who were working in schools expressed a longing for a greater level of autonomy from mandated pedagogic practices. They also expressed frustration at being overloaded with administrative tasks and *box ticking* types of mandated compliance, which made their core teaching and learning work feel hectic and rushed. What became clear in these exchanges was that despite the challenges, capable teachers are managing to *tick boxes* while still finding *wiggle room* to integrate creative, arts-based learning. Consequently, the participants felt they had some influence on the role of creative practices in the curriculum and those who were no longer in classrooms strongly expressed similar sentiments when reflecting on their professional experiences as classroom teachers.

Leavy (2013b, p. 37) stated that, 'Social research is aimed at generating meanings, creating understanding, and illuminating that which may be concealed in everyday life. Perhaps more than anything else, researchers try to portray lives, complete with nuance and context'. Leavy also articulated the

imperative to conduct research that is not disconnected from the personal. In the subsequent (re)presentation of the empirical material in the novel as an artistic product, the relationship between the 'I' of my researcher identity and that of an author of the participants' experiences additionally tells a tacit narrative of the process of coming to know. Through my professional and personal proximity to the participants, I came to better understand the field of practice that was being described. I then started to think of ways I could align my understanding of the academic tasks of research with alternative forms of writing to produce a representative and authentic text.

As a postscript to this section, I would like to add that throughout the research process, I used reflective journaling to channel my thoughts and come up with ideas. However, after the analysis phase, when I came to begin writing the novel, I found that journaling was not enough of a writerly practice, or more accurately, it did not feel formal, or writerly *enough*. It was at that point that I started writing a blog, musing on themes that were central to the study. My intentions in doing this were twofold: firstly, I wanted to enter into a more professional and regular writing space; and secondly, I hoped my writing would improve from more regular and vulnerable writing. By *vulnerable*, I mean the kind of writing that is put out into a public space for others to read (and judge). I don't imagine my blog had many followers or lurkers, but the idea that it was visibly out there made me audience-aware. As such, I overhauled the quality of my writing accordingly. Initially, the blog was focused on my study's themes, which I hoped to develop further through musing and through the act of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000b). In the beginning, these were primarily the arts and writing. As the weeks turned to months, I found the focus of the blog shifted in line with the study. As I was using tags and categories to classify my posts, it was interesting to see a pattern emerge as time went by. The arts faded into the background as creativity, writing and reflection came to the fore. Towards the end of the study, the posts read like a veritable obsession on those topics.

## Limitations

There are limitations to this type of work. The themes that informed the novel could well have informed a very different narrative, or may have been used to create a different type of fiction (not a novel). I acknowledge that the work that was produced is but a snapshot of a moment in time, and whose context must be framed within the experiences and positioning of the researcher and participants. A conscious awareness of my positioning throughout the process enabled me to constantly consider alternative points of view. These are legitimately and fairly represented in the novel through some of the major characters.

In a post-qualitative context, how can a novel written to echo themes that emerged from interviews form a reliable response to the questions under examination? How does it adequately represent the empirical material? As has been addressed in previous sections, (re)presentations do not have to offer identical mirroring of material from the original source in order to convey truthfulness. The most effective and powerful methods in which to frame or portray an event or social phenomenon sometimes come under the protective and transformative disguise of analogy, parable, or fable. It is feasible, then, to imagine how a creative (re)presentation of research can take many forms. Such abundance of options might make such creative responses to research seem too free-flow, undefined or, at worst, made up. It is therefore imperative to ensure that the analysis of the empirical material is thorough and rigorous before thought can be given to the most fitting (re)presentation through a range of possible creative avenues. A novel was chosen to represent the field text precisely because it is a highly relatable medium.

The themes from my research are very prominent and easily recognisable in the novel, yet apart from this exegesis, there is no guide to where and how the themes are represented. Someone reading the novel as a stand-alone work of fiction may focus in on different themes than would someone who has read the exegesis, or has worked in schools in the contemporary climate. I have decided

not to include footnotes, or any explanatory device into the novel. I am confident that the themes speak for themselves. The setting of a novel can assist readers to better understand themes. Leavy (2013b, pp. 26-7) wrote about historical novels being suited to represent some themes particularly strongly. I chose the present day as a setting for my novel precisely because we are at a point in history when the pressures on teachers is causing considerable stress and when they are as a group of professionals controlled to an extent that limits their ability to be autonomous and creative.

There were several ethical considerations and limitations to this study. Ethics clearance was gained from the university through the submission of an application detailing how the field text would be obtained and how the participants' identities would be kept anonymous. Difficulties with participants feeling sufficiently comfortable and able to open up in the interviews were seen as a potential limitation of the research. The conversations were planned as more personal than official. As such, through the telling of classroom and life events, I hoped to unearth deeply-felt understandings and beliefs of how creative practices and processes connect with teaching and learning. Fiction as methodology had been decided at the outset, and this meant there was a dominant imperative at work in the interviews. In order to be able to write about what was close to teachers' hearts, I understood the need to extract depth of stories rather than sheer quantity. The nature of this research was, in essence, to focus on participants' experiences, sensitivities and personal perspectives, and this could not be uncovered in a few, short interviews. Interviewing the participants separately was designed to provide confidentiality and encourage participants to feel safe in expressing their views. It was obvious that participation in a group interview would have fundamentally hindered the process and caused participants to be reluctant about speaking candidly.

As the interviews unfolded, I experienced one such limitation. As briefly mentioned in the Method section, one participant was especially guarded in her responses. This may have been for several reasons, and this reticence was a

limiting influence on the study. There were times when the participant seemed not to know how, or seemed unwilling to respond to my questions. I guessed this was due to a fear of revealing too much. Making my own connections from what she did offer, I guessed her reluctance to open up was to do with perceived criticism of her teaching practices on the part of colleagues and parents at the school. Though she hinted at this type of scenario, and sometimes gave a few details, she was mostly guarded. This unwillingness to engage with the interview process led me to make assumptions about the participant that may have been mistaken. For this reason, I was mindful of not making unjustified inferences and jumping to conclusions during the analysis from what was mostly a vagueness in her field text rather than pointed remarks. I did, however, make notes about her non-verbal communication, which in the context of the interviewing method was one facet of the chosen method of analysis.

# Discussion of key themes

## Thematic analysis

Rather than being the primary inquiry tool, the novel sprang from themes generated through interviews with participants. It is important to note that the process of identifying themes did not happen simply by reading through the transcripts. Constantly living with the content of the interviews as I went about my work and in the process of working with the participants, generated a sense of intimacy with the field text. Doing analysis in this way is best expressed as moving beyond the moments of sitting at one's desk, reading or writing the interview transcripts; field text as an omniscient presence in every day-to-day moment. Analysis therefore became holistic, simultaneous, synchronised and pervasive. Thinking and living with the field text generated and re-generated themes in an ongoing process of honing, smoothing, and sophisticating that was grounded in identifying the development of themes (Attride-Stirling 2001) that then acted as a blueprint for the creative expression of the work – the (re)presentation.

The analysis technique used in this study was primarily thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001), with some elements of the voice-centred relational method (Mauthner & Doucet 1998). Once the interviews were transcribed, I read them through once to get a sense of the emerging themes and assigned colours to each one (Steinberg 2012). During a second read-through, I coded each *global* theme, and related sub-themes (*organising* or *basic* themes). *Basic* themes were notated with the same colour as the *organising*, or *global* theme (Attride-Stirling 2001) and secondary themes were marked with a different pattern or marking. This practice introduced more subtlety to the coding. The transcripts were then revisited a third time to confirm or edit previous coding and identification of themes.

In line with Buetow's (2010) work on thematic analysis, I was not only looking for recurrence of codes in order to establish which themes were emerging, I

was also thinking about those codes that did not come up as often, but that seemed significant in relation to codes that were occurring more often, or had already been established. Codes were hence being evaluated in terms of *saliency*. Attride-Stirling (2001) also advised extracting the salient codes from the data, which requires the researcher to apply critical judgement to the data analysis. Unexpectedly, creativity and the arts was a code that did not occur as frequently as others. Despite occurring less often than expected, the code's saliency was nonetheless significant, as all participants professed a need for more arts-based creative practices in the classroom. A few of the participants were engaging in such practices inadvertently. I therefore reasoned that the lesser occurrence of this code was likely to be a result of the participants' lack of awareness and expertise in the area, and not due to irrelevance. Participants' references to this code were less frequent than others, yet it nonetheless emerged as central, as all other codes depended on it for meaning. The theme of literacy was directly linked, as were those of pedagogy, meaning-making, schooling and personal philosophy. Some codes appeared more frequently in interviews with particular participants. There was an intuitive kind of serendipity to how codes that dominated in interviews with some participants were picked up as minor codes in others, thereby linking and strengthening the field text.

The field text strongly identified creativity and teacher agency as necessary elements in teacher wellbeing. Through the interviews, schools emerged as highly-scripted, prescriptive spaces. Some of the participants noted teacher autonomy and agency as requiring resistance and struggle. In writing the fiction, I took into consideration the perspectives, events and viewpoints that emerged from the narrative of the field text, and actively utilised elements of fiction (such as plot, setting and dialogue) to bring the stories to life. Originating from the interview field text, the novel is thus a narrative about speaking back to power and authority, and the desire to create learning spaces and experiences that delight and empower students. But in order to provide these conditions for students, teachers must also have a level of agency that in present times seems unrealistic. What emerged from the field text was how in the classroom,

the arts were not a high priority for all participants. However, many were unintentionally engaging in creative classroom practices. Such practices were described with a great deal of warmth and positivity by the participants. Potential for autonomous, reflexive and thus creative practices in the workplace were identified as essential for personal and professional growth and wellbeing.

Ongoing analysis shaped the project from the beginning until the final drafts of the novel. It was a continuing process of questioning and critique that enabled a discourse of disruption and provocation to exist. The novel's characters, plot, narrative and shape were constantly tested against the research themes. In the earliest stages, the participants' stories threw up endless possibilities. The generation of new knowledge sprang from both the outcome of the interviews *and* the creative product. Despite being fraught with uncertainty, the critical analysis of the field text and its transposition to a creative work emerged as a defined and transparent process. Interactions with the arts introduce individuals to different ways of knowing and the creative analytic practice has the potential to open up a different space of knowing for researchers, exposing new gateways into interpretation: 'When using creative analytic practices, ethnographers learn about their topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytic procedures, metaphors, and writing formats' (Richardson 2000b, p. 930). The characters in the novel embody the notion of *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1992) in the way in which characters' actions are given particular meaning, and thus conceptualise the field text themes.

As the breadth of the plot increases, so does that of action. By "action" we have to understand more than the behaviour of the protagonists that produces visible changes in their situation or their fortune, what might be called their external appearance. Action, in this enlarged sense, also includes the moral transformation of characters, their growth and education, and their initiation into the complexity of moral and emotional existence. It also includes, in a still more subtle sense, purely

internal changes affecting the temporal course of sensations, and emotions, moving ultimately to the least organised, least conscious level introspection can reach (Ricoeur 1985, p. 10).

As a work of fiction, the novel was working from a place where *anything can happen* as long as it is plausible. Scenes in the novel work in multitudinous ways to represent action and dialogue from the themes arising from the fieldwork. Real life is often unpredictable and can be bizarre. In contrast, narrative must be predictable and logical in order for fiction to work. Scenes must be built in such a way that events and characters' motivations appear sound and credible, thereby making sense to the reader. Events that are dramatic or random or both must be well accounted for through the careful development of character, plot, and the judicious use of foreshadowing.

### **Tropes**

Characters and events created in specific ways in order to construct and give life to a story are the affective avenue for activating a reader response. The genre of secret history, used in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and England, made use of narratological tropes for the express purpose of disguising truths about current social and political events under a fictional structure (Carnell 2014). It is in this way that tropes and metaphors in the novel lay the paving stones for a symbolic narrative. When the symbols line up with various narrative predictions, or foreshadowing, the reader becomes aware in a literary sense, of what will happen. The novel in this project makes use of several tropes to more cogently bring home its message.

A trope is a literary device that can be used to represent a motif, or theme in narrative. When used to good effect, it can enhance and strengthen figurative meaning in a text of fiction. The trope can be utilised in several ways by writers to achieve specific effects in a story. It can be used as a recurring or framing device, and can include metaphor and metonymy (Lorre 2007). The properties attributed to tropes can be argued to be both representational and relational, though these positions can be ideologically opposed (Nanay 2012). *Running* is

the first figurative trope thrown up by the novel. Alex runs, and so does Jess. Both their inner journeys are about searching and restlessness. They are metaphorically running to something, or somewhere, though both do not yet know what or where that place is. Alongside his love of running, Alex loves literature. He has always been a reader and a journal writer. Thus, he combines these two loves through blogging. At the opening of the novel, Alex's blog, *Running Man*, focuses on fitness, travel, and exploring the big question facing him: what he will end up doing with his life. Alex's blog is about his meandering thoughts while running. But in the same way that running provides Alex with an opportunity to reflect on and analyse his life, the blog also opens up different avenues through which to explore his lack of direction. As the novel progresses, Alex's enactment of *The Joy Project* increasingly dominates his thoughts, which he reflects upon and articulates in the blog. Through running, and through writing, Alex is finding meaning and making sense of his world the only way he knows how.

A further figurative trope in the novel is the character of the difficult parent, Zara Catumini. We are first introduced to Zara through Felicity's eyes. In the scene, Felicity decides to hang about the school office while Zara settles an administrative matter. Felicity's thought that Zara *on a good day, was likely to spit in your eye*, is designed to set alarm bells ringing in the reader's mind. We know to watch this character because of the threat she brings to the apparent tranquillity of the school. She is an omen that something bad is about to happen because her presence in the space interrupts and disrupts the quotidian narratives of smoothness. Zara fractures purely by her uneasy presence in the school. The reader cannot guess the harm that will be actualised through Zara's presence in the lives of the characters. But her constant presence, albeit on the periphery, symbolises troubled waters for the characters. The use of Zara as a trope signifies for the reader the uneasy nature of the characters' lives as they negotiate their place and way of being in the school and in their private lives. That Zara does not go away underlines the simmering tension that exists in the

lifeworlds of the characters, and the search for answers in the face of uncertainty.

## **Ethics**

Where to begin? It is perhaps most important to begin with the essential ethical concern – *Do no harm*. A researcher's primary responsibility is to protect those who are involved from any adverse effects of the research being made public. With particular reference to using fiction to frame research, Sikes (2012, p. 571) contended that:

simply saying that an account is fictional is not an excuse to thinly disguise individuals, places or events. In my experience, even when characters or settings are entirely fictionalised readers will often claim to know who is being referred to, so if the fictionalising is 'weak' the risk of identification (if that is required) is the greater.

When I first read these words, I felt an urge to defend myself. I was confident my fictionalising was not weak, nonetheless I was very aware of the danger of exposing my participants to recognition. In representing themes, there were elements of the novel that could logically be connected to some or all of the participants. It was after all a novel about teachers and teaching in neoliberal times, and as such, its goal was for the themes to resonate with readers. In that sense, it would have been absurd to think the participants would *not* see themselves in the story; that they would not recognise elements of their life history in the narrative. Breaching participants' anonymity was worrisome enough but there was another dilemma that would cause me greater angst. In fictionalising the narrative, I fleshed out characters that, whilst representative and symbolic of the themes, were nothing like the actual participants. In order to be believable, I had to give these characters personality traits and flaws. For fiction to work, conflict and tension must be inherent in the narrative. As such, it was necessary to create characters that would most effectively generate that tension. Perfect characters are not fertile ground for conflict, and so it was

necessary to weave in flaws that would heighten the conflict through which the themes would be transmitted. The flaws, failings and resulting dramas in the characters' lives bore little actual resemblance to the participants' real lives. Still, the lifeworld I had created was one that would be familiar to the characters. They had all inhabited (and some still did) similar places of work. They had all experienced similar challenges. Though these similarities were only generic, I worried that the participants would mistakenly align themselves with the fictions of the characters and events, and I feared they would be offended by the portrayals.

## Themes

I will now discuss the themes that arose from the field text and how they were developed and represented through the medium of a novel. The major characters in the novel represent these themes through their actions and dialogue. The storyline also depicts the participants' commitment and investment to particular aspects of teaching that includes the role of creativity and the arts in classroom spaces. The novel also examines the importance of personal relationships in people's lives and the personal tensions that arise when individuals are faced with political and ideological contradictions.

The analysis of the field text identified the following major themes, with related sub-themes:

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### Joy

- Teacher and student wellbeing
- Child-centred pedagogies
- Negative effects of joyless classrooms

### Creative practices

- Notions of teacher agency and autonomy
- Flourishing
- Student engagement

### Transformative teachers

- Teaching as an act of love
- Socially-just, transformative practices
- Literacy curriculum and pedagogy

### Childhood

- Childhood and education in neoliberal times
  - Nurturing and enriching classroom practices
-

These themes frame the apparently irreconcilable conflict between teachers' vision of transformative education and government-mandated controls over curriculum and pedagogy. They are clearly representative of teachers' experiences and sentiments on how their work should play out and demonstrate a relationship between the professional and the personal. In the creation of the novel's lifeworld, it was my intention to depict this struggle through the creation of characters and events that readers would recognise and with which they would readily connect. It was hoped that the novel narrative would legitimise teachers' experiences, and the emotions generated by a short-sighted system that – to the detriment of teachers and students – is skewed in favour of measurable outcomes over a holistic approach to flourishing (Seligman 2011).

In reconstructing the field text as a novel, a dominant narrative was demonstrated through a questioning and critique of the institutional barriers that prevent the arts from being legitimised in the curriculum. The school in the novel represents a particular demographic section of the community, however some of the general pedagogical, administrative and curriculum challenges faced by this fictional school are common to many schools. For the sake of discussion, I have attempted to separate the themes, though this has proved difficult, as they are intensely interconnected. Direct quotations from the participants have been included at the beginning of each themes section in order to provide the reader with the voice of the participants. The quotations are representative of themes that emerged from the interviews and informed the development of the characters' narratives in the novel.

## **Joy**

...you can't have a happy class without a happy teacher  
(Participant C).

I walk around that school... Everyone's so tense! There's this intensity about... We have to get through all this... there's not much joy. And I never hear anyone singing (Participant E).

...a regional-based coach was working with my classroom... I felt like a performing seal. But I felt like the performing seal was being constantly stopped from doing the performance. That's because the coach kept interrupting whilst all these other strangers (saw how she) coached me, and how the children were responding with the appropriate language, because she wanted to show that she had been coaching properly. I reckon... I certainly would have had a seriously not happy face on (Participant B).

The title of the novel, *The Joy Principle* is representative of a dominant theme from the field text. This theme was identified primarily through the participants noting the presence or lack of joy in their professional lives as a significant measure of their personal wellbeing. The participants recognised a strong link between joyfulness in the classroom and creativity. In reflecting on literacy education, all participants acknowledged the importance of creative, arts-based approaches, though some seemed more committed to these practices than others. Nonetheless, the negative effect of joyless classrooms was unanimously agreed upon. All participants acknowledged specific joy-enabling practices, and were clear on which elements in current schooling either negated or fostered its presence. Certainly, when reflecting on instances where joy was lacking, the participants entered into very specific detail. This specificity suggested they placed a great deal of importance on this aspect of their professional lives, and had spent quite some time on the reflection and analysis of related factors and events. Their accounts detailed instances where lack of joy impacted detrimentally on the morale and learning potential of pupils. They also detailed specifically how they went about finding scope for joy where there seemed to be none. Some of these initiatives were creative, and others were downright rebellious and subversive in nature. This demonstrated the extent to which teachers will go to defend their own, and their students' rights to be creative in what can be an otherwise stifling environment.

Freire (1998, p. 45) named *joy of living* as a 'fundamental virtue for democratic educational practice'. Indeed, children's engagement in learning has much to do with engagement and joy, which teachers are responsible for fostering, and which is at the heart of child-centred pedagogy. Freire (1998, p. 45) advocated that:

by living humility, lovingness, courage, tolerance, competence, decisiveness, patience-impatience, and verbal parsimony, we contribute to creating a happy, joyful school. We forge a school-adventure, a school that marches on, that is not afraid of the risks, and that rejects immobility. It is a school that thinks, that participates, that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says yes to life. It is not a school that quiets down and quits.

Freire understood the importance of joy in learning processes and the power of joy to incite hope and awe and wonderment in the world. We see this when he writes, 'It is crucial, then, that educands discover and sense the joy that steeps it, that is part of it, and that is ever ready to fill the hearts of all who surrender to it' (Freire 1992, p. 73).

Freire's concept of joy in education is the guiding principle by which Alex lives his life. Joy is the primary impetus for his subversive action in the school. Joy also defines his personality, with many other character traits stemming directly from his determination to prioritise the emotion. One of Alex's likeable qualities is that he has a rebellious spirit. What makes him interesting is that he disrupts the status quo, and has done so all his life. It is his way of being; his natural state. Being new to the job does not deter him from listening to his heart however unwise that choice may turn out to be, career-wise. Despite understanding his actions may ultimately be detrimental to him, he is unable to be compliant. Alex also believes that rigid and mechanised teaching practices lead to disengaged learners who see learning as dreary and uninspiring. His unwillingness to adhere to the testing regime means that he does things his

way, on his terms, and what evolves is the creation of *The Joy Project*. For Alex, *The Joy Project* is a vehicle through which to engage his students in free-form creative arts activities. At first this approach generated joy for the students.

As the notion of joy was a dominant theme to emerge from the field text findings, it was an obvious choice to enshrine it as the central premise of the novel. The quest for joy becomes for the protagonist, Alex, an influential personal journey; a catalyst for dramatic and lasting change. For Alex, joy is a way of being in the world. He cannot separate this deeply personal ethos from his teaching. Once he moves away from scripted, mechanistic methods of teaching, introducing *The Joy Project*, he is transformed. His exploration and engagement with the project means his personal and professional selves are dramatically altered. By coming into being as a transformative, agentic teacher, Alex is finally having a positive impact on the lives of the students in his class. Where previously he saw them being subdued by a mechanistic system, he subsequently begins to understand he could move outside such controls and change students' lives. Through trial and error (and eventually, reading), Alex empowers himself. In turn, he empowers his students. As he reflects on his lessons, he is able to connect student disengagement with poor pedagogy. As a result, he concentrates his attention on how to make learning student-centred. By integrating creative, arts-based methods into the learning, and literacy in particular, he welcomes joy into the life of his classroom. By the end of the novel, Alex has achieved his goal of prioritising joy, thereby improving learner engagement. But he has done so at the expense of meeting his professional obligations. This, in turn, leads to him being subjected to disciplinary action by the school leadership.

The following passage from the novel illustrates Alex's commitment to, but also his questioning of the pursuit of joy in the classroom. The scene unfolds at the beginning of the day, weeks after Alex has resolved to let the students set the learning agenda through the enactment of *The Joy Project*. Contrary to what Alex envisaged, a free-range, creative approach to teaching has not resulted in

his students becoming more engaged with learning. He is faced with virtual anarchy on one hand, and being autocratic on the other. As he watches the students playing noisily in the chaotic classroom space, he questions his principles.

As Alex stood in the epicentre of his own little pit of anarchy, he wondered how he would take control without being controlling. How would he teach and lead these kids without conforming to a mechanistic, overloaded schedule?

There was something missing from *The Joy Project* that he hadn't quite figured out. Like KFC's secret blend of eleven herbs and spices, the main elements still eluded him. He knew in essence what he was trying to achieve, but was no closer to working out how he'd get there.

If joy was at the centre of the project, then coercing even one of his students into being in a space they found constricting and joyless would be tantamount to failure. Some students would easily float into a joyful space no matter how he directed their learning, but others, like Amir and Manny, would descend into recalcitrance at the first mention of tasks with which they'd struggled in the past. He could push and coerce, and make their lives miserable, but would they thank him in the end? Would he only succeed in alienating them completely? The role of teacher seemed inherently contrary to *The Joy Project*.

Alex looked at Amir and Manny. The first was commando-crawling on the floor, holding on to a Lego-made assault rifle, adding his own, remarkably realistic sound effects. The second was sitting in the book corner, rocking gently to and fro, his eyes fixed on some indeterminate point.

Alex clenched his jaw as he pondered. Was joy a basic human right or nothing but a lofty, impractical ideal? Had Madeleine been right all along? Indeed, if the pursuit of joy led to nothing much besides literacy incompetence, was that not

condemning students to a life of disadvantage? For kids like Amir and Manny, was the cost of joy too high?

‘Alex?’ He looked down. Bridie tugged at his sleeve, her face quizzical. ‘What are we doing today?’

‘Not sure, yet. How about we start with a song?’

Bridie shrugged and went to sit on the mat. For the first time, Alex felt he was losing her’ (The Joy Principle p.144).

In working through the difficulties, Alex learns that joy is not achieved by adopting a lackadaisical attitude to content knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy (a sentiment represented in the character of Felicity). With years of teaching practice behind her, Felicity is well aware of her responsibilities as an educator. Yet despite her extensive educational knowledge, she is more conflicted than ever about how to integrate creative arts-based practices and pedagogy into the literacy curriculum. She understands that kids need to be joyful in order to learn, and has concocted her ReWArD program (Reading and Writing through the Arts), run by volunteers on Saturday mornings, in order to boost literacy skills through joyful interaction with creative, arts-based practices. However, Felicity’s desire to drive the creative agenda alongside rigid, government-mandated practices brings a heavy toll to her workload. She must police teachers’ practices to ensure that the school complies with all requirements needed to satisfy the standard auditing processes. As Assistant Principal, she must also ensure the students have a balanced curriculum. This means that her lunchtimes, after school and weekends are taken up by curriculum overflow. In short, the message that this school leader conveys to staff and students is that the arts are to be undertaken in the times that are outside of mainstream schooling hours. This is done so as not to interfere with the serious, or important curriculum areas like literacy and maths. Felicity’s character articulates how, so often, the arts curriculum gets left off the day-to-day work of schools, delivered at times of the day that are not as conducive to learning, or after school hours through programs that are seen as value-adding but not essential. Compensating for this deficit in the curriculum contributes to what Clark (2016) ponders as being the challenges of being a *good* teacher.

In the novel, Madeleine represents a glowing example of the compliant or *good* teacher. Madeleine is compliant in all the ways the schooling hierarchy demands of its workers. Yet there are many aspects of teaching that Madeleine does not enjoy, and she endures these with martyr-like devotion. Central to her cause is applying a fervent industriousness to following without questioning. This leads her to focus on the completion of small-scale tasks and clerical projects that absorb a deal of her energy. Madeleine sees her life in simple terms. Her blind trust in the neoliberal schooling system in which she is employed, and her unwillingness to question (for that would jeopardise the permanence she so craves) demonstrates her acceptance of a life that will be lived, if not joyfully, predictably and with a comforting measure of stability.

Another character searching for joy is the movie star, Conor. Despite a life of apparent outrageous fortune, Conor is living a dissolute existence. Having achieved his dreams, he cannot figure out the reason for the absence of joy in his life. According to Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of wellbeing, Conor's character is missing all the vital ingredients of a rewarding life. He is devoid of *positive emotion* – everything in his present seems to generate frustration and annoyance. He is not *engaged* in his work. His personal life is shambolic. Drugs somewhat nullify the pain of this disengagement, but the relief is short-lived. His *relationships* have been falling apart, giving him little emotional support when he needs it most. He is left to nostalgic reminiscing about happier days when he was on the cusp of a relationship with Felicity. Any *meaning* in Conor's life has been obfuscated. This is despite having achieved fame and fortune. Further, he lacks the life-affirming significance he once knew in the classroom. When he revisits the primary school as a movie star, he reconnects strongly with his old life, and is reminded of the satisfaction he once took for granted.

The character of Conor is representative of those teachers who, as a result of being overwhelmed by the system, may dream of escaping. That they stay is testament to their passion for teaching and commitment to their students.

Despite the pressures and limitations of schooling in neoliberal times, teaching is still a profession that promises the possibility of achieving wellbeing, as outlined in Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory. Conor is the teacher who left the profession in pursuit of something greater and more fulfilling; an elusive, existentialist ideal that he was ultimately unable to capture. Conor was created after considering the field text narratives in which the participants spoke about the dilemmas facing them as educators working in neoliberal times. The increased metric-driven, performative culture of standardisation where students' assessment is a backdoor way of assessing teachers' pedagogical efficacy was phrased and framed around the choices of staying in the system or leaving. Conor is a personification of these sentiments. In the novel, his departure from the schooling system is represented both within the broader theme of joy but also on his return visit to the school, articulates the field text dilemma of staying or going. The participants spoke extensively about their feelings towards professional expectations and the cost of those expectations on their personal lives. Conor's ultimate reflection on what he had given up (the enjoyment of being in a classroom set against the liberation of leaving) is a direct representation of some sentiments expressed in the field text.

The ability to interpret, create and enact curriculum and pedagogy has been shifting away from the realm of individual teachers. The resulting effect is that students' experience of schooling is less creative and transformative. The creative act of using the participants' stories as a platform for the fictional narratives is something that drew upon more than studied deliberation. When I closed my eyes and recalled the interviews, when I read over what I had transcribed, coded, and analysed into a range of themes, what came through was a strong sense of what teaching meant to these teachers. I understood, associated and empathised. That understanding, association and empathy was then converted into creative output in the form of the novel. This process led me to write of *joy* not as a frivolous, self-indulgent emotion, but a necessity. Love in the positive and not possessive sense of the word means altruism and caring. Teachers who teach from a standpoint of love change their students' lives

alongside their own. It is difficult, however, to teach from the standpoint of love when there is no room to move in terms of pedagogy or curriculum. When each day is crammed with tasks, and there is no provision for teachers' personal interpretation of their role with students, the ideal of love slips away, forgotten in the mad rush to tick every box.

### **Creative practices**

I would never, ever, ever say that I was created by god to be a person who could do maths and writing. I was a person who can dance, who can move, who can sing, who can create using the art forms and that's my gift (Participant A).

I try to incorporate lots of singing and dancing, 'cause that suits me, that makes me happy, and I feel like a better teacher when I'm doing those types of things (Participant D).

if you're a six year old and you have no artistic, creative, beautiful influences in your life, if your life is devoid of any sort of creativity ...if you're in a home where books are not read to you, and where art's not appreciated, and music is not listened to and you go to school and get more of the same... where does your inspiration to create come from, and why would you read? ...I just think, to understand literature and to be engaged in literature, all those other things are really important, because it's all part of the same thing (Participant E).

Creativity is a central theme in the personal and professional lives of the novel's characters. The novel addresses themes of professional creativity, agency and autonomy in teaching and connects these to students' wellbeing. Arts-based, creative approaches work well within a school when they are valued and are given a significant role within the school culture. An arts-based program from which students can grow and flourish is not tokenistic. It is not the occasional visit by an artist, or a performing troupe. It has to be built into the culture of the school. Through that come the pervasive elements of that culture: the language,

the open attitude to the arts, the acceptance of and participation in creative, arts-based activities and practices. Most importantly, this commitment is characterised by the substantial space devoted to the arts in the curriculum.

As touched upon in commentary on the character of Conor, the notion of *flourishing* (Seligman 2011) contrasts with the capability for negativity to stunt one's growth. This is illustrated at alternate times in the novel through Alex's relationships with Madeleine and Jess. While Alex initially sets out on his journey without Madeleine's support, it is clear he cannot figure out the way forward on his own. In Jess, he finds friendship and judgement-free willingness to discuss his project. Jess thus becomes Alex's significant ally; the person whose guidance and support he needs in order to flourish. More than a mere ally, Jess soon becomes Alex's soul mate. Also discontented with teaching, Jess is figuring out her place in the world. Jess loves cooking. Her delectable offerings, which she shares with Alex, are used as a metaphor for fruitfulness and epiphanic realisation in the story. Watching Jess in creative flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and joyfulness while cooking makes Alex realise that passion is worth pursuing in all areas of life, including teaching. In choosing a career that makes joy possible, and that fosters wellbeing as a consequence, Jess is for Alex the living embodiment of a dream – the will to resist conformity. Through her cooking exploits, Jess is able to offer Alex the nurturing and fecundity he needs, in the form of the possibility of regeneration, in a way that Madeleine cannot.

Jess has discovered through the tribulations of her short foray into teaching that her interests lie elsewhere. She is a major character in the novel and as she develops, we see an intense shift towards joy. We see Jess not only finding joy, but choosing it. This is especially evident in the novel at times when she uses her culinary skills as a muse for her creative edge. Teaching is stifling for Jess; she does not feel fulfilled as a human being in this role. It is only when she gives herself permission to delve more deeply in her passion for cooking that she begins to feel more confident and joyful. Jess's search for fulfilment, joy and

a growing sense of identity is achieved primarily through her ability to engage in something for which she has a passion, and that she does well. Through her passion for food, Jess taps into her creativity. Consequently, her sense of confidence and independence receives a much-needed boost. This is the type of confidence that comes when people are at their best, when they have scope to be creative and to access a reasonable level of autonomy. When immersed in her newfound passion and expressing her creativity, Jess is in flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The by-products of this flow are increased positivity, a sense of meaning and purpose. Jess consequently becomes increasingly optimistic, resilient and is filled with vitality; she is flourishing (Seligman 2011) at last. Conversely, Jess's death, which comes at the black moment of the novel, represents the metaphorical death of the young and idealistic teacher. As the dramatic climax of the novel, the death symbolises the negative consequence of an absence of creativity in people's working lives. Jess's death in the novel could thus be read as a signifier of psychic fatigue with the structures and policy/practice interface that is characterising contemporary teachers' lives.

Unlike Jess, Madeleine is a graduate in the new mould; didactic, formative, mechanistic and metric-driven. Madeleine is invested in developing her career. She is working towards a secure future, and is the antithesis to Alex and Jess, who are thinking much broader in terms of process, of developmental learning aligned with creativity. The difficulties in her relationship with Alex are of an ideological nature in their different approaches to education. As stated at the beginning of this section, the field text findings from this research articulate a set of values and beliefs that are about two different types of teachers: those who follow government and school directives and those whose work in the classroom actively embodies that spirit of resistance. The novel is in fact a study in this particular conflicting ideology. Those teachers who openly oppose the system are easily recognisable. They are the Alexes and the Jesses of the world. But there is a type of opposition that goes unnoticed, though it is by no means a source of lighter turmoil for those who bear its burden silently.

## **Transformative teachers**

I knew that it was too rigid, and that was eating away at me, and I felt that I was being judged as not being a good teacher... How did I go from being a highly-respected teacher to now requiring to write lesson plans and no longer being able to take student teachers in the class? You know, how did that change? The way it changed, from my idea, is I wouldn't follow the rules of the Blueprint, or, you know, I wouldn't do exactly what they said without questioning (Participant B).

it's a lot of work, a lot to fit in to the literacy block. You know, assessment grids, this assessment, that assessment, you know, individual conferencing, guided reading, making resources... (Participant D).

I think I'm a caring teacher. I really care about the kids. Their emotional wellbeing is foremost, for me. I will go out of my way to make them happy in my classroom. And I actually love them, when, you know, when they're with me, I care about them, I care about them academically, and I really care about the people that they are. I try to look after them. You know, I enjoy kids. ...I want them to discover things... Always learn, strive to be the best you can be, for every kid in your grade. 'Cause they're the little celebrations. The celebrations about teaching are not in my paycheque, or in my holidays (Participant C).

The field text strongly demonstrated the participants' desire to be transformative in pupils' and in their own lives. Without knowing exactly why, Alex resists becoming a 'bank-clerk' teacher (Freire 1996). At the beginning of the novel, his idealism is far more visceral than informed. Alex's reaction to the frantic pace at which school life marches is primarily about his own wellbeing. In the initial stages of the narrative, the wellbeing of students is only a secondary consideration, though it does not take long for this issue to become the dominant one in the novel.

The theme of socially-just, transformative teachers permeates the novel, both in the scenes set in the classroom as well as those depicting personal interactions between the characters. The school in the novel is located in a low socio-economic area. Alex's adoption of creativity as a pedagogy that will engage students is hence fortuitous. In veering towards creative arts-based practices, Alex inadvertently stumbles upon a pathway to access and equity in education for his students. Creativity is linked to a social justice pedagogy centred on doing things differently for students who do not necessarily have the cultural capital to perform well in standardised tests. Students who come from middle class homes are already in the literacy club before they get to school, because their literacy maps on to school literacies (Kalantzis & Cope 2012). Creative practices in the novel articulate an understanding of making a connection with students' prior knowledge, enabling teachers to maximise learning opportunities for students who may otherwise be disengaged from schooling (Moll et al. 1992).

The ability to interpret, create and enact curriculum and pedagogy has been shifting away from the realm of individual teachers. Alex begins to read educational theory in an attempt to extend his views of teaching and learning. Through this action, his character is representative of the need teachers have to engage professionally with their peers, to discuss issues of concern, and to give and receive feedback. It is a collegial method of working that is not in evidence in the novel's school. The leadership has expectations that are non-negotiable, and those who think differently (such as Alex and Gus) are forced underground. A sense of commitment to the profession is in evidence when teachers read or join learning circles with a willingness to take action towards self-improvement. In contrast, there are teachers unwilling to move with the times, who blame the system for everything and who fail to take any personal responsibility for their weakness, as represented through the character of Gus. In the first part of the novel Alex appears similar to Gus. However, while he is a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type who is not that committed to teaching, or hard work, Alex is

fundamentally not this person. That he is not comes as a surprise to him, and is one of the major turning points of the novel. His initial impulse to buck the system, to bend rules, gives way to a methodical, systematic, and ultimately rigorous examination of the literature around educational practices.

Alex's decision to break the rules is increasingly shown to be an informed decision. What begins as gut instinct is replaced and informed by scholarship and a growing knowledge of the historical developments in education. Fundamentally, the thing in which Alex begins to invest heavily is not so much a chronology of education, but a history of ideas. Opposition and evasion are no longer appealing to Alex once he begins to digest what certain practices in education fundamentally represent. Growing ever more informed enables Alex to speak back to institutional forces that would disadvantage the students he teaches, and whom he has grown to love. Alex's initial laissez-faire attitude gives way to a deep commitment, for which he is willing to sacrifice everything. Alex embodies the transformative teacher by investing personal time to delve into educational theory as evidence of authentic moral and social commitment.

In addition to being highly principled, Alex is also shown in the novel as a courageous and inquisitive learner. Unlike his colleagues, he actively chooses to inhabit the space of unknowing rather than to blindly adhere to education department policy. Alex does not play by the rules, and so he embarks on a journey of discovery, using the blog and writing himself in to a new way of knowing (Richardson 2000b). In a few sentences that capture Alex's uneasy struggle with dogma, Vasudevan (2011, p. 1170) quotes a Twitter entry and elaborates:

“If you are not curious, you are screwed”

– John Seely Brown #nmc2010<sup>20</sup>

Embodied in this pithy remark is much about the world in which we live; curiosity, in a moment when we are inundated with the possibility of many ways of knowing, is noticeably absent in the curricula of our institutions of education. I am

referring here to the sort of deep curiosity for which the answers are not scripted, expected, or presumed. What kind of supports do teachers need to truly inquire with their students outside the scope of a prefabricated inquiry rubric? Such a question does not preclude the need for moments of predictability or benchmarks; the trouble exists when the instrumentalist narrative dominates to the point of pushing curiosity to the domains of after-school or the extra-curricular.

This is Alex's conundrum. His professional world is one where the absence of creative practices defines the daily school experiences of students and teachers. It is an instrumentalist narrative to which Alex does not wish to subscribe. It prompts him to question, to resist, and ultimately, to rebel. What Alex has not yet learned is how to guide students towards educational outcomes while still adhering to institutional regulations. Later in the novel, Alex becomes more confident in his own professional knowledge and practices. He comes to the realisation that adhering to institutional regulations will impose an unacceptable limitation on his potential as a teacher, and that this restriction will impact negatively upon children's learning and wellbeing. The ensuing decision to leave teaching thus becomes the most plausible resolution of Alex's character arc. The following quote aptly describes Alex's quandary in regard to classroom practices:

Different challenges face teachers who work in institutional settings but still need to produce classroom environments that manifest the love of learning. They must bridge the two worlds of institution and classroom, protecting students from the pedagogic desires of the institution (Metcalf & Game 2006, p. 53).

The notion of children benefiting from creative pedagogies is embodied through the students in Alex's class, particularly Bridie. Though not obviously neglected, Bridie's vulnerability appeals to Alex's desire to protect and nurture. Bridie is the

student who is alone and looking for connection. She often seeks out Alex as a companion because she is not fully engaged in the social life of the school. The child who is dropped off at school too early, or who wanders to school to escape a volatile home environment; the child who does not have solid enough friendships to see her through play times, and who seeks the company of the yard duty teacher, this child is represented through the character of Bridie. And it is through Alex's rage at the system, his refusal to engage in practices that deaden and bore, the risks he is willing to take with his own professional and personal life, that he demonstrates love for his students, and consequently offers them a pedagogy of hope (Freire 1992).

Vivian is the embodiment of teaching as an act of love (Clark 2016; Darder 2015; Freire 1996; Metcalfe & Game 2006). Despite being stressed by the demands of teaching and being in the leadership team, she finds satisfaction in her interactions with the school community. As such, Vivian is always available to parents when they need her support, welcoming parents to the school so that they feel included and valuable. Vivian embodies the belief that informed parents are more likely to contribute to the learning of their children in ways that enable them to succeed both academically and socially (Bui & Rush 2016; Hornby 2011; Vahedi & Nikdel 2011).

## **Childhood**

You know, I just got tired of always having to justify every single thing. If I wanted to go outside and read in the sunshine, I almost felt like I couldn't do that anymore. I mean, at one stage... I had eighteen boys and six girls in (my class) ...and you had to do things that kept boys engaged, you know? So, in the middle of something, I'd go outside, and they'd run up and down the basketball court, then we'd come inside... But it got that I couldn't do that. There wasn't that spontaneity... I was constantly saying, 'Sit still, don't do that.' And that's not working. That's not conducive to good learning (Participant B).

If I was doing something boring... if you were going to sit down and go through a list of verbs with kids, or if you're going to sit there and talk about the rules of grammar, you are going to have to discipline kids more, because kids are not interested in that... What I see in schools now, it's *boring*. You're *boring* the pants off everyone... And the thing is, no-one learns well when they're bored... Why have teachers at all? Why not just get a robot? ...What we're saying is that, professionally, teachers are worth *nothing* ...because we're just going to tell you exactly what to say and what to do... Teaching's about personal interactions and relationships... I think that if we're heading down this path where we have more and more prescriptive curriculum, people are going to be frustrated... That's one of the rewarding things about teaching is being able to think back, and think, *If it wasn't for me, that kid might never have read* (Participant E).

Everyone has a turn at sharing what happened... Kids will often keep a worry that they have, burning inside them, until that one hour. I just think, 'Why didn't you tell me that four days ago?' ...Sometimes I think this is more important than numeracy and literacy. I mean, it's all in one, but kids being able to share how they feel and what they think about something. ...it's a lifelong skill, to me (Participant F).

The industrial model of school (Kalantzis 2005; Kalantzis & Cope 2012; Robinson 2015) processed children through the system with no salient consideration of notions of childhood reflected in pedagogy. Desks in rows, and a standardisation of the curriculum and of the pace of learning were common and accepted practices. The theorisation of childhood as a concept that engaged with the role of play in education was explored by Vygotsky (1978, 2004) in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each development in educational thinking and practices has gone hand-in-hand with different conceptualisations of childhood. The historical understanding of play as vital in childhood is

expressed in the novel through the scene in which Alex challenges the literacy coach's directives. In that scene, Alex articulates his understanding that the teaching practice Ivana is modelling, and that she wishes Alex to adopt, is in the long genealogy of learning, transient and insubstantial. In the scene, Alex expresses his awareness of educational practices that have been around for a long time, and which have developed different conceptions of what childhood and what learning are about. Through this scene, Alex is clearly articulating a valid model of pedagogy; one that considers understandings about childhood.

The main premise of Alex as a character is that he steps into his teaching life not as a high distinction university graduate, but as someone who cares about children. Alex's practices as a teacher are thus along the lines of teaching as an act of love, and built on relationships, as espoused by Martin Buber (Blenkinsop 2005; Metcalfe & Game 2006). Herein lies a connection to the discourse around ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) score cut-offs for entry into teaching courses and the belief that only the brightest students can make the best teachers. Caring, commitment and a desire to grow creatively into the profession regardless of ATAR are not qualities that can be quantified and are therefore not a consideration when defining what makes the best teacher. Alex and Felicity are both invested in childhood. Alex is focused wholly on children's wellbeing. He is driven by a desire to create for his students lives that are meaningful and rich. Felicity's interest in children and childhood centres on the working dimension of the school. She understands what is important to children's educational development and has tried to redress the imbalance in the school curriculum by instigating her arts-based literacy ReWARd program.

Alex's personal journey has led him to a vision of education, one that has another set of literatures, which are about the construction of childhood through learning, or the construction of childhood through schooling. The history of education tells a story of a different role in schooling and education for the child. It tells of a different conceptualisation of childhood. At a time when the world

most needs creative solutions, we are teaching the next generation to follow instructions and to avoid intellectual risk-taking. Honore (2008, pp. 12-3) stated:

When adults hijack childhood, children miss out on the things that give texture and meaning to a human life – the small adventures, the secret journeys, the setbacks and mishaps, the glorious anarchy, the moments of solitude and even of boredom. The message sinks in very young that what matters most is not finding your own way but putting the right trophy on the mantelpiece, ticking the box instead of thinking outside it. As a result, modern childhood seems strangely bland, packed with action, achievement, and consumption, yet somehow empty and ersatz. The freedom to be oneself is missing – and kids know it.

It has been claimed that putting kids under such pressures at young ages is tantamount to *stealing childhood* (Clark 2016). It is witnessing children labouring under these pressures and stresses that galvanises Alex into action. His desire to challenge and resist is sparked not by an intellectual engagement with theory but a visceral reaction to the conditions of education under which students and teachers seem to be labouring. In assessing the situation in which he finds himself, Alex is saying, *This is not my understanding of childhood*. Neither do the conditions under which Alex is expected to create a vision of teaching and learning fit with his sense of transformative education. The germ, or the motivating imperative on which a genealogy of Alex's action can be constructed, is Alex's concern with the discourses of childhood he is witnessing. Seeing students so regimented and constrained by an education system that seems only interested in what they are capable of producing, or how they can be measured, motivates Alex to act. In the opening passage of the novel, Alex makes a commitment to change. Though the reader is still unaware of what that change entails, or the events that have inspired it, it is nonetheless obvious that behind Alex's action is a steely resolve to remain guided by his conscience, regardless of what consequences may lay ahead.

## Conclusion

This exegesis has sought to define how a narrative work of fiction can be a (re)presentation of research. The literature review and methodology sections have provided the theoretical framework for this project, which is grounded in the narrative methodologies of life history and ethnographic fiction.

Richardson (2000a) wrote at a time when the fluidity of narrative was being explored and tested, that the postmodern context is one of doubt. It distrusts all methods but does not automatically reject conventional methods of knowing. Rather, it invites questioning and critical scrutiny, and welcomes multiple viewpoints and interpretations. Historically, the 17<sup>th</sup> century writing conventions of sociological, scientific, and reporting methods have over the decades given way to more nuanced and complex forms of communication. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'the relationships between social scientific writing and literary writing grew in complexity. The presumed solid demarcations between "fact" and "fiction" and between "true" and "imagined" were blurred' (Richardson 2000a, p. 6). In the last twenty years, there has been a great increase in the types of options that researchers can utilise to capture and evoke more faithfully the social experiences that are at the centre of their research. Nowadays it is not so much a case of whether a narrative approach is used in research, but what type of narrative writing is most appropriate in the specific circumstance. In fact, Sikes has stated that 'It is entirely possible to pass fictional narrative off as factual and objective writing' (Sikes 2012, p. 567). In writing the novel, I was able to enter into a *small narrative* (Goodson 2006b), one not defined by size but that features the finer details of people's experiences in a particular setting. In choosing to employ fiction as a methodology, I found the elements of plot and character, which define modern narrative, as useful in portraying themes to contemporary readers already conversant with popular narrative conventions.

The factual and objective aspects of the novel are those elements that convey and represent the participants' experiences as teachers. The novel's questions

are questions for all teachers: *What does it feel like to work in schools in current times? What are the constraints and the challenges relating to an ability to focus on the personal, through creative practices?* The participants' points of view on their work environment and the impact it has on their wellbeing are real. The field text indicated that teachers have a clear vision about what works with students, regardless of the rhetoric stemming from departmental policy they are instructed to follow. Within the small sample of participants there was nonetheless a strong sense of idealism about how to improve students' lives through meaningful participation in arts-based programs and activities. There was a sense that teachers are thinking for themselves, that they do not need to be scripted. The freedom to be more creative in the classroom was foremost in their minds. The absence of this freedom was shown in the field text to be an intensely stifling force with the ability to drive teachers away from the classroom.

Reflecting upon this study, I read its usefulness in provoking ongoing discussion and thought of the issues raised in the production of this work, both substantive and methodological. The following considerations are most pertinent:

- ✚ Preparing undergraduate teachers for professional life.
- ✚ Informing policy in regard to teachers' professional lives and looming teacher shortages.

The novel has potential for a wider readership within the following arenas:

- ✚ The academic community in the field of teacher education.
- ✚ Scholarship of creativity in education and for arts educators.
- ✚ Methodological field for those interested in performative social science, and
- ✚ General readership (parents, teachers, students and those interested in issues of education).

The major shift in my thinking resulting from this research was the realisation that arts-based practices are not essential to teachers' sense of agency or

wellbeing. What emerged as central, however, was the ability for teachers to engage in creative practices. These practices enabled them to feel autonomous and agentic, and were therefore central to wellbeing. This understanding will significantly alter the work I do with preservice teachers. My focus on how they approach the mechanisation of teaching and learning will be changed in favour of introducing notions of more transformative, nurturing practices with students. I will have an increased focus on teacher wellbeing in terms of retaining committed, passionate educators in the profession.

My focus on creativity and the arts has also shifted as a result of this study. Through this work, I have reflected more deeply about my role as a teacher educator specialising in the arts. I had known for some time that seeking to convert preservice teachers to the arts is often a case of momentary gain. They seem to acknowledge and appreciate the arts while in university classes, but I had little confidence that this appreciation would extend to their future classrooms. For me, this study has reconceptualised the idea that creative practices are something to which everybody can relate, and that are desirable in all aspects of life. Being able to be more specific about the role that creativity plays in professional lives (especially those of young people) will make my work more meaningful and will lend more awareness to preservice teachers' understandings of teaching and learning.

This study has explored criticality on several levels. Primarily, the study encouraged participants to be critical of their role as teachers. It has interrogated systems of education that position teachers as programmed workers delivering scripted curriculum and pedagogies to students. It has also questioned the effects of such a system on students, which brings into question the role of criticality in learning. If students need to be critical thinkers, how do these skills develop in an environment where creativity is not fostered, and alternatives are not valued? In terms of the methodological process of deconstructing the content, the study has focused on questioning and on not making rigid claims to truth. The novel offers multiple viewpoints on the issues

presented through the lenses of the different character's positionality. As a critical work, it speaks back to systemic modes of delivery of education in schools that attempt to restrict and limit both teachers' and students' freedom of expression, and that privilege some pedagogies and curriculum areas over others. The characters and plot address the systemic undervaluing and de-prioritising of arts-based approaches to learning, with particular reference to literacy education. The novel is itself a (re)presentation of another type of speaking back to such practices in schools, and in the private lives of individuals involved in education in current times. Teachers who step outside the boundaries set by government-led education reform are very vulnerable. Assessment-driven teaching demands conformity. The character of Alex is always vulnerable, always second-guessing, never comfortable in his own skin. The first time he is comfortable is when he gains control through his decision to leave teaching. Before then, the institution controls, conforms the individual and resists any radical teaching.

The pedagogies of hope and discomfort work at the margins of an unease that Darder (2015) theorised as a dialectic process. Those neoliberal principles that impact on teachers' abilities to be transformative in their students' lives (Darder 2015; Freire 1992; Giroux 2000) were explored in this study. The ideal of conscientisation is a central theme of the study, and rightly provided a context for the novel. The central character's awakening to theoretical understandings of praxis approaches demonstrated teachers' thirst for active participation in their profession. The freedoms that creativity promises were also balanced against the need for structure and rigour and a deep understanding of content that is the responsibility of every educator. As stated earlier in this exegesis, conscientisation is the embodiment of the belief that education is always a political act as are human qualities of hope, love and joy. This belief formed the basis for the novel, which expressed and (re)presented teachers' and students' lives as dependent on joyful, meaningful practices connected to their identities. The dialectic of creativity and vulnerability was shown in the novel as a tenuous state of criticality that is in constant need of renegotiation.

Sparkes (2003) argued that narratives give meaning to experience and that identity is constructed through narrative. Seeing as we understand the world through stories, I found narrative to be a practical and deeply meaningful way to generate understandings and consider my own positioning in relation to others, to the community, and to the world. However, in considering how a product of arts-based research is created, some questions have arisen: How much of the creative product is consciously created to represent the field text? If part of it is not consciously created, in line with the creative process being used, then how does it come into being as a truthful and reliable (re)presentation of the field text? Bruner (2002, p. 22) wrote:

We know in our bones that stories are *made*, not *found* in the world. But we can't resist doubting it. Does art copy life, life art, or is it a two-way street? Even with fiction we wonder what a story is based on, as if it could not really be just made up.

How creative products come into being and the processes of refinement that ultimately shape them are open to much consideration and debate. Understanding the messages that art works convey, as well as how the artist made those connections, is as central to perceiving as is the pleasure of the experience. In terms of this project, the field text provides the context for the novel.

Life historians are motivated by finding out who their participants are in a deep, ontological and epistemological sense, and are concerned about their positioning in terms of life's big questions (Goodson & Sikes 2001). The historical perspective of participants' family culture provided the background and context for the study. However, what I was most keen to discover was about classroom practices; if and how the participants found time for creativity and the arts in their own classrooms. I wanted to understand exactly how and why those practices created a sense of wellbeing and joy for their students and for themselves as teachers. Central to the interviews was the desire to more

fully understand the place of creative, arts-based practices in facilitating stimulating and transformative learning spaces.

This study has contributed not only new understandings to the current body of knowledge in terms of how education in neoliberal times is impacting on the lives of teachers and students, but new, personalised voices. The novel has captured the participants' experiences and has created a work of fiction to which readers can relate, and through which themes, and theories of transformative teaching and conscientisation can be more intuitively conveyed and embodied.

The concept of creativity has been framed in a way that is not just synonymous with the arts. As such, it has enabled creativity to be reconceptualised as a function of life and of learning that is necessary and that should be accessible to all people and all ages. The study has posed the dilemma of how creative practices can be integrated into highly-structured, institutionalised methods of teaching and learning that rely heavily on standardised testing. In posing this dilemma, the novel has offered some responses, which can be interpreted in many ways. This study does not presume to come up with definitive answers. All complex problems require complex solutions that are usually reliant on creative processes of trial, error, elimination, and re-invention.

Through this study, the importance of teaching and learning in a creative, unhurried space has been articulated. The value of the teacher as a transformative force in students' lives has been not only emphasised, but championed. One of the most empowering of human practices, the teaching and learning of literacy, has been reframed and reconceptualised. Rather than being seen as mere functional literacy, a set of skills and practices necessary for the economic prosperity of a nation, literacy can be understood as the most transformative and empowering of practices. As Freesmith (2006) pointed out, critical literacy and traditional literacy practices are not mutually exclusive. Rather, critical literacy has been misunderstood. As well as enhancing

enjoyment of texts and increasing participation in reading and writing, the teaching of critical literacy is necessary if we are to 'create a questioning, critical, ethical citizenry' (Snyder 2008, p. 1). Through this study, creative teaching and learning pedagogies in literacy and across the curriculum are seen as more fundamental than simply attaining a set of skills: learning about sounds and how to put words together. Rather, they are viewed through Freire's (1985) lens, as a way of *reading* and *writing* the world.

## And...

This study has problematised how creativity is taught in schools, and has questioned the limited scope for pedagogical and curriculum-related creativity experienced by classroom teachers. The issue is complex, and as such, the solution cannot be simplistic. Teacher education that recognises the value of creativity and the arts alongside other curriculum areas like literacy and maths could provide some answers. However, it is difficult to imagine how those mammoth curriculum areas could be dislodged even infinitesimally from their place of substance and privilege, particularly if it is to make room for curriculum areas whose worth is synonymous with light relief. The difficulties with reimagining a differently-configured education system stem primarily from the socio-cultural, economic and historical context in which schools in the current ethos of education are steeped.

The case for creativity in schools and in education professions has been argued vigorously in this study. The benefits have been outlined in terms of how creativity fosters a more joyful learning and work environment that shapes inquiry and develops independent learners. The positive impact it has on developing critical thinking skills would seem to be beyond beneficial to being downright essential for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And yet governments that control school systems do not budge. Or they budge only slightly. Arts get *done* in schools, the value of creativity is espoused, yet we still have a dominant schooling culture that is driven by a metric imperative. Some school leaders, and certainly politicians, are still scratching their heads, wondering why the country's PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS rankings are slipping, despite the flurry of investment in infrastructure development, educational resources, training, and curriculum overhauling devoted to the end goal of successfully cramming more knowledge into children's brains. Why is it not working? The answer seems too simple to be true. Perhaps if there was less time cramming and more time devoted to agentic, soul-nurturing practices that inspire and re-energise, students would be more receptive to learning.

The way we measure student learning is another issue that needs to be considered, but that was not within the scope of this study. Certainly, there is a push away from ATAR scores dominating the final years of schooling (Cook & Jacks 2017), and though this is only the beginning, there are sufficient education professionals out there considering alternatives (Craig 2012). Questions of how to change this situation stop short of calling for an education revolution, though Robinson (2013) has used that term. Certainly, professional learning for teachers is one way forward, however that may be problematic, given the mainstream providers of professional learning in schools are education department-aligned bodies or the department itself. Teachers may in fact need to take matters into their own hands. They may need to work in partnerships that allow them and their students to experience different ways of knowing and that can open up possibilities of thinking beyond traditional ideas of knowledge transmission.

Questions of how to take forward Freire's (1998) vision for teachers as active, agentic beings are still as pertinent today as they were in his time. Teachers and students starved not so much of resources, but of creativity. When Freire was fighting his battles, they were against poverty and oppression. It was a struggle for power and autonomy. It may seem easy to dismiss his struggle as not relevant in a western economy, yet teachers and students starved of creative possibilities are nonetheless oppressed, and are equally compelled to take up that challenge. Building the social and cultural capital of teachers so they value the arts is one way forward, but again, we come to systemic failings, how the curriculum areas that most enrich can be relegated to lunchtimes or out of school hours.

There is enough scholarship to declare that schools are in crisis, that the system is broken, and there is more than the hint of a groundswell to demand some authentic and robust discussion on the topic (Giroux 2001; Meier et al. 2004). The biggest hurdle to more creative practices for students and teachers as identified in this study pointed at the continuing barrage of reforms that

seems to be turning the screws ever tighter on teachers' and students' autonomy. The system's bureaucracy has over the years increased its control over curriculum and pedagogy. Regardless of whether the control comes from high-up government departments, it is almost overwhelmingly championed by school leadership. The unavoidable consequences of these edicts are felt most keenly on the ground in classrooms, affecting the youngest members of our communities, who are our hope and vision for the future.

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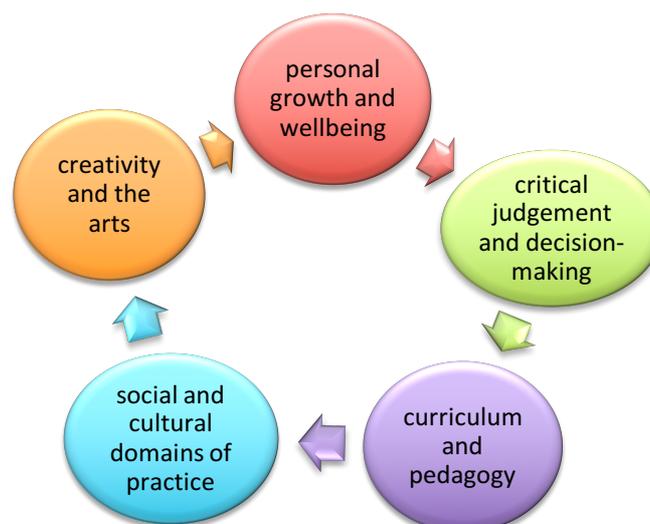
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## Appendix

### Other, related questions:

- ✚ In regard to literacy education, describe some of your most satisfying teaching moments.
- ✚ Describe some of your most frustrating or troubling teaching moments.
- ✚ What is your experience of creativity and the arts in education?
- ✚ Describe how you have successfully integrated creativity and the arts into literacy teaching, and the general curriculum. Conversely, have there been times when attempting to integrate the arts has been problematic?
- ✚ What defines you as a teacher? Is (and if so, how is) this definition connected to your ability to be creative within a teaching and learning context? How does this relate to your professional knowledge and practice as a literacy teacher?
- ✚ In what ways does the integration of creative, arts-based practices facilitate strong teacher/student relationships?
- ✚ How have you been able to steer the course of your teaching career in a way that is consistent with your personal philosophy of education? How does your ability to be creative in your teaching fit within that context?



**Diagram 2:** Scope of questions in the initial stages of the study