Telling tales: Helen Demidenko and the autobiographical pact

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“The Pact”

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Abstract

As arguably the most notorious liar in contemporary Australian literature, Helen Demidenko has been the subject of hundreds of articles, and at least four books. Her 1995 novel The Hand that Signed the Paper had already won three literary prizes and attracted significant critical attention due to its controversial subject matter, when her fraudulent identity was revealed.

The critical section of this thesis draws out the implications of the ‘Demidenko Affair’ by exploring Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the autobiographical pact, genre theory and contemporary book promotion and marketing practices.

Using Gérard Genette’s notion of paratexts, and Stanley Fish’s idea of interpretive communities, I argue that many reviewers of The Hand that Signed the Paper read the novel as though it was an autobiography, and that this reading position contributed to the vehemence of the condemnation its author received when her fraudulent identity ‘Helen Demidenko’ was revealed. I use genre theory to analyse the tendency to ‘read autobiographically’, which emerges from a cultural context which includes the growing popularity of non-fiction books and the prevalence of book promotion strategies which draw on the author’s persona to lend credence to their book.

The creative section of this thesis has a narrator who shares much of my biography: she is around the same age, grew up in the same area as I did and has a similar name.

When she returns to her hometown after a decade-long absence and reunites with old friends, she discovers that the story she has told herself about her past is only one version of events. The exploration of a notionally autobiographical theme is overlaid by a fictional narrative structure which enables an ambiguous rendering of the ‘identity’ of author, narrator and protagonist proposed by Lejeune.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

-the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the preface,
-due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
-the thesis is 30,000 words in length, inclusive of footnotes but exclusive of tables, maps, appendices and bibliography.

signed

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Melinda Denham
**Acknowledgements**

To my indefatigable, unflappable supervisor Jenny Lee, my co-conspirator in fiction writing and kid-wrangling Rose Michael, and to my three chief baby-minders: my mother-in-law, my father, and last but not least my husband, the buoyant, supportive, long-suffering-yet-still-enthusiastic Ian Hillman.

I’d like to thank the helpful staff at two Melbourne bookshops: The Grisly Wife in Eaglemont and Already Read in North Fitzroy.

I also acknowledge an unknown benefactor who donated their copy of the rare first edition of The Hand that Signed the Paper to the Mental Health Fellowship op-shop in Northcote, thus allowing me to purchase it for the princely sum of 50 cents (saving me many trips to Special Collections at the Baillieu Library).
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Introduction

Although three decades have elapsed since Roland Barthes’s influential proclamation of “The death of the author” (1967)¹, and Michel Foucault’s seminal question “What is an author?” (1969)² it remains pertinent to ask: does the author still matter, and if so, for what kinds of texts? There is at least one genre in which the author – their gender, their history, their ethnicity – matters very much, to readers and critics alike. That genre is autobiography, and its most diligent chronicler and theorist in Western culture is the French structuralist Philippe Lejeune.

Lejeune’s first work was an analysis of French autobiographies, *L’Autobiographie en France* [Autobiography in France], published in 1971. His working definition of autobiography in this work is “the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Eakin viii).

As Paul John Eakin explains in the foreword to his edited collection of Lejeune’s work, Lejeune was “quick to address the principal limitation of his definition, namely its failure to identify a clear line of demarcation between autobiography and the autobiographical novel” (Eakin vii). His solution in *L’Autobiographie en France* rested on the idea of the autobiographical pact – the author’s undertaking to readers that s/he is making a “sincere effort” to make sense of his or her own life (Eakin ix). Lejeune recognised that this pact meant that readers had to refer to “a finally unknowable authorial consciousness” (Eakin ix) to determine if a work was an autobiography, rather than an autobiographical novel.

“Le pacte autobiographique” [“The autobiographical pact”], published in 1973³, was Lejeune’s attempt to formulate a solution to this problem. The solution he arrived at was

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¹ This date refers to the article’s first publication in the art magazine *Aspen*, not its subsequent appearance in *Manteia* (1968). Michael North’s article highlights this discrepancy in cited publication dates.

² Originally a talk delivered to the Société française de Philosophie in February 1969, it was translated by Donald Bouchard and included in *Language, counter-memory, practice*. A revised version was translated by Josué V. Harari and appeared in *Textual strategies: perspectives in post-structuralist criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979).

³ As an article in the journal *Poétique*. It appeared in book form in 1975, and was revised in 1980 as “Le pacte autobiographique (bis)” [“The Autobiographical Pact (encore)”] and published in the book *Je est un autre: L’autobiographie de la littérature aux médias* [‘I is someone else: autobiography from literature to the media’].
a textual clue to the “identity” (i.e. identicalness) of the author, protagonist and narrator: the proper name of the author, as printed on the title page of the book. For Lejeune, the function of the proper name in autobiography is not to refer to a real person, but to instigate a contract: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name” (Lejeune, “Le Pacte Autobiographique” 19). So to Lejeune, the author clearly matters.

The author also matters to publishers, as Kate Douglas points out:

At a time when two, or perhaps even three generations of literary theorists have primarily been raised on the notion that the biography of the author is almost irrelevant to the text, in the contemporary world of book publication and marketing, the author has if anything become even more crucial to a book’s success (Douglas 806).

Nowhere is the truth of Douglas’s assertion more clearly demonstrated than in the reaction to certain events in the Australian literary world in 1994 and 1995, variously dubbed the “Demidenko Controversy”, the “Demidenko Case”, and the “Demidenko Affair”. In brief, a young woman claiming to be a Ukrainian called Helen Demidenko won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award (then worth $AU15,000) in September 1993, for her novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. Upon its publication in August 1994, some reviewers questioned the novel’s apparently sympathetic portrayal of Ukrainian collaboration during the Holocaust.

In June 1995, the novel won a second prize – the Miles Franklin Award (then worth $AU25,000). Established in 1954 by a bequest from the Australian author Miles Franklin, and first awarded to Patrick White for *Voss* in 1957, its terms stipulate that it is to be awarded “to the novel of the year which is of the highest literary merit and which must present Australian Life [sic] in any of its phases” (Miles Franklin Award Trust website). It is widely considered “the nation’s most highly respected literary award”, (Riemer 1996 148) and is rarely awarded to first novels.4

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4 Since 1980, only three other debut novels have won: in 2000 Kim Scott’s *Benang* (joint winner), Tom Flood’s *Oceana Fine* in 1990 (which also won the Vogel) and Peter Carey’s *Bliss* in 1981.
When *The Hand that Signed the Paper* won the Miles Franklin award, debate about the novel’s anti-Semitism intensified, and became inflected with the theme of a novelist’s responsibility to history. The Association for the Study of Australian Literature awarded the novel yet another prize in July 1995 (Gold Medal and $AU1,000). Then, on 19 August 1995, journalist David Bentley published an article in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* in which he revealed that Helen Demidenko was really Helen Darville and was of English rather than Ukrainian ancestry.

Following this revelation, media attention shifted to the author herself. The day after Bentley’s article was published, Darville’s brother, mother and school friends were all interviewed. On 22 August 1995, she released a statement defending her use of the name ‘Demidenko’ and providing other biographical details. A sample of headlines from 23 August 1995 is representative of the interest in who this author was, if she wasn’t Helen Demidenko: “An Imaginary Life” (*The Age*), “Author’s Origins Were Work of Fiction” (*The Times*), “Australian Novelist Rewrote her Genealogy to Lend Credibility to her Award-Winning Book” (*The Independent*) (from Jost, Totaro and Tyshing). The theme of these articles is most succinctly put in the sub-title of Natalie Prior’s *The Demidenko diary*: “Who is she really?”.

Despite the intense focus on this author – to date the subject of at least four books⁵, a play⁶, numerous articles and a flotilla of impersonators in the 1996 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras – only two commentators (Susanna Egan and Judith Ryan) have recognised these events as fruitful ground for autobiography theory.

As Susanna Egan argues:

> The Demidenko case is...important not only for what it suggests about its Australian context but also because the company it keeps raises questions that are foundational for the study of autobiography in every context (Egan 19).

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⁵ Riemer’s, Manne’s, Prior’s and *The Demidenko file*.
This thesis focuses on just one of these “foundational” questions raised by the ‘Demidenko Affair’\(^7\): How can a novel come to be read as if it were an autobiography? This apparently simple question suggests other questions: What is the difference between a novel and an autobiography? Who decides whether a book is a novel or an autobiography? And how do they make this decision?

The critical component of this thesis addresses these questions explicitly, while the creative component, which comprises two sections from a novel set in the Blue Mountains, has a more tangential relationship to them. Superficially, this fiction features autobiographical aspects: a narrator who shares my nickname and some of my biographical details, some settings, characters and situations based on my early life, and the theme of ‘returning home’, which echoes the autobiographical genre’s preoccupation with origins. However, these devices are secondary to the fictional quality of the narrative, which is signalled by the other textual cues: style, voice, language choice, section headings, as well as by its paratexts (not the least of which is this ten-thousand-word thesis which precedes it), and finally, crucially, by the undertaking I make here that the pact to which the creative section’s title refers is a fictional one.

\(^7\) An unsatisfactory shorthand term I use to refer to the controversy that the revelation of her imposture provoked. As far as I can tell, this term was first used as the title of an article by Kate Legge in *The Australian*, 15 Jul. 1995 (Jost et al 94).
Chapter One: Autobiography theory

It is not unusual when reading autobiography theory to come across an explanation of the meaning of the component parts of the term ‘autobiography’: *auto*=self, *bios*=life, *graphe*=writing (for example McCooey; Smith; Elbaz). This critical gesture neatly illustrates the desire to seek out origins, which motivates both writers of autobiographies and autobiography theorists.

Laura Marcus’s *Auto/biographical discourses: criticism, theory, practice* (1994) traces the preoccupations of autobiographical criticism from the nineteenth century, through the ‘new biography’ of the early twentieth century, and beyond to autobiographical theory, criticism and writing in the latter half of the twentieth century. She identifies an approach to autobiographical criticism in which various ‘seminal’ texts such as Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* are posited as central to an understanding of the whole field of autobiography. She describes this as a “critical desire for points of origin” which is “aligned with other judgements about historical developments within literature and culture” (Marcus 2).

This desire to seek out origins is also manifested in the writing of autobiography, because, as David McCooey argues:

> To write autobiography is to imply a sense of purpose, as well as to re-enact or revive a past sense of purpose. Purpose, as a mode of consciousness regarding futurity, presupposes teleology (McCooey 24).

If a teleological impulse lies behind writing autobiographies and is implicit in certain kinds of autobiographical criticism, what of *reading* autobiographies? Do readers hope to find in autobiographies what James Olney calls in *Metaphors of self: the meaning of autobiography*, “a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (Olney 35)?

My interest in this question of how autobiographies are read, or more precisely, how one can ‘read autobiographically’, does not stem from what Clark Blaise claims as the aim of autobiography – “the quest for self-knowledge and psychic integration, for cultural and social demystification” (Blaise 202). Rather, I am interested in how this
practice of ‘reading autobiographically’ operated in the case of the author ‘Helen Demidenko’ and how this mode of reading affected the terms by which her identity fraud was interpreted. In order to establish what ‘reading autobiographically’ might be, I will first discuss at some length the term and the genre ‘autobiography’.

The strand of autobiography theory which is concerned with definitions of the genre, and its intersections with the genres of history, biography, and fiction, is exemplified by the work of Philippe Lejeune. A definition of the genre necessarily encompasses a definition of the term ‘autobiography’ itself. Lejeune provides a useful etymology of ‘autobiography’ as used in literary criticism in France. He claims that the term entered French use from England in 1866, used by Larousse with the accompanying definition “Life of an individual written by himself”. This meaning was adapted by Vapereau in his 1876 Dictionnaire universel des literatures [Universal dictionary of literature] as “Autobiography: literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise, etc., whose author intended, secretly or admittedly, to recount his life, to expose his thoughts or to describe his feelings” (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 123). Vapereau’s definition has expanded on Larousse’s by adding examples of the form in which autobiography might appear (as well as introducing the thorny problem of the author’s intention).

There are four earlier citations of use (1797, 1809, 1828 and 1859) in the Oxford English Dictionary. As Laura Marcus points out, the second of these – Robert Southey’s use of the term “auto-biography” in a review of the work of Portuguese poet Francisco Vieura – is often erroneously cited as the first instance, which some critics have claimed “marks a new recognition of autobiography as an autonomous genre” (Marcus 11). However, Marcus demonstrates that the 1797 use (in a review of Isaac D’Israeli’s Miscellanies) shows it being “entertained and then rejected as an inappropriate generic term” (Marcus 12).

Marcus further argues that in discussions from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “‘autobiography’ appears as an ideal type of form, which may bear little or no relation to individual autobiographies” (Marcus 6). However, any theorist of

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8 The Oxford English Dictionary definition is “The writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself”. 
autobiography (especially a structuralist such as Lejeune) must come up with a workable classification of what constitutes ‘autobiography’, as Lejeune acknowledges:

Anyone who goes on about ‘autobiography’ (or about any literary genre whatever) is obliged to confront the problem of the definition, if only in practice, by choosing what to talk about (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 121).

He admits the inherent risks in a genre-based study: that certain works will be categorised together and others excluded, depending on the definition of the genre that you begin with. Regardless of how it is positioned in relation to its neighbouring genres – as a sub-genre of non-fiction, as an illegitimate sibling to biography, an earthier but less refined cousin to the autobiographical novel, a less complete but perhaps less ‘historical’ form of memoir – autobiography is extremely resistant to definitive categorisation. Perhaps this is because, as Tess Cosslett comments in the introduction to Feminism and autobiography: texts, theories, methods:

Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 1).

Indeed, Philippe Lejeune puts it in the strongest terms when he claims, albeit with his tongue firmly in his cheek: “In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing” (Lejeune, “Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)” 131). Earlier in the same essay, Lejeune emphasises that literary terms are most useful to the critic when their meanings are fluid. He explains that it is through “their elasticity, their plasticity, their polysemy, that literary terms…promote dialogue and ensure the continuity of language” (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 122).

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9. There seem to be an inexhaustible variety of terms for emerging ‘hybrid’ genres: for example, life writing, life stories, quasi-autobiographical, literary autobiography, fictional autobiography, even Protobiography (English author William Boyd’s 2005 book).

10. Although she makes no mention of Lejeune, Mary Evans unwittingly echoes his phrase in the title of her 1999 book Missing persons: the impossibility of autobiography.
In a more recent work, *Derrida and autobiography* (1995), Robert Smith concurs with Lejeune on the productive nature of the weakness of the term ‘autobiography’: 

‘Autobiography’ can scarcely claim the conceptual generality that those more philosophically credible terms [subjectivity, self-identity, subjective self-identity] obviously do; it is too weak, both as a term and a phenomenon. But its weakness is what gives it force (Smith 5).

One of the hallmarks of the complexity and depth of Lejeune’s thinking on autobiography is his willingness to acknowledge, even embrace, contradictions. His original theory of the autobiographical pact contained an elegant insight about the contrariness of readers: that when we are told something is fiction, we seek similarities between the characters and the author; and when we are told it is autobiography, we tend instead to look for differences (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique" 14). And in his revision of this theory, at the conclusion of “Le pacte autobiographique (bis)”, he makes his confession of faith in the referentiality of autobiography, where belief in the unified speaking subject co-exists with the “fantasy” of “[t]elling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject” (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)” 131).

Some critics hold that the concept of genre is of limited usefulness when applied to autobiography, perhaps because of, in Laura Marcus’s terms “the instability or hybridity of autobiography as a genre” (Marcus 7). However, as the argument I develop in the following chapter will show, this tendency of autobiography to spawn hybrid genres is only problematic as long as genre is conceptualised as a strict taxonomic scheme.

The idea that genre theory curtails interpretive freedom persists even among postmodern critics, whom Ralph Cohen claims “have sought to do without a genre theory…[in order] to avoid the assumed fixity of genres and the social as well as literary authority such limits exert, to reject the social and subjective elements in classification” (Perloff 5).

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11 Illustrated in Michael Kinsley’s lighthearted column about two fraudulent autobiographies in *Time* magazine, in which he coins the term “autophoniography”. Another example is “autography” – the dada term for automatic writing, which Michael North mentions.
Cohen’s conception of the strength of generic boundaries and his suggestion that it is possible to “do without genre theory” seems to ignore the insights of Marcus, Smith and Lejeune; that it is precisely the weakness of the generic term ‘autobiography’ that enables a certain kind of criticism. Cohen also appears to assume that the “social and subjective elements in classification” make the task of genre analysis a hopeless one.

However, another critic, Ann Jefferson, takes a more hopeful view when she suggests that “generic differences need to be respected as an effect of reading, even if they cannot be defined as intrinsic qualities of the texts in question” (quoted in Gudmundsdttir 3). Jefferson’s assertion that generic differences are an “effect of reading” is consistent with what Paul John Eakin describes as Lejeune’s project of developing a “reader-based poetics of autobiography” (Eakin ix) and Lejeune’s own assertion that autobiography is “a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing” (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique" 30).

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Lejeune first introduced the idea of the autobiographical pact in his *L’autobiographie en France* (1971), but the idea was fully developed only after the significant revisions which he made in “Le pacte autobiographique” [The Autobiographical Pact], published in 1973. In 1982 he conducted a thorough critique of his work in “Le pacte autobiographique (bis)” [The Autobiographical Pact (encore)]. In the interests of brevity, the following outline of his theory incorporates revisions he made in this later article.
Lejeune’s key point in *Le pacte* (1973) is that the autobiographical pact exists only if there is “identity” of author, protagonist and narrator. He suggests that if the protagonist’s name is different from the author’s name, then the result cannot be autobiography. (Note that “=0” in the following chart means ‘is indeterminate’.) He classifies the various combinations of type of pact and protagonist’s and author’s name thus:

**Figure 1: Lejeune’s classificatory scheme (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique" 30)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protagonist's name</th>
<th>Author's name</th>
<th>= 0</th>
<th>Author's name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fictional</td>
<td># author's name</td>
<td>1a</td>
<td>NOVEL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= 0</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>NOVEL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= author's name</td>
<td>3a</td>
<td>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical</td>
<td># author's name</td>
<td>2c</td>
<td>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= author's name</td>
<td>3b</td>
<td>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In his revision in *Le pacte (bis)* (1982), he acknowledges that this chart ignores the possibility that the pact may be both autobiographical and fictional; and the name of the protagonist and that of the author may be both different and the same (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 134). The insight that different pacts could exist simultaneously was derived from his consideration of texts where two pacts were evident – *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) – is cited as an example. So the proper name of the author is no longer enough to ensure that a text is an autobiography. The categories on Lejeune’s chart thus multiply from nine to sixteen, and the boundary between autobiography proper and the autobiographical novel blurs further. A theorist with less fortitude might aim to control this proliferation of categories, but Lejeune introduces a further complication.

He recognises that it is not only the possibility of two pacts prevailing simultaneously over a single text that makes generic definition of autobiography so difficult.
What I call autobiography can be part of two different systems: a ‘real’ referential system (in which the autobiographical agreement, even if it comes by way of the book and the writing, has the value of act), and a literary system (in which the writing no longer aspires to transparency but is able to mime perfectly, to mobilize the beliefs of the first system) (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 126).

So autobiography straddles two semantic systems, which perhaps makes it more susceptible than other genres to what Hans Robert Jauss calls the “shifting horizon of expectation that governs the generic recognition of literary works” (Eakin xv). No-one was more aware of the subtleties of these shifts than Lejeune. In “Le pacte (bis)” he deals with the problems he created in “Le pacte” by failing to specify the “currently accepted meanings” of ‘autobiography’ (Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 123).

He conceptualises Larousse’s and Vapereau’s definitions (mentioned in the Introduction) as “two poles” between which a productive tension is generated:

   The success of the word “autobiography” is undoubtedly linked to the tension between these two poles, to the ambiguity or the indecisiveness that it permits, to the new space of reading and interpretation that it makes possible, to the new strategies of writing that it can designate. And this is even more evident with the adjective “autobiographical”, which is certainly used as much as the substantive…(Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 124).

Having clarified his own use of the term autobiography, Lejeune goes on to say that he unwittingly created further confusion by neglecting to analyse genre labels used by authors, publishers and critics. Lejeune recognised that the term ‘novel’ cannot be used unproblematically as an antonym of ‘non-fiction’, because it carries many other connotations to do with literary value. Much of the commentary about the Demidenko Affair occurs in the interpretative space created by ‘autobiography’ and ‘novel’, which Table 1 schematises. (Helen Darville’s use of the term ‘faction’ to describe her novel could be added to this table).

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12 The OED entry for ‘faction’ describes it as “A literary genre in which fictional narrative is developed from a basis of real events or characters”, and lists a publisher’s note from the 1967 title The Games as the first usage.
Table 1: Connotations of ‘Novel’ and ‘Autobiography’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term: ‘Novel’</th>
<th>Term: ‘Autobiography’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Non-fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarified</td>
<td>Commonplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art/artifice</td>
<td>Baseline or “zero degree” of testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pejorative” connotations</td>
<td>“Platitude of personal experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mere invention(^{13})</td>
<td>“Authenticity and depth of the personal experience.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Meliorative” connotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Pleasure of a well-written and well-managed narrative”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text and terms appearing in quotation marks are all from Lejeune (“Le Pacte [bis]”) p.125).

This interpretative space lies between autobiography proper and autobiographical fiction; between stated intention and unconscious impulse; and between a single genre – autobiography – and a multiplicity of hybrid genres, including autobiographical novels, creative non-fiction and ‘identity’ fiction.

Following Lejeune’s metaphor of “poles” of interpretation, these connotations could be imagined as iron filings which cluster in various formations around ‘autobiography’ and ‘novel’, depending on changing notions of literary value and attendant shifts in genre boundaries.

When he revisited his theory in “Le Pacte (bis)”, Lejeune acknowledged that an author does not communicate his/her intention directly to the reader, because “many elements that condition the reading (subtitle, generic classification, publicity, publisher’s blurb) may have been chosen by the publisher and already interpreted by the media” ("Le Pacte Autobiographique (Bis)" 126). Gérard Genette’s concept of paratexts is immensely useful for analysing these intermediary elements.

\(^{13}\) As in Andrew Riemer’s description of The Hand that Signed the Paper as more than ‘mere fiction’ (1996 23).
Genette’s *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation* is an exhaustive examination of all of the supporting material which functions to present a text as a book, or as Richard Macksey phrases it in his Foreword to the English edition “the literary and printerly conventions that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the text” (Genette xvii). The word ‘threshold’ is key to understanding Genette’s concept of the paratext: it is a “zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*” (2, original emphasis). It is in this liminal zone that Lejeune’s autobiographical pact operates.

The paratext is made up of material physically contained within the book (the “peritext”), and material about the book which circulates separately (the “epitext”). To use Genette’s own formula: paratext = peritext + epitext (5). Genette analyses the paratext using five characteristics, but focuses primarily on the functional aspect, since this is the paratext’s *raison d’être*: it exists only to serve the text (12). He explains that the functional aspect of the paratext differs from its four other aspects in two important ways: that a single item of paratext can have several different purposes; and that it “cannot be described theoretically” (12), but rather “must be brought into focus inductively, genre by genre and often species by species” (13).

Following this inductive approach, the most interesting paratexts of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* seem to be: the publisher’s peritext, the name of the author, and some items from the epitext. The later analysis of commentary on the Demidenko Affair will clarify why I have chosen these three paratexts, but at this point I will outline Genette’s concepts.

The publisher’s peritext consists of all those aspects of a book which are under the publisher’s control. These are mainly spatial and material: the format, series, cover, title page, typesetting and the physical form – what is called by some marketing professionals the ‘look and feel’ of a book. Of these items, the series and cover are the most likely to carry genre indications. By ‘series’, Genette means the use of a logo (he

14 The book’s French title is *Seuils* ([Thresholds]), which Macksey suggests is a pun (appropriately, a paratextual one), on Genette’s publisher’s name – *Editions du Seuil*, the French publisher of some of Lejeune’s work, as well as some of Roland Barthes’s.

15 The others are: spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic.
calls it a “series emblem” [22] which designates the book as belonging to a series, which in turn indirectly indicates its genre. These attempts by publishers to control the book’s reception are hardly decisive, as Genette notes: “‘a novel’ does not indicate ‘This book is a novel’, a defining assertion that hardly lies within anyone’s power, but rather ‘Please look on this book as a novel’ ” (11).

In the following chapter, “The name of the author”, Genette discusses pseudonymity and anonymity, and coins a term to describe the default state of the author’s name—onymity.16 He classifies all of the possible permutations of pseudonymity, but bases his analysis on the most common case, which is “the real author...‘signing’ his work with a name that is not – or not exactly or not entirely – his legal name” (Genette 48). He then distinguishes between two effects that pseudonyms create. The first he calls the “effect of a given pseudonym”, which refers to possible connotations such as exoticness, a specific ethnicity or nationality, or nobility. The second he calls “the pseudonym-effect”, which is a delayed effect, produced once the reader becomes aware that the pseudonym is a pseudonym. This may happen, for example, when the reader becomes aware of biographical information available outside the text (49).

Genette discusses the epitext after the peritext, although, as he allows in the introduction, this structure “is especially arbitrary because many future readers become acquainted with a book thanks to, for example, an interview with the author” (3). Unlike the peritext, which circulates physically with the text, “the location of the epitext is therefore anywhere outside the book” (Genette 344). So critical articles, reviews, lectures given by the author, media interviews and advertisements are all examples of epitext. In contrast to the peritext, which always relates directly to the text, Genette emphasises that the epitext “consists of a group of discourses whose function is not always basically paratextual (that is, to present and comment on the text)” (346). He warns that “the epitext is a whole whose paratextual function has no precise limits and...whose relation to the work may be at best indirect and at worst indiscernible” (346). Of the various items Genette classifies as epitext, he devotes the least critical

16 Oddly for such a thorough scholar, Genette does not mention eponymy in this chapter. However since he, like Lejeune, mentions Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (1975), the omission here is perhaps because he considers eponymy a category relating to title rather than author’s name.
attention to the publisher’s epitext, because it “does not always involve the responsibility of the author in a very meaningful way” (346).

Although he acknowledges that “our media-oriented era” (347) furnishes publishers with new promotional tools, Genette’s criterion of author involvement means that his account of paratextual function overlooks many pieces of publisher epitext (press releases, catalogue advertisements, website promotions, etc.) which are crucial to the promotion of books in the contemporary publishing industry. In his introduction to Consuming books: the marketing and consumption of literature, Stephen Brown provides an overview of the transformations in twenty-first century publishing wrought by “increased competition, rapid consolidation, changing channels of distribution and the perils of celebritude” (Brown 2). He argues that one of the book trade’s responses to these changes is “the celebration of celebrity”, which he claims is “the most striking development in the contemporary book business” (Brown 7). The power of celebrity is harnessed to sell books by various means – for example, writer’s festivals and in-store book signings, movie adaptations and television book groups such as Oprah Winfrey’s (Brown 7).

Oprah’s Book Club probably trades more on its presenter’s celebrity than on that of its guest authors: Oprah’s endorsement is said to deliver a significant fillip to the sales of chosen titles (Wyatt). The author does not even need to appear on the program, as Jonathan Franzen demonstrated in 2001 when he declined an invitation to discuss his novel The Corrections, and still reaped the benefits of subsequent media exposure in increased sales (Schindehette).17 Thus, the paratextual function performed by the publisher’s epitext – that is, providing the book with its best chance of being sold, and perhaps, read – has increased in importance due to recent major structural changes in the publishing industry. Accordingly, the publisher’s epitext warrants closer critical attention than Genette gave it, which is why it is one of the three paratexts of The Hand that Signed the Paper analysed in the next chapter.

17 Laurie Brown, director of marketing for Franzen’s publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux, claims “[t]his level of news activity works to keep him front and center in bookstores” (Schindehette).
Chapter Two: Reading Demidenko ‘autobiographically’

In the previous chapter I invoked the metaphor of iron filings clustering around a magnet as a way of conceptualising changes in connotations surrounding the genre labels ‘autobiography’ and ‘novel’. It is a perfectly serviceable metaphor, but a nearly useless critical tool, for it does not allow for the active formation of genre through the interventions of various reading communities (‘ordinary’ readers, publishers, book groups, critics, academics). I start from the assumption that genre is not only decided on the basis of internal textual features, but also arises from reading practices.

In *Genre*, John Frow proposes an explanation for the difficulty we have in making genre labels stick to some texts: “texts – even the simplest and most formulaic – do not ‘belong’ to genres, but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to ‘a’ genre, but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation” (2). This implies that instead of starting with a text, scouring it for distinguishing features, and then assigning it to a genre, we instead approach it with a notion of genre pre-formed, and then read the text as an enactment of that genre. This reversal of commonsense notions of genre and reading is offered by the literary critic Stanley Fish.

In *Is there a text in this class?*, a collection of his essays and articles, Fish gives an account of how he arrived at his view that “entities that were once seen as competing for the right to constrain interpretation (text, reader, author) are now all seen to be the products of interpretation” (16, original emphasis). Throughout this volume Fish develops a comprehensive response to some of his critics, who appeal to the primacy of the text and the intentions of the author as necessary and appropriate constraints on what they feel would otherwise be completely subjective, and therefore, completely idiosyncratic, readings of the same text.

Fish marshals a number of arguments to show that completely idiosyncratic readings are impossible. In the chapter “How to recognize a poem when you see one”, he describes an experiment he conducted with students in his religious poetry class. He told the
students that the text on the classroom whiteboard was a poem and asked them for their interpretation, which they duly produced, using what he had taught them about Christian symbolism. That the students were so readily able to interpret this text as a poem (it was actually a list of author’s names, remaining from a previous class), Fish sees as evidence that the act of recognition of a piece of literature (in this case, a poem) precedes, and prompts, a listing of the poem’s formal characteristics (326).

But the formal characteristics of the ‘poem’ are only one dimension of its genre. Of equal importance, as John Frow elucidates, are the other “structural dimensions” of genre, including the “situation of address” and the “structure of implication” that a text implies and invokes (9). Fish’s students’ ability to describe the formal features of the ‘poem’ is governed by the situation of address – a teacher and his students, in a classroom; as well as by its structure of implication – that this interpretive act occurs in the context of a range of other activities given meaning by the rubric ‘being a student’.

Within this institutional context, Fish’s students produce broadly similar interpretations of the ‘poem’ using “a set of conventional notions which when put into operation constitute in turn a conventional, and conventionally seen, object” (326). Some might argue that students are far more likely than critics to rely on conventional notions to interpret a text. Fish anticipates this criticism, and in the following chapter “What makes an interpretation acceptable?” he shows that literary criticism is similarly subject to a myriad of conventions, which collectively constitute the objects of study they claim merely to observe or analyse. Thus Fish’s critics need not fear the proliferation of idiosyncratic readings of a text, since interpretations of texts – whether by students or by literary critics – are limited by the operation of genre, which as Frow puts it “is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning” (10).

Instead of a mechanistic model – in which a reader scans the formal features of a text (if it is a book, this would include any genre labels in its peritext) and uses its genre to guide their interpretation – it is now possible to imagine a more complex model. Texts may still be interpreted according to one or more genres, but the boundaries separating one genre from another are not impervious and genres themselves, as well as their relationship to a particular text, are mutable. The social meanings which genres both
produce and help to organise can thus be expected to change, as the relationship between texts and readers changes, and as new genres, and hybrids of existing genres, emerge. As Frow explains:

Genre is neither a property of (and located ‘in’) texts, nor a projection of (and located ‘in’) readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systemic existence. It is a shared convention with a social force (Frow 102).

With this notion that genre is implicit in the relationship between text and reader, it is possible to revisit, and enhance, Lejeune’s idea of the autobiographical pact. Using a formalist notion of genre in which interpretive primacy is given to internal textual features, the application of Lejeune’s theory would preclude a book from being considered autobiography if it contained no autobiographical pact18. If instead, following Frow, we treat genre as emerging from the relationship between text and reader, we can posit the idea of ‘reading autobiographically’: that the genre of autobiography can be seen to be invoked in the reading of what would otherwise – under a strict definition guided by textual features – not be considered autobiographies.

The Hand that Signed the Paper’s Vogel award made it particularly susceptible to being read as autobiography. Although the Australian/Vogel Literary Award (aka Vogel) “is popularly seen as an award for new novelists of adult literary fiction”, works of many genres are accepted: fiction for children, as well as verse, history or biography (Brady). This gap between the popular perception of the prize and its actual criteria may partly explain the indeterminacy of The Hand that Signed the Paper’s genre at this early stage, as this comment from Vogel judge Jill Kitson illustrates: “whether [a book is] tagged explicitly as fiction or non-fiction, it was assumed that many Vogel manuscripts were autobiographical” (quoted in Knox 2005). The terms of the Vogel award oblige Allen & Unwin to publish the winning manuscript, which is selected by a panel of independent judges. The independence of the judging panel and the publication guarantee combine to curtail the publisher’s editorial control of the manuscript; although the publisher can suggest changes, the author knows that the work will be published.

18 Author’s name=protagonist’s name, genre label is ‘autobiography’ or is unclear.
Since entrants must be aged under thirty-five, the Vogel is often awarded to unpublished or emerging writers, and so the judges’ reports function more like editorial reports, in the sense that they can contain recommendations about changes to be made to the manuscript before publication. Vogel judge Roger McDonald was well aware of this, saying in a later interview that his advice to Allen & Unwin that some readers might find *The Hand that Signed the Paper* anti-Semitic was given in the context of the “high professional level of editorial attention” the manuscript was to receive before publication (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing 206). His concern was echoed by Lynne Segal, a freelance editor commissioned by Allen & Unwin to review the manuscript, who declined to complete the edit because she found it “incredibly anti-Semitic and inaccurate” (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing vii).\(^{19}\)

Segal has since said “there was no doubt in my mind that [the manuscript] was non-fiction” (Manne 1996a 38). Another early reader was Sue Abbey, an editor at University of Queensland Press when the manuscript of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was submitted early in 1993. Abbey says she “looked at it as non-fiction, the story of [Demidenko’s] uncle” but rejected it, partly because “the characters were one-dimensional [and] the dialogue was wooden” (quoted in Knox 2005).\(^{20}\) Assuming this manuscript version was the same as that submitted to the Vogel judges, the characters would have had the surname ‘Demidenko’ rather than ‘Kovalenko’ (China 3). This similarity, together with the author’s claim that the manuscript was based on family history, would place it in the middle right-hand square of Lejeune’s classificatory scheme (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1), making it autobiography.

This generic ambiguity persisted once *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was published, as an examination of some of its paratexts will illustrate. The novel appeared with four different covers, but in only three substantive editions: two with Helen Demidenko listed as author, and one with Helen Darville. (The other changes to the novel’s peritext between editions are summarised in Appendix 1). This analysis begins with the peritext and moves ‘outwards’ to the epitext.

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\(^{19}\) Allen & Unwin’s fiction publisher at the time, Stephanie Dowrick, and author Brian Castro also both declined to edit the manuscript (Jost 1996, 174).

\(^{20}\) These criticisms, it seems to me, are expressed in terms more commonly applied to fiction.
As Claire Squires notes in her essay “Book Marketing and the Booker Prize” in *Judging a book by its cover*, book cover straplines “demonstrate the marketing value…of big literary prizes” (Matthews 74). The cover of the first edition of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* carried the strapline “Winner of the Australian/Vogel Literary Award”, when it appeared in an advertisement in the July 1994 *Australian Bookseller and Publisher* promoting Allen & Unwin’s forthcoming titles (see Appendix 2).²¹ The Vogel obviously carries marketing clout, as demonstrated by the inclusion of a quote from one of the judges on the first edition’s back cover:

Jill Kitson: “A searingly truthful account of terrible wartime deeds that is also an imaginative work of extraordinary redemptive power.”

The other quote printed on this edition’s cover is David Marr’s: “astonishingly talented…with the true novelist's gift of entering into the imagination of those she is writing about”. The contrast between the genre assumptions underlying each of these quotes exemplifies many of Lejeune’s insights about the ambiguity that surrounds the genre labels ‘autobiography’ and ‘novel’, but perhaps the point that is illustrated most aptly is Lejeune’s acknowledgement that two pacts can prevail simultaneously over the same text. David Marr’s use of the phrase “true novelist” implies a fictional pact, while Jill Kitson’s description of the novel as a “searingly truthful account” suggests something more like an historical or autobiographical pact. Meanwhile, Demidenko’s author’s note in all three editions of the novel clearly attempts to instigate a fictional contract: “What follows is a work of fiction. The Kovalenko family depicted in this novel has no counterpart in reality”.

Darville’s insistence that a fictional contract prevailed over her novel extended to her claim that ‘Helen Demidenko’ was a pseudonym “designed to last until [her] main source for the novel died” (Dale (nee Darville) 7). Although ‘Helen Demidenko’ wasn’t created expressly for publication purposes (the author had been known at university as ‘Demidenko-Darville’), nevertheless the connotations of this pseudonym had a pronounced effect on both Gerard Henderson and Robert Manne. Henderson claimed that “we only know one Demidenko that really existed” (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing

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²¹ Of the 13 titles pictured in this advertisement, only one other – Gary Disher’s *Crosskill* – is fiction.
116) while Manne concurred that “the choice of the name Demidenko was, almost certainly, no accident” (Manne 1996c 17). The name was sufficiently Ukrainian-sounding to fool most mainstream commentators – although, as Wolodymyr Motkya (president of the Ukrainian Studies Foundation) points out, no-one bothered to ask anyone in the Ukrainian-Australian community whether they knew of the writer Helen Demidenko (quoted in Mycak 121).

When the articles revealing Demidenko’s falsified Ukrainian background were published, Allen & Unwin released a statement (quoted in an editorial in Australian Bookseller and Publisher) downplaying the exposés’ relevance to interpretation of the novel: “[R]ecent controversy over the author’s background has in our view no bearing on the quality and importance of the book”, and unsuccessfully attempting to forestall any further debate about the novel’s merit, by claiming “the literary qualities of The Hand that Signed the Paper are beyond dispute” (“What’s in a name?”, October 1995). This attempt to deflect attention away from the novel’s historical or autobiographical aspects demonstrates how publishers can intervene to try to influence readers to favour one genre over another in their reading of a text.

Apart from the absence of the review quotes, the other significant change to the peritext for the novel’s third edition was the removal of the ‘Original Fiction’ logo from the back cover. Although it is tempting to speculate that this was prompted by the plagiarism accusations (that Allen & Unwin were implying ‘this is no longer to be considered as original’), other fiction titles published after 1994 also had the ‘Original Fiction’ logo removed. Of other Vogel titles, 1993’s The Mule’s Foal carried the Original Fiction logo, whereas 1995’s Bracelet Honeymyrtle and 1996’s The Hero did not. Regardless of what prompted the logo’s removal from the third edition, ambiguity surrounded genre from its first edition, as a review of some of the public epitext shows.

The first extensive author interview was published in the Australian Jewish News, and opens with the line: “Helen Demidenko is a striking woman”. The article’s author, Vic

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22 Being a mass murderer, this Demidenko did nothing to enhance Helen Demidenko’s credibility.
23 The controversy apparently did prompt a change in Allen & Unwin’s administration of the Vogel, so that short-listed authors are now obliged to sign “a statutory declaration saying this is their own work, and if they’ve written under a pseudonym, they also have to state their real name” (Patrick Gallagher, quoted in Knox 2005).
Aldaheff, goes on to describe Demidenko as “tall…and slim, with sheer white hair reaching to her waist…”, and “highly articulate, particularly well-read and passionate” (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing 4). These descriptions of the author’s appearance and personality are typical of ‘profile pieces’ – a genre of newspaper article that shares with autobiography an emphasis on the individual and their life story.

Maria Trefely-Deutch, another early reviewer, “suspects that Fiona, the university student of Ukrainian origin, who narrates much of the book is largely autobiographical” (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing 19). These sentiments are echoed in Robert Manne’s assertion that The Hand that Signed the Paper “looked, on the surface at least, like a thinly fictionalised autobiographical account of the author’s family history” (Manne 1996a 26). Other reviewers seemed to believe that this generic indeterminacy was a deliberate ploy by the author, intended to disguise her true aims. Andrew Riemer described a growing “suspicion that The Hand that Signed the Paper was intended as something other than mere fiction.” (1996 23), while Louise Adler dismissed the book as “[a] ‘novel’ [which] is unable to resolve whether it is fiction, history or some cocktail of both…” (quoted in Riemer 1996 25). Lynne Segal also found the novel’s genre-mixing questionable, and believed it “essential to untangle the threads of fiction and faction and biographical history because the extent of the creative endeavour is crucial to the protective cloak of fiction shielding the book’s integrity” (Jost, Totaro and Tyshing 97). Adler’s and Segal’s critiques both imply that genre-mixing is a dubious practice, hence illustrating Derrida’s pronouncement that “the law of genre is a law of purity, a law against miscegenation” (quoted in Frow 26).

However, the most sustained and overt instances of reading autobiographically occur in the two articles about Demidenko which explicitly refer to Lejeune. These articles are Susanna Egan’s “The company she keeps: Demidenko and the problems of imposture in autobiography”, published in 2004 in an ‘imposture’ issue of Australian Literary Studies, and Judith Ryan’s chapter “After the ‘Death of the Author’ ” which appeared in the book she edited, Cultures of forgery (2003). Both Egan and Ryan read Demidenko’s

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24 Interest in the figure of Dale/Darville/Demidenko persists despite there being nothing particularly new, or newsworthy, about the controversy to report. An in-depth ‘where is she now’ profile piece by Jane Wheatley appeared in 2008 in Good Weekend (the magazine supplement to The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age newspapers).
novel autobiographically, and both use Lejeune to explain why this type of reading is pertinent.

Egan situates the Demidenko “scandal” in the context of “the narrative practices that obtain in a given culture” and “those postures that define the terms in which people understand each other” (Egan 17). She argues that the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s transformed gender and race relations as well as the narrative forms in which these newly visible identities could be expressed. In discussing the centrality of the notion of “authentic identity” to readers of autobiography, Egan wonders whether the postmodernist notion of the self as being constructed by discourse has allowed autobiographical impostures such as Demidenko’s to flourish.

Although I agree with Egan that “[d]eliberate imposture barely figures in current theorising about autobiography” (Egan 15), her account of Lejeune’s theory is imprecise. To his key point about the identity of the author, protagonist and narrator, she has added a truth clause: “[t]he author, narrator and protagonist of the autobiography are one and the same and that the story purports to be true” (Egan 13). Yet Lejeune’s theory, as Paul John Eakin astutely observes, maintains a crucial distinction between the type of ‘referentiality’ implied in biography – to “the verifiable facts of the life” – and the “self-referential gesture itself as the central and determining event in the transaction of autobiographical reference” (Eakin x, xiv). In adopting what could be read as a rhetorical use of the term ‘truth’, Egan collapses a key distinction in Lejeune’s theory of the autobiographical pact. This then allows her to argue: “This truth claim is most profoundly what separates autobiography from other forms of literature, even those with elements of autobiography in them” (Egan 19).

Egan’s distinctions in both of these examples assert a separation between autobiographical novels and autobiography proper that Lejeune himself characterised as a narrowing gap: “the literary autobiographical novel has come closer to autobiography, to the point of casting more doubt than ever before on the boundary between the two areas” (Lejeune 135). Egan relies on the truth claim concept to uphold a pure form of autobiography in distinction to the hybrid forms containing “elements of autobiography”.
While Susanna Egan seems to have failed to grasp the complexity of Lejeune’s theory, Judith Ryan actively misrepresents it.

In implying that her book was in some sense autobiographical, Helen Darville put to the test yet another contemporary theory: Philippe Lejeune’s concept of the ‘autobiographical pact’. However much the autobiographer – and presumably, by extension, the autobiographical novelist – may seem to retain central features in common with the narrator of his or her text, the basic premise of autobiography is, in fact that ‘je suis un autre.’ (Ryan 177)

‘Je suis un autre’ is a misquotation of the title of Lejeune’s 1980 book *Je est un autre: l’autobiographie de la littérature aux medias*, the first part of which translates as ‘‘I’ is someone else’, or ‘‘I’ is an other’ and not, as Ryan has it “I am someone else”. As for this statement being “the basic premise of autobiography” (which phrase appears originally in *Le pacte* 1973), this is a gross misrepresentation of Lejeune, as it conflates his work on the autobiographical pact in *Le pacte autobiographique* with his later work in *Je est un autre*, which is about autobiography in forms other than the written one.

Although Judith Ryan recognises that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was “presented as a novel and not as an autobiography”, the similarity between the author and the narrator of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is for her a more decisive determinant of genre:

The author’s note clearly states ‘What follows is a work of fiction…’ Still, the Demidenko/Kovalenko similarity led many readers to conclude that the novel was an autobiographical fiction. Why did the book deliberately encourage identification between its author and its narrator? (Ryan 177).

Ryan’s analysis here neatly demonstrates Frow’s idea of genre as an aspect of the relationship between text and reader. The genre indicator provided by the author’s note (‘fiction’), is not powerful enough to override the more subtle and nebulous suggestion provoked by, among other things, the similarity between its author and its narrator – that the book is an autobiography, or at least, that it should be read like one.

Here again is illustration of another of Frow’s key points, that genres exist in a complex relation to each other and to the texts that use them. *The Hand that Signed the Paper* uses the genres of fiction, history and autobiography, as well as invoking the social
meanings that are possible when these three genres intersect. Unlike Egan’s delineation of autobiography and its hybrid cousins, the economy of genres idea allows us to progress from mere taxonomy into a discussion of the semantic field that different genres, and their relationship to a specific text, produce. So, depending on the weight that a critic assigns (whether consciously or not) to a particular genre indicator, he or she will deem that text as a member of a genre (or genres), which interpretive act will in turn influence the kinds of meanings to be deduced from the text. These meanings, like those produced by any classification system, are never neutral. There is power – cultural capital – at stake.

Judged as literature, *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was found unworthy of at least two of the three prizes it won. Judged as history, it was cursed as inaccurate and morally abhorrent. Judged as autobiographical fiction, it was seen as a powerful expression of multicultural identity, until it emerged that its author wasn’t Ukrainian. By the time this deception was revealed, it was too late for the novel to be reclaimed as ‘mere fiction’. As ‘literature’, was *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, as its author claimed, just ‘what people read on the train’, a merely quotidian object? Or was it, as its many prizes attested, *literary*, and thus to be admired as belonging to an exalted realm? If the novel was completely made up, it could not be judged by its correspondence with historical fact; but if it was only partly made up, its author could be held responsible to the moral standards which would apply to a work of history.

In “Literature, small publishers and the market” Mark Davis writes of literature as “a specific type of social information that performs a set of tasks that, taken together, no other genre performs” before concluding that that publishing “has always been a commercial business” (Davis 2008 7). The enmeshment of literature and markets which characterises publishing is evident in books themselves, which “more than any other commodit[ies], seem to offer the possibility of penetrating through to the authentic identity of the author” (Takolander 59). Paradoxically, it is only after the ‘raw material’ of the manuscript has gone through the process of publishing – in other words, once paratexts are added to transform manuscript into book – that this authenticity effect is possible. So the paratexts of a book, when accepted in their functional sense and read seamlessly with the text, reinforce the illusion of authentic identity. However, any
analytical consideration of paratexts militates against this apparent authenticity, precisely because it is only in the industrial process of publishing – the manufacture of the finished product from the raw material of a manuscript – that the illusion of a direct, transparent communion between author and reader is created.

One reviewer who analysed the novel as fiction was able to articulate a complex formulation of the relationship between history as represented in the novel, and historical fact. Ken Stewart’s article “‘Those infernal pictures’: reading Helen Darville, her novel and her critics” is an excellent dissection of the “fictional artifice” of the novel.25 Demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of how genres intersect with each other, he asks:

> When does the novel’s ‘history’, the words and tropes on the page, become separable from fiction, and how does the fictional scheme affect the meaning of the ‘history’? (Stewart 72).

Stewart’s analysis of the novel produces a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the author and the narrator of *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. Drawing attention to the narration of the novel as “the self-reflexive process of Fiona Kovalenko’s enquiry”, he suggests an intricate relationship between Fiona Kovalenko and Helen Demidenko. He argues that because Helen Darville, not Helen Demidenko, was the actual author of the novel, Darville’s signing of the Vogel manuscript as Helen Demidenko is a clue to readers – at this point only the Vogel judges – that the entire narrative is written by Fiona Kovalenko (Stewart 76). As Fiona is an unreliable narrator, this overarching fictional scheme constrains the extent to which the novel’s content can be unproblematically considered as history. Stewart’s insight gains plausibility from the author’s note that accompanied the original manuscript submitted to the Vogel panel: “The things narrated in this book really happened. Its characters are all real people, the things they did historical actualities” (China 3).

John Hughes also analyses the novel in terms of its literary effects. Although he thinks that the novel overall is a failure, he admires the sections directly narrated by Fiona Kovalenko, which have “an engaging doubt and self-consciousness” and in which the

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25 Stewart was one of three judges who awarded the novel the Australian Literature Society’s Gold Medal.
“voice is honest and rings true” (767). He argues that the ambivalence that Fiona Kovalenko displays about her investigation of family history could have created an interesting novel, if it was carried through to the way the story is told. Instead, he sees a “great emptiness at the heart of the book”, which he views as a literary, rather than a moral, failure (Hughes 767).

However, critics who considered the novel strictly as fiction are in the minority.26 The debate about the meaning of this extraordinary cultural event was conducted from a wide range of vantage points, both by the ‘usual suspects’ (tabloid, broadsheet and broadcast journalists of all political persuasions, academics, literary critics) and some less familiar participants (a librarian at Northern Territory University, the Director of the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation Commission). The interpretive contexts in which the Demidenko Affair was discussed include a descriptive survey of Australian literary hoaxes (Nolan and Dawson); discussions of national identity in a multi-cultural Australia (Goldie; Hyde; Mycak); post-modern notions of the performative nature of identity and the role of the ‘Other’ (McPaul; Shapiro; Hatzimanolis); the uses to which the “media effect” of the Demidenko Affair was put (Wark); “a collective misrecognition of the latent racism of Australian cultural life” (Da Costa 72).

As most of these articles appeared in specialist journals, and as most of the authors on the list published only one article about Demidenko (the exception is Wark), the terms in which the debate was conducted in the mainstream media were set elsewhere. As Mark Davis argues in Gangland, his thorough dissection of the cultural cliques which dominate cultural debate in Australia, the ‘literary establishment’ often mentioned in coverage of the Demidenko Affair was actually a coterie of journal editors, columnists and critics who published each other’s articles, and three of the four books on Demidenko were by “middle-aged men with strong press connections” (Davis 1999 216).

The two books which critique The Hand that Signed the Paper are Andrew Riemer’s The Demidenko debate, which basically defends it, and Robert Manne’s The culture of forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust, which roundly denounces it. By

26 Another critic who does is Morag Fraser, whose review “The begetting of violence” appeared in Meanjin.
choosing to discuss only Manne’s book at length, I do not mean to endorse Riemer’s
defence of *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. I am concerned with autobiographical
readings of Demidenko’s novel, and since Riemer critiques the novel as fiction, his
book is less relevant to my argument than Manne’s.

By virtue of his output alone, Manne’s critique is worthy of close attention. In addition
to his book, he published at least four articles about Demidenko (two in *Quadrant*, one
each in *The Age* and *The Australian*). In the second of these four articles “The strange
case of Helen Demidenko” (published in September 1995 in *Quadrant*), Manne
acknowledges that “Helen Demidenko’s novel must be judged, in part, as fiction”
(Manne 24). However, in *The culture of forgetting*, Manne not only favours an
autobiographical reading of the novel, but he also seems unaware or unable to
acknowledge that this is what he is doing.

Deploying his training as an historian, Manne devotes the second half of his book to a
convincing argument about the novel’s anti-Semitism. As this issue is not relevant to
my argument, this critique instead focuses on the first section, “Part 1: The affair”, in
which Manne identifies “the central Demidenko puzzle” as “the nature of the
relationship between this particular teller and her tale” (Manne 1995 21). Before he
discusses Demidenko’s book, Manne gives a brief sketch of her life story in a chapter
titled “The Making of Helen Demidenko”. In this decision we can see Frow’s point
about how genre works to structure a reader’s interpretation, as this chapter lays the
groundwork for Manne’s interpretation of the novel as though it is an autobiography.
Manne decides that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is an autobiography in disguise,
and therefore he approaches the text forensically, as a case to be solved.

Using the same textual features that Ken Stewart relied on in his analysis of the novel as
fiction, Manne produces an autobiographical reading. For him, the ‘fact’ that Helen
Demidenko and the family in the manuscript of her novel share the same name is a
stronger indicator of the novel’s genre than the rest of the textual and contextual
information which presented it as fiction. He also devotes significant space to
determining what he calls the “authorial presence” (Manne 1996a 124) in the sections of the novel narrated by a third-person narrator.27

At the end of this section, Manne ruminates on why the anti-Semitism he perceived in *The Hand that Signed the Paper* affected him so deeply, despite his not living as a Jew either culturally or religiously. In a paragraph in which he emphasises the importance of his knowledge of the Holocaust and the fate of his grandparents, he says “Very recently I had given a partly autobiographical political talk to a group among whom were many of my closest friends…To my complete astonishment when I arrived at that part of the typescript I almost wept.” (Manne 1996a 106). This personal anecdote is provided to explain the “intensity of [his] response”, there follows Manne’s justification for the wider cultural significance this response prompts: “I had assumed that we all knew that no one worth reading would dare to write about the Holocaust without humility and high seriousness” (Manne 1996a 106).

Here then is a different type of autobiographical reading of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* – not in terms of its being an autobiography itself, but in terms of how it measures up against the facts of the reviewer’s own life. Thus although Manne is using the discourse of autobiography to interpret the novel, he invokes only one of the semantic systems of autobiography – the referential system. (Lejeune described autobiography as belonging to two ‘systems’ – the referential and the literary.) Manne relies on this notion of referentiality to explain how readers could have been moved despite the novel’s dispassionate description of “scenes of slaughter”: “[T]heir pity was aroused not by the text but by something extrinsic to it, their own awareness of the meaning of what it recorded” (Manne 1996a 128). Some literary critics interpret the detachment of the narrator as part of the novel’s overall literary effect, but Manne sees it as a straightforward depiction of the author’s attitude towards the Holocaust.

For Manne, the only important reference to “something extrinsic” that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* makes is to an actual historical event. This idea that texts can – or should – create “a faithful copy of the real” is challenged by Paul John Eakin, who

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27 Manne’s previously published article “The strange case of Helen Demidenko”, also assumes the indivisibility of narrator and author. For example, “The idea [about a character’s behaviour]…does not seem to have occurred to Fiona Kovalenko, or, for that matter, to Helen Demidenko.” (Manne 1995b 21).
claims instead that the documentary reference autobiographies make lies in “the
unwitting imitation of common narrative forms that constitute the lingua franca of
verisimilitude at a given moment in the life of a culture” (Eakin xxi). In other words,
there are culturally and historically specific ways of writing about ‘the real world’ –
whether such writing takes the form of history, biography or autobiography.

It follows that if these narrative forms are to become lingua franca, there must be some
process through which they are codified and disseminated. One such process, or to use
Frow’s term, one “material infrastructure” (13) for modifying and regulating genres is
the practice of awarding literary prizes. Genres and prizes are both tools by which
participants in the cultural field organise symbolic action. The primary discourse of
genre is semantic: what kinds of meaning does a novel or an autobiography produce?;
while the predominant discourse of prizes is one of value: what is this cultural product
worth?

Or, as James English phrases it in *The economy of prestige: prizes, awards and the
circulation of cultural value*: “every field may be understood as part of a general
economy of practices, a broad social logic that involves interested participants in the
struggle for power…to confer value on that which does not intrinsically possess it”
(English 9). English applies Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of fields of cultural production to
the whole prize-giving endeavour and discovers an ambivalence at its core, because the
practice “serves simultaneously as a means of recognizing an ostensibly higher,
uniquely aesthetic form of value and as an arena in which such value often appears
subject to the most businesslike system of production and exchange” (English 7). Put
crudely, prize-giving is a public arena in which the values of commerce and art meet,
and often, conflict. English sees prizes as fundamentally about the exchange of cultural
prestige, and structures his inquiry using the following questions:

> How is such prestige produced, and where does it reside? (In people? In
things? In relationships between people and things?) What rules govern its
 circulation? (English 3).

English’s emphasis on the transactional aspect of prize-giving echoes Frow’s insight
that genre emerges in the relationship between texts and readers. For Frow, texts
circulate within an “economy of genres” (2), which means that changing relationships
between genres can alter the way a particular text is interpreted, or, to extend the economic metaphor, ‘valued’. The practice of assigning value to artistic output, which sometimes remains implicit in literary criticism, is made explicit in prize-giving, and the ‘currency’ that applies to prizes is capital, in all its forms. English sees prizes as “the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital…our most effective institutional agents of capital intraconversion” (10, original emphasis). Each prize enables and expresses a different combination of these types of capital, but as English emphasises “[e]very type of capital everywhere is ‘impure’ because…every holder of capital is continually putting his or her capital to work in an effort to defend or modify the ratios of that impurity” (10). The Vogel and Miles Franklin judges’ defences of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* may thus be understood as efforts to maintain their social and cultural capital.

Like genres, prizes are embedded in hierarchies of value – some prizes are worth more than others, both in prestige and in the monetary reward they confer – and the two are not necessarily positively correlated, although as English observes “[t]he most prestigious awards draw the most intensely critical sniping” (English 187). This observation holds for *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. Criticism of the novel prior to its Miles Franklin Award win focussed on its contentious treatment of Holocaust history; there was little suggestion that it was an unworthy winner of the Vogel prize, as Darville herself recognised:

[INTERVIEWER]: “You winning the Miles Franklin is probably the most spectacular case where someone under 25 has been successful in recent times in the Arts. But it certainly isn’t being presented as an inspiring example to hold up to aspiring young writers.”

DARVILLE: “Why would the powers that be set it up as an inspiring example, when it generated such a shit-fight?...I won old, distinguished prizes (notice, no-one said "boo" for the Vogel prize two years earlier) and rattled too many cages – psychological, theoretical, social, whatever.” (Westbury).

Andrew Riemer seems to confirm Darville’s suspicion that it was her winning the ‘old, distinguished’ Miles Franklin Award, and to a lesser extent, the ALS Gold Medal, that drew the most rancour amongst what Riemer calls “the literary community” (138). In a
chapter detailing objections (both his and others’) to these two prizes, Riemer highlights the primary issue as “the impropriety of distinguishing an immature though compelling first novel”, and called for “a clear distinction…to be drawn between prizes intended for young writers, such as the Vogel, and other, less restricted prizes and distinctions” (Riemer 1996 138).

As with the popular perception of the Vogel as an award for adult fiction, it is not commonly known that the Miles Franklin can be awarded to works other than novels. However, only if no novel is considered worthy, may it be “given, at the discretion of the judges, to the author of a play for either stage, radio or television, or other such medium as may develop” (2010 Award application form). This term implies that the script genres are of lesser literary merit than the novel, providing one example of the way in which prizes can perpetuate the prestige of a particular genre. (Of course, prizes can also attempt to boost the prestige associated with under-recognised art-forms.)

Until the recent inception of the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards28 and the Melbourne Prize for Literature29, the Miles Franklin award was the most lucrative fiction prize in Australia, and it could be argued that it remains the most prestigious, given its long history, its thematic criterion of phases of Australian life, and, perhaps most pertinently, its lack of corporate sponsorship or government patronage.30 Although no critic is likely to state it so baldly, the government-supported prizes and those bestowed by private foundations with corporate support are, however slightly, tainted, perhaps because, in English’s terms, their economic capital has not been sufficiently ‘laundered’. Even as the nation’s “top literary prize” (Clarke), the Miles Franklin is not immune from scandal. The year before the Demidenko Affair, Frank Moorhouse threatened legal action when his novel Grand Days was deemed ineligible due to its foreign setting.

However, rather than seeing scandals in prize-giving as an aberration, English argues that “[e]very new prize is always already scandalous. The question is simply whether it will attract enough attention for this latent scandalousness to become manifest in the

28 Est. 2008, worth $AU100,000 and awarded to a fiction and to a non-fiction title annually.
29 Est. 2006, $AU60,000 tri-annual prize which was established by the Committee for Melbourne and is administered by a trust fund.
30 Although it is partially funded by the Nelson Meers Foundation, which is a philanthropic organisation.
public sphere” (192). Pursuing this line of thought further, he characterises scandal as the device most “perfectly suited…to making things happen on the field of culture” (English 190). While it is clear that scandal pervaded every aspect of the Demidenko Affair – the novel’s anti-Semitic themes, its Miles Franklin Award, accusations of plagiarism and the revelation that Helen Demidenko was an impostor – its legacy for the cultural field of the Australian literary community is still being written.

My interest in the Demidenko Affair arose from my conviction that it challenged Barthes’s notion of the authorless text, if only because in the raft of articles the Affair inspired, the figure of Helen Demidenko was subjected to at least as much scrutiny as her novel. (Which is perfectly understandable: her sustained performance of a completely fabricated persona was compelling, to say the least.) Using Lejeune and other theorists to explore the elusive, mutable and historically changeable genre of autobiography, I realised that the social meanings it organises are particularly suited to interpreting the Demidenko Affair. To return to the Tess Cosslett quote from Chapter 1:

Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 1).

Fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary; these four borders form the field on which the Demidenko Affair played out. Was The Hand that Signed the Paper fiction, fact, or ‘faction’? Was it Demidenko’s ‘uncle’ Vitaly Kovalenko’s personal account of history? Or narrator Fiona Kovalenko’s personal reclamation of family history? Were the reasons the author chose to write and to make public appearances as Helen Demidenko purely her own business – a ‘personal’ matter – or did her imposture prove her flagrant disregard for social norms? Like the split subjects of autobiographical writing – the ‘I’ who writes and the ‘she’ who is written about – the figure of Helen Demidenko remains, almost fifteen years after her death, at once frustratingly elusive and endlessly fascinating.

With the theoretical groundwork in place, I can now expand on how the creative component of this thesis is informed by autobiography theory. Thematically, the
coming-of-age narrative links to James Olney’s idea of autobiography as a “monument to the self as it is becoming” (35) and is a widely-used narrative form for tales of adolescent self-discovery. By choosing to write fiction in this mode, I aim to explore the way in which these borders are permeable, in order to have the best of both worlds: the ability to rearrange events in a meaningful way that fiction affords, and the verisimilitude and immediacy that a first-person narrative conveys.
Conclusion

In *The death and return of the author: criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Seán Burke calls Roland Barthes’s article “The death of the author”: “the single most influential meditation on the question of authorship in modern times” (19) and argues that “the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead” (7), a paradox that would no doubt please Lejeune. While Lejeune imagines the author-reader relationship as reciprocal, for Barthes it is brutally competitive: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (Barthes 148). Even as a rhetorical flourish, Barthes’s claim is bold, and while Burke respects the contribution to literary theory that Barthes, Foucault and Derrida have made as “strong poets of the age” (ix), in a recursive critical move, he deconstructs the deconstructionists, driven by “the sheer incomprehensibility of ‘the death of the author’ to even the finest minds outside [academia]” (ix).

Burke’s Prologue, “The deaths of Paul de Man” sketches the re-evaluation of this deconstructionist’s academic career which was occasioned by the posthumous discovery that de Man wrote articles for a Nazi newspaper early in his career. Burke suggests that the subsequent debate contains “six cardinal intersections of author and text”, which are: intention, author-ity, biography, accountability, oeuvre and autobiography (Burke 4). Leaving aside the self-explanatory categories of intention, biography and oeuvre, the other categories are described by Burke as follows. ‘Author-ity’ refers to the relevance of de Man’s standing as a philosopher/theorist to the seriousness with which the revelations of possible Nazi collaboration were treated. ‘Accountability’ describes the way in which de Man’s “fellow theorists” set aside their beloved theoretical concept “that the author is a mere fiction or trace of language” and instead “defended de Man as a person”, thus demonstrating that “the signature ‘Paul de Man’ is something greatly in excess of a textual effect’ (Burke 5, original emphasis). ‘Autobiography’ stands for critical readings of de Man’s theory as either “autobiographical suppression” or “an elliptical and indirect form of confession” (6).

These strands of debate were also represented in the Demidenko Affair, with the exceptions of author-ity and oeuvre. (Unlike de Man, Helen D. was not a respected
theorist, or indeed, even a known author, nor did she have an oeuvre against which her intentions in *The Hand that Signed the Paper* could be weighed.) Although intention and biography also bear on the Demidenko Affair, these themes have been discussed previously, which leaves the intertwined themes of accountability and autobiography. The author’s accountability for his/her text in Lejune’s autobiographical pact is signalled by the proper name which signifies the author-as-legal-person, and indeed this notion of accountability inheres in the French term *récit*, one meaning of which is ‘account’. But as Burke’s analysis of the text Lejeune dubbed “the anti-Pact *par excellence*” (Le Pacte (bis) 134) : *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* [*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*] shows, the question of who is to be held responsible for authoring an autobiography is problematic.

By all accounts *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* is a radical text and Burke recognises that other critics see it as “announcing the end of autobiography” (54). Burke considers such pronouncements premature, although he does acknowledge that *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* “would seem to be breaking the timehonoured autobiographical contract – that the self writing and the self written on should be one and the same self” (54). Barthes’ foregrounding of this division of subjects in autobiographical writing serves to illustrate that other documentary genres (e.g. history, biography) proceed via a false premise, which is that the past can be “spirited in all its reality into the here and now of the text’s composition” (Burke 57, original emphasis). By contrast *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* places “the duplicities of representation…under question; [especially] the legerdemain by which the hand that writes seeks to efface itself in the interests of re-presenting the past as an immediate reality” (Burke 57).

In Burke’s critique, Barthes’s desire to pronounce the author dead is contextualised as a way of wrenching genres from their “naturalistic setting[s]” and “advertis[ing] their inherent problematics” (57). Given this context, I can see that Barthes’s proclamation that “the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent” (Barthes 145) and Lejeune’s modest suggestion of his entire autobiography oeuvre as an example of merely one ‘mode of reading’, derive from a similar aim. Despite their apparently contradictory positions on the author’s relevance to the text,
Lejeune and Barthes are both concerned with problematising the relationship between genre and texts; Lejeune by meticulous empirical research and careful reasoning, and Barthes by formal experimentation and iconoclastic proclamations.31

Lejeune continues his life’s work on autobiography, in all its forms. His most recent book is ‘Cher ecran—’: Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet ['Dear Screen—': Diary, computer, Internet] and it deals with blogs, which he considers the newest form of autobiographical writing. In a recent lecture “From autobiography to life-writing, from academia to association: a scholar’s story”, Lejeune said: “autobiography is not primarily a literary genre, but first and foremost a widely spread practice [and so] it is risky to tackle it only from the point of view of its reception” (Lejeune 2005). I read this as a recognition that criticism which aims to control the proliferation of autobiographical discourse – to root it out of literary novels, history, or biography, to condemn it as at best narcissistic and at worst irrelevant – is misguided and ultimately, futile. As I have tried to demonstrate in this analysis of the Demidenko Affair, autobiography is pervasive, not only as a mode of writing, but as a mode of reading.

To illustrate: when I looked up the word ‘legerdemain’ used in the Burke quote about 
*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, I discovered that it means trickery or sleight of hand. I immediately thought of its resonance with *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, particularly the epigraph from which Demidenko drew her novel’s title: “Great is the hand that holds dominion over / Man by a scribbled name” (from the Dylan Thomas poem, “The Hand that Signed the Paper”). This connection tempted me to muse about whether Helen D. had deliberately planted a clue to her deception in plain sight – by suggesting that her hand as the author Helen Demidenko wielded a regent’s power over her readers. Despite devoting much of my argument here to revealing the way in which autobiographical readings of the novel affected the terms in which her imposture was received, at the last moment, I, too was (nearly) deceived.

_________________________

31 Barthes was apparently not averse to exploiting his celebrity author status, as Burke notes, “[t]he theorist of the author’s death…was an enthusiastic interviewee on television, the radio, for newspapers…” (61).
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Trade press


Appendices

Appendix 1: *The Hand that Signed the Paper*'s changing peritext

Appendix 2: Advertisement from Australian Bookseller and Publisher
### Appendix 1: *The Hand that Signed the Paper’s* changing peritext

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### Appendix 1: *The Hand that Signed the Paper’s* changing peritext

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<tr>
<td><strong>Author Bio</strong></td>
<td>Helen Demidenko was born in Brisbane in 1971 and educated at the University of Queensland, where she read English and classics. She began writing short stories and poetry while still in high school and <em>The Hand that Signed the Paper</em> is her first novel.</td>
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<td><em>Addition to start of text:</em> The Hand that Signed the Paper was first published under the authorship of Helen Demidenko. The author’s name, in fact, is Helen Darville. She was born…</td>
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<td>Helen Demidenko</td>
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<td>Helen Darville</td>
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<td><strong>Dedication</strong></td>
<td>For my family, and for Melissa Richards and Paul Gadaloff.</td>
<td>Same as first edition</td>
<td>For my family, and for Melissa Richards.</td>
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## Appendix 1: *The Hand that Signed the Paper’s* changing peritext

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<td><strong>Author’s Note</strong></td>
<td>What follows is a work of fiction. The Kovalenko family depicted in this novel has no counterpart in reality. Nonetheless, it would be ridiculous to pretend that this book is unhistorical: I have used historical events and people where necessary throughout the text. I would like to thank friends and family who talked with me, particularly Paul and Bronislaw, who helped with translations and constructive criticism. I also wish to extend my thanks to Dr Con Castan, Department of English, University of Queensland, for his advice and support. Stories taken from many sources I have written, I hope, with love.</td>
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Appendix 2: Advertisement from Australian Bookseller and Publisher, July 1994

ALLEN & UNWIN
Independent publishers of quality fiction, non-fiction, academic and children’s books

Distributors for other leading Australian and international publishers

Telephone (02) 901 4088 Facsimile (02) 906 2218
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The Pact

by M. Denham
Autobiography, if there really is such a thing, is like asking a rabbit to tell us what he looks like hopping through the grasses of the field. If we want to hear about the field, on the other hand, no one is in a better circumstance to tell us – so long as we keep in mind that we are missing all those things the rabbit was in no position to observe.

from the Translator’s Note prefacing the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden.
Prologue

I offer you a scene: I am sitting on a chair, or perhaps a couch. I’m holding an exercise book. The brown cardboard cover is embossed with a school crest, the words SECRET KEEP OUT scrawled underneath in red Texta letters. I pick it up, open it, and there I am: on the threshold of a realm I have created by the deceptively ordinary act of turning a page. This act has created a pause, a tiny rupture in the normal order of things. I’m still whoever I was a moment ago, with one vital difference: I have just accepted an invitation. It’s not clear exactly where this invitation comes from, because it hasn’t arrived in an envelope covered in clues – a stamp, a postmark, an address – or preceded by an electronic beep or a flashing icon. But wherever it comes from, it generates a slight butterfly-flutter in my stomach. Someone wants me to play. It nudges me gently toward a memory of the street I grew up in and the games I played there. What will we play? It might be doctors and nurses, or keeping house. Then again – who knows, this invitation has no sender and is without explicit instructions – it could be that I’m being invited to play some nameless game created by an 11-year-old petty dictator who changes the rules on a whim. Let’s make it, says this bossy kid, Let’s make it that you have to stay inside that circle and you’re not allowed to come out, no matter what happens. I step inside the circle, scared by the implied threat, my throat taut with anticipation of a boundary about to bend. The rules are different now, I tell myself. I close my eyes. I feel something – a blindfold – being tied around my head, then my hands are bound. I’m spun around three times, then stopped. The blindfold comes off, my hands are freed; I’ve survived the unmaking of the old me, and now I’m the new me that I’ll be until the bully calls the end.

So there I was then and here I am now. Back in the weird pause: the moment of the unfolding world suspended and gathered, about to begin. Here with you at the start of the game. I didn’t make the rules, but they’re simple, and no one is going to get hurt. You’re an adult, after all. All we’re doing is playing the oldest childhood game. Let’s pretend.
Part 1: 1984

1. Sam and the logbook

My name is Mel. When I was in Year Six, I stalked a boy at my school. In case you think I’m some kind of psycho, let me assure you it was pretty mild stuff. Actually, it was more like spying than stalking, since there was more watching than following. For much of the summer holidays that ended 1983, I lay sprawled on the caravan’s hot vinyl mattress devouring a box-set of Nancy Drew mysteries, shunning both my family and my visiting rellies. For the rest of that summer and into autumn, I kept watch: writing down car number-plates, peering through binoculars. I reckon my interest would have waned, and this girl-detective hobby faded away, if it weren’t for two huge changes in my life: moving and puberty.

I’d recently begun a new nightly routine. After I emerged from the tub, I’d lock the bathroom door and then, limbs still wet, clamber onto the edge of the bath so I could see myself in the not-quite-full-length mirror which hung over the basin. With arms first hanging straight, and then raised above my head, I scanned each centimetre, alert to any swelling or sprouting of hair that would signal the start of my transformation from girl to teenager. I was just starting to resent Mum’s constant fussing, the way she would bustle into my room when I lay staring at the ceiling. I yearned for my body to supply confirmation that puberty was coming, but it remained obstinately familiar: the flat chest, the straight line from hips to waist, the pink, hairless armpits and crotch. So when I started school, I watched my new classmates closely, certain that I’d know from their behaviour whether they possessed the secret knowledge of adolescence I ached for.

Dad would drop me off on his way to the station, so I usually got to school early. It was the middle of the school year, a cold dry August, and I was the only new kid in the class. I didn’t really have any friends yet, so I got into the habit of hanging around the school gates, killing time before the bell. Kids arrived in pretty much the same order each morning. Wentworth Falls Primary was on Falls Road, which led to the waterfall
the town was named for. The next town down the mountain was Bullaburra. The school bus didn’t go there, so Bullaburra kids all came by car. Like Kylie Hussey, whose mum drove a dilapidated two-door Ford Escort. Kylie’s bum was practically in her mum’s face as she got out, but she never looked back to wave goodbye.

Next came a crew of Year Five and Six boys, riding BMXs. At 7.45 the buses pulled in. After that came another round of cars, much newer than the first lot. These parents parked, planted goodbye kisses on reluctant cheeks, and waited around until their kids were safely inside the school grounds. The last group of arrivals were the kids who lived close enough to walk to school.

Right from the early days of my loitering career, Sam stood out. He had the most unnaturally blond hair, that shade that is almost white. His Dad had blond hair too, and they arrived together every morning. They walked side-by-side, and always stopped a few metres shy of the gate. There the two blondies played a parting game, which went like this: Dad would scan the passing parade of parents, select someone’s father with his pointed finger and cock his head sideways towards Sam. Sam would stand, hand on hip, brow furrowed, and consider the target. Usually, Sam’d screw up his nose, purse his lips and emphatically shake his head. His dad would shrug his stocky shoulders and point to another bloke. Sam would shake his head again. This would go on a while – sometimes as long as five minutes – until finally his dad would turn his shotgun finger on himself and Sam’s head would bob madly up and down, like an unhinged jack-in-the-box. This was how the game always ended: with a hand ruffling hair and a big grin on both faces.

My logbook shows that I’d been conducting my surveillance for about three weeks when I got busted. By this time, I’d started to think of the bare patch of ground under two pine trees as my post, and I’d almost come to expect the tough kids taunting me with “What’s the colour of a two-cent piece? Copper, copper” when Dad drove away in the divvy van.

So there I was, scanning the arrivals, keeping my peepers peeled for the two main targets, who were yet to arrive. I’d knelt down to enter the morning’s other arrivals in the red pen columns headed “Who” and “How Long”, when a voice behind me said
“You’re not invisible, you know.” The pen spun from my fingers and dropped into the dirt. I snapped the book shut, and with my face burning like a canteen hot pie, turned around to find the voice’s owner. Looking down at me was a pale, freckled face wearing a frown, crowned by a blond fringe. The blue eyes watched me calmly, waiting for an answer.

He held my gaze as I stood up. “No,” I said slowly.

He watched me silently for a bit longer, peering suspiciously at my hands, which were wringing the log book as if it was a wet towel. Finally he said, “Maths, huh?”

That comment was a get-out-of-jail-free card, but his narrowed eyes and wry smile told me he knew it. Nodding furiously, I tapped the book on my left arm, waiting to see what he’d say next.

He stood still; close enough to touch, arms folded and head tilted quizzically. He watched me twitch for a few more seconds, then shrugged casually as if to dismiss me. He took two steps away from me, paused, looked over his shoulder and said, “Just so you know who you’re watching, I’m Sam.”

Of course I knew his name – after all, I heard it every morning at roll call. I also heard it most lunchtimes, from the gang of eager boys who jostled to be picked for his handball or basketball games. I knew other things about him too, things that took a bit more initiative to find out. I’d followed him home one Friday afternoon – darting from tree to telegraph pole to shrub to avoid being seen – and watched his teenage sisters greet him as ‘spaceman’. I was a library monitor, so I knew he’d borrowed BMX Bikes for Rad Boys four times. And I had a crush on him, but until now, I’d been so intent on finding out whatever I could about Sam that he’d become a collection of facts, a puzzle that I wanted to solve. It hadn’t occurred to me to actually talk to him.

You might be sceptical how much I really remember about primary school. I don’t blame you. I’ve been around long enough to know we all retell the stories we star in and try to forget the ones that make us cringe. The last time I caught up with my baby brother, he mentioned in passing the year I’d opened all his birthday presents. I laughed and put on a “you-got-me-there” face, even as I was thinking That doesn’t
sound like me. Even later, after Mum confirmed Simon’s story, I racked my brains in vain trying to find an entry in my mental filing cabinet that matched.

The file marked “Bad memories of my first school” is similarly empty. The city school where I spent years one to five I remember instead through a series of soft-focus images of beaming, ruddy-faced children. I know there’s no way it was sunny for five years without a break, that I must have occasionally forgotten my lunch, stepped in dog poo or fallen off the monkey bars, that someone must have teased me, but when I think about those early school years, they all blur into one, with just my grade, my shoe size and my teacher changing each year.

That year I spent at Wentworth Falls Primary stands out. I was the city kid, and even though Sydney was only a two-hour drive away, I might as well have come from outer space. It’s easy to imagine now, knowing how that year ended, that Sam’s disappearance is the reason my memories of 1984 are so clear. But even before we moved, I remember telling myself that the last year of primary school was a really big deal. I had a feeling that life-changing things were going to happen and that I’d better keep my wits about me. That’s why everything about the day Sam busted me is crystal clear.

I waited until Sam’s backpack disappeared behind the hall before following him to class. Slanted shafts of light lit up Mrs Dunstan’s back where she stood clucking “Quickly and quietly, quickly and quietly, children” at the rabble of red and blue uniforms stomping into the classroom. I hung my bag on its hook, making sure the logbook was safely hidden, and it was then my bad morning got worse. My homework, “An Eloquent Discussion of the Death Penalty for Drug Pushers”, which I’d written out in my best cursive, with Dad’s help on the finer points of criminal justice, was still on the phone table. I’d been peering into the hall mirror, teasing my fringe with a comb when I caught sight of Mum’s reflection and charged out the door, blind with embarrassment.

I can still remember my throat clenching with shame when Mrs Dunstan called on me to read first. I’d never failed a teacher before.
“Sure,” I squeaked, lifting the lid of my desk, “It must be somewhere in here, just give me a minute –” I shuffled the papers around, wondering how long this stalling technique could work, when I heard Mrs Dunstan say “Yes, Sam, what is it?”

“Sorry, Miss, but I’ve got Mel’s book in my bag. I forgot to give it back to her yesterday.”

Mrs Dunstan let out an exasperated sigh, walked over and collected the book, while I shot Sam a puzzled look, and got a little shrug and a tiny, corners-of-the-mouth grin in reply. I expected Mrs Dunstan to bring the book to me. Instead she placed it carefully in her desk drawer. “You’ll both stay after class,” she said.

The bell announcing recess finally clanged, and I was sent to wait in the hallway while she spoke to Sam alone. He sauntered out a few minutes later and gave me a ‘thumbs-up’. I could manage only a wan smile; my stomach was still tight with fear.

As soon as I realised detention was out of the question, I tuned out Mrs Dunstan’s gently scolding voice and let the mouldy smell of the carpet and the drifting chalk dust of the classroom recede as I gazed over her shoulder, searching the hurtling hordes at recess for Sam’s mop of blond hair and thinking Maybe he likes me, maybe he really likes me.

That afternoon as I waited outside school for Sam to finish soccer practice, I couldn’t decide if I was grateful or annoyed until he caught my eye and immediately left his mates to scramble up the embankment that separated me from the oval. As he climbed, I mentally rehearsed saying “Thanks,” really coolly, the way TV cops always seemed to.

He beat me to it “So now you owe me one.”

“OK,” I said, surprising myself with how calm I sounded.

“Gimme your maths book.”

“What?”
His eyes narrowed as he replied, “You know, that book. The one I saw you writing in.”

So the homework thing was just a ploy to get his hands on my logbook. I pulled a lock of hair in front of my face, twisting it as I wrestled with my disappointment.

He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the fence. “Or, I could tell Mrs Dunstan –”

I slung my bag so quickly off my shoulder I nearly fell over. He sat down on a nearby bench, the pages rustling as he turned them carefully, following each entry with his finger. I was too nervous to look right at him, but every now and then I snuck a sideways glance. All I could see was the end of his nose poking out from the curtain of his hair, and his body hunched over with concentration.

When he finally sat back he was wearing a sly smile. “This is a logbook, isn’t it?”

It surprised me to hear admiration in his voice. “Yeah,” I said tentatively, bracing myself for an insult.

Instead he jumped up, rolled the book into a cylinder and beat it against the bench behind me, pacing back and forth, muttering “It could work … it would be good for us to have someone like this … Better check, though…”

Then he stopped and thrust his face next to mine, so close I could smell his shampoo. His eyes darted sideways as he asked “Can you keep a secret?”

That was the first I heard of the Keyhole Club.

A few days later, I went to school feeling a bit dodgy, spewed in class and wound up in sick bay, where I met the club’s only other member.

2. An encounter in Sick Bay

Sick bay was a long narrow room behind the school’s office. It was lit like a dungeon and had damp cement walls to match. The greenish glow which came through a tiny window near the ceiling fell on two beds covered in thin grey army blankets, one each side of the door. Most kids who chucked a sickie – which, let’s face it, was most kids – chucked for real when they inhaled the room’s delightful aroma of Dettol, 4711 eau-de-parfum and Gestetner ink.
In the green gloom, all I could see of my cell-mate was a hand, which floated up and then rested limply on a forehead as a voice whispered, “Nurse says I’m not to get up.”

The door creaked shut; the dim light of the room resumed. I sat on the edge of the bed, holding my woozy head in my hands. My fellow patient let out an exaggerated sigh followed by a delicate cough, then said “Who are you?”

Just then my guts made a bid for freedom via my mouth, so I lay down quickly, still silent. It didn’t seem to matter to my interrogator.

“Well, I’m Sarah and I’m in Mr Kinney’s class. If I could see you I’d know exactly who you are, ’cos I know everyone.”

My eyes had adjusted to the dull light, and the form on the other bed was slowly revealed: a pair of pale legs shod in hi-top Reeboks, delicate wrists, both decorated with multicoloured friendship bracelets, and a feminine face (eyes closed), topped with a spray of blonde hair held high with a scrunchie. It was none other than Sarah Charles, queen of the playground, the prettiest, most popular girl in school. I turned back to face the ceiling.

I was seriously out of my depth. Once again, I made no reply.

I heard Sarah roll onto her side to face me. Another girly cough, then, brightly conversational, “So, what’s wrong with you?”

My breath caught in my throat: my lonely lunchtimes told me there were lots of things wrong with me, but so far no one had been rude enough to say so. I needed Sarah to like me, otherwise I’d never be part of the Keyhole Club. So for the third time I said nothing. I had to bite my bottom lip to stop it trembling.

“Well, I suppose you could say I’m prying.” She paused. “My case is perspected concussion.”

My relief at understanding her question came out as a half-sigh, half-word: ohhhh.
“I expect I’ll need a scan,” she said with a worldly air. “Probably Daddy will send me to Doctor Watts in Macquarie Street. You’d better get checked by a proper doctor too, for, what did you say you had—”

“Tummyache,” I said, wishing I knew the grown-up word for it.

“Most likely gastro,” she said.

I didn’t dare correct her. I was so desperate for approval that I couldn’t risk mispronouncing the name of her ailment.

I squirmed, forcing a loud plastic fart from the bed. I smirked as an even louder fart came from Sarah’s bed. Co-conspirators now, we giggled and shushed each other. We lay there for a while, listening to the clack-clackety-clack-ding of the office ladies typing next door.

Then she said “Are you really sick?”

I hesitated for a moment, long enough for her to say “Cos I’m not.”

“Me neither,” I said quickly, silently beseeching a higher power Please don’t let her find out about the spew.

“Ohhh, I just hate sport,” she said. “It gives me the beehives.”

It was almost time for lunch when the nurse came and sent us back to our separate classrooms. In the hallway, Sarah asked my name. Her eyes widened and then she looked at me thoughtfully and nodded. Sam’s told her, I thought, and opened my mouth to say something, but she’d already started walking away.

Back at my desk, Carla Simons moved her chair as far to the left as she could, while on the other side of me, Beth Carson held her nose and glared. I slunk lower in my chair, surreptitiously sniffing the armpits of my borrowed uniform and wishing Mum would let me wear deodorant.

At lunch, I was trudging towards my usual spot on the benches around the oval when someone called my name. It was Sarah, waving from the back of the shelter shed, where all the cool girls, including her disciples Carla and Beth, sat studiously ignoring the boys playing on the adjacent asphalt courts. When Sarah threaded her arm through
mine, a puff of air scented with “Instantly Innocent” deodorant escaped. I clamped my arms against my body, in the hope that my own unfragranced armpits wouldn’t give me away.

Carla at least covered her dismay at my arrival with a fake smile. Beth on the other hand barely looked up from picking sultanas out of her raisin bread. When I peeled the wax paper from my lentil loaf, she said incredulously to Sarah, “What on earth is she eating? Looks like dog food.” Sarah shut Beth up by offering to swap me her white-bread-Devon-and-sauce sandwich. (I declined – I knew it was a token gesture.)

It must have been as awkward for Carla and Beth as it was for me. No doubt they were also wondering what Sarah saw in this nondescript newcomer. Funny thing is, every time I bring it up, Sarah insists that she just knew we’d be friends forever. If I dare to suggest that the other two must have protested that I was too daggy to hang out with them, she simultaneously flatters me and dismisses them with a comment like “Oh, I had outgrown those cows, and you were way cooler than them anyway...”, before recounting a well-worn anecdote about the two of us, which suggests that Carla and Beth vanished out of Sarah’s life immediately after that lunch, when actually they all bored me stupid in Year 10 with their debates about whether ivory or cream was the more flattering shade for a debutante dress, and Carla supplied the razor blades when we pledged eternal friendship on Year 12 results day.

Anyway, at the time I was so dizzy with this blossoming friendship that it didn’t strike me as strange that a girl who claimed to hate sport would invite me to her brother’s soccer match.

But it wasn’t long before I saw the reason behind this invitation.

3. Initiation

I hadn’t considered the full implications of seeing Sarah outside school until I stood in front of my wardrobe the Wednesday afternoon before the game, trying to decide what to wear. At that morning’s assembly, Sarah had pointed out a smudge of egg on the collar of our decrepit principal, Mr Gallivant, and rolled her eyes at Kylie Hussey’s
Dunlop Volleys and fluorescent bobby socks. I did a gagging motion back and made a mental note not to wear my own similar socks to the game.

I woke early that Saturday and dressed in the outfit I’d cajoled Mum into buying me from Cherry Lane. It was carefully colour-coordinated: a white polo shirt (collar turned up), turquoise-and-white striped sweatshirt, white leggings disappearing into turquoise socks, just visible above white ones and white Velcro sneakers. Peering at the mirror, I added a black rah-rah skirt, and then adjusted my scrunchie several times, trying to remember how high Sarah wore her ponytail. I was already sitting at the breakfast bar when Dad stumbled downstairs, his tartan dressing gown flapping behind his bare legs. He didn’t notice me until he turned around from putting the kettle on. “Oh, it’s you, Bloss. You off somewhere today?”

I rolled my eyes and said “I’m going to the soccer, remember?”

His head buried in the fridge, he grunted and said “A wog’s game, if you ask me. Where’s the milk?”

I bit my bottom lip and turned my head away from him as I pointed to the carton.

When he sat down opposite me with his mug, he must have caught the look on my face, because he reached over, patted my hand and said “Sorry, love. What’s the story, then, with this game?”

He listened to my blow-by-blow account of this momentous invitation, sat for a minute looking thoughtful, then, face brightening, said “How about I drive you girls there?”

I envisioned the scene: Mrs Charles on her manicured lawn, staring icily as her only daughter climbed into a divvy van. “No thanks,” I scoffed. I felt a tiny pang of guilt when I saw the hurt look on Dad’s face.

Although I didn’t realise it then, walking from my house to Sarah’s was a hike both up a hill and up a social hierarchy. The builder who fixed our sagging porch when we first moved informed Dad that everyone who lived in the mountains could be summed up by the four Rs: Retired, Retarded, Reclusive, or Rich. This last category comprised, as it seems to everywhere, the old and the new. The old-money families lived north of the
Great Western Highway, in renovated weatherboards with terraced gardens overlooking the distant blue of Mount Wilson; the blow-ins in brick palaces surrounding Wentworth Falls Lake and golf course, their paved driveways proclaiming their owners’ affluence and white standard roses signalling their modest good taste. Sarah’s house was one of the latter, built next to a strip of bush which in turn gave onto the ninth hole of the golf course.

Outside her door I fluffed my hair, made sure my collar was still upright and announced myself by pounding the nose of a brass lion.

Quick steps bounced to the door, then Sarah pulled me into a tiled room – I guess you’d call it a foyer – lit by an enormous chandelier. My stomach flipped when I noticed what she was wearing – baggy jeans and an oversized check shirt. I’d dressed so carefully and somehow, I’d still got it wrong. A honeyed voice called, “Sweetie, must you let that door bang?”, then Sarah’s mum appeared in a waft of perfume and a flutter of coral-painted nails. She barely glanced at me, but swung Sarah around by the shoulders and bent down to inspect her face. Her head cocked to one side, she pursed her lips, then tutted disapprovingly, “I just don’t understand why you won’t go to the hairdressers with me.”

Sarah squirmed free and took my hand as she said primly, “Mummy, this is Mel.” Her mother’s gaze moved briskly over me from head to toe. I swore I saw her nose crinkle ever so slightly at my no-brand sneakers, then her face gathered into a polite smile and she said, “Lovely to meet you. Your father’s a constable, isn’t he?”

Actually he was a Senior Sergeant, but I just smiled and said “Yes, Mrs Charles,” which drew raised eyebrows and an amused smile.

“Well, you are very well-mannered. Perhaps you can train my wayward daughter.” Sarah scowled and rolled her eyes.

Sarah’s mother excused herself and disappeared back into the house. Sarah made sure she was gone, then grabbed my arm and looked me right in the eye. I was hoping for a compliment on my outfit. Instead she said “Do you have to go home straight after?”
Confused, I shook my head.

“Good, ’cos we’ve got some important stuff to talk about.”

I looked at her blankly.

“You, me and Sam,” she said insistently. “He’s playing today, too. Before Brad.” A look of exasperation crossed her face. “He didn’t tell you about the meeting, did he? Well, you’d better hang around after the game.”

Sarah’s dad drove us in their gleaming steel-blue Valiant. He and Sarah’s brother Brad sat on the front bench seat; Mr Charles drew field placements on the windscreen while Brad nodded intently. I looked at the scented Pine Fresh tree dangling from the car roof and tried to picture the Charles family sprawled on the velour upholstery scoffing McDonalds, the way we sometimes did on trips back from Sydney. Sarah jerked her head towards the front seat and rolled her eyes. I smiled and whispered reverently, “Nice car.”

Down at Pitt Park, the wind whipped the pine trees edging the oval like they were feather dusters. It drove dead pine-needles into the fence and on the far side of the railway line, lashed the lake’s surface into choppy waves. Flurries of fallen leaves chased rubbish along the footpath. Parents nursed hot Thermos cups and stamped their feet, while kids careered around waving team flags. Only the sandstone buildings of Blue Mountains Grammar School stood still, lending the quiet order of their Victorian architecture to the hill behind the field.

Mr Charles strode off to the sheds with Brad, leaving Sarah and me alone. She threaded her arm through mine and said as she patted my arm affectionately, “That is the exact same top I have. It really brings out your eyes.” She paused, then said more slowly, “I would have worn mine too, only...” Here she shot me a strange sidelong glance, as if waiting for me to respond. I was still blushing from the longed-for compliment and took a moment to register that this was a test of sorts. I thought about the contrast between the Sarah I knew from school – dress neatly pressed, hair brushed flat, socks folded just so – and today’s Sarah, clad in what looked like her brother’s cast-offs. I smiled shyly and said “I know. It’s to annoy your mum.” A grin broke
across her face as she threaded her arm through mine. “I knew you’d get it,” she said. Despite the blustery weather, I suddenly felt warm.

The wind tore the crowd’s roar to pieces as a snaking line of red and green jerseys and striped legs poured out of the shed. The Dragons faced their foes. The umpire’s whistle shrieked; the game began.

I’d devoured the sports pages of Dad’s papers, but the match reports presumed knowledge of the fundamentals that I lacked. I strained my eyes and cricked my neck trying to follow the play, and at half-time I checked my deductions with Sarah. Scores were even, one-all.

The second half was all about feet: shoes spraying chunks of grass as legs propelled their owners in the chase for the ball. The ball skidded sideways, then backwards, powered by quick taps of toe or instep. The play was tight, neither side conceding ground. Frustration was building, on field and off. Beside me, cords stood out on the side of Sarah’s neck as she yelled “Offside, ump, are you blind?” I studied her face, trying to find the polite, charming girl I knew from school.

She elbowed me in the ribs, jerking her head towards the field. A small, stocky boy sent a pass to Sam, who collected the ball and surged fluidly forward, cheeks puffing, feet a blur as he sidestepped one defender, then ducked nimbly between two more; and then, batting the ball from foot to foot, streaked like a comet across the field and into a commotion just outside the opposition’s goal.

As one beast, the crowd held its breath and craned its necks, exhaling with an ‘Ahhh’ as the umpire signalled a penalty kick for the Dragons. Sam swiped his forearm across his sweaty forehead, then pelted the ball past the goalie into the top corner of the net. A sturdy arm gripped my waist and I gasped as my feet left the ground. Sarah’s dad had reappeared to sweep us both skyward, booming “Bloody bew-dy, boys!”

I enjoyed the rest of the game so much I forgot why I was there. The siren honked triumphantly as the Dragons piled onto each other, delirious with victory. So this is what it’s like to win, I thought, cheering and shaking my fists at the field. I felt a pang...
in my chest at the sight of the losers slinking off but it vanished as Sarah pulled me into the throng, right up to the wire fence bordering the field.

With a wave of her arm and a hoarse scream, she summoned Sam from the scrum of sweaty boys. At first he walked slowly, arms swinging with studied nonchalance, but then his flushed face cracked into a wide grin and he sprinted the last few metres.

“Un-RE-al goal, Sambo,” said Sarah, punching his shoulder.

“Yeah, unreal,” I chorused, my voice squeaking.

Sam blew his breath out, then looked from Sarah to me and back again. “So,” he said, suddenly solemn, “Let’s go.”

I felt equal parts anticipation and dread as we climbed the hill to a disused locker room in the Grammar School grounds. As Sam stood and held aside the fence netting so we could squeeze through, one of my skirt frills caught on a stray wire. I smelt the half-time oranges on his breath as he dropped to one knee, his hand disappearing under my skirt in search of the snag. The back of my neck burned with Sarah’s gaze, so I yanked the fabric free, stumbling a few steps as I heard Sam’s startled “Whoa!”. Sarah smirked, then with exaggerated care, stepped over the fence’s lower pole nursing a canvas backpack, which I hadn’t noticed before. When we’d all parked our bums on the concrete floor inside, she set it in front of her the way you’d set down a cake on a stand.

“The Keyhole Club will come to order,” she said. “First item: our new member. Sam, do you nominate Mel?”

He placed his right hand on his chest, the first two fingers pointed, and said “By lock and by key, I do.”

Sarah drew a candle and a Bic lighter from the bag and said “Then let us induct Mel.”

The lit candle now stood in a hunk of plasticine between me and Sarah. From the field I could hear faint cheers and shouts, as though of people from another planet. I’d only been in that room a few minutes, but the sense of isolation was so strong it could have been hours. Nothing else existed except me, Sam and Sarah, all of us staring at the flickering candlelight.
At some imperceptible signal Sarah took my hand in hers and asked “Do you wish to know the mysteries of the lock and key?”

I nodded and she replied “Then you must pass the test of fire.” She drew my hand over the flame and held it there, her gaze not wavering from my face. I had no chance to protest and anyway, I wanted to be part of whatever they were doing so much that I doubt even a burn would have been too high a price to pay.

As it turned out, it was only a few seconds before she let my hand go, blew out the candle and turned back into normal Sarah. “Yay,” she said, clapping her hands. “Now for the fun bit.”

Sam set a metal box and a tiny key on the floor. I’d never seen him look so serious, or so nerdy. He said, “OK. This” – he held out the key – “opens the box, which is where we store all our documents.” He drew out a rolled piece of ancient-looking paper tied with a red ribbon.

The tea-stained hue, burnt edges and red “X” gave it away as a treasure map. My own version (which I’d long ago crammed into a crate under my bed, along with some Care Bears and other toys I’d outgrown), also sported a skull-and-crossbones ink sketch. I must have smirked, because Sam blushed as he explained that the X marked Club headquarters – a shed on the golf course near Sarah’s house – and the green squiggle represented a nearby hedge used to hide the shed’s key.

Intoning more instructions, he handed me a page of ordinary lined writing paper, with what looked like hieroglyphics on it. In a know-it-all voice I regretted almost immediately I said, “Ah, a cipher text.” Sam and Sarah both frowned and exchanged a look that I took to mean “What a show-off”, and since I was dying to know what the Keyhole Club did, I raised my right hand to my chest and said, “I promise to learn the code”, even as I thought of three cryptography books that would make short work of it.

Finally we got to the part I’d been waiting for. “This is your mission,” Sam said, handing me an envelope. The note inside read “Make a prank call to a teacher.”

I choked back a scoff. Prank calls were baby stuff. Sarah was looking at me expectantly, so I exclaimed “Ace! This is gonna be fun.”
With the formalities over, Sarah and Sam chattered eagerly about some of their discoveries: Mr and Mrs Jones, the old greengrocers, liked to sunbake naked in their backyard, Dr Evans drank four bottles of whiskey a weekend, our bachelor principal Mr Gallivant sometimes hung ladies’ underwear on his washing line. They checked that I watched *Get Smart* and nodded approvingly when I nominated *Goldfinger* as my favourite James Bond movie.

In that dingy locker room, even as I savoured the post-initiation camaraderie, I couldn’t help feeling a bit superior to Sam and Sarah. They seemed to love the Keyhole Club for the fun of going where they weren’t supposed to, and finding out things that adults preferred the wider world not to know. Although Dad disapproved of my interest in his work, I’d gleaned enough snippets by eavesdropping while he and Mum nursed their post-dinner brandies to form the impression that just about everyone had a private habit worth hiding. It didn’t seem like a challenge to catch someone red-handed; I was more interested in what you could discover over long stretches of careful recording and observation. So I played the newbie, asking lots of questions, even taking notes, while inside me brewed a determination that *I’d show them.*

The light had faded from the dusty locker room windows by the time we emerged into the grey afternoon. The field was empty apart from two overcoat-clad figures collecting witches’ hats; the crowd had dwindled to a few clumps of men around Eskies and some mums stuffing rubbish into bags. We stopped at the fence in a row: Sarah, Sam, then me, silently watching Sarah’s dad stab his finger at the air above the downturned heads of Brad’s team. “Guys,” I said, my voice wavering a bit. “The prank call’s great, but…” I paused to muster my courage and Sarah seemed to catch my drift immediately, because with a look that was at once defiant and mischievous she blurted out “Let’s follow Sam’s dad.” I noticed Sam stiffen and frown before he shrugged and said, “Sure, let’s.”

4. The house at No. 75

The next day, I followed the treasure map and met the others at club headquarters. More for show than for any practical reason, I’d brought my binoculars and camera, together with my logbook, in which I’d written a list of questions about Sam’s dad’s
routine. I’m looking at the weathered old thing now: there in my newly learnt cursive I recorded these important FACTS.

Full name: Dirk Joachim Joost
Job: Carpenter
Address: 190 Falls Road, Wentworth Falls, New South Wales, Australia, The World
Evidence: work diary

It was Sarah’s idea to check that the diary entries matched the houses Dirk visited, and Sam eagerly agreed, which made me wonder how she’d convinced him. Naturally we could only check on the afternoon jobs, since we were at school the rest of the day. Sarah’s afternoons were taken up with dance and piano lessons, and Sam couldn’t follow his own father, so it was all up to me.

My three-gear Malvern Star made tough work of the steep hills, so despite the winter chill I usually had burning calves and a heaving chest by the time I’d found the right house. When I got close, I’d stash the bike, then inspect the house with Dad’s binoculars, the cold glass eyes wobbling until the blood worked its way back into my frozen hands. That first week there was nothing to raise suspicion: at each address a King-Gee clad Dirk lugged tools and timber from van to house. Since I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, I lurked outside these houses some afternoons until my blue fingers and hunger drove me home.

Day after day, Sam and Sarah awaited my morning arrival at the bus stop and day after day, I had nothing to tell. Their disappointed faces spurred me to long-winded explanations about surveillance taking a while to get results, which I’m sure only deepened their suspicions that I wasn’t up to the task. They were extra-keen for news before the school holidays took them away, Sam to Mudgee and Sarah to Queensland.

So that last week of term, after lying to Mum about after-school choir practice, I stayed out later, and on the final day of school, a Friday, I waited for Dirk’s last appointment at an address I hadn’t yet visited, in a street not far from our house. 75 Wentworth Street was an older brick house, set back from the road, with a cement footpath leading down to its semi-circular porch and screen door, above which the outside light cast a red glow. To the right of the porch were two windows facing the street, their blinds
drawn, and on their far side, a closed garage door. The lawn was bare of the building debris that I’d noticed at the other houses.

My watch glowed 5.20 when I spotted Dirk’s van and hid behind the neighbour’s fence. I heard the engine splutter into silence and waited for the sound of the door closing. After a few minutes had passed, I poked my head over the fence. The van was parked at the top of the driveway, its inside light illuminating a silhouette that it took me a moment to realise was Sam’s dad, sliding his arms into a dress shirt. As he got out I hid again, holding my breath until I could no longer hear his footsteps.

My next breath tasted of musky cologne. Dirk pressed the buzzer, then stepped back from the door and wiped both hands along his thighs. He wore suit pants, but with work boots. A rectangle of yellow light appeared as the door swung inward; the screen door rattled, then it too opened and banged back against the porch wall. The arm holding this door open was draped in a shiny fabric, which, as Dirk stepped into the house, I saw belonged to the red satin blouse of a woman wearing a gold necklace and high heels, whose teeth gleamed as she turned to re-enter the house.

I waited a few minutes before I crept down the path, pausing at the porch steps. I strained my ears for telltale noises over the chorus of birds greeting the dusk, then tiptoed up to read the brass plate beside the door. I wrote “Ms Deirdre Grigson, FAIPD, MAPS” in the logbook and pedalled home.

Although I’d promised to fill Sarah in before she went away, on that ride home I decided to keep mum. After all, there was nothing really to tell. I wanted a chance to scope the house again, to find some clue that would force a shape out of the jumble of facts. The only thing I was certain about was that whatever Dirk did at number 75, it wasn’t carpentry.

In those days my favourite place to think was the swing. It hung from the big pine, down the side of the house that bordered the neighbours’ dense hedge. The ground underfoot was cushioned by layers of fallen needles, and shadows formed and reformed on its padded surface as the branches overhead swayed. In all but the heaviest downpour, that swing stayed dry, and even at the apex of its arc, the swing
was shrouded in shade, which allowed me to see visitors as they came up the driveway without being seen myself.

The next morning, I was letting the twists of the swing rope unwind, dragging my boots through the pine needles, when I heard a car pull up. Up the path came a woman wearing a multi-coloured skirt, her curly chestnut hair wrapped in a yellow headband. She was clasping a cardboard grocery box, and turned to call “Come on,” over her shoulder towards the street. I realised why she looked familiar when Sam appeared. My first thought was to hide, but just then Mum appeared, wiping her damp hands on her apron. They met near the garden bed planted with jonquils which ran perpendicular to the front door.

As I eavesdropped, I realised that Sam’s mum was the Freya who volunteered at the nursing home where Mum worked. The frail-aged, or geriatrics, as Mum called them, loved Freya’s colourful dress sense and her Danish accent, which turned ‘bowl’ into ‘bowel’. I’d never met her. Sam mentioned his mum only occasionally, usually in complaints: she’d baked yet another pickled-fish dinner, or she’d ambushed him again with demands to ‘share feelings’. I’d had no reason to suspect she was the friendly eccentric who brightened Mum’s workdays.

I stepped out of the shade and over the jonquils, curiosity drawing me in for a closer look. She laughed at my calling her Mrs Joost, chiding “That is my mother-in-law’s name, not mine. I am a Bertelsen but there’s no need for this Mrs. My name is Freya.” They didn’t stay much longer, since the rest of the family was waiting in their station wagon, ready to set off for Mudgee. Just before he got in the car, Sam turned back, obviously curious about what I’d found the previous night. I replied with upturned palms and a shake of my head, then called out “Have a nice trip,” as he slammed the door.

I found Mum inside, unpacking vegies from the box Sam’s mum had left. Perched on the stool at the breakfast bar, I watched her bustle around the kitchen for a while.

“Mum,” I said when she’d put the kettle on and was rummaging in the cupboard below me for a mug, “Why doesn’t Sam’s mum have the same name as him?”

“Oh, well, love, some ladies don’t change their surname when they get married.”
I thought about this for a moment. “Why?”

The hand holding the tea bag hovered above the mug. “I suppose… I suppose they just like to keep the name they had as a little girl.”

I set my elbows on the bench and rested my chin on my palms. Mum’s capable hands, which had plain short nails and a single gold ring (her wedding band), cupped the dripping teabag and deposited it in the bin. Under a daisy-patterned apron, she wore beige slacks and a pink short-sleeved blouse. She owned powder-blue, yellow and white versions of the same blouse and two other pairs of the same slacks, in black and brown, all bought from the same chain-store boutique on the same shopping trip. This wardrobe served for all occasions short of weddings and her and Dad’s anniversary dinner. I’d never seen her with long hair, although the photos in her wedding album showed her veil perched atop a soaring beehive.

I swung the stool around as she sat down at the dining table behind me. “What was your name before you married Dad?” I asked.

“Fletcher,” she said, smiling as she reached for her pen and the half-finished Woman’s Day crossword.

I turned away from her again and whispered “Diane Fletcher, Freya Bertelsen,” rolling the unfamiliar names around my mouth while I tried to imagine what their lives had been like before they had us. I remembered the name on the brass plate outside Wentworth St.

“What else can ladies be called, apart from Mrs?”

Without glancing up, Mum replied “Miss.”

“What about—”, I hopped off the stool and went over to her, writing above the crossword ‘Ms’.

“Ah,” she said. “That’s Mzzz.”

“How’s it different to Mrs?”

“Well…” She held her mug with both hands and searched my face, then leaned towards me, her voice lowered as she said “I’ve always thought that the women who call themselves Ms don’t want people to know they have husbands.”
First this Deirdre Grigson, and now Sam’s mum. Why didn’t they want anyone to know about their husbands? Most ladies I knew never missed an opportunity to mention theirs. Like the Rotary wives who cornered Mum in Jones’s Fruity, who’d recount what the Gazette had reported about some local scandal – the delay in restoring the cenotaph, say – and conclude the conversation as though they were reciting lines from a play, with some pronouncement like “My husband says you just can’t find good labourers these days.”

I thought about my return visit to number 75, when I’d seen Ms Grigson looking perfectly ordinary as she dragged her wheelie bin to the kerb. Now her jeans and faded t-shirt seemed a flimsy cloak of normality drawn over a core of … of what? Some murky, shameful secret, I was sure.

I had no idea what I was going to tell Sam, but as it turned out, I didn’t have to worry.

5. What the red light meant

Sarah came back from Queensland at the end of that week, and rang me late afternoon. I could hear banging doors and thumping suitcases in the background. She demanded I go over there right away.

When we were seated on her bed, the door safely shut, I described it all. She interrupted with questions: Does he usually wear cologne? Was he carrying flowers? How long did he stay? She nodded sagely at my answers, and when I finished her face was flushed with excitement. “I knew it,” she said as she leapt up, “He’s having an affair.”

My vague understanding of what ‘an affair’ meant came from watching Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant in An Affair to Remember, which was pretty light on details. Listening to Sarah list the consequences of what she was already calling ‘our’ discovery, my knowledge grew, as did my sense of unease. Pacing the floor, she told me that his mum was going to divorce his dad, Sam would have to choose who to live with, and worst of all, Dirk would make babies with his mistress, a whole new family with no room for Sam.
I was still puzzling over the word mistress, which I only knew from the line *England was the mistress of the seas*, when Sarah, her back to me as she peered out the window, said thoughtfully, “Maybe I should take a look at the house…” She turned and eyed me shrewdly, and although I felt a stab of possessiveness – the Wentworth Street house was *my* secret – I reluctantly agreed.

In the chaos of holiday unpacking, we slipped away undetected, and our bush-bashing short-cut around the Lake got us there just on dusk. Eyes wide and face serious, Sarah gestured “Stay,” with a pointed finger and crossed the road, sticking to the shadows down the side of the driveway. As I had, she paused at the edge of the porch. After casting a quick glance at the sign and the light, she stalked back on tip-toe, then charged back over the road and yanked me behind a nearby gumtree.

With a staged look around to check for eavesdroppers, she whispered “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about the red light,” and before I could reply she continued, almost breathless with excitement, “Don’t you see? This is a brothel. She’s not a mistress…” Here she paused and leant forward slightly, her eyes shining. “She’s a whore.”

“Are you serious?” I gasped, pressing my hand to my mouth. Here was the dirty secret lurking behind the ‘Ms’. It sent a prickly, tingling thrill through my thighs and cheeks. Although I didn’t know exactly what whores did, I knew it was a crime, and more importantly, that it involved sex.

“When we’ve got to tell Sam,” Sarah said, the soles of her sneakers skidding on the gravel as she spun away from me and strode up the hill. In the excitement of discovery, I’d forgotten about him. I hung back, watching the purposeful swing of Sarah’s blonde ponytail bobbing above her pumping arms. Her whole demeanour oozed confidence. I wanted to share it, but I wanted to protect Sam too. When her shoes were about at my eye level I called “Wait!” She stopped, planted a hand on her hip and looked back over her shoulder. “What?” she said.

The effort of running uphill made me wheeze, and just as I drew even with her, my shoe came off, so I had to sort of shuffle the last few steps. I bent over to squash it back on and tried to catch my breath. *Don’t push your luck here,* I thought as I straightened up, and my resolve weakened even further as I saw the mixture of scorn
and pity on her face. “I just…um, thought maybe we should, you know, tell him together,” I said, the rising pitch of my voice making it sound like a question.

She frowned, shook her head and kept walking, even faster than before. It wasn’t until the Angel Street hill, where we went our separate ways, that she slowed down and waited for me to catch up. This time her tone was chummy. “Good sleuthing,” she said, mock-punching my arm. After the solitary walk back, this friendly gesture was enough to quell my doubts about telling Sam. After all, I reasoned, she knew him better than I did.

6. All on the same page

Sam wasn’t due back from Mudgee until the weekend before school resumed for the final term of the year. I’d planned to go over to Sarah’s as soon as she’d told him. Instead I was stuck with my family the whole weekend, under strict parental instructions to mind my p’s and q’s on account of visiting elderly relatives. When I could sneak away, I rang Sarah’s house, but I kept getting a busy signal. I didn’t dare ring Sam, so Monday recess came and I still hadn’t talked to either of them.

Shoving past my classmates, I tugged Sam’s sleeve as he went down the stairs ahead of me. He jerked his arm away, then growled “Watch it,” at a sharp-elbowed boy just in front of me. He was still glowering as I drew level with him, and his expression remained sullen as he muttered “Hello,” and leaned against the wall. The grim set of his mouth, his narrowed eyes and hunched shoulders brought back all my misgivings about Sarah’s version of events. He swung around to face me. “Well?” he said accusingly. “Do you believe it too?”

Studying the scratches in the lino floor, I worked my lips over my teeth, bit them, swallowed hard, smoothed a non-existent crease from my skirt. I thought about Sarah’s invitation to Penrith Plaza, the training bra she’d loaned me, the guilty pleasure I took in snubbing Kelly, the diabetic girl who’d been my first friend here. I shook the hair from my eyes, raised my chin and said as I stared steadily into Sam’s blue eyes, “Yep, because it’s true.”
Later, Sarah reassured me that I’d done the right thing, and suggested we both avoid talking to Sam, “Just while he cools off. He’ll come around, you’ll see.” So instead of waiting for Sam before and after school, I caught the bus. All through that damp October, Sarah and I ignored Sam, and he ignored us.

One warm night – it must have been November by then – as I lay on my bed reading, inhaling the lingering greasy smell of our dinner snags, I was startled by someone urgently whispering my name. The hydrangea bush outside my window rustled, then parted to reveal Sam’s head. He wore a sheepish expression and his face was flushed. I stared at him for a moment, as though he might dematerialise like the aliens in my book. Then I hauled the window up and stood back as he hoisted himself inside.

He kicked off his thongs and then stood waiting, his toes working the shag pile rug. The tension of the last few weeks made me unsure of what to say. I pulled my nightie up towards my neck, conscious of the triangle of bare skin there, and just as I began “I’m sorry I—”, he tossed my furry snake to the floor and took its place on my bed, his hands locked together behind his head.

I tried to remember whether he’d been in my room before. I turned towards the door with the thought of offering him something to drink, and it was then that he said to my back, in a flat voice, “I couldn’t sleep last night…”

I sat down on my vinyl desk chair and swung around to face him. He didn’t meet my gaze, preferring to stare at the posters of Cyndi Lauper and Madonna blu-tacked to wall at the foot of my bed. By the way his voice had trailed off I could tell there was more to come. I waited.

He continued, “So,” a sigh, “so I went out to the kitchen…”

His jaw clenched and he swallowed, blinking fast. “And I saw Dad,” here he grimaced in an effort to hold back tears, “sleeping on the couch.”

I was so used to the sight of Dad home from night shift, gently snoring in the recliner while scenes from black-and-white movies flickered over his crumpled uniform shirt that Sam’s admission confused me. “Was he … sick?” I asked.
Sam looked at me and scowled, swiping his fist across his eye as he sat up and crossed his arms. “No, dummy,” he said. “Don’t you get it?”

I shook my head.

Red blotches bloomed on his cheeks and beneath his fringe, his eyes shone fiercely. He leapt up so suddenly I thought he might hit me. Instead he banged his fist against the door – once, twice, the flimsy wood shuddering in protest – and then slumped and rested his forehead where his hands had been. When he faced me again, he looked almost rueful. “You guys were right,” he said, letting out a deep breath.

“About the ... that ...” I hesitated over what to call her.

Since I’d taken Sarah to the house, we’d spent a fair bit of time embellishing on the House of Ill Repute, as we’d come to call it. We’d even written the story in serial instalments at the back of Sarah’s diary. Deirdre Grigson had become Isabella Rutherford, a Southern Belle fallen on hard times and forced to flee her American homeland for the desolation of Australia. *Her desperation propelled her to the seedy streets of King’s Cross,* Sarah wrote, passing the book to me. I added *where she sold her body to the denizens of the night.* The most recent entries referred to her only as The Whore, which we pronounced *hoo-er,* spitting out the syllables as though they made a bad taste in our mouths.

“You mean her,” I said.

“I mean the whole thing,” he said. With his hands planted on his hips and his intent expression, he looked so grown-up it scared me. “It’s not just the couch. I heard them yelling the other night. It must have been about her...” As his voice trailed off, his shoulders slumped and a tiny wobble appeared in his bottom lip.

I went over and sat on the edge of the bed. “Maybe it’s not what you think,” I said, hoping to console him.

He pinched the skin between his eyebrows, then shook his head. He grabbed my arm, and now he looked both eager and anxious as he asked me, “If I tell Sarah she’s right, we can all be friends again, just like normal, right?”
I nodded. His face creased with the familiar broad grin and he leapt up and shoved his
thongs on, calling out a cheery “See ya tomorrow” as he clambered onto the
windowsill and dropped out of sight.

After that, things did return to normal; we even had a few Keyhole Club meetings. We
never talked about it, but Sarah and I stopped writing about the House of Ill Repute.
Spring was becoming summer, and as the sun rose earlier, Sam and his dad resumed
their morning walks to school. Except, Sam wasn’t walking. Even though Christmas
was over a month away and it wasn’t his birthday until March, Sam’s dad had bought
him a brand-new BMX.

7. A song and dance

Four rag-tag rows of kids made up the choir: the stumpy ones perched on gym benches
at the back, the beanstalks lined up at the front of the stage. Behind us hung a backdrop
depicting, on the left, pipecleaner outlines of Lawson, Wentworth and Blaxland
wielding axe, compass and rope, and on the right, what my brother called a
“naboroginal” with skin of glued-on brown lentils shaking hands with Captain Cook.

Someone elbowed a boy down the end of my row, setting off a chain reaction of
poking and prodding. Kylie Hussey plunged sideways and wobbled on one leg, then
the other. She somehow clutched a dangling curtain cord – we all held our breath –
then leaned out backwards, a sailor bracing the sail, and swung back onto the bench.

Beyond the moth-eaten blue curtain, chairs scraped and banged, bass voices mumbled
and treble ones chattered as our audience assembled. For the umpteenth time Mrs
Dunstan poked her head through the gap in the curtain and shushed us. Nothing was
still; the curtain swayed, the floorboards creaked, the mass of choristers was an
undulating animal powered by thirty brains, all shifting legs and turning heads and
poking fingers.

In the melee, it was hard to catch Sarah’s eye, but I craned my neck to its limit and
spotted her down the end of the row, contorting her face with a series of fake smiles.
Being one of the shorter boys, Sam was in the front row, his hair gel glistening under
the stage lights. The curve of pink skin between his collar and hair was scrubbed clean.
I allowed myself to imagine caressing it, though I knew I’d never be brave enough. Our opening number was the school creed – *this is our school let peace here dwell let the rooms be filled with contentment* – which I mouthed over and over till I could race through it without stopping for breath.

First Mrs Dunstan’s back, then the rest of her body appeared on our side of the curtain. She faced us with eyes wide and drew a finger across her throat. We fell silent, and then as if on cue, the audience did too. Mrs Dunstan raised her conductor’s baton and glared at the Russell twins, who abruptly stopped elbowing each other in the ribs.

Mr Gallivant delivered his welcome in a much clearer voice than usual, no doubt heartened at the prospect of a summer’s worth of daytime naps. I saw my left sock had dropped, but just as I bent down, Mrs Dunstan gave two jerks on the rope, the curtain opened and the show was on.

After the creed came a desultory rendition of the national anthem, then a Rod Stewart medley. By the time we reached our finale, the ankle-biters had squirmed free of their parents and formed a gaggle of toddling groupies at our feet; mums and dads were bobbing side to side, clapping and beaming at their clever offspring, and we were marching on the spot, almost yelling “We all live in a yellow SUBMARINE” to cover the rebels in the choir who substituted “washing machine” or “tangerine”. The dilapidated piano rang out the last note and applause rained down. Mrs Dunstan was fanning her flushed face, and the boys down my end were tugging at their shirt collars.

A voice announced “And the last song, ‘Bright Eyes’,,” and the music swelled, minor chords melting with heartfelt emotion for fictional rabbits. The chorus was my favourite part. I rolled my tongue heartily to form the roundedness of the over-pronounced American ‘R’. I belted out “burning like fire”, and the lyrics seemed convincing in a way they never had before. My lungs swelled to bursting with each breath, my cheeks ached, my eyes smarted, and the words of the song seemed to pour out of me, my voice lost in the larger voice of the choir. It came to me that this might be what Mrs Dunstan meant by ‘singing in unison’.
The curtain dropped and we lost our composure: we were a bustle of rustling skirts and starched pants, boys high-fiving each other, girls hugging and squealing with delight, a cacophony of chattering excitement which Mrs Dunstan half-heartedly attempted to quell, before she too let herself go, flapping both arms at us in a flamboyant gesture that we’d never seen in the classroom. This was the signal for us all to jump from the stage, flinging aside the curtain and rush in a happy jumble into the hall and the waiting embrace of our parents.

I inhaled the Preen scent of Dad’s shirt as he crushed me to his chest, and then with a hand on each shoulder, held me out and said “My gorgeous girl, all grown up,” his voice quavering a little. I ducked under his arm, trying to catch sight of the others. We were still close to the stage, caught behind the bulk of the crowd which was slowly oozing outside. Near the door I glimpsed Sarah, who was tugging on her dad’s arm while he nodded thoughtfully at Mr Gallivant.

Through a gap in the crush of bodies, I spotted Sam with his dad near the passage that led to the toilets. The crowd closed, and when it parted again Freya had appeared and was fussing with Sam’s tie. As Dirk bent to ruffle my hair, I caught a whiff of that musky cologne and shot a guilty look at Freya. Did she know? Beneath the gold fabric wreathing her head, her blank, slightly wistful expression gave me no clues.

“It’s a great bike you gave Sam, Freya,” I said, imitating the upbeat tone I’d noticed Sarah used when she wanted to ingratiate herself with adults.

Her face darkened, then she forced a tight-lipped smile. “Not my idea. His father likes to spoil him.” Hearing this, Dirk sighed, then said in a placatory way, “I’ll get you a drink, shall I?” inclining his head towards the door.

Sam rolled his eyes, and threading his arm through mine, said, “Parents, hey?”

Outside it was dark but still warm. The early summer air was pierced by the radio-static hum of cicadas, and the footpath glowed with red and green patches as the Christmas tree lights winked on and off. I could feel the veins in Sam’s arm pulsing through the cotton of his shirt. The waxy fabric of my dress made a scratching sort of
sound as I walked, and my toes were uncomfortably squashed inside the pointy end of
my leather pumps.

I’d never realised how tedious this beauty business was until that afternoon. It had
taken over an hour at Adriana’s Hair and Beauty for my mousy locks to be coaxed into
a Lady Diana flick. The poking and prodding hadn’t seemed to bother Sarah at all.

Sam and I headed towards the line of couples filing under the crepe-paper banner
reading “Good-bye and goodluck Year Six” and into the flashing strobe lights of the
gym. Halfway there, I felt a finger jab my back, and turned to find Sarah and her date,
Scott Calder. Sam hastily dropped my arm and turned to shake Scott’s hand. “He’s
such a spunk,” Sarah whispered, her eyes on Scott, who had corralled Sam into a circle
of boys kicking a hackey-sack.

Their playing field was the paved area outside the library. To the right of their game, a
path ran between the library and a stand of hedges which bordered the front gate. In the
weak light cast by a single light high on the library wall, I noticed a bulky shape near
the fence. By straining my eyes, I could just make out a familiar figure. It was Mum,
her back to me, her arms encircling someone who was leaning their head on her
shoulder. When the head came up, I caught a glimpse of gold fabric and pale curly hair
and realised it was Freya.

Although she was standing right beside me, Sarah was too busy perving on Scott to
have noticed anything. I opened my mouth to say something, but then thought better of
it. If Sam’s mum was upset, I was sure he already knew why, and telling Sarah
wouldn’t help. Besides, any mention of all that stuff would just pierce the happy
bubble I was floating in. “Let’s go in,” I said, nudging Sarah out of her reverie.

For most of the night, the girls danced together in large circles, while the boys popped
balloons, clambered on chairs and pelted each other with used plastic cups. So I was
only alone with Sam once. The moment came at the end of the night, when the lights
were dimmed and the smooth voice of the DJ announced “This is the last song, make it
a good one”. This was the cue for the separate clumps of boys and girls to form into
awkwardly swaying pairs. Exchanging shy smiles, Sam and I fumbled our sweaty
hands into the right spot – my left on his shoulder, his right in the small of my back,
our free hands clasped. *Time can never mend* crooned George Michael *the careless whisper of a good friend*, and not wanting to spoil the moment, I heeded the song’s advice and said nothing.

Christmas came a week or so after the dance, and with it our annual trip interstate to visit mum’s family. The first thing I did when we got home after New Year’s was to ring Sarah. She hadn’t heard from Sam so we agreed to go around to his house together. We met at the shops, bought twenty-cent packets of mixed lollies and devoured them as we sauntered up through Charles Darwin Park, past the tennis courts, amusing ourselves by honing insults we planned to hurl at Sam. “Your behaviour is dethpicable,” said Sarah in an Elmer Fudd accent. I giggled and offered “I simply can’t fathom you,” in costume-drama English.

Cresting the hill on Falls Road, we passed the school. The empty grounds, the brown grass on the playing fields and the locked gates made it a forlorn looking place. “There’s our school,” I chirped, elbowing Sarah.

“Our old school,” she said, waving an arm dismissively. We smirked at each other.

Sam’s house was hidden behind a stand of willow trees where the road curved to the left, and it wasn’t until we rounded that corner that I realised something wasn’t right. The letterbox was overflowing with junk mail, there was no van parked in the driveway, and the unkempt lawn was staked with a For Lease sign. Sarah insisted on peering through the front windows, but there was nothing left inside.

The rest of that January, which was unusually hot, Sarah and I spent most afternoons at the Lake. Occasionally, as we rearranged the Kleenex in our bikini tops, or slathered another layer of Hawaiian Tropic on our legs, one of us would say, “I wonder where Sam is…” but somehow the spectacle of boys plunging from ever-greater heights off the tyre swing, the mingled aroma of sunscreen, barbecue grease and bubblegum, and the promise of high school waiting at the end of the holidays made us feel, though we never said so, that Sam belonged to a world we’d outgrown.

It’s only now, a decade later, finding the logbook again, that it’s all coming back.
Part 2: 1994

1. The true-blue mountains

You’ll never hear a true local call this stretch of jumped-up bumps the Blue Mountains. Usually it’s just “the Mountains”, but some towns have earned their own nicknames. My hometown is “Wenty” a typically unimaginative abbreviation, as is “Springers” for Springwood. My favourite’s “Bleak-heath” for Blackheath, the last true mountain town before the slide down the backside of the mountain into the slag-heap coal-mining town of Lithgow.

If you grew up in a small town, you know secrets don’t stay secret for long. The saying “heard it on the grapevine” means something more like “god’s own gospel truth” in the Mountains. Which is why everyone from the real estate agent to the postman was disappointed to discover that my dad, the city cop, knew nothing about the bent coppers that had been front page news back in 1984, and had never had a prisoner die in custody. Where’s the fun in a story if you can’t embellish, gild the lily, tweak a dull fact or two, dress up a rumour in its Sunday best?

The whole place runs like a giant game of Chinese Whispers. The players are Rotarians, nosey old biddies rehabilitated as Neighbourhood Watchers, sensible housewives like Mum who staff school canteens and working bees; they bulk out the crowds for school fêtes and write letters to the editor of the Gazette about graffiti and poorly-maintained playground equipment. Maintainers of the civil order, they’ve always driven me to civil disobedience. As a kid, there’d be one of them, everywhere I went, asking after my family, commenting how much I’d grown. I couldn’t so much as sneak a grape from a bunch in the greengrocer’s without being noticed. Other kids might have wished for fame, but I craved anonymity.

There are two ways of dealing with everyone and his dog knowing your business: you nestle right into the comforting bosom of the community, or you hotfoot out of the hole. Today I’m hooning along the newly hacked-out M4 freeway through the flat-as-a-pancake, hell-on-a-bad-day slum of a suburb known as Emu Plains, back to the Mountains for the first time since I flew the coop at seventeen, so you can guess how I dealt with it.
I’ve been coaxed back to the cradle of my youth by Sarah’s promise of two things: free booze and a reunion. I’m much more keen on the former than the latter. Ever since that phone call two weeks ago, the pale ghosts of my school days have lingered in the back of my mind, casting accusing looks at me for ignoring them for so long. When I was feeling defiant, I told the ghosts firmly but politely to piss off and sat on my bike muttering curses under my breath at every traffic light from Coolbellup to Murdoch.

One of Sarah’s many charms is her disarming disregard for the niceties of social interaction. She knows where all my buttons are, and she’s not afraid to push them. Like a military strategist, she systematically deploys every trick in her considerable arsenal: first whining, followed by bargaining, and finally blackmail.

Since she’s seen me at my worst – which would have to be chucking my underage guts up outside the cop shop after one too many Sunny-Boy-and-vodkas – insults and rudeness are a useless defence. I can call her any name in the book, slam the phone, or the door, whatever; she presses on, undaunted. On this particular occasion, although she was three thousand kilometres away at the other end of a phone line, she’d just declared war.

“Please, Mel. Come on. You know you never come to my parties.”

Untrue. And unfair, since this is the first time since sweet sixteen she’s bothered to have a party.

“It’s only a teensy drive from Sydney, maybe two hours max.”

That wench! She knows I get carsick.

“It’s my twenty-first.”

Her voice saying “first” had the wheedling tone of a kid up past bedtime.

“You’re my best friend and you have to be there. I’ll be so upset if you’re not, I’ll spend the entire night sobbing in the corner. Some party that will be!”

“I am not saying it again, I’m not coming.”

Silence.

“Sarah? Hello?”

She’d hung up.
The next day, having taken stock of progress, she switched tactics.

This call had no preliminaries, just: “There’s someone you might remember from school who’s coming.”

I put my hand over the receiver to stifle an involuntary groan. Sarah is the proud owner of an excellent long-term memory. Unfortunately for me, she chooses to use it mainly for listing, like a litany, the names of all of our classmates.

“Don’t tell me, it’s one of the Bower brothers, isn’t it? Let me guess …Troy. Who’s a baker and who you always tell me about even though I say I don’t …”

“Mel, it’s not a Bower.”

“Oh, then I know, that Krista chick who moved to Port Macquarie.”

“No, not her. It’s someone…well, no one’s seen him for years.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Trust me, Mel. You won’t regret it.”

I was still suspicious. Sarah always will be a manipulative bitch. “Are you going to tell me who it is, or do I have to guess?”

“Well …”

Why does she have to draw out one-syllable words like that?

“Yes?”

In a mocking, sing-song voice she says, “How this? Mel and Dane sitting in a tree, K I S S I N G.”

My hackles (wherever the hell they are) shoot up: She can’t keep the glee out of her voice. Nothing gets her going like the prospect of a hook-up; she’s a romance junkie. No, that’s not quite right, she’s more like the patron saint of pashing, tripping around with a carpet bag full of little black books, spouting sayings straight from the Mills and Boon treasury: “Don’t give up on your soul-mate”, “When you find the One, you’ll know”, “Love is like a rainbow, it comes in many hues.”

“Sarah, I am not going to sit on a plane for four hours, then drive for another two round those fricken twisty roads, turn up to a roomful of strangers and have some
random redneck sleaze onto me, just because you want me to meet up with some wanker who I’ve probably just said ‘hello’ to once. I’m so not.”

She makes a hurt noise and then says timidly “Sleep on it?”

That night, I drag a kitchen chair to the hallway cupboard and poke around behind the bed linen until I find some photos. Crouching back on my heels, I bend over and run my finger along each row of faces. My breath catches in my throat when I spot the name W Dane on the Year Eleven photo. Counting in five boys from the left, I wind up on a pasty, earnest kid with sticking-out ears. Not Wing-nut! I say aloud. I pore over all the other photos until my eyes water and my back aches like I’ve been trampled by a herd of camels and by midnight I still have no clue who this mystery man is. I aim a clumsy kick at the photos, sending them sliding under the couch, and stamp off to bed.

Thanks to a terrible night’s sleep, the next morning sucks even more than a normal Monday. Janice, the four-eyed pedant who likes to think she’s my boss, hauls me in for a meeting about some paperwork I’ve apparently stuffed up.

I’m not sure if it’s fighting with Janice, or the two packets of two-minute noodles I wolf at lunch, but something gets my brain going. Drowsily stamping applications that afternoon, I think A boy, open a folder, No one’s seen him for ages, play with a Post-It, He moved away. “Oh, fuck,” I say aloud over the benign hum of the air conditioner. Janice’s coiffed head bobs over my cubicle, no doubt anticipating further cock-ups. I stare blankly at my year planner, suddenly plunged a decade back. Dane wasn’t a surname, it was a nationality. Sarah had been leading me on, the sneaky bitch.

She calls me that night. I answer with “You sneaky bitch.”

“What? You asked me to call. I mean I know it’s late, but you said–”

“Not that, idiot. I’m talking about your little trick with the mystery man’s surname.”

There’s a bang, and a scrabbling noise, and when she comes back on the phone she says, “Oooh, so you’ve figured it out, I knew you’d come round once you knew it was Sam.”
“I haven’t said I’m coming yet,” I say, but she’s already breathlessly rattling off instructions, in between exclaiming that we are going to have SO MUCH FUN. Later, I cross my fingers as I read the travel agent my credit card number and lo!, the plastic money gods grant me a miracle.

In the end, it was a simple decision. I weighed up the accusatory stares of the ghosts and the familiar comfort of the booze, and the booze won. Yes, seeing Sam again after so long will be awkward, nerve-racking and potentially embarrassing, but a strange fact about me is the more I drink, the less embarrassed I get.

2. Westies and ferals

Here I am then, heading back east; back home to the “ooh-it-must-be-lovely-to-live-there” Mountains.

Here’s my plan: I stride in, make a beeline for the bar, and do polite chit-chat with the nearest stranger while sipping a middy of beer. Excuse myself, go back to the bar, fortify myself with a schooner this time, launch into a now mildly more amusing conversation with same stranger. Armed with a jug, circle the room to find the mystery man, stopping only to get down-n-dirty on the dance floor with a new friend. Pass out, get kicked out, hit the sack. Or, in the words of the billboard I’ve just passed: “Relax. Unwind. Renew.”

God, I could do with a bit of renewal myself. The cardboard crap that passes for food on red-eye flights wouldn’t nourish a fly. Luckily, I’m in prime fast-food territory, so I take the next exit off the motorway and head for Penriff, or as the maps insist ‘Penrith’. Around here every house is a brick-veneer palace with a whipper-snipped front lawn and a backyard above-ground pool. Everyone who lives west of Lapstone and east of Parramatta agrees it’s a hole. But you’d have to be pretty game to say that to the Westies who live here. If you had to shop at the Plaza, you’d studiously avoid eye contact with the trackie-clad hordes of Brads and Kylies fondling the merch at K-Mart. You’d give a wide berth to the posse of teenage mums chain-smoking Winnie Blues outside Sanity. And you’d never go near the nightclub at Panther’s World of Entertainment – unless you were a middle-aged pervert after a twosome with an 18-year old and her 35-year old mum. Penrith, Emu Plains, Gladstone Park – these
suburbs are so rank they emit their own atmosphere, a sweltering haze of car exhaust, melted asphalt, Brut33 and industrial dust.

Maybe it’s different now, I think as I pull into a McDonald’s car park. The next car over is a metallic blue Commodore, decked out with a spoiler and mag wheels, a P-plate shoved behind a numberplate that reads B1TEM3. Some blokes with crew-cuts slouch around its open doors, yelling over the booming bass coming from the car speakers. As I go past I incline my head and mutter “Fellas,” in my best ocker accent, and get a few nods and a wave back. I tell myself You should keep an open mind more often, just as one of them yells “Show us your tits!” Westies. They never change.

Back in the car with greasy fingers and a full stomach, I have to admit there’s a residual curiosity about these no-longer-teenage contemporaries of mine. I’ve only been gone four years, but that’s four pregnancies for girls like Kylie Hussey and Dana Tartt. If you stay in the Mountains, your occupational choices are determined by your gender. Got tits? Congratulations, you get to pop out a sprog or six. Dangly bits instead? Those and intact limbs qualify you for the intellectual stimulation of a TAFE course and four years of slave labour as a chippie or sparkie. (Fathering an ankle-biter is a minor nuisance which only interferes with your life every second fortnight, when your dole cheque’s depleted by child maintenance payments and you have to get pissed on a slab of VBs instead of Crownies.)

Anticipating Blaxland – the first fair-dinkum Mountain town – I bring the car shuddering down to a pedestrian-friendly speed. On my left, senior citizens shuffle into a Chinese restaurant, shepherded by a woman in sunglasses and polyester slacks. Miss Prissy Slacks perches at the edge of the kerb, alert to potential escapees. If any of the oldies did fancy escape – albeit of the spiritual kind – they could duck next door to “Astral Journeys”, where tie-dyed silk scarves flap under Tibetan prayer flags and dreamcatchers spin in the breeze. It’s a dead cert that the chick or dude reading Heal yourself with crystals behind the counter will be a feral with a facial piercing and a name like Forrest or Brook or River (hippie parents never seem to get that some words on a map should stay there). The city suckers – sorry, slickers – who patronise these new age trinket shops would normally drive their dry cleaning four suburbs away to save five bucks, here gladly palm a fifty for an affirmation book or an aromatherapy burner, seduced by the aura of alternativeness that wafts from these hemp-clad stoners. These places can’t fool me – I know it’s just patchouli oil.
An impatient honk from the car behind me yanks me back to reality and I floor it, the car’s lawnmower-power engine straining to crest a hill bordered by plunging valleys stuffed to the brim with trees. I’ve got a creepy feeling that as I climb I’m travelling back in time, although none of the usual landmarks are where they should be. The servos, for example – the fuel icon on my dashboard’s been blinking for a while. I’d even stop at “Grumbling Tums”, if it still exists. Although it was the only 24-hour servo between Blaxland and Blackheath, Dad refused to stop there, after suffering the effects of a dodgy chicken sanger he’d bought there one night shift. He got good mileage out of the story though, and never tired of the punch line he’d devised, which was “I reckon they should call the place Grumbling Bums.”

At the Hazelbrook Mobil, I pull up next to a silver Mercedes with a middle-aged woman standing beside it. She’s wearing a white blouse and beige slacks, with an expensive-looking jumper tied around her shoulders. Eyes closed, arms folded, she is breathing deeply, almost theatrically. The rock on her manicured hand glitters in the pale sunlight.

Autumn is prime tourist season here, and Emerald City daytrippers like her are everywhere. I imagine a grey miasma of city stresses evaporating from their pores, fancy I can see their wrinkles softening in the clear mountain air. They come to empty the gourmet shops of quince paste, pesto and sun-dried tomatoes, admire the colour-by-numbers red and orange deciduous trees, and troop down the paved walkway to Echo Point, where they sigh like lovesick schoolgirls over the Three Sisters.

She catches my eye and bestows a wide smile on me.

“She’s so crisp up here, isn’t it? I can just feel my lungs thanking me.”

All I can smell is petrol fumes. “Yeah,” I say. “It’s fresh all right.”

“We’re so lucky to have this beautiful wilderness on our doorstep,” she says, making a broad sweep with her arm. “Who needs the Alps?”

“The Swiss,” I say under my breath, glancing at the pump behind me.

“I’m sorry?” she says, a little archly.

I back off. “And the mist, I said, the mist is great too.”

She frowns slightly, as if doubting that it’s ever anything other than sunny here.
I finish filling my tank, lean back on the car and say, my voice and expression
deep, “Misty nights are when the yeti comes out.”

A flicker of alarm crosses her face. “Oh, really?” she says as she looks around for her
husband, who is just ambling back across the tarmac. She can’t get back in the car
quickly enough, but she looks back as they drive away, and I do my best yeti
impression: screaming mouth, wide eyes, flailing arms.

The next section of the Great Western Highway is the only part with its own
(unofficial) name: the Woodford Bends. I round the corner after crossing the railway
line at Linden, gritting my teeth and gripping the steering wheel, ready for curve after
sickening curve of the racetrack road – except it’s not there. Instead there’s a straight,
smooth stretch of pristine asphalt bordered by freshly exposed sandstone. The park
and its rusty cannon, the cluster of old oaks and the milk bar have all vanished,
bulldozed by progress.

Another ten or so minutes later, white letters on a green sign finally announce my old
hometown: “Wentworth Falls, elevation 867m”. I imagine a cartoon cut-out the size
and shape of the 17-year-old me punched through the sign. My fingers tingle, my
throat tightens and I have the weird sensation I’m merging back into the white and
green lettering of the sign, my edges blurring till you can’t tell where I start and it
ends. I pass the turn-off for Kings Tableland, where we used to camp on the cliffs by
the old deer farm. Out there’s where my first car carked it and I wore out the sole of
my Cons legging it back to the payphone on the highway.

Now Gabor’s Nursery flashes by. Robbie Gabor's tongue had to fight his cleft palate
to get words out, and when his thick glasses got knocked off, he couldn’t see his hand
in front of his face. No surprise that he was the bullies’ favourite victim. There’s that
rundown old place with the vertical neon letters spelling O-T-E-L. And there’s Bree
Hissop’s house, scene of my first game of Truth or Dare.

Here I am then, back home in the Mountains. Not a road, not a building, not a rock,
ot even a particle of air is neutral territory here. I snort derisively. *Hey, kids! Don’t
waste your hard-earned on booze, or roller-coasters, or horse tranquillisers! Looking
for sensory overload? Why risk picking up some strange lad in a laneway? Our
laboratory technicians have concocted the perfect escape from flat, dull, repetitive*
reality: just take a roadtrip back to your hometown. Guaranteed headspin or your money back.

3. She of the peachy complexion

I’m not meeting Sarah at her house. She doesn’t trust me to find it. Instead we’re meeting at the Post Office Café. It’s only a short walk from the car to the café. I keep my gaze on the pavement the whole time, in case I accidentally see someone who knows me. The outside of the building is more or less intact; the renovators have kept the red post office door with its gold-painted royal insignia. This is where we waited for our HSC results, me, Sarah, Carla and Beth, our arses parked on the cold concrete steps, trading groans and cracks about getting piles while the hand of the memorial clock creaked metallically towards 9 o’clock. That night, we sat in Sarah’s loft and passed joints, nicked our forearms with a razor blade and made the promise only 17-year-olds reeling with anticipation at finally entering the adult world could believe – that we’d be friends forever. Four years later, Sarah is the only one I’ve got left.

There she sits, the skinny little minx, her shampoo-commercial hair sitting just so along her yoga-stretched spine. She’s holding the menu at arm’s length, delicately pinching it between her thumb and forefinger. When she sees me, she rushes over, flings her arms around me and shouts “Oh my god, you made it! I can’t believe you made it!” My arms are pinned to my sides, which gives me the perfect excuse for not hugging her back. She steps back, clutches my shoulders and gives me the once-over. “Nice look. How long have you been a Goth, then?”

I blush. “Oh, it’s sort of a recent thing,” I extract my hand and wave airily to show I really haven’t given it much thought. This is a lie: I spent three hours at the hairdresser last week, and another two with eyeliner and bourbon shots trying to achieve the sexy, smoky vixen look the Lancôme chick had promised was a cinch as she smugly relieved me of eighty bucks.

I grimace, Sarah squeezes my arms hard enough to pinch, then lets me go. “Well, whenever you started this look, I approve. It’s very Robert Smith. Me, I’m too scared to try anything different.”

It’s true that she looks just the same as she did at thirteen, when she filled in the Dolly magazine “Search for Today’s Face” competition form. In answer to: How would you
describe your look? Sarah wrote: *I have a wholesome, clean look and once I was told that my nose is just as cute as Samantha’s from that old TV show Bewitched. There are some freckles on my nose and cheeks but overall my complexion is peachy. I would suit any company that wants an image of old-fashioned goodness, like for e.g. Meadow Lea.*

She bounces back into her chair, knocking her water glass to the floor, where it shatters, creating a momentary hush in conversation as all heads turn our way. I slump down in my seat as Sarah scans the room, says “Oops,” in a little-girl voice, and smirks at the waiter, already skulking over with a broom.

Although he’s at least five years older than us and didn’t break a smile when he opened the door for me, the waiter stammers as he asks Sarah to move her feet. It’s not just her looks; there is something else about Sarah that turns men of all ages to mush.

I say to Sarah, “The look still works for you, Miss Fresh-and-Clean.”

She looks at me suspiciously. “That better not be sarcasm I hear, young lady.”

I put on a ‘who, me?’ face and we both laugh.

There’s a small pause, interrupted by a hiss of steam from the coffee machine. Sarah claps and springs up to order two long blacks. She goes around behind the counter and touches the waiter’s hairy arm and whispers something in his ear. He blushes.

Her butt barely hits the seat again before she’s off: who’s coming, what she’s wearing, the decorations, the catering … I realise I’ve missed my cue when I hear her voice, “Mel, Helllooo?” Squinting, I tilt my head to show I’m listening. “I’m listening,” I say.

“But you keep looking at the door.”

Actually, I’m still watching the waiter and wondering if Sarah’s dumped that twerp Scott yet. I say, “Umm, I’m just checking for parking inspectors.”

Incredulity dances across her face. She has a point, since there’s a windowless wall blocking my view of the street.

“Anyway,” she says, shaking her head impatiently, “The important thing is, have you thought about what you’ll say to Sam?”
For the second time in five minutes, I blush. I aim for a lofty, non-committal “Maybe I have,” but my lips barely move, and my voice is so quiet I have to say it twice.

“Oh, Mel, you are just so,” – tapping my forearm – “going to click with him, I know it.” She’s staring, not at me but through me, a deranged maiden aunt on a matchmaking mission. She sighs, closes her eyes, and intones dreamily, “When you meet the One, you’ll know. It’s destiny.”

I swallow a scoff, try to cover it by skolling the dregs of my coffee, then choke for real. She’s still staring into space, head resting on her hand. I break her gaze, look around the café and hear a cultured voice say “– the next day you’re a feather duster. Well what does he expect, politics is brutal – “.

I tap a staccato beat on the table top. I want out of this café before she warms to her theme. She insists on giving me directions. I roll my eyes. “I could drive there blindfolded,” I say. She doesn’t even look up from the napkin she’s scrawling on.

Outside, clouds scud across the sky and a sharp gust of wind hurls a plastic bag against my leg. Goosebumps march across my bare arms. On the other side of the street, Anzac Day wreaths sit slowly desiccating on the war memorial steps. On a whim, I decide to buy Sarah a card from Fraser’s newsagency. I’m flicking through the rack when a voice behind me, which I recognise as belonging to Dad’s old boss, says “Well, if it isn’t Neil’s young lady”. I turn to face Inspector Carlyle, planting a quick peck on his dry cheek to mask the surprise I feel at seeing him hunched over a walking stick. “How is your father, anyway?” he asks and I contemplate lying, but his formidable stare has cracked much tougher nuts than me, so I say “We’re…um, not really talking at the moment,” blushing with remembered shame at the lecture about lawful protests Dad delivered as he refused to bail me from Freo station. Of course the inspector knows none of this, or if he does, gives nothing away, other than a sympathetic smile and a polite request to pass on his regards, whenever I should happen to resume contact.

In the car, I crank up the heater, toss Sarah’s napkin on the floor, and swing the car round in a U-bolt.

4. At Sarah’s house again
Sarah still lives in the house she grew up in, and as I pull into the circular driveway, she steps onto the porch and waves, her ancient cat Mr Whippy tucked under her arm. When he sees me he hisses. Sarah scolds him, “It’s Mel, silly,” and my stomach writhes with a familiar anxiety. Even now, coming to Sarah’s house makes me tense.

Apart from the missing foyer chandelier, the house is the same as it was. Everything about it is artificial: the leather of the lounge, the whiff of lavender air-freshener, the welcome I get from Sarah’s mum, who crosses the sea of cream carpet, saying with exaggerated warmth “Call me Cath, please,” as I mumble “Hello, Mrs Charles,” into her embrace, which is all arms and happens at a distance, her hair rustling like a chip packet as her lips press my cheek.

When we’re all settled in the lounge room, nursing our rose-patterned teacups, Sarah’s mum asks how my job is going. I’m not sure how much Sarah has let on about my public service job, but knowing her, she’s probably romanticised it. Romance – of the soul-mates forever, puffy white gowns, fated meetings kind – figures pretty large in this house. Sarah’s tomboy phase only lasted until Year 8, and now it seems mother and daughter are pretty much – pun intended – bosom buddies, since to celebrate Sarah’s eighteenth and Mrs Charles’s fortieth they both got a visit from the silicone fairy. My eyes flick involuntarily to Sarah’s chest, then her mother’s, before I notice a framed portrait on the wall above the lounge, in which a soft-focus Sarah, head wreathed in baby’s breath, gazes up at Scott, her rugby-playing high school sweetheart.

Mrs Charles (despite her urgings, I can’t think of her as Cath) follows my gaze and then shoots a worried look at her daughter. “I hope Scott doesn’t bring those mates of his tonight. Your father and I don’t want any trouble.”

Sarah rolls her eyes.

After a few minutes of polite chat, including questions about my love life (I decide on “No, no boyfriends during uni,” as the most appropriate response), there’s a pause and then Mrs Charles says “It’s really lovely to see you again, Mel,” looking at me a moment longer than feels comfortable. She seems genuine, at least as genuine as a woman with a boob job and a face plastered with TV-strength makeup can.

“Same,” I say, feeling confused.
“You and Sarah go back a long way,” she continues, setting her teacup down with a gentle clink, “And I’d appreciate if you could keep an eye on her tonight.”

With an audible noise of disgust, Sarah gets up and starts rifling through a magazine rack next to the lounge.

Her mum’s still staring at me, now wearing the slightly disapproving look I remember from childhood. I want to defy her but instead I say meekly “Sure.”

With a wide smile of gratitude, she starts clearing the teacups and I follow Sarah to her bedroom.

Aside from a few new things here and there, Sarah’s room is still the same. She even has the same single bed, although the painted butterflies on its headboard now look a little scratched. I wedge myself among the pile of satin cushions, imagining the ancient springs groaning under Scott’s hefty frame. She closes the door and plonks herself on the bed too, extracting the magazine from under her arm and fixing me with a mock-serious look as she reads “A dormant relationship reignites when someone from your past materialises after a long separation. A meeting, possibly a celebration…” (a pause, raised eyebrows), “presents an opportunity for setting a new direction, but you must overcome your natural reticence and speak from your heart.”

When I make no reply, she bats my foot with the magazine and says insistently, “You two, it was meant to be. He’s the one.”

I sigh and sit forward, thinking of how I can get it into Sarah’s thick head that I’m no longer that girl who cherished Sam as the star of my most feverish teenage dreams. We’d be the winning contestants on Perfect Match. Our prize was a tropical holiday, where we lay entwined in the hotel bed sheets, or sipped luridly-coloured cocktails from each other’s glasses. This idealised Sam hovered over my tentative romantic entanglements all through high school, and I never admitted that he was the reason I remained a virgin while all my friends, Sarah included, didn’t.

“Look, uni changes the way you think about guys,” I say, thinking of how drinking competitions and anonymity and co-ed dormitories precipitated a frenzy of one-night-stands in first year. These blokes were made of sturdy stuff: guts, ticker, Adam’s
apple, stubble, hairy chests, big balls actual and figurative. They usually had names like Sinkers or Robbo, and they congregated in packs at pubs like the Rising Sun or the Railway where they’d lean on the bar draining glass after glass until they hit on me with a “Fancy a root?” or a “Nice tits, love.” In the sack these blokes possessed all the finesse of toddlers forcing a square block into a round hole. They were quick, too: I’d mentally flip an egg-timer when my undies fell to the floor and it’d never run out by the time the bloke had heaved his sweaty mass off me and mashed his snoring face into my pillow. When I tired of them, I moved on to the pale, vegetarian intellectuals who populated my English tutes. For a while I relished the novelty of foreplay and post-coital discussions about Foucault, but as soon as they got too keen, I’d give them the brush-off with some handy post-feminist spiel about sexual double standards.

She’s still looking expectantly at me.

“All I’m saying is, I’ve slept around since school,” I say, rearranging a pillow under my head. “Things are different in the big smoke.”

She shoves my foot, hard. “Don’t be a patronising cow. We do have casual sex up here, in case you’d forgotten.” Her voice softens. “But ... it’s Sam we’re talking about.”

I realise she has no idea why Sam has come back after all this time. Sarah is an expert at simply forgetting or ignoring unpleasant things. So of course she’s blacked out that month we didn’t talk to Sam. And she doesn’t know that I’m the one who spilled the beans. In her pretty little fairytale version of events, Sam is galloping back in to town solely to whisk me away to happily-ever-after-land on the back of his valiant steed.

5. The past materialises

We’re singing, well yelling actually, “Don-chew forgeddabout me/Dow dow dow don-chew forgeddabout me/and jew walkon by/and jew say my name” over the tinny vibrations of the car radio. Sarah’s cousin Meg is driving, throwing the car around narrow bends as we head towards the party. Cool air rushes past the car windows. Meg’s steering with her left hand, waving her right hand from side to side in time with the song. The patch of road lit by our headlights is a stage, and the tall shapes of blackened tree trunks the audience. I’m trying too hard to be excited, as if by singing
heartily I can make my stomach stop turning somersaults. The dress I’m wearing is baggy enough to be a maternity number, but it feels close and clingy.

“Hey, Meg,” I yell over the music “What does Sam look like now?” I want to see if Sarah’s told her anything. Looking straight ahead and with both hands on the wheel now, Meg assumes a stagey serious look and recites: “His credentials are as follows. A pair of legs, sturdy and serviceable. Then follows a torso, to this attached a pair of arms as manly as can be desired. The whole is set off quite nicely by a head of the standard size and shape. Altogether, a very marriageable sort.” She looks wryly at me, her eyebrows raised.

I glare back at her, huff and cross my arms. She lets go of the wheel briefly, shrugs and says “Me know nothink.” We’re there.

I’m standing on a patch of sticky carpet at the end of the Golf Club bar behind a fake palm. I’m alone; the minute we arrived a swarm of aunts whisked Meg away. We’re early and as I don’t see anyone I know, I order a drink. Raising the schooner glass, I toast myself, then take a gulp of beer, thinking One down, nine to go, before I turn to face the room, gingerly patting my teased hair. I’m standing alert and expectant, as if I’ve just knocked on a stranger’s door.

Bunches of gold balloons and loops of ribbon hang from the ceiling. Down the other end of the bar, there’s a long table, draped in white. Sarah’s relatives cluster around the table; the women fuss over cheese cubes and pickled onions, the men rock on their heels, hands thrust in suit pockets.

One of the younger suits looks vaguely familiar. When he meets my eye I realise it’s James, the pasty-faced doctor’s son, whose father plays bridge with Sarah’s parents. Sometime in high school, Mrs Charles invited him to join their family’s summer sojourn at Palm Beach. “Graham and Celia simply cannot take him to Switzerland,” she insisted when Sarah and I moaned that he was going to ruin our holiday. As it turned out, watching him make passes at the surfer chicks who were way out of his league became our main entertainment.

He bounds over enthusiastically, and skids to a stop with his arms spread wide, showman style. I check his lapels: yep, he’s still got dandruff.

He socks me on the arm, “Long time no communicado, amigo.”
Amigo is presumptuous, since I haven’t seen him since that summer holiday.

“Hey, nice to see you, uh, James.”

“Enchante, madame,” he says, planting a slimy kiss on my hand.

“How’re the ferrets?” I say.

“Ha! You remembered. Well, these days I prefer them frozen. They’re crunchier that way.”

“Really?” I ask politely, regretting the intimacy I’ve invited by starting with an in-joke.

He prattles on for a bit – I catch something about system analysis before I affix an expression of vague interest to my face and let my eyes glaze over. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, the darkness of the greens is spotted with small orange lights marking each hole. It occurs to me that somewhere in the bush bordering the course is the shed we used for Keyhole Club. I picture the rusty padlock, the dim interior smelling of leather and mould, the blobs of candle wax on the cement floor. Other scenes emerge from the fuzz of my slightly pissed mind: the three of us pedalling around the streets, peering over fences; Sam’s warm hand that balmy night of the school dance. I want to prolong this nostalgic haze, so I make my excuses to James and head to the bar.

--Interlude: nine beers down--

Step, step, stumble, whoa, fall, oops – where’d that edge come from? up-sa-daisy hello feet I’m pleased to see you, put your hand down ooh they’re handy, hey there i’m standing again. like my music loud, doof-doof-dada-dada-doof, hips go left and right. i’m swinging i’m swaying i’m looking and saying: wall is big, wall is small, here it comes, there it goes. ow what’s the shiny? I don’t like it, hurts my head; oh there’s Sarah waving, to me? I wave back hand is heavy like a … like a big fat sausage, am I hungry? where’s my drink? someone’s talking – do I do or say as I do? I say words like hello or how are you and nice to meet you whathisname I can’t remember. oh nice face though warm and smiley, he he he I’m a giggle, that tickles I say, he says hold still, why? it’s a pen he writes some words, is funny and kind then gone now I’m dancing again ooh no feel sick head spins. run, push door, throw self on
floor then spew – mmm floor is cold let’s lie down let’s have a spell. cozy cozy soft and cuddly this floor is. i’ll just be here just for a bit.

--blacks out on floor--

Someone is calling me. The voice is urgent, insistent and slightly anxious. I prise open an eye, and past the wedge of white tiles I can make out a tuft of red curls and freckled nose. “He’s here,” says Meg. “Get up.”

Meg’s face swims into focus. I heave the upper half of my body up and sit gently swaying, while Meg forces a glass of water to my lips. I see things with a weird sort of clarity: the sharp edges of the basin, the shiny surface of the mirror, the top of my shoes. This happens sometimes when I black out on my binges. I’m still trashed, but it sort of clears my mind.

Back in the function room, Meg points to the bar, which is on the other side of some glass doors. Through my wavering vision, I can just make out pink and blue smudges that could be people’s heads and legs. I grip Meg’s arm, and then pat it, to let her know she can go. I’m determined to do this by myself.

As I push open the barroom door, I can see that he’s wedged in a tight huddle of guys from the soccer team. They’re chanting “Skol, skol, skol” as someone pours the foamy dregs from a beer stein down his throat. I take my time crossing the carpet, planting each foot carefully down. I can see Sam’s face in profile as he shouts jubilantly along with the others, his eyes on the drinker, who is standing right next to him, leaning back on the bar. The features are familiar – the freckles, the broad forehead, the piercing blue eyes – but the angles of his jaw and cheekbones make his unmistakably a man’s face.

I’ve almost reached them when he sees me. The smile falls off his face. I stand totally still. For the first time in hours, the room has stopped whirling. There is a white rushing noise in my ears. For what seems a very long time, he stares at me. It’s only because I’m drunk that I manage to hold his gaze.

Still staring stonily at me, he pushes free of the huddle and strides over.

“You,” he says harshly, his fingers digging into the flesh of my forearm. I flinch and twist my body away, but the next moment he’s got both arms around me, crushing me
against his chest. It’s not until he steps back and looks me up and down that he smiles, and even then, it’s a rueful half-smile which doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Come out here,” he says, gesturing with a cocked head to the covered verandah which overlooks the greens. When I pause for a second, he grabs my hand (again, his grip is a little too forceful) and pulls me out the door. He walks over and leans out over the railing, the back of his head glowing orange where the light from the bar behind us falls on it. Ribbons of mist drift over the manicured lawns. The air is cold and scented with eucalyptus. I rub my bare arms, wishing I hadn’t left my coat inside.

“So,” he says, now facing me, arms folded.

“So … what?” I say.

“What’d you come for?” A challenge.

Feeling bold again, I walk slowly over with what I hope is a seductive sway of my hips. Standing close enough that my skirt brushes his legs, I whisper “To see you.”

There’s a pause, long enough for me to register that there no smell of alcohol on his breath. “Cut the bullshit, Mel,” he says, stepping deftly out of reach. “I know you. I know there’s only one reason you’re here.”

“Oh yeah?” I say angrily. “And what might that be, since you’re obviously a mindreader?”

Instead of replying, he sighs and drags one of the plastic lounge chairs over to where I’m standing. He sits on the edge and leans his elbows on his knees, his hands held out in a placatory gesture. “Look, when I heard you were coming, it, well – it got me thinking about all that … stuff … that happened in Grade Six, and I thought, you know, you and me, we could finally … work it out.”

“Why me? Why not Sarah?”

He rolled his eyes and snorted a little. “It’s all melodrama with her. You’re more … grounded.” A pause. “And smarter.” He pats the seat of the chair, giving me a puppy-dog-eyes look.
The old charm works. I sit next to him. “OK,” I say, “But only if you tell me what’s happened since then, starting with where you went that summer.”

Then, after I’ve settled myself in the lounge chair next to his, he tells me the whole story, or his version of it at least. How his parents had a screaming match that Christmas day, how his dad cleared off, how he hasn’t heard from him since. How he tried to track down Deirdre Grigson, how, over the years, he comforted himself with ever more elaborate stories about why his dad couldn’t get in touch. Dirk had become a spy, dispatched overseas on dangerous missions. Or he was in the witness protection program, or sailing solo around the world.

We hardly look at each other for however long his story takes, and the more he talks, the more smoothly the words flow. Sitting side-by-side like this, looking out into the foggy darkness, listening to his voice slow down and grow softer, I’m lulled into believing that he’s forgiven me.

But then, as though waking up, he shakes his head and sits up, turning to face me. “So that’s the fairytale,” he says, in a normal, brisk tone of voice. “Your turn.”

It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. “You want to know … what I think?” I say tentatively.

“No,” he says. “I want to know what’s on your conscience.”

Here it is then. The reason I came, and the reason I didn’t want to come at all. The truth, or at least my truth. “You’re right about Deirdre,” I say, surprised by how calm I sound. “She wasn’t a whore. She was a shrink.” How easy that was, in the end.

He looks puzzled. “That’s it?” he says.


He scratches his head, looks to the left and then to the right, as though he’s lost something. “OK,” he says slowly. “OK.” He sits for a minute staring at the ground.

“Should we go inside?” I ask.
He rouses himself, gets up and takes my hand. “Thanks,” he says, squeezing it gently.
“Let’s go find Sarah.”
6. A reunion, of sorts

There’s a crowd of onlookers blocking the street, which doesn’t surprise me. The funeral I’m headed for is of a middle-aged heart attack victim who was rescued from his stranded yacht. The rescue alone was newsworthy enough, but his dying wish – to be reunited with his estranged family – delivered as he lay gasping for breath in the ambulance, ensured plenty of media interest in the unfolding drama. I had to park three blocks away and squeeze past a scrum of photographers and clusters of well-dressed guests – if that’s the right word – to get here. It’s humid: the air is close under leaden piles of grey clouds.

Near the front door, I see Sarah’s elegant arm, her bent elbow the point of a black triangle of irritation which finishes in the hand perched on her hip. Her other arm ends in a pointed finger, which is poking the air perilously close to the face of a woman in a cream suit and hat. Mrs Cream Hat is still nodding and clutching her hands together as Sarah turns away from her to scan the crowd with her forehead still furrowed and lips still pursed. When she spots me she flashes a short smile that is equal parts complicity and sympathy. There’s an awkward entanglement between her Dior sunglasses and my hair when we both lean in, me to kiss her cheek and her to hug me, and as I’m trying to extract myself her sunnies come off, revealing bloodshot eyes circled with puffy skin. She snatches the sunnies back and runs a single finger delicately under each eye. Looking somewhere over my shoulder, she says through gritted teeth “That silly cow,” – meaning Mrs Cream Hat – “has no idea how to do her job.” We follow the line of mourners filing into the chapel.

In the foyer, another cream-clad woman stands next to a table which holds a condolence book. Wearing her professional sympathy smile, she proffers the pen and asks us “Here for Mister Just?”

Sarah glares at her and snaps “His name is Joost,” and marches straight past her. I smile sheepishly and take the pen, wondering as I write “Sorry for your loss,” why Sarah is so upset.
The chapel is small. Even so, it’s nowhere near full. Down the front Sarah’s frowning face is just visible over Sam’s shoulder. He’s facing away from me, but I can tell from his posture that he’s trying to calm Sarah down. This seems all backwards; it’s Sam’s dad lying in that mahogany box, not Sarah’s.

Sam sits down in the front row, next to his mother, grandmother and sisters. Sarah pulls me into a chair, still shaking her head. She faces the front, three rows of mostly still, mostly silent, mostly black-clad bodies between us and the coffin. I’m about to ask her what’s up when the organ music starts.

Its sombre chords are overlaid with little snifflles and choking sounds from the audience, and as I watch Sam, his grandmother’s head resting on his shoulder, I suddenly feel sad. My breath seems solid and slow, and I’m hyper-aware of the blind mechanical beating of my heart. Outside there’s the distant hum and rumble of traffic, and clouds piling up in the sky and insects blindly buzzing and babies being born and builders hauling bricks; the whole messy, relentless business of living going on and on, while in this stuffy room everyone sits neatly, like obedient school kids waiting for the principal’s address. I want to shout Why are you all so well-behaved? He’s dead! Instead I jiggle my knees. Each second crawls past like an hour, or so it seems. Finally, cream-suited woman number 2 gets up, and the congregation – I guess that’s what we are, although this isn’t really a church – stops fidgeting.

She delivers a speech which is far too polished to have been written for Dirk, although come to think of it I’m not sure that even a prize-winning novelist could appropriately convey the strange circumstances of his demise. It has enough Christian references to convey a sense of decorum without implying that Dirk was religious (which he wasn’t). We’re then told to listen carefully to the song about to play, which was specially chosen by Sam’s sisters.

From somewhere above and behind me, the music starts. I recognise the intro and I’m trying to place the song when I feel a sharp jab in the ribs. Sarah’s picked it too. We exchange a look of disbelief. I suppose the lyrics “I am sailing, stormy waters/To be near you/To be free” are sufficiently abstract to offer some consolation to the bereaved. Though I’m sure they’re in shock, Sam’s sisters could have considered the effect that such a literal reference to how Dirk died might have on the mourners.
When the song finishes, Sam gets up, all stiff and awkward in his rented suit. He looks out over the heads of the congregation. I see his adam’s apple move as he swallows, grasps the lectern and says “My Dad...” with the longest pause after it, a pause so long that it seems like that might be his whole speech, just two words of ownership, yearning and castigation, all mixed together.

My hope in that pause is for some kind of validation, some version of the facts which will be both accurate and redemptive, a shining sword beaten out of dull metal, a story which is strong enough and true enough to hold Dirk’s betrayal, and mine, and Sarah’s, without buckling under the weight.
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