Floating (a novel) and Writing and Not Writing a Novel Called Floating (an essay)

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a fictional novel, *Floating*, and a critical essay.

The essay explores the borderlines between autobiographical writing (including memoir) and fiction. Using autobiographical narrative, the essay explores the inspiration and influences for writing the novel, *Floating*. It considers authors’ attitudes to autobiography in fiction, drawing on the work of Jessie Kesson before examining the literary techniques used by three contemporary authors: Jeanette Winterson, Janice Galloway and Jackie Kay. It considers particular challenges of writing autobiographically including: narrative perspective, identity, truth and invention.

The novel engages with themes arising in the essay, particularly those relating to the creation and assumption of identity through recounting memory.
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I must mention my late parents who would have been more proud than my achievements could possibly merit. The rest of my family help me by being here, there and wherever. My greatest inspiration and joy is my daughter, Mhairi, who kindly said she'd love me anyway.
Author's declaration

This is an original creative and critical work including a novel and an essay
Floating
(a novel)

Eoifa stood by the threshold of her new Glasgow home, suitcases at her feet having eventually wrestled them away from the taxi driver. My God they were persistent here.

‘I can get the car right in that drive there, darlin…I don’t like seein a young lady strugglin wi they heavy bags.’

But she was determined to carry her own baggage - what she couldn’t lift, she’d leave behind. She took the handle of a case in each hand and hauled them across the drive, their spinning wheels getting caught in the mix of gravel and red stone chips. This was it. Reinvention 2010. Start of a new decade, at least for the calendar, while she struggled through what remained of her thirties wondering if life really would begin (again) at forty.

She looked back to see the haphazard path her luggage left from the gate to the front door steps. She left them queuing by the front door and took this moment to enjoy the house from the garden before the removal van arrived or the landlady appeared.

This place was grander than anything she’d lived in before, set back from the road in its own grounds like the mansion houses around it. For the first time since arriving in the city, she could smell something other than traffic fumes or the odours being pumped from takeaway shops. It was a relief to be away from the hotel - all part of the relocation package and fun at first, like most things Eoifa had encountered. After the first week she could recite the dinner menu as a party piece, had there been a party to attend. Eating alone carried the ever-present danger of being joined by travelling business people. Ordering room service involved balancing the tray on a round table with a chair at the wrong height for eating and anyway it made the room smell.

Renting an apartment from a resident landlady was a departure for Eoifa. She found Mrs McQuarry’s number in a newspaper advert: tenement flat for rent. It turned out there were two flats available but neither appealed - too far from a train station. She didn’t know a lot about Glasgow but she knew it was never advisable to rely on driving to work, not when her office was right in the town
centre and not while she was yet to buy a car. On what appeared to be a whim of her own, Mrs McQuarry insisted Eoifa came with her to her own house in the leafy South Side, not far from a station and with plenty of parking.

The house was magnificent, a detached late nineteenth century home that had been converted into three or was it four? Eoifa had forgotten to ask how many flats there were. An external staircase to one side of the main building gave access to the apartment Mrs McQuarry shared with her son, Ben. There must be at least one other door to the rear. The landlady hadn’t shown her the back of the building. Eoifa would occupy a portion of the ground floor, which meant she would use the main front door and could also use a side door that opened directly into the kitchen. The kitchen was the only part of the house that didn’t have a full second storey and looked like it had originally been a garage or stables, although Mrs McQuarry assured her it had always been the kitchen. It did have a low attic room which was accessed via a spiral staircase.

‘Don’t bother with that up there. It’s just the scullery maid’s quarters,’ Mrs McQuarry dismissed the enticing possibility that lay beyond the wrought iron stairs. Eoifa imagined arranging fairy lights around the decorative spindles. ‘Oh don’t look so worried, she’s not there now.’ The landlady added, chuckling to herself.

Today, Mrs McQuarry emerged from the house as the removal van edged through the sandstone pillars. The gates looked like they were kept permanently open, pressed flat against the hedge, held at their base by the depth of the gravel and, for added security, a brick on each side. The landlady immediately began directing the driver, signalling him to turn the vehicle around so the rear doors were nearest the main house entrance. There was just about enough room for him to do this without running his tyres on to the grass.

She wore the same outfit as the day Eoifa had first met her: a dark nylon jumper, A-line skirt, and lace up shoes that looked like Hush Puppies. She resembled an off-duty nun. If she hadn’t been accompanied on that first meeting by an adult-sized boy who she described variously as her son, Ben and Number One guide, Eoifa would have assumed she had recently renounced her vows. She was the kind of person that a younger Eoifa might have made strenuous efforts to avoid.
Mrs McQuarry was followed down the stone stairs by a black and white cat that she shooed into the house, calling in a voice that might have lacked volume but compensated with crystal clear diction, ‘Ben, Be-en...Ben McQuarry! Would you come and rescue Hobbit this instant? There’s a cat-crushing truck in our midst.’

Ben lumbered down the external stairs, pausing briefly at the bottom to raise a hand in a vague wave at Eoifa, before following the cat into the main entrance. ‘There we go now, he remembers you fine’, Mrs McQuarry gushed, ‘my Number One Guide is sometimes a wee bitty shy ‘til he gets to know folks but I can see you’ve made a great impression.’ The landlady explained on their first meeting that her use of the ‘Number One Guide’ moniker stemmed from a trip she had made to India many years ago where this was common parlance. Eoifa wasn’t certain if this was intended to be complimentary. To her ears it sounded patronising. Poor Ben. He was what Eoifa’s mother would have described as ‘no the full shilling’ and the kids at her school would have called ‘a daftie’. She could hear their chants ringing through the echoey institutional corridors. Not that she had been called a daftie but there were plenty other names. In 1970s Scotland, what didn’t kill you left you scarred.

Ben emerged from the house with the cat squirming in his arms, although the van manoeuvring was completed and the driver had killed the engine.

‘Oh well done, we don’t want him getting mixed up with all my boxes,’ Eoifa smiled. Ben nodded and marched purposefully back towards his own apartment with his armful of reluctant cat.

‘Are you not an animal lover, Miss Eoifa?’ Mrs McQuarry banged on the side of the van in a proprietorial manner that took Eoifa by surprise.

‘Oh no, I do like animals.’ Her response was lost as the removal man swung out of the cab. He was younger than she had imagined.

‘Here Missus, all damages to the vehicle need to be reported!’ He slow-jogged to the back of the van and momentarily pretended to restrain Mrs McQuarry’s arm, smiling in a friendly-tease. ‘Now I know you’re all muscles, I’ll save you the heavy boxes.’

‘Ah you’ll be saving them a while...I’m not into the heavy lifting, though I can manage a kettle - tea or coffee? Come on in Eoifa, let’s get you settled.’
‘Ah, you’re Evie.’ The removal man reached to shake Eoifa’s hand. ‘I think we spoke on the phone. I’m Alan, pleased to meet you.’ His handshake was firm. ‘Is it Evie? Or Ev-a?’

‘It’s pronounced Eef-a.’ She tried not to be sour. He had a friendly smile and a chirpy manner, like an advert for Glasgow: the Friendly City.

‘Is it really? That’s a nice name. Unusual, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yeah, I guess.’ Where had her parents picked up a name like that? Harking back to some distant Irish lineage and misspelling it. Any Irish people she met told her they’d only ever seen it spelled with an A, Aoife. Still pronounced more or less the same. She always thought she’d change it. As a teenager, she imagined having an ordinary name, one that would help her...not blend in exactly but avoid having to explain herself every time she needed to let someone know what she was called.

‘Unusual in a good way, I mean’. He turned to open the back of the van.

‘Like I say, I’m Alan - pronounced Alan - pretty standard really, cannae go wrong. Heh heh.’

He reminded her of someone, someone from a long time ago. She tried to recall but couldn’t bring an actual person to the front of her mind. He raised an eyebrow quizzically. Worried she’d been caught staring, she brushed her hand roughly through her hair and shifted focus to the contents of the van.

‘Those big boxes are just for stacking in the hall.’

‘Ok I reckon I can manage that.’ He smiled. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes! Yes, I’ll just...’ she looked around for something to explain her still standing there.

‘It’s a funny business moving, eh?’ He rolled up the loose ends of the black straps that had held the boxes in place during the drive. Their heavy buckles made a loud clunking noise as they swung back against the inside of the van.

‘Yeah, I guess. Should be used to it by now.’ She coughed, ‘at least it’s dry. And not too cold, for March.’ He shouted something in agreement from the belly of the van.

Eoifa wasn’t sure if she should wait to show Alan where she wanted the boxes piled in the hall or just leave him to it. She didn’t intend to unpack all of them immediately, particularly those whose contents she could no longer remember. It was a hazard of any move but, this time, she had the belongings
from her last flat and she was being reunited with items that had spent the last few years in storage. Finally facing them was all part of the reinvention. Perhaps she was finally adulting. Was that a term the counsellors would approve of? Counsellors, Christ! What made her think of them today? Must be twenty years since she had to face them and the University Counselling Service. She shook her head and went inside to catch up with Mrs McQuarry.

The doors to all the rooms were open making the wide entrance hall lighter than Eoifa remembered. The staircase facing the main door looked particularly impressive. She followed the hall past the bedroom and paused at the bathroom, ducking inside to check herself in the mirror. She tried to recreate the expression she thought she’d adopted while speaking to Alan. She didn’t look too bad, given the early start. No visible dark circles under her eyes. Hair no messier than usual. Had she looked like she was staring? She rinsed her hands under the tap. There was no soap by the sink yet or towel, she realised, shaking her hands and then rubbing them on the backs of her jeans.

Beyond the bathroom, the hall turned sharply to the left and a narrower corridor led to the kitchen. Eoifa spotted the wooden coat hook fashioned into the shape of an owl that she had noticed on her first visit. That would definitely come down the moment the landlady left her alone. Her parents had the same one; it was amongst the first objects she burned after she inherited what had become her mum’s house. When you hung your coat on the owl’s feet its wings extended up the wall on either side of its body. She needed to reach up to touch this one but the owl from her childhood had been hung at dado height, for a child’s coat, just inside the front door and outside the sitting room where she had to wait whenever she was in trouble, which was quite often.

‘Is that you, Miss Eoifa?’ the landlady’s reedy voice carried through from the kitchen.

Eoifa followed the chicane in the corridor through to the kitchen. The house smelled differently from earlier in the week; presumably Mrs McQuarry had been airing it. It felt less like a museum.

The outside kitchen door was wide open and the landlady was bustling around, checking cupboards and running the taps, apparently propelled by the static energy generated from the manmade fibres of her jumper. Eoifa imagined she could hear it crackling as the landlady rushed around the room.
Despite its size, the kitchen had the cosy feel of a den. It was divided into distinct areas for cooking, eating and relaxing. Large sash windows on two of the walls provided views of the garden, making the cooking and seating areas bright. A dining table and chairs were nestled between an internal wall and the steep spiral stairs leading to the attic room.

‘Have you much furniture to come in? What I mean to say is, will you be needing any of the existing furniture moved out of your way?’

‘Oh that’s very kind but I actually don’t have much furniture at all. It’s mostly books, paperwork, you know, and...kitchen...things.’ Now Eoifa thought about it, aside from the very old boxes and her clothes, most of her possessions actually belonged in the kitchen. It might have been better if the van was facing the other way, with its rear nearest to the kitchen door but, given that she had stood by while the landlady directed the driver, she wouldn’t voice these thoughts just yet. She might slip out later and have a quiet word with the removal man.

‘Ah you young folks, never in one spot long enough to lay down roots.’ Mrs McQuarry waggled what looked like a monkey wrench in Eoifa’s direction, its adjustable jaws clinked as it moved. What was she going to do with that? ‘Not that I blame you. If it wasn’t for this place, I’d be the same myself. Footloose and fancy free, isn’t that the way?’ Mrs McQuarry didn’t seem to want a response, preoccupied as she was with the washing machine. ‘Let’s get a look at you, Mr Machine.’

‘Can I give you a hand there?’ Eoifa moved towards the landlady hoping she’d say ‘no’. DIY was definitely not a strong suit.

‘Ach now, be careful or I might just let you. It’s just a case of remembering where all these flexes go. They should still be leading in under the sink...’

It seemed Eoifa’s offer really was redundant. The landlady apparently was a lot stronger than she looked, judging by the way she’d managed to nudge the machine to one side.

‘Where did you say you were staying before here?’

‘Just one of those city centre hotels, a chain, near Central Station.’

‘Aye-aye but before you came to Glasgow?’

‘Oh, sorry, yes. London - I was in London for quite a while.’

‘And before that, abroad - isn’t that what you said?’
‘Yes, Japan.’ Eoifa opened one of the cupboards to assess the space available for her crockery.

‘Not much call for furniture over there, I imagine. And tough to bring it home I guess.’

‘Yes, I travelled pretty light, there and back.’ For years Eoifa took pride in being able to flit with the contents of two large suitcases. The ones she bought in Jenners on Princes Street the week she learned her mother had died. She still had those - lasted longer than any of her relationships, except maybe Mary.

Even when she first came back from Japan, she made do with whatever accompanied the furnished flats she rented. More recently she had become something of a magpie. The big change was buying her own crockery. One look at the grubby kitchen supplies typically available in the UK rented flat market had her driving straight to the nearest Ikea to purchase their cheapest set of white dinnerware. After that, pots and pans followed. Anyone who could afford their own plates should surely have them. She didn’t mind parking her arse on a loosely sprung sofa or even forcing herself to sleep on a worn mattress, although her patience with those was wearing as thin as the mattresses themselves, a thick protector and topper were not always enough. She already needed to hire a van to help her move, she might as well capitulate completely and buy a bed, or perhaps just a fresh mattress. If she was staying a while it would be worth it.

Yes, the two-suitcase flits were behind her. Even then, who had she been kidding? Euan could easily trace her. Thanks to her work she left a digital footprint that even the technologically challenged could pursue. Now she was travelling regularly to Edinburgh she might even bump into him. Would she recognise him? She could no longer bring an accurate picture of his face to mind. Portions would appear, his hair flopping over his forehead, a sly smile beginning to play across his lips in that way she’d grown to hate. Whenever she thought of him a sensation akin to claustrophobia began to grip her. She needed to remind herself it was all in the past. Locked in another time, another place.

She felt light-headed, how long since breakfast? She steadied herself on the kitchen worktop.

‘Ah you’re like myself, having a good think about things,’ Mrs McQuarry interrupted Eoifa’s reverie. ‘Now then, let’s get that kettle back into action.’
‘Christ!’ Eoifa had forgotten about the van man. Had she really said ‘Christ’ in front of Mrs McQuarry? Too late to apologise. Might as well continue. ‘He’ll be gasping for tea by now.’

‘Aye, he’ll be gasping for something I’d say.’ Mrs McQuarry sized Eoifa up. ‘Are you a tea or a coffee? I sometimes like to guess but you might as well tell me since you’re here.’ The landlady flicked the switch on the kettle which made low growling sounds suggesting its contents had been boiled before. ‘I put a few wee supplies, a starter kit you might call it, into this cupboard here and the milk’s come straight out of the fridge, it’s not been in the cupboard, or it would’ve turned to cheese by now, eh? and that would never do for your coffee. It is coffee you’d like, is it? Or are you a tea?’

‘Coffee would be lovely, thanks. I’ll see what um…Alan…might like.’ It felt a little strange to use his name.

‘He’ll be a tea - here’s one I made earlier, as they say.’ Mrs McQuarry pushed a mug of builders’ tea along the work surface towards Eoifa. ‘I made that for your man-with-a-van whenever I came in here. Is it warm enough still?’

‘It feels fine. I’ll take it out to him now.’

‘Ach, do you not think he’ll come in and sit a minute? I’ve biscuits here and everything. I wasn’t sure what length of drive he might’ve had to get here.’

‘Well, I’m not sure how far he’s driven today but the company was taking my things from London. I don’t suppose he drove from there this morning.’ Eoifa hoped that didn’t sound too sharp, but she needn’t have worried because Mrs McQuarry didn’t appear to be listening.

‘Right, so we’ll let him take the weight off his feet before he gets properly into the lifting.’

Eoifa smiled, ‘I’ll take the mug out to him and see what he says about coming in.’

‘Good thinking! I knew you were the brains of the bunch.’ Mrs McQuarry gave her an awkward thumbs up sign. ‘You do that very thing.’ She already had her head back under the worktop. ‘Let me just check this connector under the sink here.’

Although the landlady was still talking, Eoifa reckoned it was probably safe to walk away without appearing excessively rude.
‘Man! What have you got in those boxes, bricks?!’ Alan leant against the van, wiping his forehead with the back of his gloved hand.

‘Books mainly, and some CDs and cassettes as well.’ She handed him the mug.

‘Thanks.’ He took a sip and winced.

‘Is it okay? Too strong?’

‘Nah, it’ll be fine when it’s cooled down a bit. Thanks.’ He set the mug inside the back of the van.

‘Seriously?’ Was he taking the piss? It didn’t feel hot when she carried it out.

‘Aye, I like baby tea, nice and cool, loads ay milk. Just one o ma wee foibles.’

‘There’s more milk in the kitchen if you want…’ She shielded her eyes, the sun wasn’t warm but it was bright.

‘Never mind the tea, did nobody tell you, you shouldnae fill a box to the top with books? Just put a layer or two at the most in the bottom and then pack the box out with lighter stuff, towels or scatter cushions or something.’

Eoifa smiled at the incongruity of this muscular man extolling the virtues of scatter cushions.

‘It’s no’ a laughing matter, let me tell you,’ he shook his head, yet he was smiling. ‘See if I’ve to go off sick with a bad back, you’ll have to fill in for me, or maybe your maw there, seeing as she’s all muscles.’

‘I’m sure she’d be great - but she’s not my mum. She’s my landlady.’

‘Ah right, I wondered. Listen,’ he came closer and nudged Eoifa with his arm, ‘that’s a funny arrangement with the stairs there. I’ve seen some, shall we say, unusual conversions but that’s a cracker.’

Although the main house staircase was still exposed in the downstairs apartment, it was blocked off at the top. The stairway to nowhere, Mrs McQuarry had called it when she showed Eoifa round. The removal guy was right, it was an unusual arrangement. Had Mrs McQuarry been responsible for making the alteration? Eoifa stood inside the doorway, trying to imagine alternative ways of dividing the building. The cat reappeared and rubbed itself against the corner of a box. Eoifa leant down to stroke along its back. Its fur was glossy but didn’t feel as soft to the touch as it looked. The cat rubbed against Eoifa’s leg and flopped onto its side for more attention. She would enjoy having an
occasional feline visitor. As a child she had begged for a pet but her mum would never give in. She did once get the class stick insect to take home in a glass tank for the weekend. Her mother threatened to dump the lot in the compost heap, refusing to believe there was anything other than foliage and damp soil in the container.

When she was a little older, one of her mum’s friends sometimes let Eoifa take her Labrador for a walk at the weekend. Mick was a deep shade of golden brown, it was before all Labs were bred to look like pale sand. Eoifa used to walk him through the fields at the back of the town and end up on the hill, looking across the whole county. Mick loved Eoifa. He would leap around, yelping with excitement when she came to take him out. She wanted to believe it was his discerning nature or her exceptional animal husbandry but secretly knew it was the biscuits she shared with him on their walks together. She always stopped at Cathy’s sweetie shop on the corner, and bought a packet of Rich Teas.

She walked him for hours, letting him run for his ball or they would climb up the hill, where the fields gave way to open ground and the coarse grass reached above her knees. Mick would lollop along beside her waiting for her to throw his ball, or snuffle away following the scent of a rabbit, eventually poking his head above the grass to check she was still there.

When they got to the top of the hill, looking down the glen, well away from all of the houses, she would sit on the grass, or a rock if the ground was wet, and carefully open a bottle of Coke that would fizz and spit from being joggled about in her backpack. She shared the biscuits with Mick and scratched behind his ears. He’d roll over so she could tickle his belly. After a bit she’d say, ‘ok Mick, I have to leave now. Away you go!’ Mick would look at her confused, cocking his head from side to side. She’d turn around and walk away from him. When he padded after her, she would shoo him away, ‘go on! Get off with you!’ Once, after she clipped his lead back on, she tied him to an old fence post and marched off. Telling him firmly that she wasn’t coming back. She only got a few strides away before he started to whine. She kept walking. It broke her heart but, at the same time, she enjoyed the slow pain inside her chest. By the time she reached the far gate, he was yelping. She turned to see him rearing and straining on the lead. She looked around to see if anyone was watching her, she had a cover story for such an eventuality, something about teaching him to
‘stay’. Then she ran back to release him. He leapt all over her, desperate to lick her face if she had let him. She gave him the rest of the packet of Rich Teas which were mostly smashed from being in her backpack next to the Coke.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry boy. You know I’d never really leave you.’ He pawed at her and rubbed his head against her leg, looking for tickles and checking for any more biscuits. ‘Let’s get you home, eh?’

Mrs McQuarry was calling from the kitchen. With the front door open, Eoifa could hear her voice inside and outside the house. The cat ran out of the door in the direction of the external steps.

Alan was already in the kitchen when Eoifa got there. She felt a twitch of excitement as he smiled in greeting. He had a hint of stubble that was dark compared to his fair hair.

‘Now then, I got this strong chap to help me tighten the connection at the back of the washing machine. I know where it all goes but my grip’s not what it used to be and it’s apt to come loose. The machine does a wee dance when it’s on the spin cycle.’ Mrs McQuarry danced her hands around in the air to demonstrate.

‘D’you want me to have a proper look at it while I’m here? Sounds as if it’s not balanced properly.’ Alan put his hands either side of the washer. She could see why he’d used gloves for lifting the boxes. His hands looked soft and flexible. Eoifa tried to think of the song lyric, something about hands of raining water.

‘It wouldn’t be the only thing a wee bit off balance in this building.’ Mrs McQuarry chuckled, ‘Not now that Miss Eoifa’s here, of course, to keep us all in order.’

‘Well, I’m not usually known for keeping order.’ Eoifa wasn’t sure how to respond. ‘I’m sure you have plenty to do already, Alan, but it’s good of you to offer…’

‘Not a problem - I’m a jack of all trades.’ He gave a relaxed smile.

‘That would be lovely,’ Mrs McQuarry jumped in, winking across at Eoifa, ‘and I’ll get the kettle back on.’

‘Actually I wouldn’t say no to a wee glass of water.’

‘One glass of water coming right up!’
The containers with Eoifa’s crockery hadn’t been unloaded from the van yet so there wasn’t anything immediate for her to do in the kitchen. She hovered, thinking she should start opening some of the boxes in the hall. She didn’t want to unpack her clothes in the bedroom until she had the place to herself. Aware of Alan watching her as he took a long swig of water, she started opening the kitchen drawers, scanning their sparse contents in an effort to look purposeful.

‘Tell you what,’ he set the near-empty glass down, ‘I’ll get the rest of the things out of the van and come back to look at the machine when I’m done. How’s that sound?’

‘Certainly sounds good to me. Now, Eoifa, come on over here ‘til I show you how to work this stove.’ At times there was a highland or even an Irish lilt to the landlady’s accent. Eoifa wondered if she had ever lived further north, or if her parents came from outside Glasgow but, before she had formulated a question, Mrs McQuarry was talking again.

‘What a lovely young lad he is, and so obliging.’

‘Has he charmed you?’ Eoifa smiled.

‘Ah now, if I was thirty years younger, or even just twenty years…ach who am I kidding? It’s much better to have all that nonsense behind me.’

Eoifa wasn’t sure how to reply so she just smiled some more. How old did that make Mrs McQuarry? And what age was Ben?

The door of the wood-burning stove squeaked as Mrs McQuarry yanked it open. It was immaculately clean inside.

‘It’s been a while since this was called into action but I had the flue cleaned in the New Year so it should be ready to use if you fancy a little more heat in the evenings. It’s chilly yet, even though we’re marching through February.’

‘I love a real fire. Haven’t had one of these since…well for a long time.’ Her mum’s house - she didn’t really think of it as ‘home’ even though she grew up there - had an open fire in the living room.

The landlady proceeded to explain where she liked to buy kindling and logs, and how the stove would burn coal if necessary. Putting coal in a wood-burning stove didn’t sound like a good idea but Mrs McQuarry had moved on to explaining the water heater before any questions could be asked.
A thumping noise from back down the corridor allowed Eoifa to excuse herself. She used the kitchen door into the garden, which offered a quicker route to the front door than the internal corridor. She walked round the van, Alan was shifting the plastic kitchen crates inside the vehicle. The main door of the house was wide open. One of the boxes stacked two-high in the hall had split at the side and books were spilling onto the floor. These boxes had come from storage. Other than the books that had decided to unpack themselves, Eoifa couldn’t remember what might be in there. The Contented Little Baby Book lay among a selection of novels on the rug. A naked baby propped itself up on its hands to smile knowingly at the camera. That baby was not only contented, it was some kind of physical genius. Eoifa kicked the book into the corner behind the boxes.

‘I thought you were meant to read them, not play football with them.’ Alan came in carrying a crate.

‘They have many uses.’ Eoifa wished he hadn’t seen that. ‘Would it be easier to move the van nearer the kitchen? The rest of the crates are all for in there.’

‘To be honest, it’s probably easier if I just carry them. They’re not secured anymore and if I start manoeuvring again... I don’t want to smash all your plates.’ He paused in the hall still holding the crate. Eoifa watched his biceps tense and relax as he shifted the weight.

‘Do you have anything for in there?’ He gestured to the sitting room.

‘Um, not sure I do. I’m a bit light on furniture...’

‘...and heavy on books?’ He smiled. ‘What are you going to do with those?’ He indicated the spilled books. ‘I can let you have some more of the plastic crates for a few days - no charge.’

‘Oh thanks, that’s kind, but I was just going to pile them on the stairs for now. Maybe turn the steps into a bookshelf.’

‘I like it!’ He rested the container he was holding on the top of two boxes. ‘If it’s not too cheeky, could I have a quick look round before I go? It’s the fireplace and all the cornicing... a mate of mine’s doing a course, at college, so as he can repair plasterwork in the big tenements and houses like this. He’s got me into looking at all these old designs - I reckon the ones here are probably original.’
‘Sure, but you’ll need to ask Mrs McQuarry if you want to see the rest of the building.’

‘Oh I think just the big room there would be fine - the fireplace is amazing. I had a wee look when I took these into the hall.’ He indicated the cardboard boxes. ‘The door was open. I wasn’t being nosy, well, not much.’

Eoifa smiled, ‘It’s fine.’

‘Right, thanks, I better get your dishes into the kitchen.’ He lifted the crate again. ‘Good job these are no’ as heavy as the boxes of books.’

‘Yes, I remembered to pad them out - plenty scatter cushions.’

‘Aye ya cheeky...I’ll scatter ye!’ His laugh echoed off the walls as he marched down the corridor to the kitchen.

Eoifa distributed the books in small piles up and down either side of the steps on the staircase, leaving a clear corridor so she could still walk up, although they didn’t give access to anything other than a blank wall at the top. She wasn’t in a hurry to unpack the clothes from her suitcases and she definitely wanted the house to herself before she explored the rest of the boxes she’d had delivered from storage. She wandered back towards the kitchen. She hadn’t heard Alan making a trip back to the van for a while which might mean he was nearly finished. No doubt Mrs McQuarry would be finding him odd jobs or sharing her life history.

Alan was stretched out on the kitchen floor, wrench in hand, apparently working on the washing machine while Mrs McQuarry fussed around the kettle yet again, her sleeves pushed part way up her arms. From somewhere she had produced a plate with pancakes. It would soon be lunchtime. Eoifa wanted time to have a walk around the area in the afternoon, maybe treat herself to lunch in a café before unpacking her suitcases. She cleared her throat, ‘this really is a lovely room.’

‘Oh Miss Eoifa, come on here and get a cup of something. Wait ‘til I tell you, this is the one room I really miss from the whole house when Ben and I are up in our elevated quarters. Yes, this one and maybe the sitting room from its heyday, though that was always a wee bit To The Lighthouse if you know what I’m saying.’

Alan laughed. ‘A bit formal, you mean? Did the gents have to wear smoking jackets?’
‘Ah now it was a different era all right. Formal, yes. A grand room, with...not so much a view of the garden but right into it, you know, being in that room you had a sense of the garden stretching out in front of you.’ Mrs McQuarry gesticulated with her whole arm. ‘You don’t get that same sense from upstairs although you can see out over the place, you know, the city. But this room, this lovely kitchen, now we’ve had some parties in here.’ Mrs McQuarry appeared to be moving into some form of dream state, reliving past times. Alan resembled a primary school child, cross-legged on the floor listening intently; the resemblance would have been stronger if it hadn’t been for his bulk and the monkey wrench, which he still held loosely. Eoifa noticed he and Mrs McQuarry already had mugs of tea so she made herself some instant coffee and took one of the pancakes before offering the plate to the others while Mrs McQuarry continued.

‘It was New Year’s Eve, Hogmanay, I remember that although not the precise year. It must have been the ‘60s because I was young still, not yet twenty-one, but I’d been allowed a glass of something, Babysham or Bols Advocaat, my parents allowed me to have one or the other on Hogmanay and very occasionally on additional nights throughout the year, when they had a big dinner party or so. Both drinks came in small little bottles – “Bols Advocaat – it’s a lovely little drink!” Mum and dad would recite in unison. It was a cinema or television advert at the time or just before that time. They did that a lot, repeating wee sayings.

We had a television set, black and white of course, in the upstairs parlour. Thin wee spindly legs it had, funny machine yet it worked, oh, it worked into the, well, I was an adult and my father still used it occasionally until the old transmitters were switched off in the ‘80s. It might still be around in a cupboard upstairs somewhere, or maybe in the back apartment, I must look it out sometime.’ Mrs McQuarry pinched her forehead between her thumb and her middle finger, pausing the monologue long enough for Eoifa to think the older lady had finished the story, but Alan was first to speak.

‘Oh my gran had one o them, a black and white telly on legs. My dad sanded the legs off for her so’s she could put it on top of...’

‘But this Hogmanay, everyone was in the kitchen’, Mrs McQuarry suddenly looked up and continued. Mother had gone cleaning crazy the way she did every Hogmanay, as though there was something supernatural about the date, the
house could not transition into the New Year with the dust of the old year hanging about it. There was party food, such as it was in those days, wrapped in foil - no cling film - probably only sandwiches and maybe chicken drumsticks or did those come later? Crisps, we would have had, Golden Wonder and Twiglets, they always make me think of New Year. You know, New Year was a bigger holiday here than Christmas, yes, surprising I know. And drinks, boy, were there drinks! The whisky, of course, and cans and cans of lager, Tennent’s from the brewery in the town here, with pictures of Scottish landmarks on the cans. They had cans with ladies on them too but Mother did not like those in the house at all.’

‘Oh ho! I mind them all right! Do you?’ Alan leant over and nudged Eoifa. He was still sitting on the floor resting his back against the front of the washing machine, listening intently. Eoifa, perched on one of the dining chairs, smiled but there was no scope to comment before Mrs McQuarry continued.

‘We would get dozens of small, crown-capped bottles, splits they were called, delivered from the lemonade factory in a rope net bag. We got them in for other occasions but it was only for New Year that they arrived in such numbers and variety: tomato, orange and pineapple juices, India tonic water, bitter lemon and American ginger ale. The mini-bottles arrived loose inside the rope carrier - it was like fishing net. The delivery boy would set the lot over there and my brothers and I would sort through the bottles, arranging them up here.’ Mrs McQuarry was physically demonstrating the areas of the room, as though re-enacting the event. ‘Mother would put the net away somewhere and I assume the lemonade company took it back - presumably with the empties. We recycled everything in those days. We’re back at the recycling now, of course, but then, you never imagined throwing anything away. That all started in the ‘70s.’

It had never started in Eoifa’s house. Her mother didn’t throw a thing away. She even had a wee plastic contraption that she used for gathering the nub ends of soap. ‘Waste not, want not!’ she’d exclaim before highlighting the plight of starving children in Africa. ‘Sending them soap won’t help their hunger,’ Eoifa often thought. As a young child herself she had been genuinely confused by the starving children comment, which, she reasoned, appeared to be an argument for eating less and sending the leftovers to Africa. She had only voiced this once but it puzzled her often.
‘Oh well,’ Mrs McQuarry’s tale continued, ‘I sat here with my Babysham or my advocaat, the Bols ones came pre-mixed as a ‘snowball’ with lemonade and a dash of lime. I enjoyed how the bubbles fizzed on my tongue and the drink slid down making my tummy warm and my head fuzzy, especially if I managed to sneak a second or even a third. Yes, I wasn’t always an old codger! Am I shocking you?’

Alan laughed and smiled over at Eoifa who was imagining how it might feel to sit on the floor next to him, resting against his chest. Mrs McQuarry glanced from one to the other and kept going.

‘Later, at the bells, we all stood in a loose circle. Happy New Year! Happy New Year! We’d say and we’d toast each other with Mum’s ginger or blackcurrant wine, she made it every year from syrup that she bought in a shop up on Albert Road there - non-alcoholic but a dentist’s nightmare with all that sugar. We linked arms, and sang Auld Lang Syne! “Now here’s a hand my trusty fiere...” linking arms in all the right places. Some of the neighbours would come round then - you didn’t usually come before the bells, for everyone wanted to bring the New Year in, in their own homes - but they liked to come here after, this was the party house. We had the makings of a ceilidh band just with the five of us. My brothers both played the fiddle, one of them was great with the tunes but the other could only play classical, the violin he’d have called it its Sunday name, you know, he needed music and that always got him a bit annoyed, still though he’d do a turn and we’d all listen. Mrs MacGregor from the big house up on the corner there would wipe a tear from her cheek with the corner of her scarf when he played Schumann, even though he was a German composer and no one was meant to support them after the war. What trouble I got for suggesting we might sing Silent Night in German one year up at the cathedral - “I think it’s too soon for some of the older members of the congregation” said Father Ryan. Not very Christian, says I, a bit huffy because I always loved how the broad vowels made my voice soar in the big hall. And, mark you,’ she gestured towards Eoifa, ‘this was the 1960s not the week after the bloomin war ended!’

‘Ah some folk can fairly bear a grudge, eh?’ Alan smiled. Eoifa couldn’t be sure but hoped he was being ironic. He seemed quite at ease during this impromptu Jackanory but Eoifa was beginning to wonder if the tale would ever reach a conclusion.
‘So, where was I? yes, Margaret MacGregor would be wiping a tear and we’d all know it was time to start the dancing. This night I’m telling you about there was a neighbour on the guitar and my uncle on the squeezebox - do you know what that is? an accordion, yes. Oh, my days! We had an Orcadian Strip the Willow up here, my word! Four couples spinning and twirling...all the way from the corridor there to the door over here. The guitar player perched himself up there on an old table we had, before this worktop. Well, Mother was not best pleased because that was where she prepared food - but it was Hogmanay and so she said nothing, her face said plenty mind, until Father scooted her off by the arm to join the dancing. We were here til the wee small hours all right. This was the party house and no mistake! An eightsome reel we had another time, but that was through in the sitting room before the carpet or...

Mrs McQuarry’s party reminiscences trailed off. Eoifa noticed her eyes had a glassy look as though she wasn’t entirely present any longer. The thread of something had frayed and she was left wondering what it had ever been connected to. Was all this remembering upsetting for her? Mrs McQuarry said nothing at all, just held the back of a dining chair, gazing into the middle distance with a faintly perplexed expression. Eoifa shifted in her seat. She thought about moving towards the landlady, perhaps touching her arm, making some kind of contact. She looked at Alan - he made a concerned grimace accompanied by an embarrassed shrug.

Eoifa cleared her throat, ‘um, would you like another tea?’ It was all she could think of.

‘That was a cracking story, Mrs McQ! Would you like one of your own pancakes?’ Alan raised himself off the floor to get the plate.

‘Ooh-oah,’ Mrs McQuarry made a strange sound, something between a sigh and an exclamation. Eoifa walked towards her, expecting to see the landlady slide to the floor in a faint, but she stood firm, one hand resting on the back of the same dining chair, the other fiddling with the neck of her sweater.

‘Do you know, I’ve told that story so many times I’m not even sure it really happened?’ She looked straight at Eoifa, her eyes no longer rheumy but she still had a puzzled expression. ‘Does that ever happen to you?’

‘Uh,’ Eoifa struggled to think of a suitable response, unsure even what facial expression to adopt. ‘It’s a good story...and the room’s certainly big enough.’
'It was a great story! I love hearing about the way things were - ha! Was that not a telly programme? The Way Things Were...?'

Alan did his chirpy best but Mrs McQuarry addressed Eoifa, ‘Course it’s never happened to you! Smart young girl. Aye, it’s a big room but size, as they say, isn’t everything. You must forgive me, I’m a daft old trout. Now, did I show you how to turn on the immersion if you need to top up the hot water?’

Eoifa and Alan exchanged looks again, this time Eoifa feared she might laugh but the awkwardness of the situation kept this desire in check. Instead, she followed in Mrs McQuarry’s slipstream, relieved to be talking practicalities.

After demonstrating the boiler timer and override switches, Mrs McQuarry apologised for her earlier remarks. ‘I’m not forgetful, you know, you mustn’t think that. I’m not going senile in any dimension. I just, well, I have some extra memories, shall we say? We have had a lot of parties in this place; it’s a happy, joyful house and I hope you will be very happy to have it as your home now.’

‘Oh yes, I am. Thank you.’ Eoifa wished for this episode to be over before the older lady said something to spoil the positive feelings she had about the house. She wasn’t really into auras but the kitchen had felt welcoming from her first viewing, ceilidhs or not.

‘Is she away then?’ Alan stretched his arms up touching the door jam above his head.

‘Yes, she’s off to check on her son, Ben. Apparently Friday is their day for jigsaws.’

‘Is it her grandson?’

‘Well he’s an adult, not sure what age, he’s got special needs.’

‘Aw right, cool. She’s some wummin, eh?’

‘Yes certainly seems a character. Is that you finished?’ Eoifa was washing the mugs and a few of her own dishes from the crates. She looked around for a towel to dry her hands.

‘Here, use this.’ Alan tossed a dishtowel to her from the floor in front of the washing machine where he’d been working earlier.

‘Oh, no, I’ll need to give that a wash first. It’ll be gritty from the floor.’

‘Gritty? You could eat your dinner off that floor...not that I’m recommending it.’

Eoifa laughed, shaking her hands into the sink, ‘I don’t think so.’
'Suit yourself, you remind me of my mu...er my sister, very particular.'

'Were you about to say I reminded you of your mother?' Eoifa flicked a bit of foam from the washing up at him. ‘Cheeky beggar!’

‘Ho now! Is that how we’re doing things?’ He scooped an iceberg of foam from the sink and made towards her as though about to rub it in her face.

‘I’ll just get your money...’ Eoifa dodged away, jogging to the corridor laughing. Alan followed but slowly.

‘Did you not pay already - my uncle, he’s the boss, says to me you’d paid upfront over the phone.’

‘I thought that was just the London transfer part.’ She paused in the corridor doorway, facing him at close to the same height thanks to the step.

‘I’ll speak to my uncle but I’m pretty sure he said it was covered.’ He rubbed the foam on the back of his jeans and went to take her hands.

‘They’re wet,’ Eoifa held them up. Alan took them gently by the wrists and wiped them against the front of his t-shirt.

‘No extra charge.’

‘Thanks, I think.’ He felt warm under the shirt, his body was lean, but she took her hands away, a little reluctantly. Better to keep these things simple.

‘Well, let me know, I’m pretty sure he said I’d need to settle up with you for the storage transfer - the local run I think he called it.’

‘It’s fine. I know where you live...I’ll need to come back for the crates anyway. We can sort it then.’ He didn’t move away and, if he didn’t want paid, Eoifa no longer needed to fetch her handbag from the bedroom. They stood where they were, looking at each other for slightly too long. It didn’t feel as awkward as it probably should. He had a gentle smile and a relaxed demeanour.

Eoifa cracked first, looking down at her wrist where her watch might have been. She’d taken it off by the sink. ‘So, um, thanks for all your help this morning.’

‘My pleasure. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do before I leave you in peace.’

It was tempting to place her arms around his neck but she knew where that would lead. No complications, she told herself. ‘I think I’m fine, thanks. I might nip out and get a few bits of shopping before unpacking the rest.’

‘Ok, if you’re sure.’ He turned back to face the kitchen. ‘Do you want a lift to the shops?
‘Oh no, honestly, that’s really kind but I feel I need the walk. Get a bit of fresh air.’

‘Alright, I’ll be off then.’ He made for the other kitchen door, the one leading directly outside but paused as he reached it. ‘And thanks for letting me have a gander at your cornicing.’

‘Anytime. You know where to find it if you ever feel the need to gaze at elaborate plasterwork.’

He smiled, ‘my mate is the one with the interest in ornamental plaster but I wouldn’t mind coming back. See how you settle in.’ He took a card out of his back pocket and left it on the worktop. ‘This is my number when you’re ready to have those crates picked up. You can have them until next weekend without my uncle chasing you. But if you can empty them sooner, he’ll be a happier man.’

‘No problem, I should have unpacked by Sunday.’

He smiled. Did he look a little dejected?

‘Listen, thanks for everything today. The washing machine and all that.’

‘Hey, no problem. See you in a few days!’ He tapped the door jam and was gone.

It was after three o’clock when she was finally ready to leave the house. She pushed the bunch of new keys into her bag then turned back to check that she had locked the main front door. She would need to watch this. She was not going to turn into an obsessive compulsive who returned to the door fifteen times on her way to work.

The main door was locked. She had even remembered to close the inner door so the hall wasn’t visible from the front step. Just to be sure she rattled the handle of the kitchen door on her way back to the gate. She would need to be more systematic about the two-exit business.

A learner driver was manoeuvring in the road. A botched three-point turn in spite of the width of the carriageway suggested he or she hadn’t had many lessons. The car lurched as it struck the high kerb, fortunately on the opposite side of the road. Eoifa kept walking. She missed driving. Since returning to the UK she had owned two second hand cars. The first, bought at auction, had an intermittent interest in being driven anywhere. She managed to persuade the
garage where she bought her second vehicle to honour their minimum £500 trade-in deal by arguing that one month remaining on an MOT plus a valid tax disc was equivalent to being road worthy. Although she suspected it was agreeing to meet the salesman for a drink that had sealed the deal. Giving him a false mobile number meant she never had to honour that particular part of the bargain.

Her purchase, a nine-year old Vauxhall Corsa, would never have made the trip north and, like its predecessor, was probably no longer recognisably a car, broken up for parts. In a burst of rare nostalgia for the first vehicle, one slow afternoon at work she typed in its registration number. It wasn’t an unusual number, and wouldn’t have attracted a premium but its availability confirmed what she already knew - the car had been taken off the road. It had finally got its wish and been retired to the great scrapheap in the sky.

It was taking longer than Eoifa had imagined to reach any shops or cafés. She pulled on her sleeve to check her watch but her wrist was bare. She had forgotten to put it back on after washing the plates. Without it, she found it hard to tell how much time had passed. At least the surroundings were pleasant enough, tall hedges or fences surrounding large mansion houses, some evidently divided into multiple homes, a small number still appeared to be single dwellings. Despite it being a Friday afternoon, there was very little traffic in the surrounding streets although she could hear the distant roar of a larger road, presumably the M8.

An older lady smartly dressed in a narrow skirt and court shoes approached, accompanied by a small fluffy dog on an extendable lead.

‘Hello!’ Eoifa opened the pleasantries.

‘Good afternoon.’ The woman bustled past, the lead clicking as she reined the dog in.

Eoifa had hoped to ask if she was heading in the right direction for the nearest shops but the woman hadn’t even paused. Perhaps she wasn’t really from around here - everyone else seemed determined to chat.

The hedges got scruffier and the gardens less well kept as she walked. At least it wasn’t cold. An unusual traffic feature, a mini-roundabout created by semi-permanent road signs and cones appeared ahead. It looked like there were more cars beyond it and that augured well for shops or a café. She longed for a seat and was really hungry. It seemed a long time since she had eaten the
pancakes Mrs McQuarry had produced. She was a funny soul, with that long story
about Hogmanay.

When she reached the roundabout Eoifa could see two cafés. There were
a few small shops, one that looked like a newsagent and one that had fruit and
veg in boxes on the pavement outside. She headed straight for a café, selecting
the one that had bicycles hanging from the ceiling. It looked quirky and friendly.
A chalkboard in the window said it had the ‘best coffee in Glasgow by a country
mile’. That would do, she longed for a decent coffee.

Inside, there was a fantastic smell of baking and cooking. Two chefs were
chopping industriously in the tiny kitchen area that looked more like an open
cupboard than the kind of space she might have imagined would be required to
prepare the extensive dinner menu advertised on the large blackboard that was
suspended above the cake counter.

It wasn’t busy but there were a few other customers. The tables were
clean, which was a bonus. It was horrible having to clear away other customers’
detritus. A clock on the wall indicated it was after four. No wonder she was
hungry.

Windows on two sides of the café meant the space was very light. Even
now, watery late afternoon sun streamed in making it difficult to look out of the
nearest window without screwing her eyes up.

‘Bet you never thought you’d need sunglasses in February, eh?’ the
waitress laughed, making Eoifa jump. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. Never
know what to expect here between the sun and the staff jumping out at you.’
The waitress laughed, folding her pad onto a new page for Eoifa’s order.

Eoifa smiled and ordered the special burger.

‘Oh I’m not sure if we’re serving that yet - the specials are for dinner, but
let me ask the kitchen.’ She turned around and, without taking more than a
single step from Eoifa’s table, bellowed, ‘Frank! Frank! See they special
burgers, are we serving them the now?’

A more muted response emanated from the kitchen corner and one of the
chefs, presumably Frank, beckoned the waitress.

Eoifa lifted the menu from her table in anticipation of needing to select
something else but, when the waitress returned, she confirmed the special
burger could indeed be served as long as Eoifa didn’t mind having it without the
peppercorn sauce which wasn’t ready yet but might be available by the time she was finished if she’d like to sample it for next time.

Near the far window, a woman and a young girl were chatting and giggling. The woman looked about Eoifa’s age, the girl might have been ten or eleven she always found it hard to tell.

‘I look nothing like you,’ the girl said, laughing.

‘True, you look more like this,’ the woman replied, scrunching her face with her tongue sticking out.

The girl gave an out of control laugh and threw a napkin at the woman who made an exaggerated move to shield herself as if from a much heavier weapon.

They could be mother and daughter. It was possible but they seemed to be having too much fun for that. Cafe culture hadn’t begun when Eoifa was a girl and, even if it had, she couldn’t imagine her mum being prepared to sit around drinking coffee, far less coming to a café designed for the (lack of) purpose. Her mum didn’t believe in sitting down during the day unless some task she was engaged in required it, operating the sewing machine or kneeling to paint the skirting boards. Any lack of speed or alacrity in getting an activity completed on Eoifa’s part was a cue for her mother to refer to her own days working in a Nightingale-style hospital ward. ‘No time for daydreaming when you’ve got 50 patients all waiting to be fed.’ Or ‘Come on, come on, it’s plain you never had a ward sister, far less matron, breathing down your neck.’

‘Why would they need to breath down my neck when I’ve got you on my case 24/7?’

‘Don’t start that bolshie nonsense - just like your dad. Your father’s daughter. Right down your back.’

Eoifa would mouth the last line as her mother said it, usually out of her mother’s line of sight.

The waitress brought Eoifa’s burger and offered her a coffee on the house, to make up for the peppercorn sauce not being available yet. Eoifa protested a little, ‘I’m happy to pay for the coffee.’

‘Well, Frank and me are no happy for you to pay. How about that?’ The waitress laughed. ‘One cappuccino comin’ up.’

Eoifa smiled her acceptance. She could see herself coming back here, especially if the coffee was as good as their sign boasted. It was a great vantage
point for people watching too. Outside, there were children in assorted uniforms being ushered around by parents, mostly mothers. It was a little late for the end of school. Maybe there was an afterschool club or some kind of class nearby. Inside, she could no longer hear what the mother and daughter pair were saying but she could see the girl chatting excitedly and the adult reacting with animated expressions. How could they have so much to talk about? With their heads bent close together and their voices low and rapid, they looked like they were conspiring. Eoifa had never conspired or wanted to conspire with her mother over anything. There had rarely been much to say, even after her dad left and it was just the two of them.

They usually ate dinner together but other than her mum berating her for poor cutlery skills or missed homework deadlines, mealtimes often passed wordlessly, sometimes in silence if Eoifa didn’t switch the radio on. It hadn’t seemed unusual at the time. No one liked their parents, no one Eoifa knew at any rate. They were just there to stop you doing things. It made sense when you were young and they stopped you hurting yourself but by the time Eoifa was fourteen, perhaps earlier, her mum was an irritation. And it was mutual. She was sure her mum died so she didn’t have to face Eoifa coming home at the end of term. Eoifa smiled at her bleak joke.

She took a sip of coffee. It was a little hot but otherwise welcome. She brushed her top lip to check for foam or stray chocolate powder.

The University Counselling Service didn’t like her black humour. ‘I’m sensing a lot of anger towards your parents.’ Tom, the counsellor she saw most often, used intonation to convert his sentences into questions. His wet manner enraged Eoifa.

‘Did you spend a gap year in Australia?’ she rested one foot on the low round table that sat between them. A box of Kleenex tissues perched at its centre on a copy of the University magazine.

‘No, I’ve never been.’

‘You surprise me. You speak as though you were Australian sometimes – lifting the ends of your sentences.’ She provided an exaggerated demonstration.

‘I see.’ Tom inclined his head in a manner intended to convey patience.

‘Let’s return to your feelings about your parents. I’m sensing you...’
‘I’m sensing there’s limited sense in these sessions, Tom.’ She flicked the front cover of the magazine with the toe of her shoe before setting both feet squarely on the floor, ready to leave the room.

‘Ah,’ Tom looked uncertain, even as he invoked his most confident body language, drawing the fingers of both hands together in a loose clasp.

Eoifa watched as a sheen of sweat appeared along Tom’s hairline which was receding cruelly early. He barely looked thirty, but the twin peaks of male pattern baldness were evident with his blond curly locks vanishing, wiping away his little boy lost appearance.

These days, Eoifa recognised her younger self as pretty harsh. She felt a pang of something close to remorse when she recalled how Tom had stumbled out of the room to call on the support of the Head of Counselling. Eoifa couldn’t remember his name, Mr or Dr something. He wore a suit with a waistcoat and had the shiniest shoes in the whole University.

‘Let’s not say you’re stoppin’ counselling. You’ll come back to us when you’re ready?’ The Head of Counselling didn’t sit to deliver these sentences but hovered in anticipation of her departure, with the merest hint that he expected her to capitulate and beg to be given a further appointment. Tom hung back, looking uncertain whether to return to his seat or remain by the door.

Eoifa rose to her feet, stepping back from the circular table and the Head of Counselling in an effort to mask the difference in their height. She would not look up to him. ‘Let’s say “we’ll see”.’ She gave what she hoped was a tight smile. She couldn’t rely on her face to deliver a more subtle expression.

Much later, in the pub, her friend Mary mimicked the Aussie intonation, ‘You can’t just walk away?’ and they both laughed into their beer. Walking away was always an option.

A couple bustled in to the table next to her. Eoifa had to move her cup and saucer to avoid them being nudged by the man’s jacket as he squeezed by. The pair sat awkwardly on opposite sides of the table. If they weren’t in the middle of a café, they might have been in an amateur theatre production, acting out the part of a disgruntled couple. He watched his girlfriend impatiently over the top of his menu as she prodded her smart phone. Eoifa could see the girl’s roots needed done. The on-going maintenance had put her off dying her own
Floating

hair, the thought of her true colours revealing themselves. For now, she dealt with any grey hairs by pulling them out individually.

‘Is that why you got me out to a restaurant, so you could sit here looking at Facebook on your phone?’ The man pronounced it re-stew-rant, sounding the final t. The girl made a dismissive sound without looking up from her phone.

‘Well, is it?’ his tone aggressive. Eoifa was tempted to lean over and tell him to bugger off. He should be more grateful. He was no looker, a bit overweight. The girl looked out of his league.

‘I’m no on Facebook, just gie me a minute, would you?’

‘No on Facebook? What are you doing with that thing then? You’re no exactly sparkling company, are you?’

Eoifa strained the final mouthful of her coffee through the foam that clung to the inside of her cup.

‘Ach, I’m texting Julie to see if she can come round the nigh, ok? Just gie me a minute.’

‘Right, one minute. Want me to time you?’

‘Shurrup and read the menu or something.’

At least the girl sounded like she could stand up for herself. Still, Eoifa didn’t want to listen to this. She arranged her jacket on the back of her chair to make it clear she would be back and went to find the toilets.

When Eoifa got back to her table, the couple had gone. She looked around to see if they’d swapped seats but it seemed they had decided not to eat after all. An elderly lady struggled through the door with a walking stick and approached the waitress. ‘Hello dear. If Elsie comes in, will you let her know I’m sitting over there?’ She pointed with her free hand. ‘I’ve lost a bit of the sight in my left eye so I’m not seeing any of you very well.’

‘Oh dear, that’s not so good.’ The waitress placed a hand on the lady’s shoulder. A suggestion of a hug. ‘At least you’ve made it here. We’ll look after you.’

‘But it’s just if Elsie comes in, I might not see her.’ She spoke as though her false teeth were a little loose.

‘Don’t you worry, I’ll watch out for her and let her know where you’re sitting.’

The waitress gently guided the lady to a table, moving empty chairs to give her a clearer route through the cafe. Some coins dropped from the lady’s
hand or pocket as she walked. They rolled noisily across the floor, clanging on table legs before coming to rest.

‘Stella! That lady’s money’s gone all over the place!’ the young girl and woman were still at their table. Not mother and daughter, then. Surely a girl of that age wouldn’t use her mum’s first name.

The old lady paused in her trek across the café.

‘Don’t you worry, we’ll get all that picked up for you in a jiffy. Just you take a wee seat.’ The waitress ushered the lady on. The young girl darted around collecting the coins from between seats and under tables.

The old lady was settling herself when the girl approached her, placing the coins on the table.

‘There you go.’

‘Thank you, dear. That was awfully good of you, pet.’

The young girl smiled briefly before twirling back to her own table.

‘Here you go. You should keep these for all your trouble.’ The old lady pushed the pile of coins along the table and looked towards where the girl had been standing. Stella prompted the girl to go back across. The young girl stood close to the lady and said something Eoifa couldn’t hear.

‘Oh you’re a good girl.’ The old lady said, patting the girl’s arm. The youngster looked embarrassed and headed back to her seat.

Something in the old lady’s manner of speaking reminded Eoifa of her mum’s elderly friend, Janet. She was from Glasgow but it was the bother she always had with her false teeth that made Eoifa think of her now. A particular embarrassment since her husband was the local dentist. Eoifa recalled one evening, when her dad still lived at home, he and her mum had invited some friends for a rare dinner party. After all the food, the adults sat on drinking. There was quite a lot of wine - Eoifa remembered having to help her mum rinse all the bottles to be recycled in the morning. Her dad had told a joke or a funny story or something and Janet laughed so much her false teeth fell right out onto the table. The adults didn’t know where to look. Janet just muttered a gummy, ‘O me’ and pushed them back in before rushing off to the bathroom.

Eoifa smiled across the café but the elderly lady wasn’t looking in her direction. She should have brought a book. It added an acceptable veneer for people watching, and sometimes provided a way to strike up a conversation.

‘What’s that you’re reading?’ ‘Any good?’ ‘I love that writer.’ Glaswegians were
interested in books, Eoifa had noticed, and they liked to talk about them. Actually, they liked to talk about most things.

Eoifa paid the bill, which involved another good-natured argument with the waitress over who should pay for the coffee.

Stella and Anna (or it might have been Hannah, Eoifa couldn’t quite hear) were putting on their coats.

‘That’s right, wee one, you’ll need to wrap up.’ The elderly lady said as the young girl passed her table.

Stella looked about Eoifa’s age. She was dressed casually but stylishly. A luxurious arty scarf looped around her neck, one end escaping from inside her coat, which managed to remain firmly on the chic side of shabby. It was the kind of look Eoifa would have loved to emulate but tended to miss. Unsure of her own style, she was often tempted to buy a whole outfit rather than individual pieces. She didn’t follow fashion exactly but she did buy a lot of clothes, sending perfectly wearable items off to charity shops when she tired of them.

She held the door open for Stella and the girl. Stella took the door from Eoifa and they ended up in a social jig trying to determine which of them should leave first.

‘Sorry, I’ve made that more complicated than it needed to be.’ Eoifa laughed.

‘Oh please don’t apologise, it’s normally us getting in the way, eh Anna?’ Stella gestured for Anna to wait and Eoifa to leave, but the young girl misread the sign and barged out ahead of Eoifa.

‘Just like that...’ Stella laughed.

‘After you,’ Eoifa took hold of the door again.

The waitress, who was wiping the table the pair had vacated, shouted across. ‘Bye ladies! Are yous closin that door? It’s rather Baltic in here!’

Eoifa grimaced in apology, ‘thanks again’.

‘No bother - see you again, soon as I’m back out the hospital from the pneumonia.’ She chuckled and started speaking to the elderly lady as continued wiping the table.

It was colder outside than it had looked - the watery sunshine was deceptive and now the sun had set, it would soon be dark. Eoifa turned up her jacket collar and fiddled with the buttons to close it around her neck. Stella and
Anna were walking a little bit ahead. The young girl skipping on and off the curb as they went.

Eoifa noticed they had dropped something, a glove perhaps. She walked more quickly to where it lay on the pavement and picked it up. It was a woollen hat. ‘Excuse me!’ Eoifa tried to speak above the noise from the road. Friday evening traffic was well underway. She jogged a few strides to catch up with them but they still didn’t turn around. ‘Excuse me!’ At last Stella looked over her shoulder.

‘Hi, sorry, I think you dropped this.’ Eoifa offered the hat to the woman although she suspected it belonged to the young girl, it had a crocheted flower on the front.

‘Oh Anna, is that your hat?! It’s not had a good day; we nearly left it in the café earlier. Thank you.’ She took the hat and dangled it in front of Anna.

‘You’re welcome.’ Eoifa was self-conscious standing with them again but hankered after a conversation for some reason she didn’t understand herself. Did they live near here? Anything she thought of sounded stalkerish, even inside her head.

Stella nudged Anna who coyly said, ‘thanks’ to Eoifa and took the hat from Stella.

‘It’s a pretty hat, you wouldn’t want to lose it.’ Eoifa smiled at the girl, still trying to decide on her age.

‘Thanks, that was good of you. Right, c’mon you scallywag!’ Stella put her arm around Anna and they continued on their way.

‘Maybe see you around.’ Eoifa spoke quietly as they left and couldn’t tell if they heard. She paused a moment to let them walk ahead. Unless they turned at the top of the street, it was possible she would appear to be following them. Maybe they were going to recreate that awkward scene where you meet a friend in a supermarket, have a quick chat and say goodbye, only to bump into them again at the turn of every aisle.

Thinking of which, Eoifa remembered she should look for a shop that was still open. When she reached the next junction, she caught sight of a green and yellow supermarket sign down a street to the left and began walking towards it.
Eoifa spent the weekend unpacking and rearranging her belongings. It was like playing ‘house’ each time she moved. Coming here was her most ambitious reinvention yet. It was years since she had a whole place to herself. The hotel room hardly counted and the best she managed in London was a succession of single rooms in shared flats, where there was invariably someone else to manoeuvre around in the living room or kitchen. No matter how innocuous they attempted to be, it was their mere presence that prevented full relaxation.

And yet, this house had its own challenges. Whenever she moved out of the kitchen, she struggled to counteract the sense of rattling around. Her attempts at inhabiting the large sitting room with its vertiginous ceiling and gothic fireplace felt akin to scratching the smallest tip of a substantial iceberg. The bedroom, although large by anyone’s estimation, had a greater concentration of furniture and somehow felt less like Miss Havisham’s house than the front room or main entrance hall.

It was Saturday night and she was determined to spend it in the sitting room. She padded through with a book and a glass of wine. She fumbled as she tried to flick the main light switch with her elbow, trying not to jerk wine down the wallpaper. The light snapped on and the bay window yawned its black maw. In the daylight, it provided a pleasant view of the garden but at night this side of the house, which faced away from the road, had little to soften the darkness.

Eoifa set her wineglass on the tiles in the fireplace and set about closing the curtains. The weighty fabric was in several sections, each needing closed individually, and the curtain tracks were a little sticky. The noise as she jerked each one shut reminded her of her mum’s house and the strict instructions she had been given never to touch the front of the velvet, which would leave marks, but always to grab the fabric from the rear.

With the curtains closed, the fire lit and three smaller lamps on around the room, she turned off the central light and selected one of the armchairs beside the fireplace. The room had not felt cold when she was moving around but, after reading a page of her book, she became aware of a slight draft at her legs. She set her book to one side and arranged the bottom of her jeans so they overlapped the top of her socks. Before picking up her book, she looked around the room. It was a large space for one person to inhabit fully. She was aware of her movements and the faint hiss of the living flame. She needed to bring a speaker or at least a radio in here so she could mask the silence.
She took a sip of wine. The room needed more furniture but what would she add? There was no television in the flat. Perhaps she would buy one and get some kind of trunk or chest to set it on. It needed to be something solid so it wouldn’t look flimsy and incongruous in these surroundings. How much did that kind of thing cost?

There were muffled bumps and creaks suggesting movement in the upstairs apartment. Presumably Mrs McQuarry used the room above this as her lounge. Yet it was nothing like the noise transfer between rooms in the hotel. There were nights when she was sure she could hear the guest next door snoring or when she was wakened with the gushing sound of a shower on another floor. Staying in the hotel for those first weeks had disguised the fact that she knew no one else in Glasgow. Her office was based near the city chambers but there were only five of them in the unit including Eoifa. There was a very young lad who looked twelve but was presumably in his twenties, a fearsome older administrator and the other two were probably around about Eoifa’s age but had their own families and lived somewhere outside Glasgow. They swapped commuting stories in the morning and tended to leave sharp for trains or busses at five.

A trickle of loose plaster down the back wall made her jump. Her mum used to say that was mice running inside the walls and her teenage self would shiver at the thought. Surely there would be no mice here with the landlady’s cat?

She picked up her book but had lost interest in reading. Saturday night and this was the best she could do. If she was going to stay in Glasgow she would need to make an effort to meet people. She didn’t need to make friends but she needed to socialise. She ran her hands through her hair. It felt a little grubby perhaps she would have a bath.

She finished the wine and took her glass back to the kitchen. She poured another glass and sank into the small sofa, keeping the bottle close. Even with the stove off, the kitchen had a warmer atmosphere than the large front room. She needed to buy a television or meet some friends. Possibly both. She couldn’t spend another Saturday night alone.

She rummaged in her bag for her phone and scrolled through the contacts list. Did she know anyone in Glasgow? Brian from Uni came from somewhere near Glasgow but where did he live now? She wouldn’t mind seeing him again. He was
a large jolly bloke she’d hung about with, purely platonic of course, on her part certainly. They’d become pretty good mates in the post-graduation hiatus before joining what some referred to as ‘the real world’ as though University were any less real or any more surreal than any other way of living life.

She tried to recall the last time she had seen Brian. It was like that then, people drifted. So many left for London and started anew. He might be married now, with kids. Or dead. She had never heard of him over social media, unlike some blasts from the past clamouring to clutch onto their youth. She could always search his name online. She knew she had no number for him but continued scrolling through her contacts list when Mary’s name popped up. The one friend Eoifa had even vaguely maintained contact with through all the years. She’d promised to text Mary when she moved back to Scotland. What time would it be in Texas? Eoifa could never remember if they were six or eight hours behind the UK, either way, it wouldn’t be the middle of the night now so should be safe to text.

– hey Mary doll! I finally made it to the Big G and into my own (rented) place. How’s life Stateside?

They moved to Houston while Eoifa was teaching English in Japan. In those days, Eoifa and Mary still talked on the phone every few weeks, or they’d use skype. One time, after way too much lunchtime sake, Eoifa miscalculated and got Mary’s husband, Mike, on the phone.

‘What kinda time d’you call this?!’ he accused in the drawl he had affected since moving there only months earlier. He’d always been an arsehole in the UK now he’d simply removed the r.

‘It’s time you passed the phone to my pal.’ She slurried back.

‘It’s the middle of the fuck...it’s the middle of the night!’

‘Never! The night is young...’

‘Are you drunk?’ He sounded like he was cupping his hand around the receiver.

‘I may be just a little.’

‘It’s 5 A-M!’

‘Oh, the night is older than I thought.’ She tried to supress a burp. ‘Is Mary home?’

‘She’s asleep! Like I was. Don’t call here again.’

Eoifa scowled at the high-pitched monotonous beep from the phone.
Eoifa wished Mary had moved somewhere more appealing with a bit of culture and a more agreeable climate. Houston might be handy for the oil industry but that, as far as Eoifa was concerned, was its only strong point. Not that Eoifa had actually visited, but she could tell it was the kind of place she would hate. She certainly never liked Mike, which was evidently mutual.

When Mary first moved to the States, she and Eoifa talked about the Girls’ Own adventures they could have, hiring a car and touring. Picking up Route 66 in Texas and driving to its endpoint at Santa Monica pier. They were chatting excitedly on skype about the fantasy road trip and when they could make it happen when Mike walked past in his underpants shouting, ‘That sounds about right for you two. Eventually everything loose rolls west.’

Mary laughed and Eoifa shouted something back about his gut having rolled south. They all laughed that superficial way where the veneer is fragile. The trip never happened. She and Mary didn’t even talk much about meeting up anymore. Occasionally Mary would mention missing home.

Eoifa’s phone, lying face up on the arm of the sofa, glowed.

– Gimme a call wen u get chance. Lang may yer lum reek! Mxry xox

Eoifa smiled. Mary always texted as though she was still using a key for every three letters or she was being charged per character. Eoifa started to compose a reply, not easy with these touch screen phones and predictive text thinking it’s so damn smart. She took a large slurp of wine and set the glass at her feet.

Living in the States had changed Mary. Her humour had changed. She was more earnest. She wasn’t serious exactly but she’d got involved with a church group and a couple of times commented about not enjoying jokes at the expense of others. Shit! What use were other folk if you couldn’t laugh about them?!

Eoifa found the church going particularly hard to understand. All through Uni Mary had been an evangelical atheist, entreating others to share her disbeliefs. Their friendship began in Fresher’s week when they stole the Gideon bibles that were distributed to all the rooms in Pollock Halls, signed each one and left piles of them defaced at the end of each corridor.

Mary said the church group was a way of meeting people and ‘giving back’ to those less fortunate. Maybe they had sucked her in through some social but
Eoifa suspected Mary actually attended the church services. She had always hoped Mary was better than that.

The touch keyboard slid to one side as she typed with her finger and she was back on the list of messages. There was no name on the one she opened but she knew it was the text from Alan, telling her he was on his way to the house with the van the morning she moved in. She reached down for her glass and drained it.

She could let him know about the crates. They were all ready for collection anytime really. Ach what harm could possibly come from sending him a wee note?

– Hi, it’s Eoifa. Enjoying a glass of wine (or two) in the new place.

   Crates are ready for collection whenever you are. Thanks for your help 😊

Smiley faces were always a leavening touch.

She switched view and continued her reply to Mary. If she didn’t hear from Alan by the time she finished texting Mary, she would not text him again. She set the phone down. Poured more wine. She should probably eat. What was there that could be cooked with minimum effort? When she went food shopping yesterday she was still imagining turning over a new leaf that involved more home cooking as a break from hotel food. Strange that is should be possible to tire of other people cooking. She padded around the kitchen opening and closing cupboards, trying to remember how she had decided to organise them. Tinned food lower down, bread and cereals in the top cupboard near the mugs and glasses.

Her phone screen was dark where she left it on the sofa. He might have replied when she wasn’t looking. Don’t look back at the phone! She made herself a sandwich. She would not look at the phone again until she had finished making the food.

– All alone on a Saturday night...?

Shit! Had she looked desperate? She reread her original text. No, she had definitely not suggested that she was alone, well, she hadn’t said she was drinking the wine alone. She would not text him again. He could work out for himself when to collect the crates.

No, she would text him. Since he clearly had an exciting life, she typed,

– Hope I didn’t disturb your clubbing
Almost as soon as she pressed ‘send’, her phone glowed:

- Not even seals are getting clubbed round here

There was a delay and then he messaged again,

- sorry bad taste joke. Got any wine left?
- It made me laugh E//
- Good….about that wine…any going spare or should I bring my own?

She checked the time and suggested he come round in an hour. She hadn’t showered since the morning and it had been a busy day. She put some up-tempo music on, that would help her get ready in a hurry.

In the shower, she shaved her legs and underarms as methodically as she could manage after all the wine. She giggled. At least she’d had a bikini wax in the hotel spa so she wouldn’t look like she was wearing hairy pants. It was difficult to know what men expected in that region these days. The younger men were all about hair off but older guys, well, they varied. Probably depended how much porn they watched. She couldn’t decide what she thought about all that, but she had, effectively, made a booty call; it wasn’t the moment to awaken her inner feminist.

She turned the shower off and stepped out of the bath. Rubbed her hair with the towel, wishing she had set out another towel for her hair. She was getting better, getting on top of the self-imposed ‘right ways’ of doing things. You could walk away but there was always a little part that remained; wouldn’t let you change. ‘Lock it away’, she spoke aloud but couldn’t look herself in the eye because the mirror above the sink was steamed up. She drew a smiley face in it. Tried to write ‘resilience’ and got as far as ‘resil’ before running out of space. She giggled again and erased the letters with her hand. She wrapped the towel around her body and brushed her teeth.

She was dressed and back in the kitchen when Alan knocked on the door.

‘I was going to ring the main bell but I thought maybe the tradesman’s entrance was more appropriate.’ He handed her a bottle of fizz, ‘it’s a house-warming present.’

‘Wow! Thanks so much.’ She could hear herself gushing. She needed to tone that down.
They moved awkwardly around each other, neither sure whether to hug in
greeting. Alan took six cans of lager out of the carrier bag he was holding and
set them on the dining table.

‘I see you brought your six pack.’ Eoifa pointed to the lager.

‘Ha, very good! You only want me for my body and no my excellent
conversation?’ He pulled off his sweatshirt to reveal a shirt with a collar
underneath. ‘It’s okay, I’m leaving the rest on.’

‘Make yourself at home, why don’t you.’ Eoifa laughed. ‘If I open this,
will you have some?’ She held up the prosecco.

‘Well, I got it for you but, if you’re opening it anyhow…’

‘Let’s open it!’

Alan looked relaxed on the kitchen sofa. Eoifa pulled one of the dining chairs
over to sit nearby.

‘Should you not have the comfy seat?’ he offered to swap but she insisted
it was fine. ‘There’s plenty space here.’ He patted the other cushion on the
sofa.

‘I’m fine here, for now.’ She smiled, sitting sideways on the chair as
though that made it less formal.

‘So do you see much of Mrs McQ? Any more of her stories?’

‘Oh help, I know. She can certainly talk.’ They both laughed. ‘I’ve not
seen much of her but she did come down this morning to ask if I’d used the stove
yet. I haven’t, but she said I could have some of her logs if I wanted. There’s a
pile by the shed.’

‘Want me to get the stove going for you tonight?’

‘Are you cold?’

‘Not at all, but, tell you the truth, I love a real fire. Can I get it started?’

‘Yeah, I suppose.’

‘Have you got any newspapers?

‘Just the one I bought this morning.’

‘One should do it. Is it a decent broadsheet? None of your red top
nonsense, they’re rubbish for starting fires, wars mibbe.’

‘It’s a Herald. Jeez should I have bought marshmallows as well?’
‘You’ve no marshmallows?! Kidding...right, you get the paper and I’ll bring in some logs. Next to the shed did you say?’

After one failed attempt where the paper burned too quickly for the log to ignite, they managed to get the stove going.

‘I am a fire starter...’ Alan chanted, turning back from the stove to look at her sitting on the sofa.

‘Where did you learn to do all this stuff?’
‘Starting fires?!’ He sat beside her and took a big swig of his prosecco.
‘Well, there’s that, but the washing machine as well. Were you born handy?’ She refilled his glass and the bubbles stopped just below the rim.
‘Ooh, I can see you’ve done that before!’ he took a quick slug. ‘Ach, I just picked stuff up here and there. I don’t like to sit still. Didnae help me much back in school but I’m getting better. Done a couple of college courses, trades things mainly. My da talked me into training to be a plumber, ‘ye’ll never be short of a job, son’ he says. But it’s more like yer never short of a jobbie. All blocked bogs and burst pipes. Pretty dirty work, though the money’s good for out of hours, I’ll say that for it.’
‘So do you not work with your uncle all the time?’
‘Nah, just help him out now and again. What I really want to be is a lumberjack!’ They laughed.
‘But for now you’re a plumber?’
‘Well, for now, I suppose. But it’s no how I see myself, you know, I wouldn’t want to be defined by a u-bend. Do you know what I’m saying?’ He turned to look at her.
‘Yes, definitely. I know that feeling.’
‘So what is it you do yourself? What brings you to Glasgow?’ He enunciated the last sentence like an interviewer.
‘Well, a bit like you, I’d rather not be defined by my job.’
‘Fair dos, but what do ye do?’
‘I work in a wee company, but it’s kind of related to the City Council - they give us office space at the moment. It’s all about promoting ‘Enterprise in Europe’.’ Eoifa laughed. It felt strange actually describing her job to someone who didn’t immediately need to use the service.
‘Ok and what does that involve?’
She described the schemes they offered and the small local businesses they were
designed to help trade in other European countries. They chatted about that for
a while, Alan asking Eoifa how she’d learned other languages and Eoifa saying
she didn’t really, she could just get by. They finished the prosecco and Alan
opened a can of lager which he split between their two wine glasses.

‘Right, promise you’ll not laugh?’ he set his glass down on the floor and
touched her arm, feeling for her hand.

‘I’ll do my best.’
‘I’m sure your best is pretty good but ye’ve definitely no to laugh.’
‘Ok.’ Eoifa couldn’t stop herself from smiling.
‘Ask me what I’d really like to be.’
‘What would you really like to be?’
‘Good girl, that’s good. Well, thinking about it, it’s not so much what I’d
like to be. Ach, I’ll just say it, but don’t laugh, I’m a writer.’
‘Seriously?’
‘Yeah, well, trying to get good at it.’
‘That’s great. Have you had anything published?’
‘Aye, I have! Glad you asked.’ He laughed, pausing to take a drink.
‘Excellent!’
‘Well, I dunno if it’s excellent. It’s no the Booker Prize. But I’ve been in a
couple of wee pamphlets and I’ve read my stuff out a couple of times at one of
the local pubs in town, the Scotia Bar.’
‘Very good! Are you the Plumber Poet?’
‘Ah no, I don’t write poetry. Poetry’s too scary. Too many rules. I like
wee short pieces of prose. Things I can start and finish and that I can read out
without folk getting bored, you know?’
‘Flash fiction?’
‘Aye, well we keep our clothes on, mostly.’ He nudged her and they both
laughed. He put his finger on her lips and lent his head close to hers, ‘you said
you wouldn’t laugh’.

She moved his hand away from her mouth, ‘I’m not laughing like that.’
‘C’mon, dance with me, Eoifa!’ He took her hand and pulled her to a
standing position. ‘We need some dancing music.’ He kept his arm around her
while manoeuvring them both over to the player. ‘What have you got on here?’
he scrolled through the playlist. ‘Right, I love this one, c’mon on!’
They were entwined on the kitchen sofa. Their jeans discarded beside the stove which hadn’t cooled completely although the logs had turned to ash. Two fat candles flickered on the dining table.

‘Did you bring a condom?’

‘No,’ he was kissing her neck, his voice muffled by her hair, ‘that would have been presumptuous.’

‘Presumptuous?! Were you never in the Scouts?’

‘The Scouts?’

‘Yeah with their “Ever Ready” saying or whatever it was.’

‘Be prepared, you mean. “Eveready” was a type of battery. You’re showing your age now doll.’ He laughed, momentarily resting his weight on top of her in a kind of hug. He sat up, stroking her legs, reaching round to caress her backside. He had a lovely touch, his hands were not soft exactly, but supple. She stroked his head, letting strands of his hair run slowly through her fingers.

It was good to be held. That was what she missed most. She let her head rest on his shoulder and stroked his back. He was in good shape.

‘There’s plenty we can do without a condom. I’ll bring one next time.’

‘One?’

‘One’s a start isn’t it?’

The bedroom was dark apart from a faint glow of an orange streetlight seeping through the curtain fabric. She must have slept. The duvet had slid or been pushed away from her. She pulled at the part nearest her leg but Alan was lying with it tangled around him. She kept pulling until enough came free. He moved but didn’t wake. She could hear music. It must have been playing on a loop since they were in the kitchen. Now it seemed to be coming from the hall; maybe he had moved the speaker at some point. Eoifa hoped it wasn’t too loud, it was the middle of the night. She should probably get up and switch it off. She thought about how to negotiate the hall.

‘You ok?’ Alan turned to face her, his body still flat on the bed.

‘Yeah, just tired.’

‘Sound like you’re miles away.’

‘No, I’m right here. Wondering if that music’s too loud.’ Her voice was croaky.
‘Nah, s’fine.’ He let his arm flop over her. ‘I’ll get up and turn it off if you’re worried about getting an ASBO on your first weekend.’

‘I’m not sure how the sound travels, if Mrs McQuarry can hear it upstairs.’ Eoifa felt sick at the idea of Mrs McQuarry knowing anything about this evening’s escapade.

‘I’m pretty sure we’re the only ones who can hear it, but I’ll knock it on the head if it makes you happy.’ He sat on the edge of the bed and rummaged through the pile of discarded clothes on the floor until he found his shirt. ‘Probably had enough Suzanne Vega for one night.’

She listened to him move around the house, uncertain which room he was in until she heard the toilet flush. The music stopped. She groped for her dressing gown before making do with a jumper from the top of a box that still needed to be unpacked. She padded through to the kitchen and tried to remember which cupboard the glasses were in. She was thirsty but also needed to pee, Alan must still be in the bathroom.

‘Hey, where did you go?’ he came into the kitchen and wrapped himself around her back. It was comforting but she needed the toilet – and more sleep.

‘Do you think you’d be ok to drive?’

‘I doubt it but I don’t have my car. You ok?’ He turned her to face him. Eoifa shrugged.

‘You’re looking pretty damn good in that jumper. Let me take you back to bed.’

‘You’ll have to leave.’ Her voice was husky and she hadn’t fully decided if she was serious.

‘Even if I do this?’ He kissed her, pushing his tongue into her mouth. He was a good kisser, there was no denying that.

‘I need to sleep.’

‘Better get you back to bed then.’ He picked her up and carried her to the kitchen door. She felt insubstantial; something between joy at her apparent weightlessness and irritation that she was being teased.

‘No, no stop! I mean it. Put me down.’ She spoke quietly but her tone was stern.

‘Ok, ok sorry. I didn’t mean to….scare you.’
‘I’m not scared. I just need…want…I really think you should go. Please. Sorry to…I know it’s probably the middle of the night. Well, it is the middle of the night.’

‘Is it ‘cause I lifted you up?’ he caressed her back.

‘No, no it’s not that.’ She moved away from him, towards the corridor. ‘I just need to get some sleep. I’ve got a lot to do here tomorrow, later today.’ She looked back, ‘are your clothes here or through there?’

‘Bit of a mix I think.’ He lifted the tangle of their jeans from beside the sofa.

‘Will you need a cab?’

‘Eh, mibbe. What time is it?’ He looked around for a clock.

‘It’s after five.’

He rubbed his face with both hands. ‘It’s ok, I’ll walk up the road and jump on a bus.’

She was surprised at his confidence in the buses but, eager to get the house and, more specifically, the bed to herself, she didn’t argue.

Eoifa woke to the sound of a car manoeuvring in the gravel drive. At first she couldn’t tell if it was arriving or leaving. It was loud as the small stones shifted below the tyres. Eventually it drove off and the room was quiet. There was a wash of curtain-coloured light projected onto the bedroom wall. Her head ached and her mouth was parched. She felt on the floor for her watch. 10am. Not too bad for a Sunday. Respectable, and then she remembered the night before. Quite a night. She squirmed to untangle her leg from the duvet. It was a relief to wake alone.

The car might have been a visitor for Mrs McQuarry or the landlady herself. She cringed at the thought of Mrs McQuarry, or even Ben, having heard Alan leave. There was no doubt Mrs McQuarry would have seen him arriving and she’d have watched him gathering the logs.

She got a big glass of water first. The kitchen was a state, the wine bottles and cans lying around, plates from toasted cheese left on the table and worktop, but she couldn’t face tackling it immediately. This was the worst hangover she’d had for ages. She filled the kettle and sat on the sofa with her
dressing gown wrapped around her while she waited for it to boil. It was the first
time she’d had casual sex in a few years too. Not that they’d gone all the way,
saved by the absence of a condom, of all things. She curled her legs up on the
sofa, set her head on the armrest and let her mind wander.

‘Have a nice life!’ It was the thing to say as you left virtually any group of
friends in the summer of 1991. The day was hot. The city was sticky. Eoifa
thought she was queen of the world in a shirt dress. She’d tricked the University
of Edinburgh into awarding her a 2.1 - she had a certificate to prove it, or would
have as soon as she paid the £20 administration fee - in spite of the nights she’d
spent drinking in the Union while others studied in the library, in overcrowded
flats or at institutional desks in Pollock Halls.

Although the phrase was used so often, Eoifa was surprised when Euan
turned at the corner of St Andrew Square where he hop
ed to catch a bus to
wherever it was and said,

‘Have a nice life! Isn’t that what we say?’ he squinted through the
escaped strands of a blonde quiff.

‘Is it?’ Eoifa was surprised because, other than the 90 minutes it had
taken them to walk into town and eat a lunch of sorts in a lack lustre café,
they’d spent the entire previous five days in bed together.

They had met precisely six days earlier at another friend’s flat. Eoifa had to
move out of her accommodation as soon as the term ended. Fortunately, her
friend Brian was living in a flat with three other boys, the place belonged to one
of their parents so they were spared the usual end of lease panic. All of them
had graduated that year except Brian who’d finished the year before, having
switched to an Ordinary degree. He had a job in a printer’s office, desk top
publishing leaflets and flyers, but wasn’t ready to give up the student life.

There, in the no man’s land between the results coming out and
graduations starting, the other three had headed home, no doubt to be
measured up for suits and shiny new shoes for those ceremonies. Eoifa had asked
Brian if she could stay there for a few days until she decided what to do. She
had no job and no immediate plans. On her second night sleeping in one of the
two vacant bedrooms, Euan had turned up for a party, although no party had
been planned. He brought two bottles of Romanian red wine and a packet of
French cigarettes. Brian ‘found’ a bottle of Moet et Chandon planked at the back of the fridge - presumably remaindered from one of his flatmates’ post-exam celebrations. The party trio, Brian, Eoifa and Euan, drank the Romanian red before popping the champagne cork. When Eoifa decided to head out for chips, Euan insisted on going with her. ‘She’ll be fine!’ Brian shouted from his position of choice sprawled on the faux-leather sofa. ‘The muggers and rapists are terrified of her.’

By the time they returned, Brian had gone to bed. Eoifa scrunched up the greasy chip papers, dropped them in the bin, and said she’d head for bed too.

‘What are you doing? Are you staying here or have you anywhere else to be?’

‘Let me see, should I stay or should I go now?’ He kissed her salty lips and manoeuvred her into the hall. ‘Which of these doesn’t have Brian in it?’ He pointed to the bedroom doors with his foot.

They didn’t emerge from the room until the following evening and, even then, only one at a time. Scurrying to the kitchen for food and returning to their lair. So it continued for the rest of the week. Brian carried on going to work and, when he returned to the flat, he would indulge them by delivering snacks and water which he loaded on to a tray and pushed round the door without having to enter the room.

It had been, in the words of the Suzanne Vega song, a timeless, placeless place. Out of context and (Eoifa hoped) beyond all consequences. And yet, as they stood on the corner of St Andrew Square, Euan picking at the fraying cord handle of his duffle bag, Eoifa wondered what the possible consequences might be. They hadn’t swapped numbers, not that she had a telephone number to swap. Her family house was rented out with the proceeds coming to her eventually - her dad had required that she should not be provided any large sums of cash until her twenty-fifth birthday. In the absence of a house, you could have no house phone - mobiles wouldn’t be a regular accessory for another twenty years.

‘It’s been a laugh.’ Euan couldn’t look at her directly, because of the sun or embarrassment, Eoifa couldn’t tell. She nodded slowly.

‘It’s definitely been something.’

‘Or nothing....’
‘Or something and nothing.’ They were falling into the nonsense speak of the last five days.

‘Ok, this is now a pants conversation. I gotta go. I’d say “keep in touch” but, you know, we’re young, free, single. Who knows where we’ll end up?’

On her solo walk back to Brian’s, Eoifa ran over the departure scene in her head, trying out all the replies she wished she had given. In one version she slapped him, hard. In another she kissed him passionately before walking away. All of them made better theatre than the mumbled, ‘fair enough’, she managed before turning on her heel and jogging away so he wouldn’t see the tears that threatened to reveal themselves. Every time she relived the scene she wished she hadn’t looked back to see him swing his duffle bag onto his shoulder and stride off. It meant he definitely hadn’t called her back or even watched her go. She tried many times to recall exactly what he’d said. The words that had signalled the end of the end. But the harder she strained to replay the words he had chosen, the more they ducked and dived.

By the time she got to the flat, Brian was home from work.

‘Where’s boy wonder then?’

‘He’s gone home - got a couple of job interviews in London next week, he said.’

‘Euan?’ Brian snorted.

‘Ye-es, who else?’

‘He hates the city. Said he’d rather cut his right arm off than live in London.’

‘Well amputation could be arranged and not his fucking arm!’ Eoifa threw herself onto the other end of the sofa which might have bucked back if it hadn’t been for Brian acting as ballast.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah...no...oh I’m fine, just the heat getting to me.’

‘The heat, right.’ Brian nodded sagely.

Later that night, Brian and Eoifa sat side by side watching television, their feet propped on the coffee table in front.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, right? It’s been great having you here, but how long are you thinking of staying?’
‘D’you need me to go?’
‘Well, no immediately like, but the lads’ll be back for graduation in a week or so. If they all come back, there’ll no be a spare bed, never mind a spare room.’
‘Okay I can take a hint!’ Eoifa stood up and made for the door.
‘Calm doon, they’ll no be back the night. I’m just askin what your plans are. Have you got anywhere else to go?’
‘Oh thanks! You’re chucking me out and saying I’ve got nae mates?!’
‘Right, back up the truck, this isn’t how I wanted the chat to go. You’re welcome to stay here as long as there’s a spare bed. If Derek and Ian come back you can stay in the spare bed in my room but if Dougie comes back an all, there’ll be no space. I’m just giving you a friendly heads up.’
‘Yeah well, thanks for the advance notice.’ Eoifa’s tone was sour.
‘Hey, steady on. This is your Uncle Brian here. I’m trying to help you out. Are you okay? Y’er awfie grumpy.’ Brian rubbed his hair from the neck onto the top of his head.
‘Yeah, yeah, sorry. I’m really sorry Brian. I’m not sure what’s up.’
‘Is it Euan?’ Brian turned to look at Eoifa who was hovering around the door, playing with the handle.
‘No!’ she blurted. She did not want to get into that discussion with Brian or anyone. ‘It’s probably just my period.’ She said the first thing she could think of that would shut the conversation down.
‘Aye, you better hope it is!’
‘What d’you mean?’
‘Did you use that packet of condoms from the living room window ledge?’
‘Not that it’s any of your business, yeah, yes we did. Why?’
‘Well, me and the lads sat sticking pins through them one night the telly was rubbish.’
‘Fuck off!’
‘We were bored, what can I say?’
‘Why would anyone do that? Anyway, it would’ve made them rip when we…used them. Wouldn’t it?’
‘Yeah, most likely.’
She remembered moving out the following morning when Brian was at work. Was that the last time she’d seen him? Made sense that they’d not kept in touch after all. She remembered collecting her big suitcase from the storage at the halls of residence and caught the night bus to London. It had been her first true reinvention. She was scared but mainly excited, knowing she could meet a whole new set of friends, get some kind of job. Living on her allowance wasn’t easy in London.

Eoifa roused herself from the sofa and ate a breakfast of sorts. There was no bread left so she made do with some sliced fruit. As she boiled the kettle for coffee, she noticed Alan’s sweatshirt slung over the back of a dining chair. She scanned the rest of the room for any of his other belongings. Provided there was nothing valuable, she would never need to face him again. She remembered the crates. Shit! There was almost always something. She would leave them outside so they could be collected during the day, while she was at work.

She started tidying up. She set the wine glasses and mugs in the sink and then started throwing anything that wasn’t her own crockery into a black bin liner. This was no time for recycling. She wrapped Alan’s sweatshirt in a Marks & Spencer carrier bag and set it on the table.

She needed to get out, even for a short walk. Who was she kidding? She’d go back to the café and get something filling to eat. She needed carbs. She picked up a novel from one of the piles on the stairs and went back through to the kitchen. She stuffed the carrier bag with the sweatshirt into the bin liner along with the rubbish and dumped the whole lot into the green wheelie bin Mrs McQuarry had allocated to her.

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Eoifa had been back at work for nearly a week and each night she returned to see the crates still sitting by the kitchen door. It was surprising, though also a relief, that Mrs McQuarry hadn’t asked about them. Eoifa took them inside at night but put them out again in the morning, hoping they’d be collected when she wasn’t around. She hadn’t let Alan know of this arrangement but she was sure he would figure it out himself if he came to the house. He had sent a couple
of texts, the first late on the Sunday evening. She replied that she was glad he got home safely but ignored any follow-up.

The walk back from the station was pleasant, past all the grand houses with their large gardens and driveways. The weather was mild, everything was starting to grow, and the air was full of lovely scents, especially in the evening as though the plants relaxed.

Eoifa could hear Mrs McQuarry’s chatter while she was still walking along the pavement towards the house, her disembodied voice carrying through the hedge. ‘That’s my boy now, Ben. Good work and good riddance to those weeds, eh? Another day or two of sunshine and we’ll get the bulbs in. Won’t that be good, what d’you say?’

Ben’s response was audible but indistinct. When she turned into the drive, Eoifa could see him grinning broadly, gardening fork in hand, prongs piercing the soil at his feet. They had dug over a large patch in front of the shed. Eoifa couldn’t remember what it had looked like earlier. Perhaps it had just been overgrown, a veg patch in waiting. The cat lay on the edge of the newly turned earth, pawing idly at what might have been a worm or some other insect. It seemed an unlikely place for the cat to choose.

‘Now, here’s the brains of the operation.’ Mrs McQuarry greeted Eoifa’s arrival with her usual exuberance. ‘What do you say to my Number One gardener’s efforts here this afternoon? I could hire him out to the Council at reasonable rates, what d’you reckon, eh Ben? Will we ask Eoifa if she could get you a job in the Parks Department or whatever they call themselves these days? I’d say you could show them a thing or two about hard work.’

Ben shuffled, rubbing his brow with his sleeve, his smile a little less evident than before.

‘Did you do all this today?’ Eoifa tried to sound impressed without patronising, trying to remember a leaflet she’d read, something about how to, or how not to, talk to disabled people. She couldn’t remember if it advised slowing down or definitely not slowing down your speech.

Ben nodded. ‘Me, yes, I did, today, and mum helped.’

‘Och mum did nothing much but hand out orders, as usual. I make a better chief than an Indian.’ Mrs McQuarry chuckled.
‘Well it’s very good, Ben…both of you. That’s a lot of digging.’ Eoifa took out her keys and moved towards the kitchen door but felt obliged to admire the newly turned patch of soil, its edges geometric against the grass and path.

‘And how’s Eoifa today? Had a busy day at the office instead of getting out to enjoy the Spring sunshine?’

‘Yes, it’s pretty busy. Now I’m not quite the new girl anymore.’ The gravel shifted under Eoifa’s shoes as she headed towards the door. The crates had gone. She looked back at the mother and son. It was probably better not to draw attention to them. Alan must have been round.

‘Of course, don’t let us hold you back.’ Mrs McQuarry manoeuvred the wheelbarrow past Ben. A rake balanced awkwardly across the top, the barrow itself contained a pile of muddy stones and clumps of weeds that they must have pulled out of the newly dug patch. ‘We’re just getting tidied up and we’ll head on in ourselves before the darkness comes down. We’ll not have the long light nights yet a while. Is it two weeks till the clocks spring forward?’ Mrs McQuarry pulled back the sleeve of her raincoat, checking the space on her wrist where a watch might have been.

‘Uh, yes, something like that.’ Eoifa had no idea when the clocks were meant to change. She relied on the radio or newspaper announcements to remind her the night before it was due to happen. She loved the lighter nights but resented losing the extra hour in bed.

‘Ah yes, we’ll all be sorry to lose the lie in,’ it was as though Mrs McQuarry had read her mind, ‘but we’ll be glad of the longer evenings all the same. More time in the garden, eh Ben? We can dig and weed til all hours!’ Ben was still smiling but kept his head tilted down, focussing on the fork prongs that he pushed in and out of the soil. His jumper the outsize version of something a young child might wear. ‘Now then, we’d better be getting these tools away in that shed and stop holding Eoifa back.’

Ben coughed suddenly, a spluttered choke. Eoifa looked at Mrs McQuarry who was focussed on pushing the wheelbarrow along the strip of grass to the compost heap. Eoifa wasn’t certain whether she should offer to pat Ben’s back or pretend she hadn’t noticed. He was using the garden fork like a balancing pole, steadying himself with his head bent low.
‘That’s sounding nasty,’ Mrs McQuarry commented but kept moving off with her load. Ben gasped and spluttered, letting go of the fork, both hands on his knees, body buckled.

‘Are you ok?’ Eoifa moved towards him, placing a hand on his arm. Not wanting to get too close in case he was about to vomit. He didn’t pull away but his body was lurching with the effort to catch a breath. ‘Would you like anything? Water?’ Ben wasn’t able to reply. He made a movement with his head that might have meant ‘no’ or it could simply have been a reaction to the coughing. If he’d been a small child, Eoifa would have been tempted to turn him upside down, or whack his back, something physical to clear his airways.

‘Come on now, there’s a good boy, don’t forget to breathe while you’re choking yourself.’ Mrs McQuarry finally left her wheelbarrow.

Ben hacked and a trail of clear saliva dripped from his mouth to the ground. He took a few desperate gasps of air, noisy but sounding like the worst had passed. ‘We don’t like spitting but sometimes there’s nothing else for it.’ Mrs McQuarry patted at Ben’s shoulder as he straightened.

‘You had me worried there,’ Eoifa said and moved away, her sense of responsibility diminishing now his mother was in charge. Ben probably didn’t want two people fussing over him. She could see a small dark patch had appeared on the front of his trousers, the poor soul. She looked around, at the garden, the hedge, the grey sky. She needed something to say that would make it seem she hadn’t noticed, but she couldn’t think of anything.

‘Come on then Ben, let’s get ourselves in and changed, eh?’ Mrs McQuarry apparently had noticed, perhaps she expected it. ‘We’re all mucky from the garden.’

‘Can I put the tools away for you?’ It felt rude to walk away into the house now. ‘Do they all go in the shed there?’

‘Oh that would be grand! A great help in our hour of need, eh Ben, isn’t that kind?’ Mrs McQuarry guided him towards their entrance to the house. ‘Yes, they can all squeeze in the wee shed. The padlock’s hanging in the door. If you can’t get it to snap tight, give me a shout upstairs and I’ll sort it later.’ She spoke over her shoulder, a pixie-like creature next to Ben, still efficient but there was a hint of frailty beside the bulk of her son.

‘Are you sure you can manage there?’ Eoifa regretted the words as soon as they were out. They might sound interfering, judging even, to her new landlady.
Mrs McQuarry paused on the drive. ‘There’s really no need to worry about us. Ben and I are used to managing.’ She nodded a tight smile and resumed their retreat. From the back they looked like a single creature, a hermit crab perhaps. Something in the shuffling movement, not quite sideways, but not wholly forwards either. Working as one, if a little disjointed.

Eoifa hurried in through the kitchen door to drop off her bag and slip into some jeans before sorting out the gardening tools. The cat trotted after her and perched on the window ledge.

Eoifa had never seen such a tidy shed. There was a rack for the larger tools. Shelves on two sides were filled with labelled boxes - all kinds of seeds, dibbers, twine. It smelled fantastic, a mix of wood from the shed itself or the shelves, and earth. It was obvious where the tools they had been using earlier belonged but Eoifa was less sure what to do with the contents of the wheelbarrow. There was a compost heap round the side of the house for the weeds but where to put the pile of stones? She looked at the upper floor of the house, the large windows reflecting the dimming sky. There were sounds from across the street, someone reversing a car into a garage or a driveway. The engine’s noise changed as the car crawled backwards before accelerating forwards. The tyres scraped on a loose surface, more gravel probably, and the whole manoeuvre was repeated. Another learner driver perhaps.

She tucked the wheelbarrow in to the space between the shed and the hedge. That would need to do. She tried chasing the cat out so she could lock up, but it ran behind an old dresser that appeared to double as a tool store. Eoifa knocked the fork against the wooden drawers, hoping to force the cat out but it remained hidden. She stood still inside the shed, looking out at the garden. If the windows were lower down it would make a great den, all it was missing was an armchair.

Eoifa helped her mum in the garden, not very willingly, as a small girl. She wasn’t a reliable gardener, more likely to pull a plant up to see how fast it was growing than nurture it, so her mum would send her on a series of errands, fetching packets of seeds or tools. One of her jobs was to empty the container full of cut grass on the lawnmower. They had a long stretch of grass in the back garden and the mower used to fill up at the end of each row. At first Eoifa enjoyed running between the compost heap and the machine but after three or
four trips, she tired and would hide or pretend she couldn’t hear her mum calling.

The mower was electric and her mum used a long extension lead plugged into a socket in their garden shed, which doubled as a coal bunker at one end so there was always a thin film of oily dust on anything stored inside. One evening her mum asked her to switch the mower off at the socket while she cleared some rough grass that had wound itself around the blades. Eoifa watched her mum from the shed as she first tried to clear the blades with an old stiff brush and then started pulling at the coarse grass with her fingers. Eoifa had read in one of the Sunday papers about a lady in New Zealand who had chopped all her fingers off by lifting her lawn mower up to trim her garden hedge. Even though Eoifa’s mum was usually more benevolent, they had both laughed.

‘Silly bitch!’ It was the first time Eoifa had heard her mum use such a term. She couldn’t remember now if that had been before or after her dad left.

Watching from inside the shed that afternoon as her mum struggled to clean the blades of the lawn mower, Eoifa was caught in a struggle of her own. The temptation just to flick that switch.

Eoifa closed the shed door, counted to ten and, when she opened it, the cat shot out. The padlock closed easily enough and Eoifa extracted the key, which was small but attached to a length of blue ribbon making it look like it should open a treasure chest rather than a garden shed. Eoifa wound the ribbon around her hand and headed for the upstairs apartment.

Ben answered the door, smiling and nodding at Eoifa but didn’t allow her past the doorway until Mrs McQuarry shouted from another room that he should show her in. The clanging sounds suggested the landlady was in the kitchen.

The decoration was similar in style to downstairs. There was lots of wood panelling in the hall. The wood with the grain showing through was beautiful but it did make the space rather dark. Eoifa’s mum would have painted it white gloss. Additional panels had been added to disguise the space where the main stairway would have lead in to this level, if it hadn’t been blocked up. It was a pretty good match. There were two corridors leading off the hall. Eoifa would have loved to have a look around but had to content herself with following Ben into the sitting room. It wasn’t quite as vast as the main room downstairs although it was still a large room with the same walk-in bay window, but the
view was remarkable. She could see why Mrs McQuarry had chosen to live in the upper conversion. The extra height gave an excellent vantage point right across the city to the hills beyond, the Campsies, Mrs McQuarry called them. There was no mistaking the gothic University building on the other side of the river, although the river itself was hidden. Funny the significance of the Clyde, carving the city into more or less desirable segments. The city centre was also out of sight, apart from a few of the taller office blocks. The City Chambers, where Eoifa worked, were enclosed in George Square. You would need a helicopter to get a proper view of that.

Ben seemed excited to have a new person to show around his home or perhaps it was anxiety. He stood a few steps back from the window, watching Eoifa more than the view. She was aware of him fussing with the hem of his jumper, in turns rolling it up in his fingers and smoothing it back down with his palm.

‘Now then if we only had a window on the other wall, we could take in all points of the compass.’ Mrs McQuarry appeared, straightening piles of papers as she moved around the room perhaps searching for something or simply reordering the place. All the while she narrated her thoughts, sharing the names of city landmarks, visible or hidden from the window. Despite her activity, Mrs McQuarry was calmer, more measured than she had been in their earlier interactions. Eoifa found her accent intriguing. It didn’t sound purely Glaswegian; there were traces of Irish or some form of Scots Gaelic.

Glasgow was a patchwork of architectural styles and forms. Lots of greenery, especially in this area with its broad leafy avenues. The area around the University appeared greener from here than she had realised. Kelvingrove was the name of a park as well as the Art Gallery, Mrs McQuarry informed her. From here, the West End looked like it simply rolled down into the Southside, instead of one viewing the other with lofty suspicion across the banks of the Clyde. It was the same in most places Eoifa had lived, they all had their West End versus Southside rivalries, or their local equivalents. Glasgow had more than most. And, of course, all parts of the city united in competition with Edinburgh, Glasgow’s dusty brogue-wearing rival. Eoifa’s colleagues rarely tired of rattling off terms of limited endearment for Scotland’s capital city. And the activity was mutual. As a student in Edinburgh, the locals there had viewed Glasgow with suspicion and, occasionally, a touch of fear. There were pantomime qualities to
the name-calling and an undercurrent of ignorance. She was a student the year Glasgow was named European City of Culture but, when she suggested a trip through to see what a cultural city looked like, quite a few in her group declined. ‘Isn’t it all gangs and knife crime?’ one of them had asked, probably Rebecca, she was an English public school girl of the sort Edinburgh University attracted.

Mrs McQuarry kept up her role as part guide, part quiz master even as the fading light meant she had to switch on a table lamp. This, effectively, switched off the view. The contrast between the inside and outside shifting. Mrs McQuarry adjusted the curtains but didn’t close them.

‘Did you know we have our own castle in Pollokshields?’

‘Yes!’ Ben reached out to Eoifa, pointing to the door with his other hand. ‘You can see Sherbet Castle from my room!’ He gave her jacket sleeve a tug.

‘Really? Your own castle, Ben?’

‘Now, we’ve been calling it ‘Sherbet’ since Ben was little but it’s really called…’

‘Sherbook! Sherbrooke!’ Ben grinned.

‘There’s really a castle here?’ Eoifa wasn’t certain if this was a joke. She didn’t think Glasgow had a castle.

‘Yes, Sherbrooke Castle. It was built as a house but it’s a hotel now. Have you not seen the tower with the Saltire flapping about at the top when you’ve been on your travels?’

‘Um, no.’ Eoifa was pretty sure she hadn’t seen a castle but she had a feeling she might have seen the flag, now that Mrs McQuarry mentioned it.

‘Well you’ll notice it the next time. It’s up on the hill over that-a-way.’ Mrs McQuarry gestured.

Eoifa turned from the window, wondering how clearly they might be seen from the street or the neighbouring houses. They weren’t directly overlooked and the large gardens put quite a distance between the properties, but sometimes it was hard to tell. Perhaps someone could see right in. She watched a family in the house across the road load their children into an expensive-looking four-wheel drive. Their garden was on a slight slope. She watched one of the wee boys chase his football down the path where it rested against the iron gate. It looked liked their main gates were electric. Eoifa had noticed several houses here had those. She was glad Mrs McQuarry left hers propped open. Some
of them, with their high gates and security cameras, made the properties look like gilded cages.

Eoifa smiled at Mrs McQuarry. Eoifa often had to remind herself to actually smile. She could feel quietly content without remembering to turn up the corners of her mouth, prompting people to say, ‘smile love, it may never happen,’ which didn’t help.

‘Well, you certainly have a lovely home.’ Not the most original line but it would have to do.

‘Thank you. Now you’ve seen the HQ, where all the plans are hatched.’ Mrs McQuarry reached behind Eoifa to pull the curtains this time, perhaps drawing the scene to a close.

‘Thanks for showing me the view. I can really understand why you love it here.’

‘Yes, it’s not a bad old house at all.’

Eoifa moved towards the door. ‘I’d better let you get on with your meal.’ The smell of something cooking became distinct as they walked into the hall. Ben rushed ahead, switching on lamps, creating a path of light towards the front door. It was a busy style with lamps on side-tables and dressers. Rather like the garden shed, the house was too well ordered to be described as cluttered, but it was full of belongings. There were books stacked into all the available spaces between pieces of furniture, as well as filling bookshelves in the sitting room and hall. The apartment appeared scrupulously clean but keeping it that way must take so long with all the belongings gathering dust.

With the lamps on, Eoifa looked to see if she could spot a colour difference in the wood panelling at the top of what should have been the main staircase.

‘When did you convert the house?’

‘Ooh, now you’re asking. I’d struggle to give you a year but it must have been the ‘70s...might have been as late as the early ‘80s but I don’t think so. I’d come back from abroad - and that’s a whole other tale for another time. Mum and Dad were getting frail, the place was too big for them but I wasn’t for moving back in with my parents. No, no.’

Ben wandered away down one of the corridors, his duty with the lamps complete.
'It was Dad who suggested staying put and dividing the old house up. Lower conversion for them, upper conversion for me and the bit at the back for renting out.'

‘There’s another apartment at the back?’

‘Yes, it’s sometimes empty, sometimes not.’ Mrs McQuarry continued, ‘Dad and I had a job persuading Mum, mind you. And she would never agree to have the stairs closed up. She wasn’t concerned about the external steps, but she had ‘too many memories to give up that staircase’, she always said. Oh me! What a palaver we had with her. In the end my Dad arranged for workmen to come and do it while they were away visiting his sister. I stayed here to supervise. They put all this in over a weekend.’ She knocked at the panelling. ‘Come to think of it, it might have been a week. In which case it would have been the time he took her to the Summer Isles.’ She rubbed her forehead with her index finger as though precision poking would evoke great accuracy in the memory.

‘It’s lovely wood.’

‘Aye-aye, they made a grand job of it. You have to get these things right. It could have been a right bourach.’

Eoifa laughed. She hadn’t heard that word in years. She reached out to touch the panelling.

‘Yes, on you go, give it a good knock. None of your hollow modern nonsense here. This is just the covering, of course, they built a real wall in behind. Fixed all the cornicing too.’

They looked up at the ornately patterned plasterwork between the wall and ceiling. It appeared as though the additional wall had always been there, the pattern matching exactly.

‘And, do you know,’ Mrs McQuarry moved in close to Eoifa as she lowered her voice, ‘it was nearly a month before my mother noticed they were closed off.’ She laughed heartily. ‘A whole month and never once did Mum walk up the stairs. “Well!” Dad says, “There you go, Elizabeth McQuarry, you’ve managed a whole month without struggling up the stairs and the sky has never come down, let’s see how many more months you can manage”. That’s what he said.’ Mrs McQuarry nudged Eoifa. ‘What d’you make of that, eh? Of course, that’s how things were in those days. Still, he’d never have spoken to her like that in the real olden times. Nah, nah, Mother ruled this roost back then all right.’
Eoifa was glad Mrs McQuarry didn’t really want an opinion. Despite apparently including questions, she rarely paused long enough for the other person to respond. It was difficult to know what to say in any case. It seemed unlikely that Mrs McQuarry’s mother hadn’t noticed the stairs in her own house had been blocked off but, then again, we sometimes see what we want or expect. Eoifa thought of her own parents, but couldn’t imagine her dad having the vision or the organisational skills to arrange building work in her mum’s absence.

McQuarry wasn’t the landlady’s married name then. There were no rings on the older lady’s fingers. It hadn’t occurred to Eoifa to look before. Perhaps she wasn’t ‘Mrs’ at all, but what about Ben? That wasn’t a topic she could explore while standing casually in the woman’s hall.

‘So that’s the story of the staircase. One of them anyway. This house has lots of stories. Lots of secrets too.’ Mrs McQuarry winked conspiratorially.

From along the corridor, they could hear someone playing the piano. It was good enough to be a recording but occasionally the player would hesitate and repeat a section.

‘Is that Ben?’

‘Yes, my Number One Maestro. He loves to play for other people but only from this distance. If you were to walk into his room, he’d stop and not start up again. He’s a very shy show-off.’

‘He’s very good,’ Eoifa smiled, ‘but I really should let you get on.’

‘Not at all, it’s me that shouldn’t be keeping you. But there was something I was to tell you. Now, what was it?’ Mrs McQuarry scowled, pressing the tips of her fingertips against her forehead again, perhaps in an effort to draw the thoughts out of her head. ‘Just a second, you hang on there and enjoy the recital a moment longer.’ She scurried back through the apartment and returned without any physical object but regarding the palm of her hand as one might a notepad, running over an invisible list with the index finger of her other hand. ‘Yes!’ she said at last, ‘you had a visitor. This afternoon.’

‘A visitor?’ This was unexpected. ‘Was it a delivery of some kind?’ No one had her address, not even Mary and she was on the other side of the Atlantic.

‘It was your man with the van! Now I can’t just recall what he said his name was.’
Oh God, Alan. She had forgotten about the crates being collected. Eoifa cringed internally, forcing herself to retain a non-committal expression in front of Mrs McQuarry. She thought of his sweatshirt in the bin. She thought of the conversation he might have had with Mrs McQuarry. Surely it can’t have been too damning or the landlady wouldn’t have been so friendly all this while.

‘He seems a nice lad.’ Mrs McQuarry wasn’t making this easy. ‘Said he thought he might have left something here yesterday.’

‘Oh?’ Eoifa could hear the blood pulsing in her ears. ‘Was it the crates? I left them out for collection.’

‘I forget what he said it was.’ Mrs McQuarry checked her palm again, ‘But, if I’m not mistaken, I’d say whatever he told me he’d left behind was just an excuse.’ She nudged Eoifa again.

‘Oh?!’ Eoifa struggled to articulate anything that wouldn’t give herself away.

A tinkling noise sounded from the kitchen.

‘Ah, there we go, Miss Eoifa, saved by the bell.’ Mrs McQuarry laughed. ‘Dinner calls.’

Ben bustled along the corridor chanting ‘Dinner, dinner, dinner, dinner...’ his arms stretched behind him holding out an invisible cape.

‘I’m no great shakes as a chef, m’dear, or I’d insist on you eating with us.’

‘Oh, no that’s fine. I need to get back downstairs.’

Ben, who had marched through the hall without acknowledging Eoifa or his mum, popped his head out from the corridor that Eoifa presumed led to the kitchen, ‘Eoifa, stay!’ and vanished again without waiting for a response.

‘There you are, you see. You’re a big hit with all the boys today.’ Eoifa shook her head. ‘Oh no, I’m sure it’s just novelty.’

‘And not just today, I’ll bet. I didn’t mean that.’ Mrs McQuarry seemed undecided whether to open the front door or return to the kitchen. The smell was making Eoifa hungry.

‘You’ve certainly got a big fan there. It’s good for him to have someone other than his bossy old mother around.’

‘Well that was great piano playing, Ben.’ Eoifa raised her voice so Ben might hear the compliment direct instead of waiting for his mum to tell him
later. ‘I really need to let you go. Your dinner will be burning – was that your timer that went off?’

‘It’s just a casserole, but I should check it’s not dried out. My days of timing things with the smoke detector are over. I try to make an effort to give Ben a good dinner. It can be hard for him. Not that he’s a child but he still has trouble chewing sometimes.’

‘Oh, that’s a pity.’ Ben didn’t look like he had much difficulty enjoying his food.

‘Yes, it’s a worry for me, you know.’ Mrs McQuarry lowered her voice. ‘Who knows how he’ll do when I’m gone.’ She made a face and, as quickly as the confession had been shared, she turned her head away to shout, ‘Be-en! Turn that oven off altogether, there’s a good lad. Remember the white line on the knob needs to be pointing up like twelve o’clock?’

‘I’ll let you get on.’ Eoifa turned the large door handle but the door didn’t budge.

‘Oh, there’s a knack to this.’ Mrs McQuarry used both hands, turning a yale lock further up as well as the main handle. She put a hand on Eoifa’s arm before letting her cross the threshold. ‘You’re sure I can’t tempt you with my burnt offering of a casserole?’

‘Oh it smells lovely, but I better go.’ Eoifa could tell she would need to work on her exit strategies.

‘Bye-by Eoifa, come back tomorrow.’ Ben called through from the kitchen.

‘Bye Ben. I’ll see you soon.’ Best not commit to a daily visit.

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Eoifa trimmed the time she took to walk from the house to the train station in the way she always did, wherever she lived, wherever she was going. Once she knew the lie of the land, she never spent longer getting anywhere than was strictly necessary. It left very little time for contingencies, relying on all other arrangements falling into harmonious alignment. But it reduced the amount of her life she had to spend waiting.
From the first morning standing on the platform, watching the rest of the commuteratti with their ticks and foibles, she knew she must avoid becoming one of them. The Irish man with the unruly sons who rough-housed on the platform, sometimes actually wrestling on the ground, would nod to her, rolling his eyes as though to say, ‘geez these lads are a pain, aren’t they?’ She knew they lived nearby because she had seen them playing with remote controlled cars in the middle of the road, a form of roulette with the learner drivers.

She often saw Stella, the woman from the café, but she didn’t acknowledge Eoifa, beyond an occasional remote smile. Stella and Eoifa were usually the last to arrive. Stella entered the platform from the steps at the bottom, the opposite entrance to Eoifa’s. Presumably she worked somewhere with flexible hours or perhaps she only worked part-time. Days could go by without her appearing for the train, then she’d be back catching the six minutes past eight, faithfully arriving at five and a half minutes past, although she rarely had the air of someone who was late. Perhaps when Eoifa didn’t see her it was because, on those days, she arrived at six and a half minutes past and had to catch a later train.

Twice Eoifa missed the early train herself. On those occasions she walked down the steps at the far end of the platform and caught a bus on the main road. Several bus routes converged on Pollokshields Road. It didn’t seem to matter which one she took or where the sign on the front of the bus said it was going, they all went through the city centre.

This particular morning, Eoifa arrived a little out of breath and with aching calf muscles; the curse of walking quickly in skirt shoes. The platform was empty except for the mad man whose routine was to set his briefcase down beside the orange metal bench and walk up and down, up and down like a zoo-caged animal. Eoifa always suspected he didn’t actually get on the train and his presence now confirmed that. He stopped mid-stride, looked directly at her and said, ‘You’re late. The train’s gone.’

‘Yes, thanks. I thought I’d catch the bus today.’

Eoifa wasn’t giving him the satisfaction. He resumed his pacing without making further comment. She walked along the platform herself, keeping clear of his route, and headed for the stairs at the end.

She needed to cross Pollokshields Road to catch a bus into town. The trick, once over the road, was to stand close enough to the bus stop to flag down
a bus while avoiding being crapped on by the pigeons nesting under the railway bridge. The polka dot pattern on the pavement was a stark warning.

But first, she needed to cross the road, running the gauntlet of the morning traffic on this arterial route into town. There was a steady flow of traffic on the far lane, the one heading towards the city, while the near lane had more discernible gaps between cars. She checked the diary on her phone before beginning to cross. Her first meeting wasn’t until ten but she hadn’t printed out any of the papers and she wanted to make a phone call first. She needed to catch the first available bus and this called for an assertive attitude towards the traffic. She crossed the first lane and waited in the middle for someone to take pity and pause long enough to let her get the rest of the way across. No one was conceding.

There were parents on the school run, no doubt anxious about dropping their kids before rushing on into work themselves. She tried catching the drivers’ eyes, appealing to their sense of humanity. She could see a bus edging along from the roundabout at the far end. But the line of cars was moving too fast for her to risk crossing ahead of it.

A cyclist in a yellow tabard with a rucksack in the front basket was cycling up the centre of the carriageway. Christ, they didn’t make this easy. Eoifa checked the lane behind her to see how far she could move out of the cyclist’s path. ‘C’mon mate, I’ve no space here’. She moved her arms to indicate the hopelessness of the situation, but the person on the bike kept wobbling towards her. She felt the hairs rise from her skin as the follicles contracted, adrenalin pumping around her system, but she had to stand there. No cars were giving way. She should have waited and caught the next train. The bloody bus would be in touching distance soon, surely the driver would let her cross in front of him?

A car horn blasted somewhere. Behind her? And there was a short squeal of tyres against tarmac. Eoifa was pulled backwards by her arm onto the pavement she had left moments earlier. It was Stella.

‘Jesus fucking Christ! I thought it was Goodnight Vienna for you there.’ Stella kept hold of Eoifa’s arm, gasping to catch breath herself.

‘What the fuck? I was trying to catch that bus.’ Eoifa watched it drive past the stop, no one there to flag it down. The line of cars kept moving into town. The cyclist hadn’t stopped either, just continued wobbling along the middle of the two lanes.
'Aye, very good. Smart fucking move yah daft lassies!' The driver who had applied his brakes in the near-lane shouted out of his car window. A second car appeared behind him and tooted for him to move. ‘See women? Ye shouldnae be allowed on the road in or oot a car. Fucksake man.’ He restarted his car, revving the engine viciously and drove on.

‘Oh piss off.’ Eoifa said, safe in the knowledge he wouldn’t hear.

‘Sorry, I, I really thought...’ Stella released Eoifa’s arm, running her hand roughly through her own hair. She looked close to tears.

‘No, I’m sorry, I just didn’t think I was actually in danger.’

‘Here, that was a lucky escape girls.’ A man Eoifa recognised from the newsagents approached them. ‘I didna see what happened but I heard the brakes, man. You have to careful. It’s a busy road at this time of day, innit?’

Jesus, was everyone around here a not-so-secret member of the Tufty Club?!

‘Oh, hi Nasir. It was just a bit of a misunderstanding.’ Stella smiled and rubbed an escaped tear from her cheek.

‘Yes, we’re fine here, thanks.’ Eoifa warned him off further intervention.

‘You’ll be needing a drink now, eh?’ Nasir joked with Stella.

‘No, this is a bit early, even for me.’ Stella laughed but her voice was still shaky. ‘Thanks for checking on us.’

‘That’s ok. I cannae lose my best customer. No before your papers are paid up anyway.’ He laughed.

‘The cheek of you!’ Stella sniffed but managed a smile. ‘You always make us pay in advance!’

‘I think you should go and have a wee seat before you get into work. On you go, down to the old Swan.’ He pointed further down the street. ‘They’ll be in there setting up. Chap the door and say I sent you. They’ll give you a nice cuppa.’

‘Maybe we’ll do that Nasir, thank you.’

‘Bye, thanks for your concern.’ Eoifa instantly regretted her formality.

‘Ok, girls. You take it easy now.’ He raised his hand as he turned and made his way back to the shop.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to create a drama. I just really thought you were going to get hit standing there. It’s...I’ve...’ Stella stammered and Eoifa could see her hands were shaking. ‘I-I’ve seen it before.’
‘You’re not okay, are you?’ Eoifa put her hand on Stella’s arm. ‘Come on, let’s get a coffee.’

‘Don’t you need to get into work? I mean, I think I should probably sit down for a bit, but won’t it make you late?’

‘It’s not every day I’m rescued from the middle of the road. I’ll tell them I’ve been unavoidably detained.’

The ‘old Swan’ looked like had been a traditional Glasgow pub, Eoifa noticed the etching on the windows and the solid wooden bar, but it had been reincarnated as Bistro Jacques. Strictly speaking it didn’t open until eleven but the staff were already there prepping for lunch and were happy to serve Eoifa and Stella coffees. It felt odd sitting in a pub at that time of day. It even smelled strange, not unpleasant but an odd mix of cleaning product with a hint of the night before lingering, overlaid with a fresher set of smells from the kitchen. They sat in a booth made of wood with leather padding, facing the door.

Before the coffees arrived, Stella started explaining herself. ‘My sister was in an accident. A bad one.’

‘Sorry to hear...’

‘It wasn’t recent, nearly eight years ago, but anytime people and cars are moving in close proximity...’ Stella squirmed in her seat, struggling to form the particular words she needed.

‘It’s understandable. Don’t worry.’ Eoifa tried to brush off the explanation but could see Stella was determined to share more than a hot drink.

‘It happened in a supermarket car park - crazy, like the start of a joke. It wasn’t raining but the concrete was still wet from heavy showers the night before.’

‘Who’s having the cappuccino?’ Stella was interrupted by a chap in kitchen overalls. His hands had an orange tinge like he was in the middle of chopping carrots and there was a blue plaster wound round one of his fingers. ‘If yous’d like anything else, give us a shout through there.’ He indicated a door by the bar.

Eoifa wrapped her hands round her coffee cup but didn’t lift it.

‘So Hannah, my sister, was coming out of the supermarket with a week’s worth of shopping. Anna, her wee girl, was standing in the trolley, chewing a
Stella paused while she stirred half a sachet of brown sugar into her latte. ‘Sometimes I can see Hannah, struggling to control the trolley, getting it to go in the right direction, trying to chat away to Ann, she was only two at the time. I can just imagine her wrestling with the heavy load on wobbly wheels across the car park. She was pushing it over one of those wee crossings they have, you know, like a zebra crossing.’ Stella seemed to sense Eoifa nodding although her gaze was fixed somewhere over Eoifa’s left shoulder.

‘I can see Hannah’s cheeks flushed with the effort, feel the tiniest droplets of sweat pricking their way out of her forehead, just like the effect of the rain on the car roofs. I’d like to reach out to push her hair back...’ Eoifa wasn’t sure if Stella was taking comfort from the minutiae of the imagined memory or beginning to really lose it.

‘Sometimes I just hear the skirling of wheels and...that’s it, Hannah slumped on the ground. Wee Anna eyes wide, watching. It was another customer pulled the trolley clear and lifted Anna out. ‘

‘Oh my god. Is she okay?’

‘Anna’s fine. My sister died at the scene, “almost instant”, I was told.’

‘You weren’t there?’ Eoifa was confused.

‘No, I was working.’ Stella appeared aggravated at this interruption. She scratched her arm and carried on.

‘I didn’t know what almost instant meant. I guess they didn’t know for certain whether the first impact had killed Hannah or...shock or...something.’

‘I’m so sorry, but how...what about the driver?’

‘Sped off.’

‘No!’

‘Aye, he drove off.’ Stella nodded, taking a sip of coffee. She wiped her eyes and Eoifa couldn’t tell if it was steam from the drink or if she was having a wee cry.

Eoifa touched her arm. ‘I’m so sorry. What a dreadful thing.’

‘Girl, 2, Saved by Cereal Packet’ was the Evening Times headline. ‘Which was rubbish because Anna wasn’t hit directly by the car at all. The trolley was shunted to the side but it stayed upright, thank god. So, physically, Anna was fine in amongst the pile of shopping. Mind you, it was a bit of a miracle she didn’t fall out. Must have bumped right down on her backside. One of her shoes ripped the box of cereal. Apparently there were Cornflakes and eggs all over.'
That puzzled me,’ Stella looked directly at Eoifa, ‘my sister never bought Cornflakes.’

Eoifa gave an involuntary laugh and covered her mouth with her hand. Stella shook her head, ‘For months, years, it left me thinking maybe it hadn’t been her.’

‘Nobody wants to believe that, do they?’ Eoifa touched Stella’s arm again, trying to recall any worthwhile tips she’d picked up from the counselling service.

Despite the grim nature of Stella’s story, it was good talking to someone around her own age. She checked her watch; it was after nine. She’d need to call the office shortly. The thought of her ten o’clock meeting didn’t fill her with joy. As she formulated her excuses for a late arrival at work, a more thrilling idea occurred. Why not call in sick and have the day to herself? The thought of it was wonderful. Reminded her of the Saturday job she had as a teenager, working in Woolworths. After too many vodkas and coke down the pub on a Friday night, she and her friend, Fiona, would take it in turns to call in sick for each other.

‘What have you got on today?’ Maybe Stella could be persuaded to take an illicit day too.

‘Oh crikey! Yes, I’ve got to get in.’ Stella pushed her coffee cup into the centre of the table and started to pull on her coat.

Eoifa felt a sense of disappointment but not enough to share her alternative plans with Stella. She’d keep the idea of a sickie for another day.

At her desk over lunch, a quick internet search let Eoifa find the Evening Times piece Stella had mentioned, along with a number of other links to a court case. Some of the material was no longer accessible. She didn’t disbelieve Stella but wanted to check.

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Nearly a month after moving in, most of the boxes were stacked, unemptied in the hall. Eoifa had lived without this particular baggage for so long, another few weeks hardly mattered. That is what she told herself each time a weekend
rolled around and departed without the boxes being touched. If she hadn’t been so eager to be reunited with her books, she would have left it all in storage or paid the company to destroy it.

She hadn’t kept anything from her childhood home, other than the house itself which she rented out. Thanks to her dad’s will and the complex trust arrangement he’d set up, it was of no benefit to sell the house immediately. The lawyer, a friend of her dad’s, advised against a quick sale because it acted as a form of investment. The rent wasn’t huge but, as an asset, it was fairly safe. That had been true when her parents died within a month of each other, leaving her a nineteen-year-old orphan. Periodically she thought about selling it and buying somewhere to live in instead of renting. But she liked being free to move on.

She regretted leaving the piano but, at the time, when she was still at University, what else could she do? She hoped it hadn’t been chopped up for firewood, as she had once done with an old table in a rented flat. The thought of the beautiful old piano being vandalised made her wince. It was a waste, a Bluthner boudoir grand sitting up there. As a child, Eoifa loved propping the lid open to reveal the magnificent overstrung interior.

In the Christmas holidays when she was nine or ten, she had a friend over. Veronica always preferred to be called Vonnie and Eoifa’s father, who could barely remember anyone’s name, referred to her as The Very Short, V. After dinner, Eoifa’s parents had drunk too much wine to drive, presumably Vonnie’s parents were in a similar position in their own house, and so Vonnie was invited to stay overnight, an unusual occurrence.

In the morning, Vonnie and Eoifa crept downstairs to play the piano undisturbed. They left the curtains closed and only switched on one lamp. With the piano lid propped open and the lamp providing a theatrical glow, they imagined they were performing at the Royal Opera House.

‘Don’t go dissolving into tears!’ Eoifa’s mum said as she threw open the velvet curtains. ‘It’s nearly time for lunch. The pair of you need to be getting washed and dressed.’ People didn’t just cry, in her mother’s opinion, they ‘dissolved’. Once you were over five and, in the absence of any serious injury, she refused to recognise tears as a sign of genuine emotion. They were reconstituting themselves for effect, becoming dilute. Eoifa resisted, although it was futile; the concert was over.
All those years later, Vonnie came to her mum’s funeral. Must have seen the notice in the local paper. Crying might have been acceptable on that occasion but Eoifa didn’t feel diminished and the secret to a good cry is knowing you will feel better when you stop.

Her father didn’t come to the funeral. At the time Eoifa imagined he was too busy philandering, probably intended to come but got waylaid, in more ways than one. He’d never remarried or settled down with anyone after he left Eoifa’s mother. On that occasion, however, it turned out he was sick himself. He phoned her that night from his hospital bed, distraught that he’d left her to face the funeral alone.

‘Let’s just call it practice, eh dad?’ was what she might have said. Instead she muttered that it didn’t matter and she’d come to see him soon.

The piano had been her father’s. She always imagined he would return for it after he left. He’d played it virtually every day. It was how she knew he was home from work, the house filled with crashing cadenzas and syncopated rhythms. His skill as a pianist was one of his greatest accomplishments. He had a large collection of manuscripts but he could play virtually anything by ear. He claimed he had learned to play so he could accompany films in the cinema but the dates didn’t work out. Even he wasn’t old enough for that. Eoifa was furious when she finally did the arithmetic. Her mum merely gave a small patient smile.

She was six years old when she sang solo at the Lochaninsch and District Music Festival for the first time. Her dad accompanied her on the watery-sounding upright piano on the low, wooden stage in Ballcuillin High School’s main hall. The piano was pushed to the back of the stage while she was up front looking the morning audience in the eye.

‘Bobby Shaftoe went to sea, silver buckles on his knee, he’ll come back and marry me, bonnie Bobby Shaftoe.’ She learned six verses and sang them all, punctuating each one with the chorus. The audience was arranged on either side of a wide aisle with the adjudicator’s table positioned in the centre, about a quarter of the way down the hall. It is doubtful the acoustics were improved by a fractional adjustment in position but there was coloured tape on the floor marking the prescribed spot for the adjudicator to sit. The audience clapped after each chorus, which Eoifa regarded as a cue to stop but her dad kept playing so she kept singing. And the adjudicator flapped his marking sheet in a signal to end the premature applause.
An hour or so later, Eoifa was swinging her legs on the wall outside, drinking Tizer, vibrant red fizzy, from a dumpy plastic bottle and admiring her certificate: 89 marks ‘indicating a performance with honours’. Before heading back to work at the airport, her dad said if she had let him play the harder accompaniment, the one with the harmonies where she had to sing the melody on her own, she would have got 90. Eoifa tried to look disappointed but she didn’t really care. One mark lost was a small sacrifice to avoid the embarrassment of forgetting the tune.

Eoifa yawned. Arranging books was less of a chore than sifting through old possessions. She still liked the idea of using the stairs as a vertical library, which involved arranging the books on each step. They looked better pushed into the tread of each stair with the spines facing the front but, now she’d started, it was obvious she could store more by stacking them side on. She tried different approaches, recalling the plot of each novel as she selected its spot on the stairs. She wanted to cluster the books by genres. It was a nice idea but time consuming. She had always been dismissive of any acquaintances who arranged books by their height or cover colour but, with them lying out on the stairs, she had to admit some form of size discrimination would make for a tidier hall. She decided to let herself off by thinking of the books not individually but rather as a collective artwork. She definitely liked the idea of being able to walk up the ‘shelves’.

She walked to the top of the stairs to examine the stained glass window more closely. It was a large arch, like the window the television presenters hardly ever picked in Playschool, but considerably more elaborate and colourful. It depicted a scene with a figure on either side of the frame, reminiscent of Adam and Eve in happier times. The hall must have looked magnificent when the house was in its prime. The beautiful curve of the banister with the window casting dappled light into the hall. She could understand exactly why Mrs McQuarry’s mother would not have wanted the staircase blocked off.

It gave her mild vertigo looking down the rows of books towards the front door below. She stretched her hand out against the wall to steady herself and felt a seam in the wallpaper she hadn’t noticed from lower down. She felt along the wall with her hand and, when she pressed, a concealed door sprung open from its catch. The door was narrow and low, Eoifa needed to dip her head to enter. The room it revealed was little more than a cupboard although, once she
had crossed the threshold, there was enough height to stand. There were deep shelves all along the right hand side that were full of possessions. Piles of folded clothes, pairs of shoes lined up three-deep on the bottom shelf and, at the far end, a stack of what looked liked hard-backed jotters. The far wall also had a tiny stained glass pane, the pattern simpler than its grand companion by the staircase. The coloured glass gave the cupboard a warm, welcoming glow. The floor space was narrow, only just enough to get past the shelves, but it broadened by the window where two cushions that looked like they came from an old sofa were lying. The room felt like a child’s cosy den. It reminded Eoifa of a linen cupboard in her mum’s house. She used to hide there, secure in the smell of fresh laundry but, if her mum caught her, she got a row for crumpling the sheets and making them dirty with her outdoor clothes.

Eoifa was tempted to sit on the cushions. She couldn’t tell from the doorway whether it would be possible to see through the glass pane or which aspect of the grounds it might offer. It was difficult to get her bearings because of the curve in the stairs and the unusual architecture. Did the window look to the front or the side? Although she knew she was in the house alone, she looked back out of the doorway and down the stairs. She listened for the sounds of the house before ducking inside. It had a faintly musty smell but otherwise reminded her of Mrs McQuarry’s apartment. Presumably these clothes were hers. But why keep them here rather than her own apartment?

Eoifa bumped down onto the pile of cushions, they were lower than she had anticipated. As she hit the first cushion with her bottom, a cloud of dust and tiny moths lifted around her. She jumped up, nearly kicking over the pile of jotters. The moths flew around the cupboard, searching for safer resting places. Eoifa shivered and patted the dust off the back of her trousers. She had a strong desire to run back down the stairs and change her clothes. She imagined the moths landing on her. Shivered again, shaking her hair to discourage any from settling there.

She lifted a jotter from the top of the pile. It reminded her of the old science lab books she had to fill in at school. She blew on the cover to dislodge any remaining dust. Inside there were intricately drawn maps that had been painstakingly coloured with pencils and annotated with copperplate handwriting. The first page bore the inscription, ‘Galicia, province of Ourense’. Had these been Mrs McQuarry’s? Eoifa flicked through the pages, not easy because some
were heavy as the maps and drawings had been glued in. There were beautiful
drawings of elaborate buildings that looked like churches or monasteries. There
were sketches of classrooms with young children, they didn’t look much beyond
nursery age, sitting in rows. Perhaps Mrs McQuarry had taught in Spain. Eoifa was
tempted to take the jotter downstairs to read it in more comfortable
surroundings but it felt wrong to remove the book from the secret space.

Eoifa thought of her own primary school, how different it looked from
these drawings. For the first three years her classroom had been in one of the
wooden huts constructed in the large school playground. At break she played
alone, pretending to be a white horse galloping in the fields. Sometimes other
girls wanted to play but they didn’t have her passion for it. They would pretend
to ride around on horses and soon got bored. Eoifa wanted to become the horse,
whinnying into the wind, she flicked her hair and imagined it was a mane.

One morning Miss Aspin told the class some people believed humans were
created from apes. But Miss Aspin didn’t believe that. She was in the Christian
Union. Eoifa remembered she played the guitar. It had a ‘Jesus Loves Me’ sticker
on it with a cartoon image of a big smiley face. Eoifa always thought about the
gluey mess it would make if it got peeled off.

Miss Aspin kept biscuits for the tuck shop in the classroom cupboard. If you
were allowed to go in for a new jotter or the scissors and glue, you could see
them in the corner on the bottom shelf. Mint Yo-yos were Eoifa’s favourite,
wrapped in green foil. At home her mum saved silver paper for charity; she had
a massive ball of it in the kitchen, wrinkled and multi-coloured.

The Yo-yos were bigger than the palm of Eoifa’s hand but she managed to
fit one into each pocket of her cardigan when she went into the cupboard to get
a new jotter.

Miss Aspin had a talk with her at her desk. She spoke quietly but everyone
knew. She held both of Eoifa’s hands and bent close to her face. ‘Tell me the
truth and there won’t be any trouble.’

‘Knock-knock anyone home?’

Eoifa jumped, Christ! It was Alan! She moved very slowly to poke her head
out of the little door and stopped there, listening intently. She could see a
couple of the tiny moths on the wall opposite the cupboard door. She would sort
them out later.
‘Hello-o.’

His voice sounded like he might actually be in the kitchen, not outside the door. Would he really come right into her house without waiting for an invitation? Cheeky git! They had exchanged a few texts but hadn’t spoken since the eventful night.

Eoifa thought about hiding but didn’t fancy getting stuck in the secret cupboard until he left. Her breathing was shallow. There was a knock on something that sounded much closer than the kitchen. Surely he wasn’t walking through the corridor?

Eoifa shot down the stairs, navigating the narrow path between the books. ‘Yes, coming,’ She tried to sound busy, as if she might only just have heard him, although she wasn’t sure whether her voice would carry as effectively as his seemed to. She rushed along the corridor into the kitchen. She felt shivery, possibly after being in the confined space of the secret room but perhaps it was something else. She was excited to see him, and nervous. He was still outside but had opened the door. A bit of a liberty, she might have left it unlocked but there was no way she had left it open.

‘Hi!’ Alan was standing awkwardly with one foot over the threshold, having to bend a little because of the height of the door jam. It made him look like he was peering into a doll’s house. ‘I saw your car so I thought you must be in.’

‘I don’t have a car.’

‘Oh. Then I saw a car and hoped you’d be in.’ He gave a tentative smile.

‘I’m kind of in the middle of things here.’ Eoifa stood near the door but not right beside it, neither inviting him in nor blocking his entry. He looked good but she didn’t want him to make assumptions.

‘Hmm. I brought you this.’ He produced a flowering cactus from behind his back.

‘A cactus.’ Eoifa’s tone was flat but, in spite of herself, began to smile. It was a wonder he hadn’t jagged himself holding it like that.

‘Yes, a cactus, flowering. You can get bunches of flowers any day but they’re overrated and don’t last. It’s a house-warming present.’

‘Another one?’

‘This one might last longer than the bubbles.’ He held the plant towards her and, as she was about to take it, he stepped into the kitchen. ‘Allow me.’
He set it on the worktop. ‘If I pricked you with it, you might fall asleep for a hundred years and stop returning ma calls altogether.’

‘You haven’t made any calls.’

‘A technicality.’

‘I returned your texts.’

‘Not the same.’

Now Eoifa was nearer the door than Alan. ‘Um, thanks...for the plant.’ He nodded in acknowledgement, looking around the kitchen.

‘So...?’ Eoifa wasn’t going to make this easy. She hadn’t decided if she wanted him to stay.

‘I had a wee bet with masel that you’d make me a cup of coffee before flinging me out.’

‘One cup, ok.’ She pushed the external door shut and went to fill the kettle.

‘Excellent! Milk, no sugar, I’m sweet enough.’

‘I remember...’

He smiled.

‘...about the milk,’ she added quickly. ‘Actually why don’t you make it yourself? I was in the middle of putting something away.’

‘Uh, alright. D’you want a cup?’

‘Em, I don’t really mind...och go on then.’

Their paths crossed as he approached the kettle and she moved towards the corridor.

‘I don’t really mind about the coffee either.’ He reached for her arm as she passed and pulled her towards him. She resisted momentarily and then relaxed into a hug. His body felt substantial next to her. She looked up at his face and he lent down to kiss her, hugging her tight. ‘I missed you.’ He said as their lips parted.

‘You hardly know me.’

‘I missed gettin to know you.’ He stroked her back. ‘Oh! I meant to ask, do you have my sweatshirt? I left it here - over there, mibbe, by the table.’

He moved over to look, which was fortunate because Eoifa felt sure she was blushing. ‘I haven’t seen it. Did you not take it with you?’

‘No, I definitely wisnae wearing it. I was freezing!’
‘Yeah, sorry about that.’ Eoifa grimaced at the memory of sending him out in the middle of the night.

‘Ach it’s alright. I’ll no be the first or last to make the walk of shame without a jumper.’

Eoifa tried not to think about how she had dispatched the sweatshirt. The secret to appearing truthful was to really believe in the lie yourself. She tried to remember what Mrs McQuarry had said about how often the various bins were collected but, even if she could sneak outside and have a look, it would surely have been emptied by now.

She made a show of looking around the sofa.

‘I’m pretty sure I put it over the back of one of the chairs. But maybe no.’ He tilted his head as though checking below the kitchen table without moving any closer to it.

‘I definitely haven’t seen it there. What colour was...is it?’ she hoped her expression wasn’t giving her away.

‘Grey, grey flecked. Ach I wouldnae bother but it was one ma wee mammie gave me at Christmas.’

‘Oh that’s a shame to lose it.’ Eoifa felt bad. She would definitely have a look in the bin. Or maybe buy him a new one.

‘Yeah, well. As ma mammie would say it’s no lost, it’s somewhere.’

Eoifa smiled but it felt forced and contorted on her face. ‘Could you make the coffee til I check on something?’ She walked towards the corridor.

‘You ok?’

‘Yeah, I just need to...I was in the middle of something when you came round. I’ll be back in a minute.’ She walked smartly out of the kitchen, through the corridor and into the hall. She looked up the stairs and noticed the door to the cupboard was slightly open so she ran up and clicked it shut. Those damn papery moths would be all through the house! She unlocked the inner door and started turning the mortise lock in the main front door. There was really very little chance that the bin hadn’t been emptied in...she tried to count...had it been five weeks?

She walked across the gravel. There was no way of getting to the bins without passing the kitchen windows. She would brazen it out. She passed, keeping as far away from the window as possible, looked towards the kitchen and gave a wave as casually as she could. Round the far side of the shed, she
was able to open the bin lid without being seen from the house. Until she lifted the lid, she hadn’t factored in all the additional rubbish that had been added since she deposited the ill-fated sweatshirt. She shut the lid and walked back to the main front door.

Alan was waiting at the dining table with the two steaming mugs of coffee. He looked good sitting there and she felt a flood of pleasure at the realisation that he’d come back despite how she had behaved.

‘You ok?’

‘Yeah, thanks. I’m fine. Just wanted to check on something.’ She walked right round to where he was sitting.

‘I made you a cup, wasn’t sure if you wanted any…’

She ran her hands over his shoulders and leant to kiss his cheek.

‘…coffee. Don’t think I’ll bother with mine now either.’ He stood up, squeezing her in both arms, before relaxing his grip to run one hand up and down her back. They kissed and he moved his hand further and further down her back until he ran it lightly over her backside.

‘Hey!’ Eoifa laughed, kissing him, pressing herself against him. This wasn’t such a bad way to spend the weekend.

He guided her towards the end of the worktop and turned her body to face it, so she lent with her back against him. It was awkward kissing him with her neck twisted round but she realised what he was trying to do when he slipped his hand inside her pants and pushed a finger right inside her. She was surprised at this sudden escalation, but it felt really good. She squirmed against him and he breathed heavily into her ear. She closed her eyes, enjoying his touch. He unbuttoned her trousers, slipping them down her thighs.

‘Oh there’s Mrs McQuarry.’ Alan announced brightly.

‘Fuck!’ Eoifa grabbed her trousers.

‘Joking, just joking.’

‘You bastard!’ Eoifa turned round to hit his chest ineffectually and they started kissing again.

‘Let’s move somewhere more private.’

‘Good idea.’

‘I like what you’ve done with the place.’ He let her walk in front of him as they weaved through the kitchen. The room was pristine. She hadn’t been
cooking much this week. ‘Certainly a great view from here.’ He reached out to stroke her bum.

‘You really are a cheeky...’ He stopped her saying more by turning her around for a kiss.

‘I brought you another present...’
Eoifa hoped he wasn’t referring to his erection.

‘Look!’ he pulled a slim packet of condoms from the back pocket of his jeans.

She laughed. There was something about him. Difficult to resist. He lifted her and carried her through the corridor. She wrapped her legs and arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder.

‘You’re lighter than those boxes.’
‘Lighter than a box full of books. That’s quite a compliment, thanks!’

He used her back to gently push open the bedroom door and set her on the bed, leaning over her. ‘Sexier than the Kama Sutra...’

‘Isn’t that a curry house?’
‘Shhh,’ he brushed his lips against her, ‘...and just as complex.’

Alan was soundly asleep beside her, one arm draped across her waist. She moved so there was a little gap between their bodies. Not yet ready to get out of bed, she let her mind wander as she lay there. She thought about all the times she had woken in bed next to someone. It wasn’t so many, not really. Her University days coincided with the AIDS public service broadcasts reaching epidemic proportions, heralding the end of free love before it had begun for her generation. Using condoms, or talk of using them, would become cool eventually but, for many ‘good’ boys and girls in those days, safe sex involved not having much.

One girl Eoifa only knew by repute was always short of money, even more than the rest of them. It was before most students had term-time jobs. One night, the girl came back to the bar in Pollock Halls boasting that some bloke she’d picked up had bought her a week’s supply of fags for the ‘small price’ of giving him a blow job. ‘But I’m not a prostitute.’ She kept saying over and over in the way of someone who is traumatised and drunk. Eoifa never knew her name and didn’t remember seeing her again, although she was spoken about for most of that term.
Alan stirred but remained unconscious. Eoifa moved so his arm, which
remained stretched across her, wasn’t quite so heavy and let one leg rest
outside the duvet to keep cool.

Euan wasn’t the first boy Eoifa had slept with, of course, but he was the
only one she had ever got back together with. She didn’t generally go in for
second chances.

She was in the British Airways Silver Lounge at Heathrow. Terminal 5, ‘the
home of BA’ hadn’t been built then. It was probably Terminal 1 because she was
heading home but it might have been one of the others because she had flown in
from Paris or was it Madrid? You think you’ll never forget, she chuckled.

She was choosing which wine to have with her lacklustre BA-
branded
snack - the food has definitely improved in the lounges - when a male voice from
over her shoulder said, ‘So you did have a nice life, didn’t you?’ She turned
around to see Euan. Older, more handsome but still the same cocky smile, one
eyebrow raised. She remembered wondering how long it had taken him staring in
front of a mirror to perfect the one-raised-eyebrow look.

‘Oh yes, this is me, living the dream.’ She indicated the array of booze
available in front her.

He wasn’t such a seasoned traveller as she was then. His jet setting came
later.

They drank their way through the BA bar, lining up a collection of swizzle
sticks and paper coasters, which the lounge staff didn’t seem to clear whereas
they assiduously removed the glasses. He was going to Edinburgh - flying home,
of course, while she was heading for Manchester and the flat she shared with
Mary and two other girls.

‘Isn’t there a crazy music scene in Madchestah?’ Euan never could resist a
chance to try out an accent whether he’d perfected it first or not.

‘Why don’t you come down and see for yourself?’

‘I might. I can actually see myself doing that.’ He’d stroked her hand as
he set down his whisky glass.

Neither of them caught their flights that evening. They transferred their
tickets to the following day, and slipped out of the terminal to an airport Hilton,
which Euan, ever the romantic, emphasised he could claim back, perhaps trying
to impress with the size of his expense account.
It was possible to make these impulsive travel changes in the ‘90s before the terrorists made airline travel such a drag with rules that changed weekly and involved dressing and undressing at ‘security’ more frequently than a supermodel on a Milan catwalk. It would soon be quicker to get the train from London to Glasgow if you counted all the hanging about you had to do at the airport. Those useless little parcels of time during which you had to put liquids and laptops into separate trays. Even the word ‘terminal’ carried connotations of the levels of boredom every traveller was forced to endure.

They were so dull these airport security guards, no sense of humour. It was all, ‘Does that jacket come off?’ Eoifa longed to reply, ‘Only if you buy me a drink first.’ But feared this would result in spending an extra hour being patted down and having the contents of her baggage subjected to a fingertip search.

Eoifa checked her watch. It was nearly six o’clock. Shit! She was having dinner at Stella’s tonight. She didn’t know exactly what time. She would need to text her. What if she said seven? Eoifa would need to shower first and pick up some wine.

‘Alan, hey Alan,’ she nudged him with the palm of her hand on his shoulder. He groaned but remained asleep.

She got up and made them both fresh coffee. He was still lying in bed when she came back with the mugs.

‘Captain Sleepy.’ She shook him. ‘Alan!’ she spoke in a loud voice, ‘You’re going to have to go.’

‘Oh Jesus no again.’ He rolled onto his back and scrubbed at his hair with both hands.

‘Sorry, I’ve got to get to my friend’s for dinner.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Just after six. That coffee’s for you, I’m off for a shower.’ She tightened her dressing gown, mug of coffee in one hand.

‘Can I come in with you?’

‘No way!’

‘Oh go on.’ He caught her free arm and pulled her towards the bed.

‘Watch my coffee!’

‘I’d rather watch you.’ He took the mug from her hand, set it on the bedside table and pulled her onto the bed.

‘Oh c’mon, Alan, I’ve got to get ready.’
‘When have you to be there?’
‘I just texted her and said about half seven.’

He pushed his hands inside her dressing gown, holding her against him.
‘I’ll give you a lift.’

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Stella lived in one of the traditional tenement flats. Eoifa pressed the buzzer and the door released without anyone replying. She hoped she wasn’t too late. The close had ornate tiling, Eoifa would have paused to admire it but she focussed on climbing the steps to the first floor.

‘Come in, come in! Good to see you.’ I’ll give you a hug in a minute when I get this closed. Stella needed both hands to operate the locks on the back of the door and a security chain swung around as well. ‘Just one of the hazards of living on the so-called preferred first floor - it’s mainly preferred by burglars.’
‘Oh no, that’s rotten.’
‘Ach, it’s not too bad, touch wood,’ Stella tapped the door with her spare fingers as the locks clicked, ‘it’s been a few years since I’ve had any bother.’

The flat was warm and spacious simultaneously.
‘You should feel it in the winter. It’s Baltic!’ Stella waved away Eoifa’s compliments. ‘Now then, settle yourself in. Fait comme chez toi, as you linguaphones might say. Feel free to have a nosy about. The room with the sign on the door is Anna’s - it’s not private but it is a permanent tip so probably best avoided on a first visit.’

Stella invited Eoifa to sit with a glass of wine at the table in the kitchen so they could chat while she finished cooking.
‘I should have warned you, I’m a cook to survive kind of chef. If you can’t eat it, I honestly won’t be offended.’
‘It smells lovely and I’m no great shakes in the kitchen myself.’
‘I thought you were talking about some very elaborate dinners you made in London.’

‘Oh that was when I’d a hoard of hungry housemates to share meals. Since I’ve been here, I’ve fallen out of the habit of cooking. It’s not the same cooking for one.’ Eoifa took a sip of wine, ‘God! That makes me sound like a granny!’
The room didn’t have the dimensions of the kitchen at Mrs McQuarry’s house, few places did, but it was still a good-sized dining kitchen. It had a large window overlooking the communal gardens. It was beginning to get dark but Eoifa could see Anna and another young girl playing on scooters.

‘You’ve a great view from here.’
‘Yeah, some of the flats have the opposite arrangement with the sink by the window but I prefer sitting there. It’s our little joke, Anna and me. If we’re eating at home I’ll say ‘will we have a table for two by the window?’
‘Aw that’s sweet. Sounds like you get on really well.’
‘You could say. We have our moments but that’s pretty normal.’ Stella lifted some plates out of a cupboard. ‘Could you do me a favour and put these out on the table?’
‘Sure, d’you want me to set the table?’
‘Brilliant, thanks. Cutlery drawer is that one.’ Stella pointed to a spot near the cooker. ‘This’ll be ready in a sec, I’ll just summon the girls. Actually, it’s spag bol do you want to put out spoons as well?’ She walked over to the window, swapping places with Eoifa who had stood to get the cutlery.
‘Ooh, just like the Red Arrows.’ Eoifa joked as they passed each other.
Stella knocked on the window. As Eoifa came back to the table with the knives and forks she could see Anna looking up. The other girl was circling the garden on her scooter.
‘Your tea is ready.’ Stella mouthed, speaking quietly in time with the hand gestures.
Anna mimed the international signal for, ‘Huh?’
‘Jeez that girl. What does she think I’m trying to tell her?! Your TEA is ready!’ Stella raised her voice, made the T symbol with her hands and beckoned Anna to come quickly.
Anna confirmed the message had been received and understood by raising both thumbs. She then ran after her friend and both girls disappeared from Eoifa’s view as they approached the building.

Stella went out to the hall to unlock the door for the girls and Eoifa looked around the kitchen. It was tastefully decorated with lots of signs of a busy life on the walls: drawings, certificates and a big family planner covered in
entries written in different coloured pens and stickers with what looked like letters from the school and other organisations tacked to the bottom.

‘Now then, here’s Anna and this is our friend, Claire.’ Stella introduced the girls on arrival. Eoifa had met Anna once in addition to the first time at the café. They never discussed the connection and she wasn’t certain whether Stella remembered her from that day or only from the time outside the station.

‘That’s a funny name!’ Claire said as Stella introduced Eoifa.

‘Claire!’ Anna said in a stage whisper, nudging her friend.

‘It’s true, it is a funny name.’ Eoifa could have cheerfully slapped the legs from the cheeky little tyke but she was determined to make a good impression on Stella so she arranged in her face into the most benevolent expression she could muster. ‘My mum wasn’t as nice as yours giving me a good clear name like Claire.’

‘I don’t really like my name.’

‘Oh I do!’ Anna bounced a little for emphasis as she spoke, ‘but not quite as much as I like my name...sorry Claire.’ She stopped bouncing and switched to swinging from side to side.

‘What would you rather be called, Claire?’ Stella spoke over her shoulder as she checked the garlic bread in the oven.

‘Umm I don’t know.’

‘We’ll stick with Claire meantime then. Ok?’ Stella looked round but her glasses had partly steamed up from the oven. The girls giggled and Stella laughed too, shoving her glasses up to rest in her hair. ‘Now, let’s get hands washed for food. Claire? You know where... Anna! Pick me a winner would you?!’

Anna retracted her finger from her nose, laughing. ‘Sorry, I’ve got a bogey stuck.’

‘Delightful. Claire, I was about to say you know where the bathroom is, so you go on through and start washing your hands, Anna will be through in a minute.’ Stella moved close to Anna and spoke quietly. ‘Ultimately, these things are your choice but it’s my duty to point out the usual social parameters. Not to mention the germs.’

‘Yup, I know. You’re my loco parentis, geddit?!’ Anna reached up to hug Stella. ‘My crazy parent, kind of like a parent but crazier.’ She gave a loud giggly laugh and skipped out to join her friend.
'Give those bogey fingers a good wash!' Stella shouted and, turning back to Eoifa, ‘She’s dead right about the crazy part. This place is a mad house!’ and she raised her arms in emphasis, before turning back to the cooker.

Eoifa was not sorry when Stella let the girls finish their dinner in front of the television in the other room so the two adults could talk. Eoifa enjoyed the cheerful atmosphere of Stella’s home but she found it difficult to think above the noise of the girls’ constant chatter. She could sense Claire didn’t like her - and it was a case of ‘right back atcha’ as far as Eoifa was concerned - but Anna seemed like a very clever, intuitive little girl. Stella looked proud when Eoifa mentioned that.

‘Oh she’s super smart that one. I just need to keep her away from drugs and boys, not necessarily in that order, and she’ll be First Minister one day.’

‘You’re so good with her. Did you ever think of having children of your own?’

Stella paused before answering, giving a polite smile. ‘Anna is my own child. Well, she’s her own person but she’s my daughter. Not wholly biologically but...’ This was clearly a response Stella had been compelled to deliver before.

‘Sorry,’ Eoifa covered her own mouth in an exaggerated way for what she hoped might be comic effect or at least conciliatory, ‘sorry, I’m an idiot. What I meant to say was you’re a fabulous parent and I wondered, not that it’s any of my business,’ Eoifa lifted her wine glass, ‘if you’d ever considered having any more super smart children.’ She hoped she hadn’t overdone it with the super smart bit but Stella was smiling.

‘Never met the right guy.’

‘Ha! I’ll drink to that!’ Eoifa clinked Stella’s glass.

‘So...how about you? I’ve burdened you with my personal history, what’s your story?’

Eoifa picked up the crust of her garlic bread and began to chew as though she couldn’t possibly respond until it was masticated fully.

‘Would you like more wine or some coffee?’ Stella rose to fill the kettle, ‘I’m going to make some coffee but there’s loads more wine so help yourself.’ She set the bottle beside Eoifa’s glass.

‘Oh my story’s pretty dull.’
‘Didn’t you say you do a lot of travelling? That doesn’t sound dull.’ Stella wandered out of the kitchen, ‘Just checking on the girls, back in a minute.’

Eoifa wasn’t sure why she hadn’t simply reeled off the usual potted history, her time in Japan and all the dodgy flats she’d lived in in London. Perhaps because Stella had been so open, she deserved more in return. But it wasn’t lying to leave things out. That was editing.

She could hear Stella talking to the girls in the other room. She checked her phone. Couple of texts from Alan. The second one offering to pick her up when she was ready to go home. Hmm was that over-keen? She might leave it a day or two before replying. No word from Mary, not that she was expecting to hear from her. Even though Eoifa didn’t always respond, she liked to see that little flag waving from beyond the right here, right now. A reminder there were other possibilities.

Stella came back in wearing a full-length leather coat, ‘I’m going to walk Claire home – she’s just a couple of blocks up that way.’ She pointed towards the hall. ‘You’re welcome to stay here or join me if you’d like a little fresh air. Anna’s coming.’

‘Oh, I’ll come with you, actually I might head off myself after that.’

‘You don’t need to! I’ll be straight back and I fully intend to get torn in to the rest of that wine,’ she raised her voice and turned her head to the door, ‘once Claire’s gone home! Just kidding sweetheart, can you find your jacket?’ She turned back to Eoifa. ‘I think she’s in the loo.’

Eoifa smiled, ‘That’s a gorgeous coat.’

‘Thanks, it was my sister’s.’ She stretched her hands into the pockets and looked down at it. ‘Funny, I still think of it as hers even though I’ve worn it for longer than she did.’ She glanced into the hall, then moved closer to Eoifa. ‘This is kind of daft but, whenever I put it on, I feel as though I’m becoming Hannah, my sister.’

Eoifa wasn’t sure how to respond so she tried to look sympathetic. Stella perched on the edge of the seat opposite Eoifa.

‘I’ve got quite a lot of her clothes, actually. She had great taste. There’s a trick sheep farmers use for getting a ewe to foster an orphaned lamb. If the mother has already lost a lamb of her own, the dead lamb’s skin is placed over the orphan so the ewe recognises the scent and accepts the new lamb.’

Eoifa wasn’t clear where this was going.
‘When I wear Hannah’s clothes, I sometimes think I’m wrapping myself in maternal form so Anna won’t reject me.’ Stella poured a small amount of wine into her empty glass and drank it in one mouthful. ‘Sorry that’s a bit heavy.’

‘No, well...it’s a powerful image.’ Eoifa hoped the girls wouldn’t take long.

Stella pulled a linen handkerchief from the pocket of the coat. ‘This was Hannah’s. I found it in the pocket of the coat when I first went to clear her things. Couldn’t believe it! Paper tissues, maybe, a child’s sock, yes. But a linen handkerchief? I didnae even know she owned one!’

‘Nice to have it though, I imagine.’ Eoifa wasn’t sure how to respond. Stella didn’t seem tired and emotional as the euphemism described. Perhaps she was always this open.

‘Yes, nice to have, yes it is.’ She nodded, running the lace edge of the handkerchief between her fingertips. She looked relaxed and contented.

Stella’s phone buzzed and she stood up so she could pull it out of her trouser pocket. ‘Ah, Claire’s mum. Just a moment til I text her back.’ She walked out of the kitchen, head bent over her phone. ‘Girls! Come on now! Let’s rock n roll. That’s your mum texting, Claire we’ll both be in trouble if I don’t get you home in the next ten minutes.’

Stella persuaded Eoifa to come back to the flat with Anna and her although, in truth, Eoifa didn’t need a lot of persuasion because, once outside, she didn’t fancy walking home in the dark by herself. When he dropped her off, Alan had instructed her not to walk home alone, but she’d laughed him off. She was used to living in London. She’d walked around most of the cities of Europe. Standing on the street in the darkness of Pollokshields she realised there was no point taking unnecessary risks.

Back at her flat, Stella showed Eoifa right into the living room and excused herself to get Anna organised for bed. ‘She’ll take herself off but I need to get her going in the right direction or she’d chat with us here all night.’

‘No problem, I’ll be fine with these.’ Eoifa motioned to her wine glass and the bowl of crisps Stella had hastily set on the coffee table.

If Eoifa hadn’t seen Mrs McQuarry’s house first, she would have been impressed by the dimensions of Stella’s living room. There were two large sofas
at right angles to each other, one facing what looked like an original wooden fireplace. A flat screen television made up the fourth side of the square and a low coffee table sat in the space in the centre. An upright piano was pushed against one wall and a tall bookshelf was against another. In the bay window, two carver chairs were artfully arranged around a small table. A large bookcase had a look of permanent homely clutter, overflowing with books, CDs, DVDs and games. Otherwise the room was tidy.

Eoifa wondered how she could recreate this ‘lived in’ feel back in her enormous sitting room at Mrs McQuarry’s. She definitely had enough books to create clutter of her own but it was the sense of using the space, bringing it to life. That was tough. She didn’t miss having housemates but it was hard to fill such a large house alone. Hearing the odd bump and thump from Mrs McQuarry’s apartment was welcome insulation against the void. The silence that gathered and threatened to suffocate if you didn’t cheat it with music, or a visitor.

She heard Anna laughing somewhere in the flat and then Stella’s calm voice. It was comforting to spend time in someone’s home, to observe their rituals and rhythms. One of them, possibly Anna, was singing softly, short snippets from familiar pop tracks accompanied by more laughing. Eoifa didn’t remember singing to her mum at bedtime. Going to bed was a utilitarian affair, something to get through as quickly as possible. She remembered the draughty old house and being terrified of moving from her bed in case ghosts and goblins attacked her.

How was she going to get back to the empty house tonight? It wasn’t far but she would need a taxi. Even when they walked Claire home, the streets had an edge to them. It was mostly residential around here with a few shops that closed earlier in the day. Not busy enough to have the company of others walking home and not quiet enough to be sure she would be undisturbed. Was she getting afraid in her old age? She had a mouthful of wine and snuck a look at her phone. There was always the option of a lift. Alan had offered, and he had sent another text,

– Howz your night going, gorgeous? X

That made three texts since he’d dropped her off. Did that count as keen or obsessive? Euan had never been a texter. Of course, it was a different era when they got together, even the second time. She had to phone him to tell him she was pregnant. Standing in the tatty hallway of her shared flat in Manchester,
she dialled his home in Edinburgh. His mother answered, she had gone round ‘to clean’. Nosy bitch! Eoifa almost didn’t tell him. For being a feckless mummy’s boy he could wait another day to receive the news.

‘I’m expecting.’ Why the euphemism? Perhaps it was the strained brief chat with his mother that had made her coy.

‘Expecting what?’

Had he been deliberately obtuse? She should have ended it with him right then. Should have hung up and taken herself off to the clinic. Could’ve been out dancing by the weekend. Might have met someone else. She took a large swig of the wine, nearly pouring it over her cheek. Might have? She would definitely have met someone else. And that was the truth. The truth, what counted as the truth? ‘Here’s the thing’ isn’t that what people said these days, presaging a meaningful announcement.

And what was The Thing? Eoifa had wanted to know how it would feel to be pregnant. Was that really The Thing? Even as she lifted the telephone, she was wondering how it would feel to be someone on the phone telling her boyfriend that last lustful weekend he’d spent Down South in the North of England had been earth moving in many senses of the phrase. ‘Down South in the North...’ being one of their few mutual jokes back when mutual anything was part of their Thing. Of all the possible reactions, she had not anticipated his saying,

‘I suppose we better get married before you start to show then.’

Stella came in carrying a tray with the wine bottle, her own glass and a selection of snacks.

‘Oh, I should have helped!’ Eoifa jumped up attempting to be useful by taking the bottle off the tray, the tallest, least steady item.

‘Sorry to leave you so long. I’ve got a little livewire there who’s determined to stay awake.’

‘I heard that!’ Anna’s voice carried through the open door.

Stella put on some low music and they resumed their conversation. There were so many questions Eoifa wanted to ask. Why Anna had come to live with her? Where was her dad? But the break meant they had to start with a neutral topic. Perhaps following on from the bedtime chat she’d had with Anna, Stella
mentioned the films she’d been to see. Stella’s cinema-going was restricted to films Anna could watch with her – those rated U, PG or 12A. Avatar was the only film Eoifa and Stella had both seen in the cinema. Eoifa usually refused to watch cartoons but she’d made an exception for that one. Everyone was talking about it in the London office and she enjoyed the 3D despite herself.

She had steadfastly refused to watch any of the Harry Potter films, even though she had heard the special effects were great. Stella and Anna had evidently worked their way through them all.

‘We cheated and didn’t read the last two books. For the earlier ones we read the books first before seeing the movies. We did listen to the last one as an audio book. I couldn’t compete with Stephen Fry doing all the voices. Took us weeks – something crazy like 27 CDs, can you believe?! I borrowed the set from Pollokshields library and we sat here each night listening while we ate our dinner. It took us weeks! Had to keep renewing them at the library.’

Eoifa couldn’t imagine reading any of them. It wasn’t a phenomenon she needed to concern herself with. She wanted to move the conversation back onto more interesting topics. Before they walked Claire home, Stella had seemed so keen to talk about her sister.

The door pushed open slowly and Anna, wrapped in a fluffy white dressing gown appeared, ‘I liked the film Coraline, but it was a little scary.’

‘It was a little, I guess.’ Stella answered without missing a beat. ‘Am I going to need to get a little scary to get you into your bed tonight?’ Her tone remained calm and friendly.

Anna looked younger than her ten years now she was all ready for bed. Eoifa could see she was cute, but felt frustrated that the possibility of a good chat was being interrupted.

Anna stood beside the arm of the sofa nearest Stella. ‘They’re here again.’ Her tone was matter-of-fact.

‘Did you explain you need to sleep now and don’t have time for them tonight?’

Anna nodded. ‘I don’t think they want a long chat but they’d like to stay in my room.’

‘Anna has some very friendly ghosts who come to visit.’ Stella explained.

Eoifa attempted to arrange her face into a quietly amused expression but decided it would be better to disguise her unease by taking a sip of wine.
‘They say they’ll be very quiet but they’d like to read some of my books.’
‘Could you ask them to come back tomorrow? It’ll be lighter then and much easier for reading.’
‘Oh they don’t need a light.’

Eoifa had another look at her phone but there were no new messages.
‘Do you mind them reading while you sleep or would you like me to come through and ask them to leave, just for now?’ Stella stroked Anna’s hair away from her face.

Anna’s expression suggested she was thinking very carefully about the options. She slid onto the sofa beside Stella. ‘Well, I wouldn’t mind them reading for a little while but I don’t like it when they mess up my books. They leave them lying out sometimes and I’m worried you might think I’d done it.’

‘Oh when I was your age, I didn’t like it when other people messed up my things and I got left to tidy them.’ Eoifa felt compelled to join in.

Anna looked round at Eoifa while she rested her head against Stella’s arm. ‘Stella?’ She looked back at her hands where she was rolling the belt for her dressing gown around her fingers.

‘Yes, Anna-pie?’
‘What’s it like to die?’

Eoifa wondered if she should stay for this or slip out to the bathroom. As a halfway measure, she pretended to be reading something on her phone. This was an unusual way for a ten year old to spin out bedtime.

‘That’s the thing. No one knows,’ Stella put her arm around the little girl, ‘because no one’s come back to tell us.’

‘Not even good ghosts?’
‘Not even them. They like to keep it secret, don’t they?’

‘One day will we know?’

‘Well, we all die in the end so I guess we’ll know then, but I think it’s probably just like going to sleep. When you think back on it, you can’t really remember the moment it happens and you drift off into a big comfy sleep.’

Stella was smiling, rhythmically stroking the little girl’s head.

Eoifa hardly dared move, even to reach for her wine glass in case she interrupted what seemed like a well-practiced flow.

‘I hope you don’t get bad nightmares when you die.’
‘Oh no, I’m sure you don’t.’
‘I think maybe I will and I’ll come back and get you!’ Anna twisted round suddenly and grabbed Stella’s neck, giggling fiendishly.

Eoifa jumped although she was also relieved at the tension breaking.

‘No! Not an attack of the killer Annas – aaargh!’ Stella played her part, rolling around on the sofa while Anna made jerky zombie movements until she giggled so much she got hiccups.

‘I need to pee!’ Anna made a dash for the bathroom.

‘Good move, real zombies never wet their pants.’ Stella rose to follow the young girl, turning back to Eoifa, ‘I am sorry about this, I’ll be right back.’

Alone again in the sitting room, Eoifa considered using this as her excuse to leave, except Stella’s wine glass was still nearly full. It felt a little too much like abandoning her. She stood to have a closer look at the books and CDs on the bulging bookcase.

A real mix of children’s and adult’s fiction, and a few reference books with board games and music all stuffed wherever they would fit by the look. Eoifa knew she should hate the disorganisation but there was something satisfying about the higgledy-piggledy bookcase. It affirmed a full life, one in which books were for reading. She eased an Encyclopaedia of Animals out of the bottom shelf, its dust-jacket was torn and a coffee mug ring proudly adorned the contents page. Eoifa had the same book when she was young. Hers had been pristine when she stacked it with the rest of her things as she cleared her parents’ house. She could have sold most of her childhood books and toys, they were in such good condition.

This copy had a panel on the inside cover indicating it had been presented to Stella Robertson by the RSPCA for a competition but the date and nature of the competition were both obscured by a mix of ripping and overwriting in biro. Eoifa seemed to recall her copy had been a gift from a friend of her parents but she couldn’t remember the occasion. She wondered where it had ended up after she’d dropped all the boxes at the local Thrift Shop. Funny, she hadn’t thought about that book for years and here was another copy from the same era.

It was after 11pm. She couldn’t ask Alan for a lift now, could she? She chuckled, how late could last orders for a lift be taken? He must have realised she was unlikely to go home much before midnight. She wrestled with the idea. If she asked him for a lift now, he would be bound to stay over. Is that what she
wanted? She thought about the morning, how she planned to finally clear the rest of the things from the hall. It was time to get shot of those old memories. She didn’t need new ones cluttering the place up. No, she would call a taxi. If they complained about the short distance, well, let them try walking home on their own at nearly midnight…Jesus, was Stella coming back?

Eoifa opened the door quietly and made her way across the hall to the bathroom. There was no sound coming from Anna’s room but the door was nearly closed. There were three switches on the panel outside the bathroom door. Eoifa flicked the first which turned the hall light off. She put the hall light back on and tried another. This time, it was the bathroom light. She went inside.

She hesitated before flushing the toilet, unsure about how much noise it would be acceptable to make if Anna was having trouble getting to sleep. She decided to flush anyway and pulled the chain to the overhead cistern which, as she suspected it might, squeaked and squealed as it delivered water through the down pipes. It was enough to waken all of the dead Anna had claimed were visiting her room earlier.

Her face in the mirror above the sink was pale and her lips were crimson from the red wine. Could she have been like Stella if things had worked out differently? Patiently helping a child develop into a well-formed adolescent. Or would she have become her own mother, critiquing every move?

She cupped her hands together and took a drink of water. It was so cold from the tap it made her knuckles ache.

‘I am so sorry about that.’ Stella whispered, closing Anna’s door behind her as Eoifa also emerged into the hall. She indicated Eoifa should follow her into the sitting room.

‘I totally understand.’ Eoifa tried to sound generous, hoping her irritation didn’t reveal itself in her tone. ‘I think I should probably get home though.’

‘I’m sorry. She doesn’t normally do that but she’s probably…I blame the bloody school and all their talk about the resurrection, Easter and all that.’

‘Seriously?’
‘Not really but she has been asking a lot about her mum recently and whether she might come back. Sorry, it’s a bit morbid.’ They hadn’t sat down again. Stella rested her hand on the back of one of the sofas.

‘What about her dad, does she see him much?’ Eoifa seized her chance to ask.

‘Oh god no, he’s a Bad Lad.’ Stella looked at the door, apparently checking she wouldn’t be overheard for the first time that night. ‘He and Hannah weren’t together when she died. He was, well, he was involved in her death, that’s probably the quick version. The rest is for another night.’ She moved over to the coffee table and started putting the bowls and glasses on to the tray.

‘Involved in her death…?’

‘Well, it’s complicated, as they say. He was into a lot of dodgy things. He was never accused of anything, but I know he was involved.’ Stella paused with the wine bottle in her hand. ‘Do you want to sit a minute? You might as well have a seat and I’ll phone you a cab. You never know how long they’ll take at this time of night.’ She poured Eoifa half a glass of wine, and added a splash to her own. ‘Might as well eh?’

‘Ok, thanks. But how do you mean involved? I thought your sister’s…I thought it was an accident?’ Eoifa sat down.

‘Well, it was and it wasn’t.’ Stella rubbed a hand through her hair. ‘There was an enquiry, you know, and it turned out the driver was someone Johno,’ Stella dropped her voice, ‘Anna’s dad,’ she continued, ‘owed a lot of money to. Nothing was ever proven, but it seems a bit of a coincidence. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get the cops to agree.’

‘What? Didn’t they catch the driver?’

‘Oh yes, they caught him. They were delighted at catching him. He was wanted for a couple of aggravated robberies as well. Charming bloke.’

‘Bloody hell!’

‘You didn’t think you were moving to the sleepy suburbs did you?’ Stella offered Eoifa the crisps.

‘So it wasn’t an accident? Your sister, I mean.’ Eoifa knew there was something odd about that story the first day she heard it.

‘No, well, yes and no. The driver was convicted for causing death by dangerous driving and there was a separate trial for the other stuff, the
shootings. Although the police were happy to have caught him, they were never prepared to go with murder, which is what we, my mum and I, thought he should have been charged with. I mean, Jesus, he knocked her down and drove away. Could’ve killed a two-year-old. But they didn’t think a murder charge would stick. Not enough proof of intent, they said.’

‘But you reckon Anna’s dad was involved?’ Eoifa took a handful of crisps.

‘Well, I always thought it was something to do with his debts - but the cops said there wasn’t enough to link Johno and the driver. Needless to say, Johno refused to offer any evidence, the fucking asshole. He denied any knowledge whatsoever. Said he didn’t know the driver. Said he barely knew Hannah - the bastard. Of course, he hadn’t seen her much in the previous two years. I don’t know if he actually saw her at all since Anna was born. He’d phone her up sometimes when he was pissed. But Hannah definitely said something to me about him owing a load of money. He’d been back in touch and she thought he was looking for money from her.’ Stella pulled at her hair in a move Eoifa was becoming familiar with.

‘So he maybe didn’t owe money to the driver then?’ Eoifa tried to keep her tone as light as possible.

‘It’s just too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?’ Stella took a mouthful of wine. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t make you listen to this. It’s all so long ago and the police weren’t even interested then. I just,’ Stella paused, ‘I just wish I could’ve convinced them to really look into the whole thing. I mean Johno just vanished. He fucking disappeared.’

‘He never got in touch with you?’

‘Never.’

They sat quietly for a moment. There was evidently much more to this but Eoifa recognised she needed to enquire gently. She thought of another angle. ‘How about your mum? How does she feel about it?’

‘Oh my poor old mum, she’s in a home. She has dementia. Most days she doesn’t recognise me. She never knows Anna, which is actually better. For a while she thought Anna was Hannah and it was all very difficult. Upsetting, you know, for all of us.’ Stella stood to change the music. ‘Christ Eoifa, I’m sorry. What a bloody lot of misery I’m facing you with!’

‘Don’t apologise, please, it’s fine. It’s such a big story, I mean, huge,’ she gesticulated, ‘it’s no wonder you want to talk about it. I’m happy to listen.’
‘Oh there’s always more with me.’ Stella laughed.

‘How did your sister meet Johno?’

‘Hmm, good question, I was never too sure to be honest. Ach I expect it was just the usual, must’ve met in a club somewhere, a night out. She first told me about him not long after she left college. He was a good-looking bloke, charming...she was never really with him. They had a few flings, one of which resulted in Anna.’ Stella came back to the sofa and refilled their glasses, ‘You better have another drink after all that. I don’t know what exactly he was involved in, the fringes of the drug scene, Hannah said, I didn’t want to know. I hoped Hannah never got involved and I don’t think she did. She never wanted him to move in. Didn’t want him anywhere near Anna. He wasn’t the kind of guy you’d want your parents to meet, put it that way.’

‘So, Anna doesn’t see him now?’

‘Anna never saw him. Hannah didn’t want him anywhere near, like I said. Didn’t even put his name on the birth certificate.’

‘Oh, but he’s definitely her dad?’ Men had it so easy. It was trickier all round missing the mother’s name from the birth certificate.

‘Well, short of a DNA test...my sister was pretty sure.’ Stella turned in the sofa to face Eoifa. ‘Please don’t judge her. We’ve all slept with guys we wish we hadn’t.’

‘I totally understand. No judging from me.’ Eoifa raised her hands for emphasis.

‘She just...got caught out, fell pregnant, that ridiculous expression.’ They both laughed.

‘I haven’t heard that in years. Sounds like you slipped and landed on a penis.’

‘More or less how it happened for Hannah.’ Stella snorted and looked around for a hanky. Eoifa fished one out of her handbag and passed it over. It was certainly how it had worked for her. She and Euan had taken precautions but they’d clearly not been cautious enough. It was all so fast. After the airport re-encounter, there were those hectic weekends of him coming down or her heading up to Edinburgh. They’d spent most of their relationship in a state of inebriation. Until the sobering moment of discovery.

‘Does Anna know about her dad?’

‘Christ no, and you mustn’t tell her.’ Stella grabbed Eoifa’s knee briefly.
‘No, no of course I wouldn’t.’ Eoifa waved off the idea but was pleased at the assumption she’d have a chance to discuss such things with the wee girl.

‘We’re very open about pretty much everything but not that. Not all of it anyway. She knows her mum and dad weren’t together and that we couldn’t find her dad to tell him about her. Seemed kinder putting it like that, than saying he didn’t want anything to do with her. How do you tell a wee kid that?’

‘Sometimes it’s better never to have known - not all parents are up to the job.’ Eoifa took a slug of wine and set the glass on the table more firmly than she intended.

‘Well you might be right, but I’ll have to help her get in touch if she ever wanted to find him, which she’s bound to do at some point.’ Stella leant round, using a remote control to adjust the music volume.

‘Why would she want to find him? From what you’ve said she’s much better off without him.’

‘Well of course I think she’s infinitely better off without him but it’s not my decision to make. All kids have a right to know their parents. It’s who they are and where they came from. Much as I hate the bloke, I’m not going to stand in Anna’s way if that’s what she decides.’

‘She might not. Some kids are happy not knowing, aren’t they? She can be anyone she wants to be. Why weigh herself down with this…tosser?’ It was Eoifa’s turn to get agitated. What was the big deal about meeting your ‘real’ parents? Eoifa’s were nothing but a disappointment. The strongest emotion she experienced at her mother’s funeral was relief and her dad, well, he’d never been around for her. When she discovered he’d set up that Trust in his will, it was the most involved he’d ever been. Sure, there was the music festival stuff but that was mainly about him getting a chance to play the piano in public. No, parents who took themselves off should be left alone.

‘Personally I wouldn’t disagree - definitely not about the toser part - but, like I say, it’s not a decision I can make for Anna. If she wants to try and find him. I’ll have to help. That’s the deal.’

‘So he’s never had any access or paid any support?’

‘Ha! You’re kidding! He’s not the supporting kind. And no, no access either. Honestly I don’t think he ever saw Anna. He’d call Hannah sometimes, wittering down the phone about how he’d always love her, but the minute she mentioned the baby, he’d blank her, like he couldn’t hear or had to go.’
‘Well, if he wasn’t on the birth certificate and wasn’t paying any support, he won’t have any rights to see her - she’d have to try and find him.’

‘You know quite a bit about this…’

‘No I, I just read about it for something I was doing before.’ Eoifa realised she’s made an uncharacteristic schoolgirl error. It wasn’t like her to give too much away. ‘I just meant you shouldn’t have any bother from him.’

‘Oh he’s never once been in touch with me, before or after Anna.’ Stella poured the last of the wine, which wasn’t much, into their glasses. ‘But listen, this is all about me. I wanted to hear more about you.’

‘Oh there’s nothing too exciting about me. Just getting settled - funny being back in Scotland after all the years away, and kind of funny living here. I didn’t really know Glasgow at all when I decided to take this job.’ Eoifa checked her watch, half twelve. ‘Sorry, can I check, did you call a taxi earlier?’

‘Oh shit! No, sorry, let me do that now. I know a company that’ll come really quickly. Let me just grab my phone.’ She stood to pat her back pocket and looked around the room.

In the taxi, Eoifa gave her address and apologised to the driver for it being such a short distance.

‘Listen, no need tae apologise tae me, hen.’ The driver rasped. The car smelt like he’d just put out a cigarette although a sticker on the dashboard ironically indicated that there was to be no smoking, eating or drinking during the journey. ‘Ye cannae be walkin home yersels, young lassies, ye never know what kind a nutters are out there, no? I mean maist folk are fine, brand new. But now an again, something no nice goes on, no what I’m sayin?’

She asked him to drop her outside the gate and gave him a good tip.

‘Thanks very much, darlin. You take care now.’

The garden was full of shadows but the gravel drive was clearly visible thanks to the street lighting. Mrs McQuarry had said something about lighting the garden but Eoifa couldn’t remember whether the landlady was opposed to such extravagance or whether she simply hadn’t got around to it yet.

Eoifa had her key ready, she had taken it out of her bag while she was still in the taxi, and made her way directly to the kitchen door. As she turned the key in the lock, something caught her eye at the far corner of the house. A
figure was standing, beyond the main house door, near the foot of the steps to Mrs McQuarry’s apartment. Eoifa froze, her hand on the lock. She tried to instruct her body to jump inside and lock the door behind her but she didn’t seem able to move. She opened her mouth but a small yelp was all that escaped.

‘Hobbit.’

Jesus fucking Christ, it was Ben. ‘Ben, you nearly gave me heart failure.’ Eoifa tried to keep her voice calm but her hands were shaking, the key rattled in the lock.

‘Hi Eoifa, sorry. I’m…I’m calling for the cat.’ Ben lumbered towards her. ‘He likes night hunting but I like him to come inside.’

‘Oh Ben, is your mum still up?’ Eoifa opened the kitchen door a crack and felt for the light switch. She realised she’d had quite a lot of wine as she felt herself sway a little with the door swinging open, or maybe it was a combination of the shock.

‘She’s in the bathroom upstairs. We watched a late film. We like the late film on a Saturday.’ Ben was trying to keep his voice quiet but was alternating between a loud whisper and his usual speaking voice.

As Eoifa opened the door further, still trying to find the light switch, the cat trotted out of the shadows and bolted right inside the kitchen.

‘Oh dear!’ Ben exclaimed but remained standing a little away from the kitchen door.

‘Don’t worry, Ben. I’m sure Hobbit will be fine.’ Eoifa flicked the light on but there was no immediate sign of the cat. She could see at the far side of the kitchen, the door to the corridor leading to the rest of the house lay open. The cat could be anywhere. ‘Hobbit!’ She called softly.

‘Hobbit!’ Ben called too but remained outside the kitchen door. ‘Here, pussy puss-puss. Hobbit!’

‘Is he good at answering when you call?’ Eoifa asked hopefully.

‘No.’ Ben shook his head. ‘Only when it’s dinner time.’ He adjusted his footing on the gravel. ‘Or if he thinks I’m going to shut him out. But not in the house, no. He’s a naughty kind of cat.’

It was the most Eoifa had heard Ben say in one go. ‘He sounds like a catty kind of cat.’ Eoifa chuckled at her own joke but, seeing Ben’s puzzled look, she explained, ‘Most cats are pretty naughty. They don’t like being told what to do.’
‘No.’ Ben shook his head then nodded. ‘That’s right, Hobbit decides things himself.’

‘If I can’t chase him out quickly, perhaps he could just spend the night downstairs with me?’

‘Oh, you have to be careful.’

Eoifa was puzzled. ‘It’s ok, I don’t mind having a cat in the house for one night.’

‘No, he needs his special toilet.’

Even if Hobbit didn’t pee in the house, it looked like Ben would stand outside the kitchen door all night unless she delivered the cat back to him. ‘I’ll find him.’ She walked through the kitchen to the corridor and switched the lights on to the back hallway. She moved through the house, expecting to find Hobbit at the top of the main staircase or hiding among the remaining boxes in the big hall. The sitting room door was closed and he wasn’t in the bathroom. That only left the bedroom. A quick check confirmed he wasn’t there either. Eoifa took the opportunity to switch the radio on low so she could hear it when she eventually got to bed.

Perhaps Hobbit had been in the kitchen after all. She went back through, this time closing the corridor door behind her. She saw Ben’s shadow looming outside the door. The cat was chasing a moth around the kitchen units, standing on his back legs, batting with his front paws as though they were hands. She admired his dexterity. She could invite Ben inside to help capture Hobbit but he was probably better remaining where he was, guarding the cat’s exit. She moved towards Hobbit and he skipped past her, jumped onto the sofa, ran maniacally along the sofa back, briefly alighting on the stove top from where he leapt onto the window ledge before slinking down and strolling to the kitchen door towards Ben who gathered the cat into his arms.

‘Thank you Eoifa.’ Ben turned and trudged back along the outside of the house.

‘That was exciting.’ Eoifa looked out to check Ben made his way to the apartment steps all right. She guessed he knew what he was doing. ‘Good night Ben.’

‘Yes. Hobbit is a funny cat.’ Ben half-turned, the cat still firmly in his arms. ‘Good night Eoifa. Sleep tight.’

‘You too, night.’ Eoifa stepped inside the kitchen and shut the door.
She needn’t have worried about returning to a dark house - the whole place was illuminated now. She got herself a large glass of water and headed for bed.

Lucky she hadn’t phoned Alan. It would have been awkward bumping into Ben when she was with a man at this time of night. She had another look at her phone as she plugged it in beside her bed to charge. No new messages but she scrolled over the previous ones. She squinted at the phone and decided to let him know she was back safely.

– Thanks for the lift offer. Bit late so grabbed a cab. G’night...

As she set the phone on the bedside table, it glowed with his response

– Good. Glad you’re home safe x

The speed of response was pleasing but she couldn’t block the sense of mild disappointment that he hadn’t offered to come round. Not that she wanted him here. Och these silly games we play! She set the phone face down on the floor so she wouldn’t be tempted to look at any further messages.

The radio whispered its late night voices and soporific tunes. Why was Stella so certain Anna would want to see her dad? She seemed so happy with Stella, who had presumably adopted her or was her legal guardian or however these things worked. Ok she didn’t have a dad but, Christ, Eoifa didn’t have any parents. How exciting not to be bound to one possible identity. If you never knew them, they could be anyone at all. And from what Stella had said, Anna’s dad didn’t sound like the kind of parent anyone needed.

There was something odd about Stella blaming him for her sister’s death. The money thing didn’t add up - Stella herself admitted she didn’t know who Johno owed the money to. What made her so certain he owed money at all? A half-remembered comment from her late sister which presumably the cops had refused to take to court. Eoifa didn’t remember reading anything other than ‘tragic accident’ or similar in the old newspaper articles she’d found online. Not that the papers ever carried the full story and certainly not ten years on.

Stella didn’t treat Anna as though she was a burden yet she must have sacrificed plenty to look after her. No financial support was tough. Maybe the mother had some money or Hannah had life insurance that helped Stella out. Eoifa sat up and drank some of the water, feeling in the dark to check she was setting the glass back on the table.
Stella got a bit defensive when Eoifa asked if she’d ever wanted kids of her own. The idea that Anna wasn’t ‘hers’ had irked her, clearly. Well Anna bloody wasn’t hers whatever the legality of the situation. She’d taken her in. Good for her. Medals would be issued in heaven or by the good ghosts, or whatever it was Anna talked about. Eoifa slid back under the duvet, the mattress protector was warm where she had lain previously. Ghosts, Jesus! That would have her shitting herself if a child came up to her saying, ‘they’re here again’. Right out of the Shining. If she’d started scootering round the living room the scene would’ve been complete. Eoifa smiled to herself and rolled onto her side.

Who was it said we create two families in our lives, the one we’re born into and the one we create through marriage or partnership? Might have been the counselling team. It was the kind of armchair philosophising they specialised in. Both versions were equally fucked up for Eoifa. Her first family was a husk, her mother would’ve been at home running a concentration camp and her dad couldn’t help himself chasing everything that swung past in a skirt. Her own efforts at family life were a fiasco.

What had possessed her to marry Euan? There was the pregnancy, of course. It wouldn’t hurt to admit she had been scared. Curious at first, yes, but once the whole thing had developed beyond the point of easy alternatives there seemed to be greater safety in numbers. And she got caught up in the idea of giving it a go. He made that half-arsed offer over the phone while she was still living in Manchester. Seven weeks later she was counting the individual planks on the parquet flooring of the Leith Registry Office, hoping her morning sickness would hold off to the afternoon. Euan’s mother was barely speaking to Eoifa. She was never a fan of the girl she considered ‘flighty’. Euan let her know how his mum had described her. He was always been pleased to tell Eoifa what his mother thought of her, never left her wondering.

The first time Eoifa met Euan’s parents, James and Margaret, was in his flat in Trinity, an appropriate name for the place that became their first home together, the three of them: Euan, Eoifa and the unborn illegitimate one. At least it hadn’t been twins. Dear god, the thought there might have been more!

When they were first introduced, Euan’s mother shook Eoifa’s hand with a limp touch and, turning towards Euan, asked, ‘what did she say her name was?’ as though Eoifa was not a native English speaker.
Turning back to Eoifa, she enquired, ‘and is it short for anything?’

‘No.’ Eoifa tried not to make a farting sound as she adjusted her position on the leather sofa, adding, not quite under her breath, ‘What might it be short for?’

‘Oh, I thought...perhaps...Evelyn?’

‘Didn’t you say it’s a Celtic form of Eve, Eoifa?’ Euan offered before taking his dad – call me Jim – through to get drinks in the other room.

‘Ah, so it might be short for Evelyn then?’ Euan’s mother was triumphant.

‘I don’t think Eve is a short version of Evelyn.’ Eoifa tried not to roll her eyes.

‘I thought it might be…’

‘What, as in Adam and Evelyn?’

Euan’s mother looked as though a soor plum had burst in her mouth.

Euan pretended to have made them dinner when he had actually arranged for the food to be delivered from a restaurant down the road. Eoifa might have cooked but there was no time between her train getting in and his parents arriving. Besides she was already starting to feel a bit queasy. His mother noticed the containers in the kitchen and chided him like a five year old who’d missed the toilet and hit the potty.

‘Darling you could have come to ours. I’d have rustled up a little something....and your friend could have come along.’ She indicated Eoifa.

Eoifa remembered thinking Margaret’s hair looked like a helmet. She was one of those women who liked to have it ‘set’ regularly. Shouldn’t have had it set to ‘witch’. Christ Eoifa, why didn’t you get back on that train to Manchester? You and Mary could have howled about it. Too late for the morning after pill but there were other options, even then.

Euan broke the news of the wedding and the baby as a package on that first evening, just before he opened the cheese. Margaret was rendered speechless initially, lost for words, even acerbic ones. She lifted her handbag onto her knee and searched around inside it for something that turned out to be an inhaler, which she turned her back on the dining table to use as though repositioning made her invisible.

‘At least the child will only be a partial bastard when it arrives.’ Jim had already drunk a large glass of the port he’d brought round. He continued to
explain this was because they would marry before it was born, more secure in law than waiting until afterwards ‘...assuming you can get the forms completed in time.’ Margaret laid her hand like a claw on his forearm.

‘The forms are submitted, it’s all booked up.’ Euan smiled as though expecting a special award for his organisational skills.

‘It seems you’ve thought of everything, if only you’d been that well prepared a little earlier.’ Margaret regained her speaking voice. ‘And where, pray tell, have you booked up for the big event?’

‘The wedding or the baby?’

‘The wedding, Euan, she means the wedding.’ If Eoifa could have reached Euan’s forearm, she’d have clamped it herself. ‘We decided to go with the Registry Office in Leith, Margaret. They have a lovely room and, um, they could also fit us in by November.’

‘November, well that was lucky.’ Jim topped up his port glass.

‘Lucky?!’ Margaret’s voice moved into its upper register, ‘What the hell is lucky about it?’ she flushed with the excitement of the expletive.

Margaret proceeded to try and insist they had the whole ceremony at a hotel, somewhere less ‘utilitarian’.

Euan stood behind Eoifa and his mother, with an arm on each of them, and explained that the wedding was just a single day while they hoped to be enjoying their life together for many years. At the time, Eoifa thought Euan was perhaps standing up to his mum but, looking back, she knew he was merely wheedling for her approval.

A compromise was reached and they agreed that, after the formalities, they would have a late lunch at Prestonfield House Hotel on the outskirts of the city.

If their first dinner had elements of farce, the wedding day continued the theme. Euan’s brother failed to catch an early enough flight from London so missed the ceremony, such as it was, meaning Jim had to step in and perform the role of best man or ‘first witness’ as it was described. In spite of the wedding party being limited to a total of six, and that number was only achieved once Rory, Euan’s brother, had arrived at the hotel, Jim insisted on delivering a short speech over lunch in which he affirmed that he and Margaret hoped Euan and Eoifa would make them grandparents ‘really soon’.
Margaret’s face was a study in controlled fury, as though her approbation could dissolve the foetus growing in Eoifa’s belly. Helmet Hair actually had the cheek to say aloud, ‘Well you won’t be wearing white, dear.’ Like it was the 1970s. Like Eoifa had any intention of wearing an actual wedding dress. Eoifa punched her pillow at the memory and turned over to her other side.

She should have taken Mary up on her offer when she joked before the ceremony, ‘If you want me to help you run away, just give me the nod’. Eoifa had hugged her as they stood shivering by the sinks in the unheated toilets of the 1930s civic building. Mary was the closest living soul Eoifa had to family, marrying Euan never changed that. She got a bit teary when she waved Mary off on the train back to Manchester that evening.

Stella reminded Eoifa a little of Mary. In spite of her theories about her sister’s death, she was good company, relaxing to be around. Her flat had a welcoming atmosphere. Perhaps she would ask Stella could help her to do something about the sitting room. It felt unused as though it was in storage somehow. She could buy a bookshelf. That might work if she could afford one that didn’t look like furniture for a doll’s house in the room with its high ceilings and ornate fireplace. She would think about that some more in the morning.

It was her turn to invite Stella for dinner, maybe next weekend or the one after. Eoifa felt herself beginning to doze as she pondered ways of inviting Stella with or without Anna.

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The next day she couldn’t get out of bed until lunchtime. It had been a late night but mostly her head was fuzzy from the wine and crisps, despite the prophylactic glass of water at bedtime.

The closest she got to clearing the remaining boxes was pushing them into the sitting room so she didn’t have to look at them in the hall. There were nine boxes in total, one stack of three and the rest were piled two-high. Eoifa found they could be persuaded to slide along the hall rug and into the sitting room without too much difficulty, provided she pushed the bottom box only and didn’t try to move them too quickly or the top box would begin to slide off. They were too heavy for her to lift, full of miscellaneous papers and objects.
As she slid the first pair of boxes towards the sitting room, two or three tiny moths, like the ones she’d disturbed in the secret room off the stairs, emerged from the gap between the top and bottom box. Eoifa squashed them with her fingers and they disintegrated into a papery dust. She checked the other boxes, manoeuvring the top box on each pile from side to side in small twists to see if any others would emerge. None did.

When she went for a shower later, a cloud of them flew out of the towels she had folded in the bathroom, some choosing the wall as their new home while others picked their way along the floor or inside the bath. She got a wad of toilet paper and squashed each one. They were insubstantial, all that remained was a light brown powdery mess where each one had been. She wiped the surfaces and flushed the toilet paper. She shuddered as she lifted all of the towels that had been in the room, took them through to the kitchen and stuffed them directly into the washing machine.

At least they were easily dispensed with, unlike regular moths, there was no crunch or slime on crushing, but she didn’t like the idea of them crawling around the house and into her things. She walked up the stairs to check the door to the small room was tightly shut. Presumably those cushions or maybe even the clothes stacked on the shelves had been their source. The door seemed well sealed. Hopefully that would be enough to prevent any others migrating to the rest of the house.

Once she was washed and dressed, she made her way to the supermarket. Not having a car meant she could only carry enough food shopping to last a few days at a time. There were pluses and minuses to this pattern. A definite downside was the frequency of having to shop and she was pretty sure it was more expensive, although on the whole everything seemed cheaper in Glasgow compared to London. A real benefit was the spontaneity, browsing the shelves with more or less immediate consumption in mind helped to reduce the tedium of the task. Eoifa wasn’t one of life’s great planners, whatever outward appearance she might give. Colleagues had mistaken her reflective nature for a measured weighing up of options, but she tended to go with an intuitive flow. An experimenter in life’s laboratory, if things got uncomfortable you could always stop the experiment and move on.
As she locked up and walked along the drive, it occurred to her that she hadn’t seen Mrs McQuarry for a few days. She noticed the garden had been tended, although that might have been Ben, and she had heard the hoover going upstairs earlier today when she was wakening up, which might have been Ben but most likely was a Mrs McQuarry pursuit. Living so close to the landlady wasn’t such a bad arrangement really. She was a chatterbox when you bumped into her but she didn’t drop round. In fact, she hadn’t been in the downstairs apartment since the day Eoifa moved in.

Now she knew where she was going, Eoifa enjoyed walking to the shops. On the way there, when she had nothing to carry, she would detour to see more of the houses and gardens in the neighbourhood. They were intriguing the way they pointed to a different era, giant square constructions set in their own grounds or the less grand but still substantial semi-detached houses, each half with its own extensive gardens. Some had similarities but no two homes were identical in appearance, especially now so many had clearly been converted. External stairs and additional doors gave them away. There was a preference for a straightforward upper and lower conversion arrangement with an external staircase in stone or, sometimes, metal. The metal ones looked incongruous against the, mostly, blonde sandstone. The precise placing and, especially, the design of the stairs were rarely identical. It was like walking through a spot the difference puzzle. Eoifa liked picking out the ones that might still be single homes and guessing how many rooms they had. If she saw a ‘for sale’ sign, she would imagine making an appointment to view simply to get a look around the interior.

There were a lot of Asian families in the area, a few of the houses around Mrs McQuarry’s were owned by Asians but nearer the shops and the train station there was a very high concentration of people who looked to be of Pakistani descent. Like in London, the shops and even the local supermarket shelves reflected the neighbourhood in their range of products. Exciting sacks of pulses and exotic-sounding spices sat among more typical brands of rice and canned vegetables. Not that Eoifa’s culinary skills were a match for the variety available even among the more conservative offerings but she liked to imagine the possibilities.
Someone at work said Glasgow had the biggest Muslim population in Scotland. It made sense. She didn’t remember many Muslims where she and Euan lived in Edinburgh, although the central mosque was near the University in town. Where she grew up, in Lochaninsch, there was only one Asian family. Predictably they ran the local shop. The kids at school called it ‘The Darky’s’ without any sense it might be a pejorative term until Miss Aspin told them off, asking how they’d like to be called Whities.

Beyond the shops was the Tramway theatre with its large café and the Hidden Gardens. It would be good to spend some time there in the summer if she decided to stay. It was full of kids which was a nuisance but she liked the mix of cultures with the theatre selling itself as a community space. This definitely reminded her of the best aspects of London. There were times when the different parts of the population here seemed to regard each other with suspicion. If she walked past the Tramway down towards Pollokshields library, it began to feel as though she had walked into another culture, with the smell of spices and the sounds of Qawwali music blaring from car stereos. The young men typically wore western clothes and drove around in groups just as young men from Eoifa’s home town had done. Most of the Asian woman wore traditional dress, usually a hijab but Eoifa had seen many with face coverings.

There was a small park Eoifa found while trying to locate the library, the map on her phone made it seem like a short cut. It had benches and a few scruffy swings, enclosed behind a high wall. As she cut across the worn grass she became aware that she was the only woman in Western dress. Two women in full burkas turned their backs as she approached, although she had no intention of trying to engage them in conversation. Did they think her indecent with her uncovered hair? At least she was wearing a thick coat and not flaunting her legs. She tried to smile at the ladies in headscarves nearest the path but she couldn’t tell if they were willing to return her gaze.

She kept walking and chided herself for the relief she felt as she reached the pavement and road beyond the park gate. Later, in the library she had mused on the benefits of a burka or niqab. The opportunity to observe without being observed.

As she walked towards the automatic doors of Muirfields supermarket, she noticed one of the commuters from train station loading a car with shopping
bags. Funny to see him without a suit. He nodded in acknowledgement. There was a toddler strapped to a child seat in the back of the car. Was she the last child-free person in the city?

The supermarket appeared particularly gaudy. Someone at their corporate headquarters had evidently decided to max out the marketing budget on Easter. Large swinging signs hung from the ceiling with pictures of chicks and cartoon bunnies with slogans like ‘Hop on board...’ and ‘Spring into Easter’. Given the customer-base, Eoifa wondered if Eid would be celebrated with such alacrity by Muirfields.

An entire aisle was devoted to foil-encased chocolate. No brand of confectionary appeared to have overlooked the chance to offer itself in outsized egg form. The noise levels had risen in line with the visual cacophony as children beseeched their parents in ever-increasingly whiney tones to purchase the eggs or one of the Easter-themed stuffed toys that had also appeared on the shelves.

These were the parts of being a parent that Eoifa would never miss - who would? And yet some parents appeared to be encouraging their offspring to reach fever pitch. The temptation to drag the little demons outside and lock them back inside the car, preferably not her own, so she could shop in peace would have overwhelmed Eoifa. The sound of grizzling children was akin to motion sickness, once it hit your resonant frequency you had to get out.

She moved to the homecare aisle at the far end of the shop and scoured its shelves for moth-killing products but could only find cedar cubes. A hasty internet search before she left the house had suggested those were useless. Along with aggressive cleaning, you really needed chemicals. Still, she had to feel she was doing something so she threw a couple of packets of the wooden cubes into her basket and headed for the till.

She checked her phone while waiting in the queue. She had a text from Mary about skyping later and a voice message. The lengthy automated announcements before you got to the actual message were an irritant, although the line, ‘please press the hashtag for more options’ always amused her. She was a fan of more options.

The message was from Alan. They had already agreed to see a film one day this week. Alan was suggesting Thursday. The signal wasn’t great but she heard him saying something about wanting to spend a whole evening with her
where she didn’t either send him away or run away herself. Hmm, the whole evening. Presumably that meant he was hoping to stay at hers. Except it was a Thursday. A school night. Christ! Even she was making references to kids.

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Eoifa stepped out of the train as the doors opened, forced by the volume of people to adopt a shuffling pace, as they were channelled along the platform towards the human barriers at the main concourse of Glasgow Central, the station Roy Jenkins was said to have once declared his ‘favourite’.

There were some familiar faces among the morning commuters, the man with the pale raincoat and curly hair who occasionally delivered ‘on location’ news items on Scotland Tonight and an older dark-haired gentleman who had achieved minor celebrity by appearing on daytime chat shows to give legal opinion. A few weeks ago she never would have known these people, now she spotted branches of the lawyer’s offices all around the city.

The STV man studiously avoided making eye contact with anyone around him. Eoifa sometimes wanted to tap him on the arm to let him know she’d recognised him from the television and still didn’t care. The thought that even a half-hearted exchange might feed his ego prevented her from following through. The lawyer on the other hand appeared much more relaxed with his little slice of fame. Once or twice she had seen him respond to acknowledgements from fellow travellers, exchanging a few words or pausing to the side of the human crocodile for what looked like signing an autograph.

The crowd bilged past the staff checking tickets and on to the central concourse where there was more space to spread, some pausing to buy coffee, others chatting on phones as they continued moving to the exits, their heads tilted into their mobiles. In London there had been a short-lived fashion for Lieutenant Uhura earpieces, especially amongst drivers but pedestrians had favoured them as a hands free option too.

A group of secondary school kids in a distinctive uniform, green blazers with brown and gold ties, jostled and wrestled each other on their way to the Hope Street exit, perhaps it was them or maybe only Eoifa’s imagination that made her hear a baaing sound as the herd pressed on. There was something
animalistic about the rush hour crowds or perhaps tidal was a more accurate term. The human traffic ebbing and flowing with the train timetable. Central Station reminded her a bit of the London crowds but, on the whole, it was more civilised here. You were more likely to receive an apology from fellow commuters to emphasise any nudging had been accidental or to overhear a bit of banter.

She could see Roy Jenkins’ point, Glasgow Central was more attractive than your average Scotrail station with the dark wood facades around the shops and cafes, taking the harsh commercial edge off the gaudy livery of the burger, coffee and sausage roll counters. No bins though, in common with most public spaces throughout the UK, the bins had all been removed in the wake of the London bus bombing. Glasgow had experienced its own brush with terror when two men attempted to drive a burning jeep directly into the airport terminal. It even made the news in Japan, Scotland’s fight back against the suicide bombers. John Smeaton the off-duty baggage handler’s message for any future would-be terrorist needed a little extra translation, ‘Come tae Glasgow, we’ll set about ye!’ The proudly hard edge to the friendly city.

Would events have been different had the target been Edinburgh? No way of knowing, but Eoifa suspected how her former in-laws would have been relieved it was safely at the other side of the country. Only forty miles apart and yet half a world away. She thought about weaving that phrase into a campaign for the Council.

No doubt Euan’s parents would have been outraged at the cheek of the terrorists perpetrating their lawless acts ‘on UK soil,’ Eoifa all-but heard them say it in unison. For them, these incidents didn’t induce terror so much as indignation. They weren’t ones to let a nostril-flaring opportunity pass them by. Euan’s mother probably still cleaned his flat. It was entirely possible he now lived with them. The only way of knowing would be to get in touch and that, as the social media status put it, was complicated.

Eoifa left through the massive iron gates of the Gordon Street entrance heading for Queen Street station, no need to visit the office before going to her meeting in Edinburgh. Apart from the purveyors of coffee and breakfast snacks, the shops in the town centre were not usually open before she went to work. It gave the city a sleepy air of being caught off guard, with shop assistants huddling in doorways or tapping the glass for supervisors to let them in, the
shutters mostly still in position until well after nine. It contrasted starkly with
the end of the working day when the shops were in full retail swing most nights
of the week until well after six. So much for austerity, some folk were clearly
having a good recession. Not so the Big Issue sellers and miscellaneous buskers
and beggars who lined the route between the two stations.

There were more people begging in the morning, Eoifa noticed, the
buskers came out later in the day, lunchtime and after work. Most of the folk
out in the morning had Big Issues to sell but some were simply sitting with caps
or disposable coffee cups set out in front of them to collect a few coins from
those heading to work. Eoifa had seen beggars everywhere she’d lived in the UK
and always wondered about their lives. How they spent their long cold days,
especially the ones outside London who didn’t have the relative luxury of the
underground to pitch in. Some people chose to leave their families and homes.
That was the rhetoric. It was the only time Eoifa felt any sense of gratitude to
her parents. At least they hadn’t left her destitute. How different her life might
have turned out without that financial security. She wasn’t rich but she never
had to sleep on the streets.

She paused to buy coffee and a croissant at Queen Street station before
boarding the Edinburgh train. She’d been to Haymarket two or three times since
starting her job in Glasgow but this was the first time she had a meeting in
Edinburgh town centre. It was bound to happen eventually. She felt a frisson of
excitement mixed with something close to dread.

She slid into the first available seat with a table. She didn’t mind which
direction the seat faced but it was good to have a table. When she was pregnant
and travelling up from Manchester she got sick if she had her back to the
direction of travel. And bus journeys were completely out. A lot of unusual
things happened then. Her body was no longer solely her own. She had gone off
coffee, which seemed hard to comprehend and even giving up booze had been
remarkably easy. Yes, pregnancy wasn’t the tough part of motherhood.

Her croissant had shed flakes of pastry like a desperate case of dandruff.
She twisted the emptied bag and pushed it to the side. She checked her work
phone and started running through the emails that had built up overnight. A
hazard of working with people in different time zones. There was a group of
emails about the charity night walk some of the staff in the Council Corporate
Services section were planning. She wouldn’t mind going on the walk but who would she get to sponsor her? Outside the office she only knew Mrs McQuarry, Alan and Stella.

She had never got a chance to ask Mrs McQuarry if she was married. She had forgotten about that. There was no sign of a Mr McQuarry, but of course any husband would have a different name anyway. Maybe she had never married. But how had Ben appeared? Eoifa checked herself; he had clearly appeared the same way any child did. Unless he was adopted. Maybe the clothes in the secret cupboard belonged to her husband who lay under the patio. Eoifa smiled at the unlikely thought.

The train snaked through the Queen Street tunnel and emerged into the building yards and demolition sites that characterised the rail route north of Glasgow city centre. It really was a most unattractive line whether you were leaving or entering the second city of the empire. Her link director at the Council actually used that phrase and he was only joking a little. What did tourists think when they caught the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow, leaving the Georgian splendour of Edinburgh’s town centre, Princes Street Gardens and the castle to swing by Robroyston and what remained of the Red Road Flats? Did any of them decide to get the next train back East?

Glasgow didn’t yet feel like home, perhaps it never would. She struggled to remember how she had felt about Edinburgh. She had lived there twice, first as a student and later with Euan. She had been at ease in the city for a time but never would have described herself as ‘coming from’ Edinburgh. Even as she and Euan moved in together, it was someone else’s home. Previous Eoifa. And she had been previous. Previous to marry that man-boy who only really wanted to marry his mother. Previous going through with the pregnancy. Well she’d done her best. She’d gone to the classes.

Eoifa remembered the sterile room at the Royal Infirmary where the midwife had etched out key words on a white board in primary school handwriting, lecturing the ladies with bumps on how to cope once ‘baby’ was born.

‘Pare down all activities to a minimum’ the midwife had declared.
Well that was easy, she barely had time to fart.
‘But don’t forget to make time for something you enjoy - every day you should manage a little something: a walk, a nice bath, bake a cake...’
‘Bake a cake?’ the woman with pink streaks in her hair and three earrings in each lob had cackled, ‘home baking went out with the ark, love. I don’t have time to bake now, never mind when the wean appears!’

The rest of them had smiled, stroking their different sized bumps, none had the guts to really support the feisty girl. Something in the hormones had prevented Eoifa from refuting all possibility of knocking up some scones with homemade jam each day while her cheery, ruddy-faced offspring gurgled contentedly by her side. Of course that day had never materialised.

Further up the carriage, a little boy, presumably pre-school but looked only just, swung between the seats, his legs reaching along the corridor, while what looked like his mum and granny shouted a barrage of threats.

‘Sit doon, Kyle. Kyle! Sit doon! Ky-yle!’

‘Right, that’s it, no playstation the night, that computer’s gettin put back, so it is.’

Most of the seats were taken and the boy was bumping other passengers as the train shuddered and he grabbed the seat backs or arm rests.

‘Ah’m sorry,’ the granny offered those on the receiving end of her grandson’s exuberance. The mother seemed less forthcoming with apologies but Eoifa could only see the back of her head. Her voice carried well enough.

‘Kyle! Ah’m pure tellin you, get back in your seat. Right you’ll need tae get back in your seat noo, here’s the man.’

The conductor headed along the train, checking tickets, even though there were automatic barriers at Queen Street. Eoifa thought she might move to another carriage, none of them would be quiet but it was unlucky to have the child from hell on such an early train.

Would she have been the kind of mother who shouted in public? Some children were uncontrollable but Kyle’s mother didn’t seem to be helping.

‘Here, Kyle, see you’re annoying that woman there now, look. I telt ye!’

Eoifa smiled weakly, couldn’t bring herself to say the child wasn’t annoying, even though he wasn’t the full cause of her current beleaguered expression.

She felt her phone buzz gently in her bag, the sign of more emails arriving. She scanned them, deleted the ones advertising penis extensions and filed those she could read when she got back to the office. She took her notepad
out and started to draft an informal agenda. It helped to focus on the morning’s meeting.

She got off the train at Waverley and headed out the back steps on to Jeffrey Street before taking a left down The Royal Mile towards the Scottish Parliament. It was the first time she’d been to the Parliament building. Construction was just about to start when she left Edinburgh. She had seen pictures of it, of course, and heard all about the building project overshooting its budget.

Approaching from the Royal Mile, Eoifa realised, meant you crept up on the building from the side. She overshot the entrance without realising she was officially at the front door. Once she found her way inside and got through security, she liked the open feel of the reception area. A little too much tempered concrete but she liked the use of wood and there were some quirky touches with the MSPs’ offices as pods with window seats to the side. She had seen the debating chamber on television and it looked magnificent. She wouldn’t see in there today.

The meeting ran on to nearly two o’clock. There was plenty coffee and biscuits but no offer of lunch. Perhaps they hadn’t expected to take so long, as though a sales and marketing plan for craft traders to mount their first show in Toulon was something that could be dashed off in a morning. Still, Eoifa wasn’t in charge, she only hoped to get more work if the whole thing went ahead.

She left the Parliament building and made her way back up the Royal Mile but this time she continued on to the High Street and down to the North Bridge. It was colder than Glasgow but just as pretty as she remembered. She wanted to have a quick walk along Princes Gardens before heading back through. The more she walked around, the greater the chance of being seen. Euan would be working and, if he was still at the same consultancy firm, not very likely to be near Waverley at this time of day. His parents were more likely to pop up unexpectedly. They loved The Dome so it was possible they could have been lunching in George Street.

The Gardens were sheltered, trapping such sunshine as the Scottish spring offered, so she picked up a baguette and a coffee from one of the kiosks at the far end and walked back to find a free bench. At least she had missed the
lunchtime rush of shop and office workers but she did need to run the gauntlet of mums with buggies. The trend for prams that looked as though they had four-wheel drive capabilities had clearly reached Edinburgh. Eoifa passed three or four being pushed at a run by mothers in lycra. What was wrong with these people?

She nearly gave herself whiplash doing a double take when she spotted a blonde man in a black coat bending to take the hand of a toddler. A lycra-wearing mother captured the scene with her camera phone before lifting the child and all three embraced. From the side, he looked like Euan. They were standing near the flowerbed at the gardener’s cottage. She and Euan had one of their biggest rows at that very spot. Their buggy, which would have looked flimsy by today’s standards, had rolled a little on the paved slope. Eoifa was sure she’d engaged the brake but Euan started shouting about irresponsible she was. How she only cared about herself. ‘What about you, joining a golf club when you’ve just become a father for the first time?!’ she’d yelled back. They shouted some more as passers-by tried to look like they weren’t listening.

In the greatest irony of the afternoon, Euan had walked off. Eoifa thought he’d gone to get the car but he’d driven home leaving her to negotiate getting a bus back to Trinity with the buggy.

The carriage was quieter on the return and, after responding to a few work emails, Eoifa felt herself nodding off, waking intermittently with her head bumping against the window.

A woman struggled past with a baby, a changing bag and a folded pram. Eoifa dozed and was aware of the woman struggling back along the passageway, getting buffeted from side to side with the motion of the train. Somehow she managed to hold onto everything and keep her feet. The woman lurched into the table at the other side of the aisle to Eoifa and began to unpack some of her belongings. She slid the pram along the foot of the seats opposite her and placed the changing back on the table. The baby was on her lap.

‘Excuse me,’ the woman leant over to Eoifa, ‘scuse me. Would you mind if ah changed the wee one here?’

Eoifa tried to give an indication of being relaxed. She felt too tired to project her voice across the noise of the train.
‘Ah widnae ask but the toilets is disgustin on this train. That one there’s pure mingin.’

‘No problem.’ Eoifa shrugged.

The woman pulled a changing mat out of the back and laid the baby on the table, holding the wee one’s arm expertly. The baby kicked its chubby legs as its mother released them from the pink and white clothing. Eoifa looked away, out of the window at her own side. She didn’t need to see the demonstration.

The smell of baby wipes, presumably calculated to evoke notions of freshness or at least mask other odours, made Eoifa nauseous. It made the skin on her fingers itch and gave her a sense of foreboding. She looked around to see the woman packing the baby equipment away, a bulging orange nappy bag lay on the floor at her feet. The baby girl, now fully clothed again, lay out on the table top, the hood of her tiny jacket offering some protection for her head.

‘Thanks, I wouldn’a usually do that. It’s just...disgustin.’ She pointed in the direction of the toilets. ‘Oh here, ye couldnae do me another wee favour, could ye?’

Eoifa gave what she hoped was a calm, pleasant smile, she understood the woman’s reluctance to use the on-board toilets.

‘Would ye hold her til I dump this and gie ma hands a wee wash?’ She held the baby up but kept her on her own side of the aisle. The baby’s body hung down as though she was a doll in Michelin man clothing.

Eoifa wasn’t expecting that. Her heart thumped unevenly in her chest. ‘No! I’m sorry, no, I can’t.’ She slid her phone into her handbag, grabbed her coat and moved away. At the end of the carriage she looked round. The woman had hooked the baby under her arm while she wrestled with the pram as though attempting to erect it in the aisle.

Eoifa felt guilty seeing the woman struggle but the thought of holding a baby was worse. Maybe if she’d had more warning or been asked to hold almost anything else. She moved into the next carriage, over the corrugated connection between the two automatic doors. The noise of the tracks roared in her ears as she stepped across. What was the next stop? It wasn’t a long train. She didn’t want to see the woman again. Could she get off and get a taxi home? The new carriage was quiet too. She looked round, the electronic sign above the door said, ‘the next stop is Croy’. Not much use, essentially just a car park. Eoifa

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tried to think if there was even a taxi rank there and how far it might be from Glasgow by road. She chose another seat, this time a bus-style one that only had folding tables. Less exposed. She kept her jacket on and pulled the collar up.

It was after four by the time she got into Queen Street. She felt a little shaky and insubstantial. Perhaps she was tired. It was hardly worth going back to the office so she walked towards Central Station to get her train home. She snaked through the town centre, expertly navigating her way over the road, down the pedestrianised Buchanan Street and along Gordon Street.

Mrs McQuarry was working in the garden when Eoifa marched through the gates. Eoifa was surprised at how pleased she felt to see her.

‘Hello there!’

The landlady looked round, straightening up as she saw Eoifa, ‘Ah hello stranger. You’ve been keeping yourself busy this fine weather.’ She was in her usual uniform of a-line skirt and jumper. Her concession to the changing season had been to roll the sleeves up.

‘Looks like you’ve been busy too. The garden is beautiful.’

Mrs McQuarry was standing in a patch of different types of daffodil, pulling the deadheads off. She had a hoe at her feet. ‘Ah it’s not too bad at all with the golden display we have here. Pity a few of them are past now. They don’t last too long.’

‘Is Ben not out with you?’

‘Ah he’s off to his club. They collect him on a Monday at two and bring him back about 5pm, so it’ll not be long till he’s back amongst us.’

‘Here, why don’t you take a bunch of these into the house? Nothing like a nice bunch of daffs for brightening the place up.’ Mrs McQuarry produced secateurs from her skirt pocket and began chopping a selection of the flowers. ‘You’ll just have to watch they don’t drip onto your lovely outfit. They’re apt to let go of the sap when they’re first cut.’ She held them up and one or two dripped on cue. ‘Here, I’ll carry them over for you.’ The landlady took the fistful of daffodils and walked towards the kitchen door.
‘Thanks Mrs McQuarry, those look lovely. Oh look at Hobbit!’ The cat was stretched out on the stone step at the main front door, bathed in a patch of sunlight.

‘Aye, he’s a great sun-seeking missile right enough.’

Mrs McQuarry suggested Eoifa went in and got a vase while she waited by the kitchen door. She and Ben seemed to have a code that meant they wouldn’t enter the house now that Eoifa was living there.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ Eoifa felt benevolent towards the landlady and eager to have some company rather than opening up her laptop to catch up with work.

‘Oh I wouldn’t say no. A nice cup of tea would be lovely after all my gardening. I feel I’ve earned it, shall we say. But you’ll not want me bringing any more of the garden in with me.’ She steadied herself on the window ledge while she wiped her shoes vigorously on the metal grate outside the door.

They sat at the dining table with their mugs of tea. Eoifa didn’t have any biscuits but she offered Mrs McQuarry a selection of cereal bars from the collection she sometimes took to work to eat instead of lunch.

‘Oh now would you look at this fellow.’ Mrs McQuarry made her way to the sofa, snatched up the cushion and hit it hard against the seatback. She took out a tissue and lifted the powdery remains of a moth to show Eoifa.

‘I’ve been finding a few of those.’

‘You never have! Oh now, that’s not so good. They’re crafty and the very devil to get clear of. But you know, I think I may have something to help.’

‘It’s not cedar cubes is it? I’ve been trying those.’

‘Oh now, I like cedar, didn’t know you could get it in cubes. You’ll maybe not be a fan of what I was going to suggest then, but I swear by lavender.’ She came back to the table to drink the last of her tea but didn’t sit back down.

‘And never storing anything that isn’t spotless, but I see you’re keeping the place in fine style so that won’t be the problem here.’

Eoifa followed Mrs McQuarry’s line of sight around the pristine kitchen. The empty worktops were more a reflection of how little cooking she had been doing than a testament to her housekeeping prowess. It was hard to be bothered
when there was no one to share the meal and no one to split the chores with. In all of her shared flats, if you cooked, you didn’t have to clean up.

She couldn’t let on to Mrs McQuarry about the real source of the moths without admitting to snooping, even though she was renting the place, the room off the stairs felt out of bounds.

Mrs McQuarry drained her tea and banged the mug down decisively. ‘Come on til I show you. I’ve lavender a-plenty in my craft studio.’ She took Eoifa’s arm and led her out.

The craft studio turned out to be the third apartment at the back of the house. Eoifa hadn’t walked right round here before but she had the chance to have a good look while Mrs McQuarry went off to fetch a set of keys from her own apartment upstairs. It didn’t look like it got much sun and consequently was given over to scruffy grass, unlike the well-tended lawns at the front. Close to the high boundary wall with the next house, there was a wooded area which looked a bit like a pet cemetery with low headstones among the trees and green shrubs. Nothing was flowering here yet or perhaps ever did.

Eoifa contemplated the moss on the path and the two steps that lead to the back door. Someone had recently scraped the moss from the central part of the steps. It lay in brown clumps at either side of the stonework. Moss was revered as an essential element of a traditional Japanese garden, encouraged and cultivated rather than treated like a weed as it was in European gardens.

In Nara-koen Park, Eoifa had watched gardeners delicately sweeping debris from among the moss and been politely chided for accidentally standing on some. ‘Moss carpets the earth but cannot be walked upon.’ The guide explained. It had invited itself in and been welcomed to the extent that neither gardener nor visitor could distinguish between the cultivated and the squatter. Eoifa tried to look on the back garden with that Eastern view of the spongy green plant but here, in a Southside Glasgow back garden, it didn’t seem possible to regard the moss as anything more than a slip hazard and a den for slaters.

The back door opened into a scullery, which Eoifa reckoned could have been the original house kitchen. She hadn’t stopped puzzling about the layout of the house in its heyday. There was a Belfast sink under the window but the room
was otherwise fitted with rather shabby kitchen units that were incongruous with the scale of the space. Mrs McQuarry confirmed she had obtained the units from a house clearance in the 1990s when she had first decided to let out this part of the house.

‘I’ve had occasional lodgers here off and on but mostly I keep it as a wee hidey hole for myself. It’s not everyone I would have in the house here with Ben and me. I don’t want you getting big headed but I took a shine to you the first time I met you.’

Uncertain how to respond, Eoifa went with, ‘Thanks,’ and a smile.

‘Now, I’ll find the lavender in a moment - I’ve bags of the stuff somewhere hereabouts, I was going to be making it into...what d’you call it? Pot pourri, you know, for freshening drawers and hanging in wardrobes and the like - but come for the grand tour.’

The apartment had the feel of a place kept in storage. The rooms were sparsely furnished and most of the items were covered in large plastic sheets. Why Mrs McQuarry decided to use this as her craft studio rather than one of the upstairs rooms with their large, south-facing windows was anyone’s guess. Perhaps she liked the sense of being hidden from immediate sight.

‘I sometimes wonder about locating Ben hereabouts, give him his own quarters. But he’s never been keen. Oh he likes it here well enough but he likes his old mother on hand too.’

Eoifa wondered which of them liked being close at hand the most, although she also noticed that Mrs McQuarry was a little different in Ben’s absence. Still frenetic but less anxious.

‘Now come on here til you see this.’ Mrs McQuarry pushed open a wide door to reveal what looked like a sitting room currently being used as an art space. ‘This was the morning room in the old days. My father’s favourite room. A wee bitty different these days, of course, but it could still be turned around if need be.’

Two armchairs, covered in plastic sheeting, had been pushed up to one end and a modern table - light wood with a white Formica top - was in the centre. The large casement windows looked onto the garden at the side of the house making it lighter than the scullery. A roll of carpet, also wrapped in plastic, was stored against the skirting on one wall, and a large sheet of yellow linoleum was protecting the floorboards around the table. The linoleum was
spattered with different colours of paint, some of which extended to the wooden boards beyond the floor covering.

A large hand-drawn map was pinned to one wall although it was evidently still being worked on. A set of pens, pencils and other equipment was laid out at that side of the table, giving the impression that the artist had merely nipped out momentarily.

‘Are you the cartographer, Mrs McQuarry?’

‘Ah cartographer, very good, there’s a fancy word for everything is there not? Now don’t be offended I’m only joking with you. Yes, it’s all my own handiwork. Drawn a little from memory and a little from these books here.’ Mrs McQuarry opened a door which revealed a bookshelf, crammed with a mix of coffee table-style books and a pile of hard backed jotters that looked like the ones Eoifa had found in the secret room. The landlady pulled one of the jotters out and opened it on the table.

Eoifa also spotted a dark bottle that looked like whisky. She didn’t have Mrs McQuarry marked down as a secret drinker.

The landlady spotted Eoifa looking at the bookshelf. ‘On you go, have a dig around and see what you can see in the shallow press, as we used to call it.’

‘Thanks Mrs McQuarry, what a fabulous collection! When did you write all of these? Are they yours?’ Eoifa indicated the jotters.

‘Och now, what’s all this with “Mrs McQuarry”? Do you not think it might be time for you to call me Jean?’

‘Oh, yes, certainly.’ Eoifa wasn’t sure if Mrs McQuarry imagined she had already divulged her first name.

‘And yes, these are all mine. From long ago and literally far away. I’m sure I used to have more but I can’t for the life of me think where they’ve taken themselves off to.’

Eoifa wanted to ask about the room beside the stairs but she couldn’t confess to having seen the journals without having mentioned them before now. Did you know there’s a wee secret cupboard in your house? She didn’t think she could pull it off. Another day perhaps.

‘This is mine too, do you see what it is?’ The landlady indicated the whisky bottle. ‘Take a closer look.’
Eoifa touched the bottle and discovered it was actually a radio, the whisky cap swivelled and the body of the ‘bottle’ released a crackling noise that took Eoifa back to her childhood when her mother insisted on listening to the radio as accompaniment to all chores, regardless of how awful the reception might be. She laughed, ‘Now that’s clever.’

‘Aye, not bad though it’s a real old timer, I doubt you could get anything more advanced than Clyde One on yon these days. It was my father’s, no idea where he came upon it. There was an old television here too.’ She looked behind the armchairs as though it might have been hidden by them. ‘Father would sit in that chair there by the window here and watch Ironside. He loved that show when it was on in the 70s or was it the 80s? Anyhow it was the repeats in a morning he used to love. He’d sit here with his cup of tea, the Herald crossword and Ironside on the old telly. “Nothing gets past a man in a chair,” he’d say, for the show had a detective in a wheelchair meanwhile he was in his armchair! He was a character my father.’

‘The other thing he used to say, now this is a wee bit morbid, but the old television set was a right old timer, more so even than that radio, it sat on these stalks of legs like a stork I used to think. Anyhow, when you went to switch it off, it was one of those where the picture got smaller and then went into a wee dot in the centre of the screen before finally vanishing altogether. That would be way before you’re time.’

‘Oh I think I remember having one that did that in my mum’s house.’

‘Och I’m sure you’re just saying that to make me feel less old.’ Jean smiled and slapped the plastic on the back of the chair which made a crinkling sound. ‘Anyways, father would be sitting here and he’d say, that dot’s like the way a human life fades away. Regardless of the cause of death, we all go gradually as those we leave behind start to forget us. The memory of us gets smaller, becomes a wee dot and then fades away altogether. In a generation or two, there’s no one can remember how ye really were. That might seem sad but that’s a fact.’

‘When I was a wee girl, I’d say to him, “I’ll remember you daddy!”’

Eoifa thought she could see Jean’s eyes glistening and feared another funny turn, but before she could think of the best response, the landlady was off chattering again.
‘Maybe I moved it to another room for fear of paint splattering. Ben and I get awful free with our creativity!’ She laughed and moved over to the table where she’d set the journal. ‘Now I wanted to let you see this.’ She beckoned Eoifa over as she leafed slowly through the book. ‘You see I made all these notes when I lived in Galicia.’

‘Ah, that’s the map! I was trying to guess the shape.’

‘Well, if you come right round to this side of the table there’ll be no need to guess, you can see the place names.’ Jean seemed a little put out.

‘And where did you stay when you were there?’

‘Province of Ourense,’ she pointed to the centre bottom of the map, ‘with a family in a wee farm, more like a croft you would call it. The countryside round there, it’s a wee bit like, do you know France at all? In fact, do you know Galicia itself would be the better first question?’

‘I know France, I’m not so sure about Galicia. I think Santander is the closest I’ve been.’

‘Ah well now that’s further along towards France. Anyways, do you know the Cevennes where Robert Louis Stevenson travelled with his donkey?’

‘Yes…’ Eoifa laughed.

‘Good, well the Ourense countryside is a bit like that, lots of terraces and lovely walking around all the monasteries. Except it’s a dodgy business heading off for a decent walk because there are no proper maps of the place, or there certainly weren’t then. No – what d’you call them? – Ordnance survey maps.’

‘Wow! Really? Even now?’

‘Even now in some parts I believe. I’ve not investigated it myself for a few years. It was the 60s when I lived there first but I made a return trip in the late 70s, after Franco, and it was much the same. Always meant to take Ben back.’

‘And you’ve been drawing the maps ever since?…Oh! was Ben with you in the 70s?’

‘Well he appeared not long after, shall we say. But that’s one for another time.’ Mrs McQuarry, or Jean as Eoifa would need to learn to call her, closed the journal and took it back to the cupboard. ‘I’ve been thinking I might try to put in the Galician place names, you know they’ve their own language? But I never picked it up. It was illegal to use it in those days, worse even than the treatment of the Gaelic.’ The landlady looked particularly old as she struggled to slot the
book into the shelf, Eoifa helped her to hold back the other books to make space.

‘What took you to Spain back in the 60s, you must’ve been a young girl?’
‘Aye, young and more than a bit daft.’ She laughed.

A car horn sounded outside. ‘Oh now that’ll be Ben. Would you do me a very great favour and run out there to let him know I’ll be out in a minute? Tell him to go on upstairs. I’ll lock up here.’

‘Yes, sure.’

It looked like Jean had forgotten all about the lavender that took them into the apartment in the first place. Not that it mattered. Eoifa doubted its moth repelling properties.

When Eoifa got back to her apartment she noticed the daffodils drooping. She had put them in a vase but had forgotten to fill it with water. The first teacher she had when she started at primary school, Mrs Swanson in the infants department, had demonstrated how daffodils that had been left without water for an hour or two could be brought back to life by trimming the ends of their stalks and giving them a big drink. The teacher told a story to go with the experiment but Eoifa couldn’t remember it, only the nursery miracle. The infant class used to beg Mrs Swanson to repeat the floral second coming all through daffodil season. Eoifa had wanted to try it at home but her mum kept filling the vase before the flower heads got a chance to droop.

Eoifa opened the fridge; its unremarkable contents stared back. Was it only yesterday she had stood in the supermarket and imagined fresh pasta plus a jar of pesto would make an appealing dinner? Pesto, seriously? Far too much like eating squashed moss!

She looked round for her phone and texted Mary,
- I’ve had a bad day. Some daft lassie asked me to hold her baby on the train

Shit! Where had that come from? She deleted it without sending and retyped,
- How’s you? Had a work visit to Edin today, trip back in time! E//
There had been no texts from Alan since the morning. Perhaps he was working today. She didn’t want to text him first. She messaged Stella instead, inviting her to dinner at the weekend, Friday or Saturday, her choice.

She flipped open her laptop and kidded herself she was working by checking emails and considering flight options to Toulon.

Stella picked Saturday for dinner. She might need to bring Anna. Eoifa wondered what she could do with her. It wouldn’t be much fun trying to chat with a ten year by their sides. Maybe she should offer for her to bring a friend, set the two of them up in the sitting room. They could scooter round the room!

By nine o’clock she was ready for an early night. She padded through to the bathroom. She could just about hear the radio on low in her bedroom, even though her bedroom door was closed. Sound travelled in funny ways through the apartment.

She looked at the bath, wondering how long it might take to fill. She was used to stepping in and out of it every day to have a shower. It was deep but there should be plenty hot water. She checked the plug fitted and ran the hot tap. She hadn’t had a bath for years. She usually hated the idea of lying in the muck she hoped she’d washed off, worrying about all the things she should be doing instead. But tonight, other than sorting through the removal boxes, there were no pressing tasks. She leant on the edge of the bath and watched the water thunder in.

There was a corner bath in the midwife unit at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. For six hours she panted and paced the corridors of the maternity ward with nothing stronger than Paracetamol to dull the pains that began as agony and accelerated from there, winding her from the inside, before receding to a deep rending somewhere around her pelvic floor.

‘Don’t fight it! Go with it! Work the pains!’ the staff nurse assigned to her care was a sadist or an ignoramus, perhaps both. What did she know? The size of her hips suggested her personal experience of childbirth had been more like throwing a handbag up Princes Street than anything Eoifa was going through. The sky outside was dark as Eoifa’s heart when she was finally admitted through the swing doors of the labour ward.
‘Give me drugs!!’ she screamed but apparently only internally because the midwife who met her at the threshold to this promised land offered her a bath.

‘A fucking bath?!’ she articulated aloud that time.

‘I think she was hoping for something a bit stronger.’ Euan, who had nothing more to carry than Eoifa’s small overnight bag, was irritatingly calm. The antenatal nurses had emphasised how little space there would be in the labour ward and therefore all possessions should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Eoifa finally capitulated when the midwife - who was to be accompanied by a trainee, unless there were any objections - offered that Eoifa could have gas and air while she was in the bath.

So she’d lain there like Jabba the Hutt, sucking on the demand value for the gas cylinder. Occasionally giggling, sometimes crying and checking her hands to see why her fingers no longer felt connected to the rest of her body. It had been a long night. She didn’t care if she drowned in the bath. Her body wasn’t under her control and was about to be irreparably torn apart. She urged Euan to go home. No need for him to witness this. But he refused. He wasn’t interested in what she had to say, he wanted his son. She was a vessel. A delivery system for the next generation.

Sean James Campbell arrived at 4:37, 3.23 kilos (or seven pounds two ounces in ‘real money’ as the midwife put it). By six, Eoifa had been delivered back to the maternity ward with Sean in a transparent cot, which the trainee midwife wheeled in beside Eoifa’s bed. The duty nurse instructed Euan to go home because the rest of the ladies were sleeping or feeding their babies.

By lunchtime, he was back with both parents. No matter that Eoifa lay under the scratchy institutional sheet, her face slicked with sweat, her limbs aching with exhaustion and pain in her nether regions that could not be quelled by the Co-Codamol that was the ward sister’s best offer drug-wise.

Euan’s mother yanked back the curtain that loosely shielded Eoifa’s bed from the other three ladies in the ward announcing her grandson needed daylight or he would be jaundiced.

‘Get the wee darling over to that window. You’ve more to think about than yourself now, dear.’
Perhaps she hadn’t put it exactly like that. Perhaps it wasn’t the day after the birth, but in the weeks and months that followed she had certainly reminded Eoifa of the need to put her baby first so often that Eoifa shouted, ‘Perhaps if you fucked off out of my house, I might get a chance to do that!!’ Of course Eoifa hadn’t said that. But she thought those words. And she swallowed them, locked them deep inside.

Her arm was stiff from leaning on it. She gave her elbow a rub and turned the tap off. The room was steamy and her face felt tight with the heat. The idea of lying in the bath no longer appealed. She tugged the plug out by the chain to avoid burning her hand and let the water seep away. The drain gurgled loudly.

She chose a book from the display she had created on the stairs and headed for bed. Apart from the low hum of the radio, the house was unnaturally quiet. No sounds of movement from upstairs.

She lifted the t-shirt she wore as a nightie from the chair in the bedroom and two tiny fawn moths hopped onto the floor. They were lazy gits these moths, always crawling or hopping around, never flying if they could help it. She stamped on them and they disappeared into the carpet leaving only a trace of powder. These were the first she had spotted in the bedroom. This called for a chemical response. She would find an ironmonger or a big chemist in town, somewhere that had moth napalm aplenty.

She threw the duvet back and lifted both pillows but nothing else moved. She took off her socks and dropped them with the t-shirt in a pile on the floor. She wasn’t going back through to the kitchen to put them in the washing machine tonight. The corridor was too silent and the lights were all out. Tomorrow she would consider whether to tackle the source of the problem or perhaps just check the secret room was completely sealed. It might be the excuse she needed to mention the room to the Mrs McQuarry, Jean…it would take a while to get used to being on first name terms.

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The Council asked Eoifa’s company to bid for a possible new contract at short notice - she got a tip-off from another local authority that they were bidding to be Scotland’s preferred supplier of language support packs to small and medium-
sized businesses and that forced the cogs and chains of bureaucracy to spin surprisingly quickly. It also made the week disappear with long hours at work finalising the proposal documents and preparing a presentation for the pitch.

Suddenly it was Thursday, the night she was meeting Alan. And not a school night after all. She’d forgotten it was the Easter weekend with four glorious work-free days ahead.

He wanted to let her see the Glasgow Film Theatre. They were showing a series of movies that had won academy awards in the Best Foreign Film category. They picked a Czech film, Kolya, mainly because its showing time fitted with their plans for dinner.

Alan laughed, ‘Sorry it wasn’t in a language you can speak or I could’ve quizzed you about the subtitles.’ He threaded his fingers through hers as they walked towards the Merchant City.

‘You’re hands are quite soft, considering.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?!’ He nudged her towards the curb but held her from tipping over. ‘For a rufty tufty tradesman?’

‘Yeah, something like that.’

‘I’ll have you know I only spend half of each day oxter deep in cludgies. The rest of the time I’m nicking the special lotions and potions that you ladies leave cluttering up your bathrooms.’

‘Ah I forgot you’re only a ladies’ plumber...oh, that didn’t sound quite right.’ Eoifa laughed.

Alan guided her into the side of the pavement, held her tight and spoke into her ear, ‘I’ll sort out your...’

‘Don’t! I’m not listening.’ She pretended to push him away. ‘Plumber to the Gentry, that’s what I meant to say.’

They walked on, holding hands again, a solid unit so people walking past had to break their own groups and move around the pair.

‘And you’re the gentry I suppose.’

‘Unfortunately no, just one of the plebs.’

The town was busy, of course it was the Thursday before the Easter holiday weekend but Eoifa had never known such a fervent community response to a public holiday, with the exception of Christmas. The streets had a carnival atmosphere. Clusters of smokers puffing near bar doors shouted ‘Happy Easter!’
as she and Alan walked by. ‘Same to you, mate!’ Alan responded. It got busier and busier as they approached Albion Street, at times having to walk in single file, Alan keeping hold of her always, even when revellers moving in the other direction had to dodge their joined hands.

As they squeezed through the crowds at the door of the Merchant Square, she was glad they had booked, thanks to Alan’s local knowledge. Given all the restaurants in Glasgow, she had thought they could walk in someone at half eight on a Thursday.

He was still wearing the glasses he’d needed to read the subtitles at the film. He turned to face her with the lenses steamed up.

‘Look at this! Nobody clearin a space for the half-blind guy!’ He put the specs in his shirt pocket and they negotiated their way through the herd of people that filled the usually cavernous central space.

In the middle, a crowd was gathered around two girls, one playing the violin and the other miming or singing, it was hard to hear. They were dressed as a cross between an Anne Summers rep and the Easter bunny.

Finally, after waiting in line to be seated, they were shown to their table.

‘That a big enough bag you’ve got there, are you thinking of leaving home?’ Alan offered to keep it at his side of the table which was nearer a wall.

‘Not yet. I’ve actually got something for you.’

‘For me?’

She delved in her shoulder bag and pulled out a package in a silver, thick plastic carrier.

‘Ooh, House of Fraser - very nice! What’s this?’

‘It’s no big deal. You don’t need to open it here.’

‘Oh did you find my sweatshirt?!’

‘Not the original but one the same colour. I hope you’ll like it.’

‘I’m sure I will. Thanks Eoifa!’ He looked in the top of the bag without taking the sweatshirt out, ‘It looks great, don’t let me leave it here.’ He folded the bag and went to put it at his feet. ‘Actually would you mind keeping it...’

Eoifa made a mock-frustrated expression and held out her hand for the bag.

‘...sorry, I know, I’m such a kid. But I wouldn’t want to lose another one.’
The waiter explained the kitchen was really busy and gave them some complimentary bread while they waited for their food to arrive. Eoifa had missed lunch and now, surrounded with all the food smells, she felt her stomach complaining about her lax attitude to mealtimes.

They talked about the film which involved a young boy being looked after by an initially reluctant male musician.

‘I was nearly greetin for the wee fella, I don’t mind admitting.’

Eoifa agreed it was emotionally charged but disagreed that it was sad.

‘Don’t you think it showed that the boy could be happy in different environments? Provided they’re looked after, children adapt.’

‘I’m no sure I’d have adapted to my mum leaving me with a grumpy cull.’

Alan dipped the end of a large piece of bread in the shallow container of oil and vinegar.

‘Why is it always the mother who gets blamed? What about his dad? Anyway, I’m not sure I’d have gone back for him. He was fine with Louka, the musician. Think of all the freedom Kolya would have growing up.’

Alan set the dripping bread on his side plate.

‘I’m no sayin I’ve never wanted to run away from my family but I’d miss them like hell. I mean, they’re family, aren’t they? It’s ok for me to slag them off but I’d fight anyone else to the death if they tried it. I’m sure you feel the same about your family, don’t you?’

‘I don’t have a family.’

‘What?! None? I know you said your parents aren’t around but do you not have uncles, aunts, cousins...?’

‘No. My mum was an only child and my dad had a brother but he was much older and died when I was tiny. He never got married.’

‘My God. That’s amazing. Well, it’s a bit sad really, but you’re amazing. I mean you’re great, getting on with your life. But it must be so tough.’

‘Not really, I mean, I was left a bit of money, not loads but enough to help out. I’ve still got to work, which is fine. But I don’t have any ties. I can take off anytime.’ Eoifa waved her water glass in a gesture of freedom.

‘Don’t be taking off tonight, not before the bill comes anyway.’

Eoifa smiled, hoping he wouldn’t mention that first night when she sent him away.
They talked about this and that. Eoifa’s voice was getting hoarse having to talk loudly over the noise of the crowds.

‘So what age were you when you moved to Edinburgh?’ Alan took a swig of wine and lifted the bottle to refill their glasses. ‘And I’m disappointed it was Edinburgh you chose, incidentally, it should’ve been Glasgow.’ They both smiled.

‘I left home at 17, well nearly 18, for Uni and I told my mum I was never coming back.’

‘Did you really?’ Alan laughed. ‘When I was 25 my dad told me I’d to get a place of my own coz he didnae want me bringing any lassies back that he couldnae get a crack at himself. Sorry…but that’s more or less how it went. I’ve stopped taking my washing home on Sundays now though.’

Eoifa threw a crust of bread at him.

‘I do still go back for Sunday lunch most weeks. It’s a big thing for our clan. I like it. My brother brings his boys. My sister’s got a wee girl. My ma dotes on them all.’

‘Sounds noisy! But you don’t have any kids yourself?’ She tried to keep the question light.

‘Not personally,’ he teased. ‘No, never settled down at the right time for it.’ He shrugged but looked wistful. ‘I’ve settled down a lot now. I was a bit, how can ah put it? Wild.’

‘Ah now the real reason your folks got you to leave home!’ It was Eoifa’s turn to poke fun.

‘Spot on! Och no, my folks are great. Ah gave them a lot to put up with.’ He took a bite of bread and gave Eoifa a cheeky smirk. ‘Oh, nothing too desperate. Just, you know, the usual, left school early, thought I was a big guy. Started workin wi ma uncle, it was borin work but decent pay for ma age so ah started goin out at the weekends. I was never in any big bother, just daft lad stuff wi the drink, loads ae drink…’ he rolled his eyes for emphasis, ‘and messin aboot wi ma mates. All that.’

Eoifa nodded. She wondered if he’d ever been in trouble with the police but it felt too prim to ask.

‘Talking of drink,’ he lifted his wine glass, ‘cheers!’ They clinked glasses. ‘So, how about you? You went straight to Uni, how did that feel, moving so far from home?’
‘Yeah, it felt pretty good actually. You know, getting away.’
‘Must’ve been tough for yer mum all the same.’
‘I dunno, I was never that close to my folks. I always knew I would leave and so did they, well my dad had already left.’ She gave a shallow laugh.
Alan nodded, waiting for her to continue.
‘I picked the biggest suitcase we had in the house and packed all my stuff in that and a shoulder bag. My mum said, “If you get a job in Edinburgh for Christmas, it’ll save you a trip back home.”’
‘Och surely she was just testing to see what you’d say, d’you no think?’
‘I don’t think so. I mean, she probably didn’t mean I couldn’t come home, just making a dig about me not earning money and going to University instead.’
Alan raised his eyebrows.
‘I think she maybe did get up and make me eat some toast before I left in the morning, I can’t remember now. I do remember I’d to walk down the road myself for the six o’clock bus. It took three hours on that bus just to get to Inverness and I had to wait there another two for the train to Edinburgh. My case was so heavy I couldn’t get it into the left luggage lockers at Inverness Station and had to stand with it by the platform.’
‘Maybe if you’d no been so cheeky sayin you werenae comin back, your old mum would’ve given you a lift, eh? Did you think of that?!’ They both laughed.
The waiter arrived with their food, warning Eoifa in particular not to touch her plate. She could feel the heat radiating from it.
As they ate, Eoifa thought about her departure to university all those years ago. Although she did have a fall out with her mum the night before she left, she hadn’t really got the bus and train on her own. Her mum gave her a lift all the way to Edinburgh in her silver Talbot Sunbeam. Eoifa drove the first part of the way and they argued about how fast she was going, especially around the sharp braes at the Struie. Her mum had overreacted, bracing her hands against the dashboard and sucking air between her teeth in that way she had.
They arrived at Pollock Halls in the early evening, both a bit stressed at navigating their way through the city traffic. A few Freshers were still unpacking but most had arrived the day before. Eoifa’s room was on the second floor of Holland House and had institutional grey-green walls, still better than the burnt orange that some folk had to deal with. She walked her mum back to the car
park but refused to go out for dinner. She hadn’t thought about it until tonight, but that meant she had left her mum to find the B&B on her own.

‘Penny for them…’ Alan mopped up the last of the sauce on his plate with a chip.

‘Oh sorry, I was miles away thinking about…stuff…and nonsense.’

‘I like the sound of “nonsense”, tell me more about that! Do you fancy a coffee?’

‘Yeah, why not?’ Eoifa pushed her plate away and set her napkin on top.

‘Okay, you order up - Americano for me please - I’m just gonna nip out to powder my nose and I’ll see if I can shout up a cab. The taxi ranks will be like the Wild West tonight.’

Alan got a text when the taxi arrived and they made their way outside. It was easier exiting Merchant Square with the performance area closed and fewer people milling around, most having been seated in one of the restaurants or having opted to eat and drink elsewhere. Outside, on the corner of Candleriggs and Bell Street, there were revellers aplenty, groups moving between bars or individuals trying to jump into taxis.

‘Let me just check which of these is ours.’ There were several cars stopped with idling engines, double parked or bumped onto the pavements. Most of them were private hires rather than the black hackney cabs making it harder to distinguish taxis from regular cars. Eoifa stayed close to Alan as he scoured the street.

On Candleriggs, some shouting between five or six young guys condensed into a carelessly choreographed ballet of flaying fists and loosely directed boots. Eoifa couldn’t tell if it was a good-natured scuffle or a serious fight. No one was on the ground and there wasn’t any blood yet, but she didn’t want to stare. A middle-aged couple walking past tutted, ‘that’s a sin,’ and a bouncer minding the door of a nearby bar shouted that he’d call the cops if the lads didn’t, ‘cool their jets’. This elicited muffled responses from the group that sounded like, ‘nae bother, mate’, although there were some quieter retorts that sounded less conciliatory.

Alan walked Eoifa round onto Bell Street where he finally spotted their taxi sitting along from the street corner.
‘Some night, eh?’ the driver said as they got in. ‘Right, where are we off to folks?’

The taxi moved slowly along Bell Street and, as he waited at the junction to turn into High Street, a girl in skyscraper heels and a skirt so tight she could hardly bend her legs, tried to get into the front seat. She pulled on the door handle but it wouldn’t open. The driver gesticulated that he already had a hire.

‘The cheek of some folk, eh?’ the driver jerked his head over his shoulder to address Alan and Eoifa.

‘Aye ya fuckin hun ye!’ the girl shouted at the taxi from the pavement, and slapped the roof or the door, Eoifa couldn’t see which. She was glad to be inside with central locking.

‘And the same to yourself, darlin,’ the driver retorted to the closed window as he drove off. ‘Get her eh? Dunno what she’s doin walkin about like that anyway. Some lassies are askin for trouble.’

They joined a queue of traffic filing past the Trongate. Alan lent across to her side of the backseat so he didn’t have to shout, ‘Much as I know you’ll want me to, I can’t stay at yours tonight. I’m on an early tomorrow, big job out at Cambuslang.’

‘That’s fine, I’m working tomorrow too.’

‘Well, you could pretend to be a wee bit more upset than that! Maybe I’ll sneak in for a quick kiss. And a chinwag with that gorgeous landlady...’

‘Stop it you’re seriously starting to freak me out.’

‘Jealous, that’s your trouble.’ He squeezed her hand.

‘Oh, what am I thinking? I don’t have work tomorrow. Hurrah for Easter, my most recent favourite religious festival.’ Must’ve been the wine making her forget a holiday.

‘Aye, it’s all rest for the wicked!’

‘How come you’re working on the holiday weekend?’

‘Ach it’s a job my uncle set up. I think it’s for one of his mates which might mean there’s no even extra time for it bein a holiday.’

‘Plumbing or removal work?’

‘Bit of both I think. My uncle said it’s a big stone house, lotsa traditional features so I’ll be takin more snaps of those. Apparently there’s a piano needing shifted from one side of a room to another and an en-suite to be fitted.’
‘That’ll keep you busy.’
‘Eh?’

The driver put on some music. Eoifa didn’t want to shout over that and the engine noise, she gave Alan a thumb’s up and looked out of the car window. She didn’t know this route over the river. She’d been to the Tron Theatre but had walked back along Argyle Street to get a train at Central Station.

The streets got quieter and darker with fewer bars and restaurants as they headed south. They seemed to be passing through some kind of nether world before more sandstone flats started to appear, followed by a few shops, all closed but some still lit up showing Asian dresses with elaborate gold braiding. There were small offices offering legal advice or services to send money abroad, and what looked like greengrocers with metal grills pulled across the shop fronts.

She thought about what Alan said at dinner. The way he spoke about family and kids. Strange he’d never had any of his own. Even stranger that he wasn’t married or living with someone. She felt suddenly lucky the way things had worked out. Of all the removal men in all of the world... She glanced at him. He was looking out the window at the other side. He squeezed her hand and absently lifted it to his lips. How would he react if he ever knew?

They crossed into Pollokshaws Road or maybe it was still Eglinton Street at that point, Eoifa could never remember, and then it was a right turn into Nithsdale. Eoifa was on more familiar territory. The car advanced into Pollokshields and the streets widened, even before the big mansions, the flats, or ‘middle class tenements’ as she’d heard them described, were accorded more space and there were areas of greenery with trees growing along the railway lines or in small pocket parks.

‘Oh ho, what’s goin on here.’ Alan craned his neck to the front.
‘Someone’s had a rough night.’ The driver swung in to park at the curb.

Eoifa leaned between the front seats to see out of the windscreen. An ambulance was stopped outside the gates of her house. Its lights weren’t flashing but the rear doors were open and a paramedic in a green uniform was illuminated inside.
‘Shit…must be Mrs McQuarry or Ben.’ She hoisted her bag on her shoulder and opened the car door. ‘Oh, I’ll give you some cash.’ She turned back, one leg already on the pavement.

‘It’s ok, I’ll settle up. You go on and investigate. I’ll be out in a moment.’

After a bit of negotiating with the paramedic, Eoifa was allowed into the ambulance where Mrs McQuarry was strapped to a trolley and attached to a heart monitor. There were wires coming out of her clothes at the top and bottom and more taped to each hand.

‘I’m really fine now m’dear. Don’t you go worrying yourself.’ She was breathless. ‘I’m just sorry to have caused all this fuss.’

‘I’m sure you’ve been no bother at all.’ Eoifa reached uncertainly to touch one of Jean’s hands. She felt a little cold. Eoifa tried to arrange the blue mesh hospital blanket so it provided more cover for the landlady. There wasn’t much space in the ambulance. Eoifa perched awkwardly not wanting to sit on the narrow trolley but not quite able to stand either.

‘She’s been a top class patient, haven’t you Mrs McQuarry?’ The paramedic had a clipboard and was filing out a series of forms.

‘Aren’t there normally two of you?’ Eoifa asked, hoping she didn’t sound rude.

‘My colleague’s in the front there.’

There was a window with meshed glass but Eoifa couldn’t see into the cab. She turned back to Jean. ‘What happened?’

‘Och, I just took a wee turn and Ben, he’s such a good lad, got straight on to 999. And now these boys want me to go to hospital.’ She took Eoifa’s hand. ‘I’m sorry to ask, dear, but…Ben will be fine, he can see to himself for a night, but I’d feel so much better if I knew you were keeping an eye out for him.’

‘Yes, yes I can do that.’

Mrs McQuarry, Jean, appeared to have aged by at least ten years since Eoifa last saw her. Although it was no laughing matter, Eoifa couldn’t help thinking the landlady resembled a turtle as she tried to lift her head up with her wrinkled neck.

‘Where is Ben?’ It was odd he wasn’t with his mum.
‘He’s upstairs...in the house. I asked these nice men not to let him see me getting carried out.’ She licked her lips. Her mouth appeared dry. ‘I told him to stay inside and play some piano. I hope I’ll be back tomorrow.’

‘I’ll go up and see him in a minute.’

‘Thank you, dear. I knew I could rely on you. He’s a good boy. Won’t give you trouble.’

‘Do you want me to stay in your apartment with him?’

‘Not a bit of it.’ She waved her hand and the wires flapped. ‘Maybe just let him know you’re there. I’ll get something sorted at the Centre for him in the morning.’

‘Can I do that for you? Is there anyone I can call?’ Eoifa turned towards the pavement as she became aware of Alan standing at the back of the ambulance. ‘He’s with me.’ She said to the paramedic. ‘I’ll be right out, Alan.’

‘Is that your nice young man?’ Jean tried to raise her head.

‘Yes, we were out having dinner and seeing a film.’

‘Oh I used to love the movies.’

‘Okay, I hate to break this up but we’re needing to get this lady off to the hospital.’ The paramedic put his clipboard on top of some other equipment, more monitors by the look. It was packed with dials, cylinders, tubes, Eoifa couldn’t take it all in.

‘Which hospital are you taking her to?’

‘The Vicky first and they’ll either keep her in a ward or send her on to the Southern.’

‘The Vicky?’

‘Sorry, the Victoria Infirmary. We’ll take her to A&E, Accident and Emergency, first for assessment and they’ll decide whether to keep her in and where she’ll be transferred from there.’

‘Might I get home?’ Jean’s voice wavered.

‘It’s a possibility but I’d say they’ll keep you in. Your symptoms suggest a wee heart issue but they’ll check you out properly in the hospital. Your heart rate and blood pressure aren’t looking too bad at the moment. You were a wee bit woozy when we first saw you though, weren’t you? So they’ll want to check up on what caused that.’ The paramedic turned to Eoifa ‘I’ll travel in the back here with her. Are you coming or staying?’
‘Staying, I need to check on her son.’ Eoifa got out onto the pavement next to Alan.

‘Sure, ok, well I’ve got your details. If you like, you could ring the hospital in about an hour to see what they’re doing with her. But it’s a busy night, holiday weekend. I can’t guarantee how quickly she’ll be assessed. She’ll be a priority though, with her age.’

‘I heard that!’ Jean quavered from behind the paramedic.

Eoifa updated Alan. ‘Look, if you need to head off, that’s fine but I better get in and see how Ben’s doing.’

‘No, I wouldn’t feel right leaving you. I’ll stay til you see how her son is. D’you want me to come up with you or wait in your place? Sorry to say, but I could do with getting in for a pee, it’s no the warmest standing out here.’ He flapped his arms around his body.

Eoifa gave Alan her keys and went up the stairs to see Ben. The door to the landlady’s apartment was open a crack, either Ben or the paramedics hadn’t closed it properly. Made her think he might not manage on his own. Although she could have walked in, she rang the bell and waited for him to answer. He didn’t come to the door, so she pushed it open a little further and shouted gently. ‘Been, it’s only me, Eoifa.’

After a delay she heard him plodding through the hall.

‘Hello Eoifa. Mum’s gone.’ He stood squarely in the doorframe.

‘Yes, I was speaking to her. She’s going to get checked up at hospital and you should be able to see her tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow. Yes.’ Ben nodded his head once.

This was going to be trickier than Eoifa had imagined. She hoped he would show her in and offer her a list of phone numbers she could call.

‘Would you like me to come in and see that you’re all right?’

‘Oh I’m fine, Eoifa. Thank you.’ Ben spoke slowly and deliberately. He didn’t move from the doorframe, either to let her in or to close the door.

Now Eoifa had this chance to look directly at his face close up, she could see he was older than she had first thought. It felt more awkward asking to look after an adult than a chid. She wished she had paid closer attention, asked more questions when she was chatting to his mum before.
‘Yes, your mum said you would be doing well but she asked if I would come up for a chat, and I wondered if you would like a cup of tea...or maybe some company, to chat, like your mum mentioned.’

‘I don’t drink tea. Don’t like it. But I could make you a cup if you would like one Eoifa.’

This was the breakthrough she hoped for. Ben showed her in to the kitchen, a square room with a substantial dining table in the middle and units around the walls. She was unsure whether to sit or stand while she waited for him to make the tea. He was very safety conscious, checking the kettle was unplugged after it had boiled, using a teapot rather than popping the teabag directly into a mug. He wasn’t speedy but it allowed her to have a good look around the room for possible places Jean might have kept the number for the Centre he attended. There was nothing pinned to the fridge door. There was a blackboard but it looked as though it was only used for shopping lists or reminders, no letters or other notes were dangling from it.

When the tea was ready, Ben asked Eoifa if she would like to go through to the sitting room. She agreed, apart from anything else, she wanted the chance to check another room for possible notes.

The curtains were open and she could see the house across the avenue was all lit up. Their garden was illuminated too; fairy lights were wound around some of the bushes and trees but she couldn’t see anyone outside enjoying them. Perhaps there had been a party and the guests had gone home.

She sat on one of the armchairs. Ben had used a small tray to carry her tea through from the kitchen. He set it on an occasional table and checked she could reach it before sitting himself on the end of the large settee nearest Eoifa’s chair.

‘You’re not worried about your mum, are you?’ Eoifa decided to be direct.

‘No. I will see her tomorrow.’

‘The ambulance man said she might be kept in hospital overnight.’

‘Yes. I will need to visit her in the hospital tomorrow.’ Ben looked at his shoes but didn’t seem upset.

‘Do you know how you’ll get there? I mean, I can organise that for you...’ Eoifa flustered, ‘...but is there anybody else you might want to ask...for help, to help you?’
‘No…’ Ben didn’t seem so certain this time, ‘...there’s the Centre but they
don’t do hospital visits.’ His brow furrowed.

‘Don’t worry, Ben. I can take you to see your mum tomorrow. I only
wanted to ask if there was anyone else your mum might want you to speak to?
Do you have any other relatives in Glasgow?’

‘No.’ He shook his head absently.

There was a knock on the apartment door and Alan called out, ‘Hello-oh,
anybody home?’

Eoifa stood up quickly. She wasn’t sure how Ben would feel about a
stranger coming into his house. Ben stood too and went into the hall.

‘Hiya, Ben, is it?’ Alan smiled. ‘I’m Alan, Eoifa’s friend.’

‘Yes!’ Ben was more animated than he’d been when Eoifa arrived. ‘I know
you, Alan Van-Man.’ He beamed.

‘Well I’ve no van with me tonight, but you’re right. You’ve a good
memory, eh?’

‘Oh yes. Good memory. For lots of daft things, mum says.’

‘Well daft things are good. What’s the daftest thing you remember?’

Ben looked thoughtful, a smile twitching across his mouth. They were all
standing in the hall. ‘Granny’s knickers!’ Ben shouted suddenly.

‘Is that a book or a telly programme?’ Alan laughed. ‘My niece and
nephews have a book called The Queen’s Knickers. They nearly pee their pants
laughing at that one.’

Eoifa was lost but Ben seemed so relaxed, she didn’t want to interrupt.

After a bit more banter, Alan said, ‘Now, do we know who we’re go-
nna call in the morning for this young gentleman?’

‘Ghostbusters!’ Ben shouted.

‘Good one, Ben. They might be handy but I’ll tell you what we really
need, did you give Eoifa the number of that Centre your mum mentioned?’

Eoifa shook her head subtly at Alan, keeping a smile on her face so she
didn’t worry Ben. Ben was still giggling.

‘Right Mr Ghostbuster, away you and grab us some phone numbers.’ Alan
rubbed his hands together. ‘I want the Centre and anyone else you know your
mum would want you to call, ok? How quick do you think you can be?’

‘Not long. Wait here!’ Ben rushed off.
‘What d’you think, Eoifa, should we time him?’ Alan raised his voice so Ben would hear. He turned to Eoifa, ‘so, how’re you doing, gorgeous?’ He hugged her into his side and kissed her head.

‘Are you wanting to get away?’ She checked her watch, ‘It’s nearly midnight.’

‘No, I’d rather stay and see you sorted. Is that ok?’

‘Yes, of course.’ It was annoying to admit, but she was glad of his help.

Ben came back with two numbers for the Centre and one for someone who sounded like a social worker. No other relatives right enough. Alan’s next mission was to ‘suss out’ the sleeping arrangements. Ben was eager to stay in his own bed.

‘Now you know where I am if you need me?’ Eoifa gave Ben her mobile number as well.

‘Posher than my phone.’ Ben said, holding up his mobile which had buttons rather than a touchscreen. ‘I’ve got fat fingers.’ He laughed and held up the hand that didn’t have the phone in it. Eoifa was pleased to see he knew how to put her number straight into his phone.

‘Your fingers can’t be too bad, you play the piano so nicely.’ She remembered.

‘But piano keys are fatter than phone keys, Eoifa.’ Ben explained patiently.

Alan sent him off to get ready for bed and, before they left, asked Ben to give Eoifa a set of keys for the upstairs apartment, ‘just in case’.

As they were leaving, Eoifa remembered the cat, ‘Oh, where’s Hobbit, Ben?’

‘Sleeping. On mum’s bed.’

‘He won’t need out tonight, will he? It’s a bit late.’

‘No, he can use his special toilet. I don’t go out in my PJs.’ Ben tightened the belt on his dressing gown.

‘Alright Ben, you’re a good man!’ Alan bumped fists with him and Ben smiled.

‘Goodnight, Alan Van-Man.’

Eoifa patted his arm, ‘night, Ben. You call or text if you need me, ok? And I’ll see you for breakfast.’
‘Ooh that sounds good, see ya!’ Alan headed down the external steps.
‘Goodnight, Eoifa. Thank you.’

When they got back inside Eoifa’s apartment, Alan asked if she wanted him to stay. ‘I’d need to grab my overalls and tools in the morning but I can easy text my uncle now and let him know I’ll be there by nine instead of eight tomorrow.’
‘No, honestly. It’s kind of you to offer, but I’m sure I’ll be fine.’
‘Did you hear from the hospital yet?’
Eoifa checked her phone, ‘Nothing.’
‘Well that’s more or less an hour, d’you want to try giving them a ring while I’m still here?’
‘I can use the phone in your absence, you know.’ Eoifa tried not to get cross. Just because he handled the Ben situation better than her didn’t mean she was incapable.
‘Ok, ok, Ms Independent. I’ll ring for a taxi.’ He felt for his phone in the back pocket of his jeans, making a face at her.
She smiled back. One of her mum’s friends used to call her Little Miss Independence.
‘What? Why are you looking at me like that?’
‘Nothing, just thinking of something.’ Eoifa turned to look in a drawer for some paper before phoning the hospital.
‘What were you thinking of?’ He moved over to her and hugged her from behind.
‘Something daft - granny’s knickers!’
They both laughed. He pulled her so she lent against his body and he nuzzled her neck. ‘You sure you want me to go...?’ She squirmed round so she was facing him and they kissed.
After a few minutes she pushed back, ‘I better phone the hospital.’
‘I didn’t think I bit you that hard.’ He stepped to the side to let her past.
‘Ha, ha.’
‘Sorry, poor taste - me, not you, you taste good.’ Alan stretched, flexing his arms to the side in a crucifix movement.
‘Easter symbolism abounds.’ Eoifa lifted her phone from the worktop. Still no message, she’d have to phone them.
‘I’ll ring a cab then, if you’re sure.’ He caught her expression. ‘You’re sure, you’re sure, I see ya!’

After being passed around by the hospital switchboard, Eoifa got through to a staff nurse in A&E. The nurse took Eoifa’s details, checking they tallied with the information Mrs McQuarry had given when she was admitted. Jean had been assessed and would be kept in overnight for more tests. She was being monitored as though she’d had a minor cardiac arrest, although all observations since she’d first arrived were in or around the normal range. Given her age and reported symptoms, it was also possible that she’d had a myocardial infarction. Eoifa took some notes so she could explain things to Ben.

The nurse said they were still waiting for a bed to become free on a woman’s ward at the Vicky. There were beds at the Southern General but there was a queue for an ambulance to transfer her.

‘So where is she now?’

‘On a trolley with us in A&E. It’s not ideal but it’s a holiday weekend, we’re chock-a-block down here.’

‘Yes, she chose a bad time to get sick.’

The nurse gave Eoifa a direct dial number for A&E but begged her not to overuse it. If she was still on shift when Mrs McQuarry was transferred to a ward, she’d try to text Eoifa.

Alan’s taxi arrived shortly after Eoifa finished the phone call. He was about to leave when she remembered the sweatshirt, which she grabbed out of her shoulder bag for him as he stood by the door.

‘Now I’ve nothing to come back for.’ He joked.

Finally, Eoifa climbed into bed and her phoned glowed. It was Ben.

– got up for a glass of water but I’m back in bed and going off to sleep again just now
– that’s good, sleep well Ben. Eoifa/
– I will, thank you Eoifa

It was after one in the morning. She was glad he was fine and the texting worked but hoped he wasn’t going to send reports of all his movements.
She lay in the dark and thought about the nights and days she had watched Sean’s baby monitor glow. She admitted she had often turned the volume off, leaving only the green and red lights dancing. Couldn’t bear the screaming or her body’s automaton reaction. She’d been disgusted the first time she looked down at the dark blotches on her t-shirt. She, who had always avoided extremes of emotion - although that was already changing since she’d first met her mother-in-law - was wracked with revulsion at the act of rebellion by her own body. How dare her breasts decide to leak? Out on display, not even safely tucked between her legs and capable of being disguised with a pair of thick jeans, there was a limit to the number of pads you could sneak into your bra unnoticed - that limit was none, unless you wore the chunkiest of jumpers.

Euan worked ridiculously long hours and even when he was home, he wasn’t interested in anything she had to say, except to make fun of her. Not Sean though, Sean was to be taken deadly seriously. His, ‘son and heir’ he’d used the phrase so many times even thinking about it now made her want to punch someone.

All those hours she had spent, pinned to her chair, trying to get it right with breastfeeding. Or, on Tuesday afternoons, shuffling along to the breastfeeding workshop.

‘Breastfeeding workshops, breastfeeding advisors. My God! You young mothers don’t know you’re born.’ Margaret had been as supportive as Eoifa expected. ‘She doesn’t know she’s born, does she my little cherub.’ She squeezed and baby-talked at Sean who gurgled on her knee. Eoifa wished she could train him to shit or projectile vomit on command.

There was a horror film Eoifa had watched as teenager. As the young heroine turns the key to her front door, the monster she thinks she has shut out of her house, speaks from somewhere inside, ‘that’s us both locked in for the night.’ So many times Eoifa had the same thought as Euan headed off for some evening meeting or trip to the golf club, while she was imprisoned with the little parasite draining the nutrients from her body. Euan took up golf when Sean was born, his father gave him the membership. Who the hell takes up golf when they’ve just had a baby?!

‘That’s us both locked in for the night.’ She’d say, swapping the baby monster from one breast to the other. What you really needed was an extra hand. You’d to do your best not to drop baby, and you needed to present your
breast to baby’s mouth but baby didn’t always play his part so you really needed the extra hand for angling his head, sticking a finger in the corner of his mouth and quickly slipping the slick nipple in to replace your finger. Sometimes you could wedge the baby on your knee with a pillow, so you could manage with just the two hands. Other times your nipples hurt so much because they’d cracked and you were prepared to try anything, including cures straight from the Middle Ages, like keeping a savoy cabbage in your bra, because someone had heard it might help ease the pain.

Once Eoifa got Sean latched on, she could be trapped in that exact spot for an hour or more. Terrified that if she moved he’d slide off and the dreadful cycle would need to begin. Eoifa never imagined she would fantasise about a simple glass of water. Breastfeeding made her so thirsty but she couldn’t get up to pour a glass herself. She had to sit there being siphoned. Desiccating.

One afternoon, she had fantasised about a mouthful of iced water. The pang in her teeth as she sucked it from the glass would be glorious. Or maybe she would gulp it straight down, a rushing stream across her tongue. She’d planned how she might make her way over to the tap, how she could reach into the cupboard for a glass. No, too high, she’d have to make do with a semi-clean one from breakfast that now lay beside the sink. ‘Any minute’, she thought to herself or perhaps she’d said it aloud but quietly so Sean wouldn’t get wind of her plan, ‘any minute I’ll stand. Push myself forward onto my feet.’ She’d done it before. Made it from the bedroom to the living room without him stopping feeding. Sean had patted her breast as he fed, slapping her, impatient for all the things she wasn’t able to give him. What about me? The tears had rolled down her cheeks, what about all the things I can’t have anymore?!

Food that required the use of both hands was impossible. She survived for months on filled pasta that could be speared with a fork or soup in a mug. No surprise she got back into her jeans. Holy shit what was so great about fitting into your old clothes when you were starving? The child was indirectly consuming her flesh, filtering it through her breast milk.

She’d bought a selection of baby books while pregnant, laughing at the elaborate routines they recommended. Now she scoured them hoping for a nugget of advice. What did they suggest for days like these? She leafed through one awkwardly, balancing the book on top of the nursing infant so she only needed the use of one hand to turn the pages. There was a whole chapter on the
Baby Blues. Was that it? Was she actually depressed? She tried to talk to Euan that night over dinner. She had managed to put Sean down in his cot and ignore the crying for long enough to boil pasta and throw in a jar of sauce while Euan showered as he liked to do when he first got home.

She slid the book along the table, ‘have a look at chapter twelve. I think that might be me.’

He opened the cover and glanced at the list of contents. ‘The Baby Blues? I’ve got all their CDs.’ And he’d tossed the book onto the pile of soft toys that were propped in the corner.

‘Aren’t you going to read it?’

‘I’m eating. I’ll maybe have a look later.’

Eoifa was incredulous.

‘What? We’ve got a baby, we don’t need to read about them as well.’

Eoifa rubbed her eyes and checked her phone, nothing. She got up and went to the toilet. She wouldn’t text Ben about it though. It was a relief that she could laugh again. She knew she’d made the right decision. No regrets, ever.

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Eoifa found out in the morning that Mrs McQuarry had been transferred to the Southern General. Eoifa wasn’t surprised. What had the nurse meant last night when she said they were waiting for a bed to become free in the Vicky? Who got discharged from a hospital bed in the middle of the night, unless they were literally waiting for someone to die? ‘More likely moved to another ward or a different hospital,’ Alan pointed out when they chatted on the phone that night. He was exhausted after his early start and a full day of heavy lifting.

Ben had woken before Eoifa and made her breakfast in the upstairs kitchen. He texted when it was ready. Just cereal and toast but he’d set the table and offered to boil her an egg when she got there.

Once they’d eaten, he was keen to go and visit his mum. He’d made her a card.

‘You have been busy this morning.’ Eoifa said and felt an emotion she wasn’t expecting when a proud smile stretched across his face.
Before they could leave for the hospital, she had to make phone calls to the Centre and the social worker. Eoifa couldn’t speak to Ben’s assigned social worker; they were operating with a skeleton staff, as the person on switchboard duty told her several times. ‘Ah shouldnae even be on the switchboard, ah’m only helpin oot.’ And a marvellous job you’re doing, Eoifa managed not to say.

Eventually she got transferred to someone who appeared to be reading off notes left by someone else. Social services hadn’t had much contact with Ben recently, she said. She used phrases like, ‘keep themselves to themselves’, ‘all seems to be stable,’ and ‘minimum intervention’. None of which suggested they would be taking over from Eoifa imminently. The Centre staff were more sympathetic. They too were working a reduced service for Easter but nonetheless the person on the phone knew Ben. He went there two afternoons and one morning a week for different activities. If his mum was to be kept in longer term, they could look at extending his hours or they were prepared to have him at the Centre for a full day three days a week, if that helped Eoifa out short term.

Eoifa was glad she had gone back to her own apartment to make the calls. She didn’t want Ben to overhear her emphasising that she didn’t think he could be left alone all day while she was at work. The lady from the Centre said Ben was a big help on the days he was with them and they’d be happy to help but there were fire regulations and limits on the numbers they could take.

It was nearly noon by the time Ben and Eoifa got to the hospital, between the phone calls, packing some toiletries and clean clothes for Jean, and waiting for a taxi. Mrs McQuarry looked a little pale but chirped away in her usual style. She was delighted they’d made it and apologised for having to receive them in bed, ‘looking like a burst sofa’. Eoifa felt guilty when she realised the landlady was wearing a disposable hospital gown. It hadn’t occurred to Eoifa last night that she wouldn’t have had time to take anything with her in the ambulance. It was so obvious now.

She left Ben with his mum while she looked for a member of medical staff to ask about arrangements. The duty nurse told her to come back in twenty minutes when one of the doctors was expected to make an appearance. She got the lift back down to the shop on the ground floor and browsed the unimaginative display of helium balloons, limp flowers in gaudy wrapping and
gossip magazines. She left the shop and wandered over to the automatic doors at the hospital entrance. They swished open to reveal three patients smoking under the canopy wearing nothing more than their pyjamas and dressing gowns.

There was a taxi rank across from the front door with two cars sitting in it. She was tempted to get one and head off. None of this was her responsibility. She had stumbled into this by accident. A porter pushing an elderly man in a wheelchair emerged from the lift and headed for the door. ‘Are you coming or going?’ he paused with the chair although he could surely have got past Eoifa without her having to move.

‘I’m staying.’ She said, almost taking herself by surprise. She walked back to the shop. Might as well see this through. She bought two magazines and made her way up the stairs rather than get in the lift with one of the patients she’d seen smoking.

The Registrar couldn’t be certain how long Mrs McQuarry might need to stay in, but he did confirm that, whatever had been the cause of the ‘little episode’ she had experienced the preceding evening, it was unlikely to have been cardiovascular. He’d personally conducted a series of stress tests with her on the treadmill earlier that morning and, despite her disturbed night’s sleep, she’d performed better than a woman twenty years her junior. Eoifa thought that was almost certainly an exaggeration, but wasn’t prepared to argue. Jean was nimble around the house and garden.

The cardiac consultant was prepared to sign her off, but they were awaiting word from another consultant in a different department to see whether she would need to remain in the hospital for further investigations or if she could attend as an outpatient. Either way, the Registrar agreed it was possible she would be discharged after the weekend. This was cheering news overall. Eoifa calculated she could juggle between the Centre and working from home next week, especially with Monday being a holiday anyway, but after that she’d really need the social worker to come up with something.

Late that afternoon, while she and Ben were in the supermarket choosing what they’d like to cook for dinner, Eoifa got a call to say that Mrs McQuarry was likely to be discharged the following morning after the other consultant made
his ward round. This was better than Eoifa had hoped. She could definitely cope with one more night.

She and Ben walked back towards the house. It was the first fresh air they’d had all day after using taxis for the hospital trip.

Ben suggested a detour to Mrs Ahmed’s shop. ‘She has the best samosas.’ Eoifa hadn’t tried any of the Asian food shops, so was happy to agree.

Mrs Ahmed greeted Ben cheerfully and asked after his mother. When she heard Mrs McQuarry was in hospital, she insisted that Ben could have two samosas ‘on the house’. Ben looked unlikely to share so Eoifa tried to buy her own, setting a few pound coins on the counter.

‘No, no.’ Mrs Ahmed wagged her hand indicating the money wasn’t necessary.

The samosas were indeed delicious. They were warm so Ben and Eoifa ate them walking along the street, folding back the greaseproof paper to reveal the thin layers of pastry encasing soft potatoes with peas and spices mixed through. Eoifa thought samosas were deep-fried but these were wrapped in something like a soft filo pastry and were much nicer than any she remembered trying before.

‘We won’t be hungry for our dinner when we get back.’ Eoifa said as she looked for a bin to deposit her empty wrapper.

‘I will. I’m always ready for dinner.’ Ben smiled, handing his crumpled wrapper to Eoifa.

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The next day, Alan collected Ben and Eoifa from the house shortly before nine so they could give Mrs McQuarry a lift home from hospital.

‘No van?’ Ben seemed disappointed.

‘No, this is my own car. There are only three seats up front in the van and I didn’t think your mum would like being thrown in the back.’

That amused Ben. He got in the back of the car so Eoifa could sit in the front with Alan and they set off.

When they got to the hospital, Alan waited in the car.
‘I know my place,’ he laughed, ‘just wish ah hadnae left the chauffeur’s hat at home.

Mrs McQuarry was discharged with a letter that she was told to hand in to her GP’s surgery as soon as they reopened, and a form to collect a walking stick from the resources unit on the ground floor of the Southern.

‘I’ll be collecting no such thing.’ She told the staff nurse. ‘Who says I’ve to have one of those? I could walk the socks off the lot of you!’

The nurse smiled and handed the form to Eoifa, ‘Not an uncommon reaction.’

‘I’m not bloomin deaf!’ Mrs McQuarry turned to leave.

‘You’re certainly not. It’s been a pleasure having you.’ The nurse touched Mrs McQuarry’s forearm.

‘Yes, well. Sorry about that. I shouldn’t take it out on you. Just wasn’t expecting a walking aid. I don’t need one, you know.’

Eoifa try to help Jean with her coat, while she shrugged as though to say she could manage herself.

‘Home James and don’t spare the horses!’ Jean pointed her arm to the door and took Ben’s arm.

Eoifa thought the landlady could have delivered that line even more effectively if she’d had a stick to point, but she kept that observation to herself.

It was a sunny day. Warm enough to sit out in the sheltered spot at the front of the house when they got back from the hospital. Jean, she had Alan using her first name as well now, sent Ben into the shed to get the garden furniture out. Alan helped him to carry it. Eoifa managed to make a batch of scones with ingredients Jean had upstairs, although she baked them in her own kitchen, and they picnicked in the garden.

Before the hospital drama, Eoifa had invited Stella for dinner. On a whim, endorsed by Jean, Eoifa asked Stella to come round that afternoon with Anna so they could have an Easter egg hunt in the garden.

‘Easter Saturday, does that work?’ Eoifa was sure Jean would know.

‘As long as you don’t eat all the chocolate before Sunday, it’s fine.’ Jean declared authoritatively. ‘Tell the wee one to bring a friend, the more the
merrier!’ She was clearly enjoying directing operations from the garden bench.
‘Here, you couldn’t be a dear and cut off my electronic tag?’ she held out her
wrist which had the plastic hospital identity tag on it, no trace of electronics.

Alan and Eoifa made a dash to the supermarket, picking up provisions and
a chocolate egg hunting kit, which was sold in a decorative basket.

To supplement the chocolate eggs, Jean had a collection of stones which
had a brightly coloured Easter egg painted on each one.

‘Now these are what you need for a hunt in the garden when you don’t
mind losing a stone but you’d be upset if a wee chocolate one got left out for
the squirrels. Do you remember painting these, Ben?’ She held one of the stones
up for him to see, even though he had fetched the bucket of them from the
shed. ‘Some of them could maybe do with brightening up but they’ll do a turn
yet.’

‘Hide the chocolate ones inside the house, if you don’t mind Eoifa, that
is.’

‘Fine by me, just leave out my bedroom.’ Although Eoifa soon realised
that hiding them was going to be her task anyway. Alan was dispatched to hide
the stones in the garden. Ben would have done it but Jean said he liked to join
in the hunt.

‘My! What a fabulous place for an egg hunt!’ Stella walked through the
garden gates accompanied by Anna and Claire. ‘I knew the area but wasn’t sure
which house was yours.’

‘Now you’ll have to forgive me being a lazy bones sitting here today but
no doubt Eoifa has mentioned, I’ve just spent two days under the tender loving
care of the NHS. No sleep and no greens to speak of. But you don’t want to hear
me rattling on. Come on in and get yourselves comfy.’ Jean compensated for not
standing by gesticulating in large movements as though mimicking a scout
learning semaphore minus the flags. A few hours in the Glasgow sunshine had
chased the hospital pallor from her complexion, replacing it with a beatific
glow.

Eoifa hugged her friend and say ‘hi’ to the girls.
‘Here’s a few bits and pieces.’ Stella handed her a large gift bag with a bottle of wine and various other goodies. ‘You might need to hold the bottom of that.’ She steadied it as Eoifa took the handle.

‘This is so generous, there was really no need to bring anything.’ Eoifa thanked Stella and took bag into the house. ‘I’ll be back out to take drinks orders in a minute!’ She called over her shoulder.

Eoifa came out with lemonade for Anna and Claire, wine glasses and a bottle for the others. Alan was chasing the girls around the garden, threatening to get the garden hose to them.

‘Where did you find him?’ Stella whispered but Ben overheard as he marched past with a rug for his mum’s lap.

‘Alan Van Man!’ He shouted.

Alan looked over.

‘He’s actually answering to that now, Ben!’ Eoifa teased.

Anna and Claire took advantage of Alan being distracted to throw some daffodil petals at the neck of his polo shirt. Their lack of height compared to him meant the petals bounced off his stomach and onto the grass.

He caught the movement in his peripheral vision and span around. ‘Oi!’ and made a grrrring sound as he chased them with his arms spread wide.

The girls squealed and ran off alternately bumping into, and clasping onto, each other.

‘So where did you meet him?’ Stella stood right next to Eoifa and lowered her voice to a whisper.

‘Help me with some salads in the kitchen.’ Eoifa enticed Stella inside to give her the story.

‘Is there anything I could be doing for you?’ Jean volunteered.

‘Have a good rest, we can manage.’

‘Oh I can manage that all right.’ She adjusted the rug on her knees.

‘Are you warm enough?’ The garden was fine for the rest of them but bound to be cooler than the hospital.

‘Perfectly toasty, thank you!’ There was another arm wave.
There wasn’t a great deal to prepare for dinner other than some salads because, after Ben told his mum about the samosas he and Eoifa had enjoyed the day before, Jean announced her penchant for curry.

‘Do you know I haven’t had a proper curry in the longest time? Have you had a Glasgow curry yet, Eoifa?’

Eoifa hesitated and remembered she had while she was still staying in the hotel.

It was decided, principally by Jean, who insisted she would treat them all that they would get a curry delivered from The Happy Paneer, which the landlady thought was owned by Mrs Ahmed’s son or nephew. They discussed when they would order and when they would eat and whether the young girls would want curry.

By the time Eoifa and Stella were finished in the kitchen, Ben and Alan had set up croquet hoops on the lawn in front of the sitting room window. The girls were swinging wooden mallets around and Alan was persuading them to keep the head of the mallets low and line up their shots. Ben was trying to demonstrate.

Jean watched from her spot on the garden bench. ‘Your man’s braver than I would be. He’ll be lucky to get out of that game without concussion, and me just back from the hospital. Wasn’t that an old advert? Public service announcement or some such.’

‘Yes I think I remember that.’ Stella said, ‘was it something about not leaving rugs on a wooden floor? Goodness that’s a long time ago.’ She laughed.

‘That’s right, clever girl! It was the rug on the wooden floor and the man’s just brought his wife home from hospital with their new baby! I’m a mine of useless information.’ Jean tapped her head.

‘That croquet makes a great sound, doesn’t it? The wood clacking together. Better even than leather on willow!’ Stella adopted a faux posh voice for the final phrase.

‘Right, who’s for a glass of fizz before dinner?’ Eoifa threw the end of the dishtowel she had been holding so it rested on her shoulder.

‘Definitely me, no car tonight - Claire’s mum volunteered to collect the girls.’
‘Jean, what do you think? Would a small glass be just what the doctor ordered?’

‘Maybe the smallest of wee drops, Eoifa. I don’t want to go wonky on my pins after refusing that stick!’

‘How about Ben, is he allowed any?’ Eoifa let herself believe it was all right not to address him directly since he was over playing croquet and almost out of earshot.

‘Have you any sparkling water?’ Jean lowered her voice.

Eoifa nodded.

‘Put a drop of that in a wine glass for him and we can all kid on he’s joining us. He knows it’s not good for him. Reflux, you know.’ She rubbed her hand on her chest as though the problem was her own.

‘Well looks like the bottle is mostly for us, Stella.’ Eoifa turned towards the kitchen.

‘What about Alan?’

‘Oh yes, I might let him have one glass.’

They gathered near the bench where Jean was sitting and gave a toast to good health and a happy Easter. They clinked glasses, Anna and Claire were especially vigorous but no glasses were smashed. After the ‘cheers-ing’ the girls ran off to hunt for the painted stones.

Jean said she would nip upstairs to freshen up before dinner.

‘Are you sure you should be nipping anywhere? You could use the downstairs apartment. Ben or I can bring you anything you need.’

‘Och you’re too good to me, but I’ll manage fine.’ She distracted the attention from herself by asking loudly, ‘how are those girls getting on in the hunt for the painted eggs?’

The girls were rooting around amongst the shrubs at the top of the garden. They ran down the grass a little nearer, thinking they were being summoned.

‘On you go girls, leave no stone unturned!’ Jean raised one hand aloft as she ascended the steps to her apartment.

Eoifa was relieved to see the landlady had her other hand on the railing.

Alan leant over to Eoifa, ‘How much did she have to drink?’
'No more than a sip.' Eoifa pointed to Jean's glass, which had very little out of it. 'I thought of going up with her but I think she'll be fine. Probably just knackered after being in hospital.'

It was a happy squeeze around Eoifa's kitchen table for dinner. The two girls sat side by side at the head of the table, giggling as they elbowed each other gently.

‘Do you remember the first Asian families moving in to Pollokshields, Mrs McQuarry?’ Stella ripped some naan.

‘I do that. It was early in the 1970s, I wasn’t long home from Galicia.’

‘Oh wow you went to Spain under Franco?’

‘I did, but one story at a time, m’dear.’ Jean patted the side of her mouth with a paper napkin. ‘I was just back and my mum asked me to get something from the shops...or was it my dad asked me to get him a library book? Yes, it would’ve been the library I was heading for.

I was walking along Albert Drive and this lady was coming out of one of the tenements wearing the most beautiful Sari, it was bright orange with embroidery all around. The details have gone but I remember the material was a gauzy kind and it all wrapped about her.’ The landlady motioned the shape of the fabric. ‘But lord it was thin and I thought to myself, “that poor wifie’s going to catch pneumonia!” From then it was a regular sight, the women in their Saris. The men tended not to wear traditional clothes, though some did. You’d often see a lady in a regular Scottish mac with a beautiful Sari sticking out the bottom. They’re not really designed for the Glasgow rain.’

Alan laughed, ‘Mind you, what is designed for the Glasgow rain. I’ve been soaked to the skin in a Gortex jacket before now!’

‘This is true.’ Jean nodded.

‘I love all the foods we get, even in the regular supermarket you can get more exotic things with so many folk from other cultures. I wonder how far they have to ship it to get it here.’ Stella scooped a spoonful of dhal onto her plate.

‘Yes, we’re all about the food miles now. It’s not a worry for us though, eh Ben? We keep up our veg patch and it only travels a few steps from the ground to the pot to the table. Of course we’ve got to beat the birds and the slugs to it!’
The girls got bored of the adults chatting and asked if they could explore the house. Eoifa said they could, as long as they kept out of her bedroom, and asked if they’d found all of the eggs yet.

‘The stone ones in the garden?’ Anna asked
‘No, the chocolate ones in the house.’
‘There’s chocolate eggs?!!’ the girls shouted at once, bouncing and skipping to dissipate the excitement or perhaps it was a reaction to sitting so long over dinner.

Stella issued some ground rules about their expected conduct during the hunt and they set off through the back corridor.

Eoifa and Alan cleared the plates. The girls’ squealing could be heard faintly over the scraping of crockery, despite the thick walls.

Alan checked with Eoifa and Jean that he had their approval to set off an indoor firework for the girls in the sitting room.

‘As long as you’re careful burning down my house…it’s ok, Alan knows I’m only teasing, don’t you?’

Ben was making faces at his mum.

‘It’s more like a giant party popper than an actual firework, but I thought it would give them a laugh.’

‘We like a laugh, Alan, you know us.’ Jean was remarkably relaxed.

‘You sure, Eoifa? It’ll be a helluva mess…’

‘Go for it before you put me off!’ Eoifa knew Claire’s mum would come for the girls soon and thought the firework sounded like a good finale.

‘Right, you folks stay here and I’ll shout you when it’s ready to go.’ Jean and Ben remained in their seats, while Eoifa and Stella tidied the rest of the food dishes and wiped the table. It was the most static Eoifa had seen the landlady.

‘Keep your glasses anyone who’d like more wine.’ Eoifa warned, setting Alan’s to one side for him.

Ben told his mum he was excited to see the giant party popper.

Alan came back into the kitchen, ‘Slight problem, there’s a lot of those moths going about.’ He gestured to Eoifa.

‘Is it the confetti from the firework?’ Eoifa assumed he was teasing.

‘I haven’t set it off yet.’
Eoifa headed through the corridor with Alan to investigate and, after a moment, she heard Stella coming too. The girls were running and giggling in the sitting room but it took her a few moments to comprehend what she was seeing in the hall. Up the stairs, the door to the secret room was ajar and all the way back towards the hall was a living trail of the tiny moths, hopping and crawling like an animated wall hanging.

The only insect infestation anything like this Eoifa had witnessed was on a school trip to Portugal. A thick trail of ants had spread through their digs from the balcony in one bedroom, across the open plan sitting area, and into the kitchen where the end of a baguette had been left out on a worktop instead of being sealed away in an airtight container.

‘Fuck me!’ Alan realised where Eoifa was looking. ‘I saw the ones in the sitting room, I never noticed this.’

‘Makes your head itch, doesn’t it?’ Stella was just behind Eoifa.

The girls must have gone into the secret room while they were hunting for eggs. She’d forgotten about it or she would have ruled the stairs out of bounds as well as her bedroom.

‘What’s going on here at all?’ Mrs McQuarry slowly made her way through the corridor with Ben following behind, ‘Och my, there’s been a hatching! They’re attracted to the light, you see?’

A number of them were dancing or crawling around the lampshade on the hall ceiling. Ben made ‘Oh’ noises.

‘They’re definitely attracted to something. I’m sorry to say there’s some more through here.’ Alan indicated the sitting room, ‘but nothing on that scale. Jeez I never even looked up the stair.’

Eoifa said nothing, partly shock and partly awaiting Jean’s reaction to the secret room having been breached.

‘I should’ve given you that lavender.’ Jean shook her head. ‘I doubt it’s a job for Rentokil now.’

Ever focussed on the practical, Alan said he could get hold of a high-powered vacuum cleaner that might help. ‘It’s the eggs and larvae you need to get shot of. The moths themselves are just a nuisance.’ He reckoned he could call in a favour and get something from a relative’s plant hire place in the morning, even though it was Easter Sunday. ‘Might do the trick.’
‘Not just a pretty face.’ Jean wasn’t engaging with the secret cupboard being opened at all.

The girls gathered in the sitting room doorway, agitating for the firework to be set off.

‘Sorry girls, we maybe better leave that for tonight.’ Alan leant against the doorjamb and they looked up at him like baby birds.

‘Ach let it off, why not? What’s a few more bits of paper to vacuum up? Eh Eoifa?’ Jean walked towards the sitting room. ‘I ask because you’re the one who’ll be faced with it.’ She laughed but she looked tired as she headed into the sitting room.

‘I’ll help you get it all hoovered.’ Stella offered.

Eoifa found her voice, ‘Why not? I’m intrigued to see it myself now.’ She checked her bedroom door was still tightly closed.

There were a few moths in the sitting room, mainly around the lights but nothing like the hall display. Alan lit the fuse and the giant party popper exploded multi-coloured confetti and streamers into the room. Ben and the girls all covered their ears to muffle the initial bang. Ben laughed and laughed when he saw the ribbons of paper streaming up and around. The girls danced about, gathering bundles of the streamers and balancing them on each other’s heads, squealing that they were really moths. It was messy all right but it was going to be much easier to tidy than the insect invasion.

Eoifa turned to go back to the kitchen. ‘All this calls for more wine, I think. If you can’t beat em, get drunk!’ She spotted the cat perched on top of the highest pile of boxes, partially hidden by the open door. ‘Hobbit! What are you doing up there?’

Stella laughed, ‘surprised he stayed in here with that popper going off!’

The girls came over to the piles of boxes and stretched up to the cat but he was too high for them.

‘Right, come on Ben, let’s you and me go through for a beer in the kitchen.’

‘Oh no beer for Ben.’ Jean put her hand out towards Alan’s arm as he passed her chair.

‘Just a turn of phrase, Jean, no worries.’ Alan winked and he left the room, pursued by Ben.
Eoifa was about to follow them, but noticed Claire was attempting to climb up for the cat. She had nudged the stack to give herself a toehold between the bottom and middle boxes. She balanced herself with a foot on the lowest box and her other foot pointed out behind.

‘Careful you don’t put your shoe through that.’ Eoifa wanted to give her a real telling off but held back.

‘Claire come on down from there, those aren’t your things.’ Stella’s tone was friendly but meant business. Anna stood beside Stella.

Claire bent her knee to comply but nudged the middle box which she then grasped in her hands. The whole tower wobbled and Hobbit jumped down, just before the top box crashed onto the carpet, spilling its contents across the floor.

Claire hopped to the ground and grabbed a packet of photographs from amongst the strewn items. ‘I love looking at old photographs!’

It had been a while but Eoifa recognised the dog-eared envelope, which dated from the time when most people still had their photographs developed and printed out in packs. She felt sick.

‘Is this you?’ Claire held up a print. Exhibit A. There was Eoifa with Baby Sean at a park. Claire rested it on the back of the nearest armchair and took out another.

Eoifa was light-headed, she didn’t think she could walk over to take the photographs from Claire without swooning or slapping the little cow.

Exhibit B was conclusive. It showed Eoifa in a nightdress holding Sean when he was only a few days old. Plastic identity bands dangled from his wrist and ankle, the metal rungs of the hospital bed were clearly visible behind Eoifa, her face shiny and tired, his ruddy and poised for a scream.

‘Did you have a baby? It is you, isn’t it? Where’s your baby now?’ Claire was agitated and accusing.

Eoifa looked at the mess of twisted paper on the floor. She had no words. Slowly she turned towards the door. Mrs McQuarry who, miraculously, had nothing to say either laid a hand on Eoifa’s arm.

Stella quietly took the photographs out of Claire’s hands and set them on top of one of the boxes. ‘Come on girls, let’s get your things packed up ready to go.’

The three of them walked into the hall just as Alan was coming back from the kitchen. ‘Everything all right?’
‘She had a baby.’ Claire pointed back into the sitting room.

‘What, tonight?!’ Alan had no idea how much had changed since he’d left the room. He looked at Eoifa, confused.

‘Yes. Yes, I had a baby.’ Eoifa’s voice was soft but clear.

‘Oh my dear.’ Jean tried to comfort her.

Eoifa walked into the hall past Stella and the girls, past the staircase where her books that had been ordered in attractive piles were knocked askew. The moths trickling from the secret room.

She went into the bathroom and locked the door. She sat on the closed seat of the toilet and shut her eyes.

It had been a difficult night, Sean wouldn’t sleep, he wouldn’t eat. Euan was away at an overnight conference. She dressed Sean while he wailed, bracing his back against her efforts. She strapped him into his car seat and carried him out to her Honda. He liked open roads, they sent him off to sleep. She drove towards the bypass, turning up the volume on a Singing Kettle cassette to mask the crying. She accelerated along the slip road and eased into the traffic on the dual carriageway. After a few minutes he fell asleep. She kept driving. She didn’t want to turn around and go back to the flat in Trinity.

She turned off the bypass and drove into the car park of the Arlington Sports and Leisure Centre. She had no intention of going to the gym. She unclipped the car seat and carried Sean straight to the crèche. £1.30 for an hour of childfree peace and quiet.

Sean remained asleep, encased in the car seat as she handed him over to a girl in a bright blue polo top who whispered that she would take him to the quiet area.

There was a jotter for parents to indicate where they could be located should the need arise. Eoifa scanned the entries from earlier that day: ‘Circuit’, ‘gym’, ‘swimming’, ‘circuit’, ‘squash’, ‘gym’, ‘swimming’, ‘swimming’. She picked up the pen and wrote ‘café’.

The large woman behind the counter pointed to a handwritten notice that had been Sellotaped over the coffee machine: ‘out of order’.

‘We’re not doing any speciality coffees, luv.’ Eoifa hovered, looking at the other options. A man in sports gear moved in front of her to get served while
she dithered. ‘A peppermint tea please.’ He smacked the coins on the counter and moved off.

Eoifa didn’t want tea. She didn’t even want coffee. She turned away from the counter and slowly walked out of the café. She looked around. The glass wall behind the reception desk provided a view into the main gym hall. There was some kind of class going on with an instructor shouting and whooping. The class whooped back. Nothing would persuade Eoifa to join those people. She needed air so she walked out into the car park and kept going until she stood by the driver’s door of her car, contemplating the ‘Joy Machine’ sticker on the quarter window. The car key was in her hand. She could drive to the nearest café and be back in time to collect him. She could take more than an hour. They had baby food in the crèche. How long could she leave him without causing alarm? There’d be no alarm for Sean, he’d be delighted at the new surroundings. The Arlington was one of the few places he liked almost as much as his Granny Margaret’s house.

They were in Tenerife or she’d have dropped him there. He was one of them. No longer part of her. She felt betrayed. He smiled for Margaret. She let him pull at her gold necklace while she blew raspberries on his cheek. He actually laughed when Jim jiggled him on his knee pretending to be the farmer’s horse. A wave of revulsion that had been boiling inside spread within her.

If she could drive to a café, why stop there? She could phone Euan, tell him to collect Sean. He could be there in two hours maximum. His conference was only in Peebles. The crèche might not even notice, their security system wasn’t up to much. She’d left him more than an hour before when she went swimming and went to the café before collecting him.

She thought about where she might go. She couldn’t go home. If she did this, she would never be able to go back to that flat again. The idea of it felt good, a relief. She opened the car door, paused, got in. She turned the key and the engine awoke. She released the handbrake and eased the Honda onto the open road.

There was a knock on the bathroom door and Stella said, ‘Eoifa? Eoifa, that’s me and the girls away. Claire’s mum will be here in a minute... We had a lovely afternoon.’

Was she seriously not going to talk about it? Well that suited Eoifa.
‘Em, I think Alan would like a word.’
‘Please tell him to go.’ Eoifa raised her voice to be sure she’d be heard. ‘I can’t talk to him.’
‘Do you want to talk to me?’
She might as well get this over with. What a fucking mess. She unlocked the door and let Stella in.
‘Look, I hardly know what to say.’ Stella’s face was sombre and she looked at the ground when she spoke, as though eye contact would tip the scene into further chaos.

Eoifa stood still, leaning her back against the sink for support, but her mind was working at lightning pace, identifying and weighing up the options. What did they imagine? She ran through the evidence so far. They knew she’d had a baby and there was currently no baby. How to explain the parts in between? Was it worth trying the truth? She glanced at Stella. No, that couldn’t be an option. Fucking hell she was standing next to St Therese of the Adopted Child!

Stella cleared her throat. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t like rushing off but I think I really need to get the girls home.’
‘Yes, of course.’ Eoifa’s voice was thick. She had almost forgotten the girls. She wanted to kill Claire. Best get them out before she had to look at that little bitch’s face again.

You’ll be okay here with Alan til the morning? I’ll come back and give you a hand then. We can catch up?’
‘Thanks, yes. You don’t have to.’ Eoifa raised her head but couldn’t look at Stella directly. Instead she scanned the narrow room, pausing where the hand towel hung limp and mucky from all the visitors.
‘No, I’d like to, happy to. I feel bad leaving you.’ Stella reached for Eoifa’s arm.
‘It’s fine, you need to see to the girls.’ Eoifa finally managed to look at her friend. Stella’s face was full of concern. Perhaps something could be salvaged. But she needed to say something, give her something. Tomorrow would be too late for the truth. She’d have to tell a different version.

Stella reached over and gave Eoifa a loose hug. The undeserved kindness made Eoifa’s throat knot. ‘You’re a saint.’ The phrase escaped as a whispered rasp.
‘I’m no saint, believe me. Just a mortal doing my best, or the best I can manage. Just getting by. Just as fucked up as the next person.’ Stella moved back from the hug but kept a hand on Eoifa’s arm as she spoke.

‘I doubt that.’ Eoifa felt her lip wobble. She coughed to ward off tears.

‘Listen, it’s been a big night. I’ll go now but I’ll come back tomorrow and see how you’re doing, okay?’

Eoifa nodded. The moment for truth had slipped out of reach.

‘Alan’s out there and I think he’d really like to see you.’ Stella gave Eoifa’s arm a quick squeeze and opened the door.

Eoifa got some toilet paper and blew her nose in an effort to compose herself. There was no chance Alan would leave without seeing her. And then there was still Jean and Ben to deal with. What a bloody tangled, moth-infested web! How would she weave this one... She sat on the edge of the bath.

Stella and Alan were talking quickly and quietly outside. ‘Yeah...look, sorry but I’ve got to go, that’s my lift. I’ve said to her I can come back tomorrow to help clean up. What a night, eh?’ There was no sound of a car in the drive. Claire’s mum must have parked on the street.

There was another knock and the door swung open.

‘Oh Eoifa, hey.’ Alan walked over and knelt beside her, placing his hands on her arms. ‘I better not sit on that or I’ll cowp it.’

‘Don’t look at me, please, I’m a total mess.’ Eoifa wiped her nose on the crumpled ball of toilet paper.

‘Well, I’ve seen you look better I must say.’ He tried to take her free hand in both of his.

‘Look it’s fine, you go and I’ll deal with Jean and Ben.’ She lifted her hand away.

‘They’re all sorted. Jean looked pretty bushed so I got them to head upstairs while you were talking to Stella. She asked me to let you know she’s sorry about the baby. She’s worried about you.’

A thin trickle of tears escaped down Eoifa’s cheek. ‘The baby, my son,’ the words felt odd in her mouth, ‘is fine.’
Alan looked puzzled. Eoifa was surprised herself. It wasn’t the option she intended to take but it felt oddly freeing. He gave her a look suggesting he wanted to know more but said nothing.

‘I couldn’t cope so I left him with his dad.’

‘What? When, when...did this happen?’ Alan sat back placing one hand on his forehead.

Eoifa paused as though calculating afresh. ‘A little over ten years now.’

‘Wait, what?! You...that baby in the photograph is ten now?’ His expressions were shifting between incredulity and horror.

‘Yes, more or less.’

‘More or less, right.’ He remained on the floor but moved right back from her. Shaking his head. ‘Let me get this straight,’ he gestured towards her, ‘you had a baby and you left it, him, with his dad.’

‘Yes, yes I did that.’

‘But how...?’ He was moving his arms as though greater understanding could be plucked from the space around him. He looked back at her, his expression softening briefly, ‘You didn’t lose him?’

Eoifa could see how much he wanted to believe that other version. How easy it might have been to convince him - he’d clearly already convinced himself and the others, Stella and Mrs McQuarry, it was presumably what they wanted to believe too. Why was she so determined to disappoint them? For a moment, she replayed how far she’d gone. Was it too late to reverse? Alan was looking right at her, expecting a response.

‘Did you lose him?’

The repetition irked Eoifa. Surely it was fucking obvious. ‘No, well, not that way. I’ve lost touch now. I...think it’s for the best.’ Eoifa nodded sagely and stood up. She didn’t owe Alan any more explanation. The carnival was over.

‘For the best?! But, do you not want to see him? I mean, how old is he, ten?!’ Alan was almost shouting. He was sitting on the floor, looking up at her and somehow managing to convey the impression of looking down on her.

She closed her eyes for a moment and wished he’d leave. When she opened them, he was standing in front of her.

‘So, is this why you left London? Are you, married?’ He spoke more quietly but his tone was full of contempt.
Eoifa sighed. Always the marriage question. ‘They are both fine, I assume. I was married but that is no longer the case.’ She’d had enough questions. She opened the door wide and looked into the hall.

‘I see.’ Alan moved to her spot by the sink, scratching the stubble on his chin.

‘Listen, it’s been a long day. I’m going to see if there’s anything to be done with those moths and then I’m going to get some sleep.’ She walked into the hall. ‘Will I phone you a taxi?’

‘Uh, ah’ll do that.’ He reached into his back pocket for his phone.

Eoifa wondered briefly if she should persuade him to stay. If there was anything to be salvaged. She wanted the house to herself but she liked the thought of another reality in which they went to bed and he told he loved her no matter what.

She looked at the scene of the infestation on the wall by the stairs. There were still a lot of moths but it wasn’t as bad as before and the cupboard door at the top was closed. Alan finished phoning the taxi and came over to where she stood.

‘Did you close that?’ She indicated the cupboard.

‘Uh, yeah and I gave the walls a quick wipe with this lavender stuff Jean had in her apartment. Looks like it’s helped. I’m surprised though.’ He spoke in a monotone.

‘Thanks, that was good of you.’ It felt surreal to be discussing cleaning tips and, for a moment, she was reminded of the first day they met when he chided her for the weight of the removal boxes. If only he’d known how heavy they would become.

‘You’ll really need an industrial vacuum. I can leave a number for one.’

‘Sure, thanks.’ So this was it. No more talk of calling in that favour at the plant hire company. She turned to face him. For a second or two they held each other’s gaze. He was first to look away.

‘I better find my jacket.’ He turned towards the kitchen.

She walked the other way to put out the sitting room lights.

Alan’s taxi arrived surprisingly quickly for a Saturday night. They said an awkward goodbye and she thanked him for helping with the moths, Mrs McQuarry
and ‘everything’. They didn’t talk about what would or wouldn’t happen next. But she knew the score. It was better to walk away.

She checked the doors were locked and got herself a glass of water. It had been quite a night and tomorrow she would have to set things straight with Mrs McQuarry, and Stella had promised to come round as well. For a moment she wondered if Stella and Alan might have swapped numbers. A flame of jealousy ignited and died down.

She drank half the glass of water. It was ice cold, making her teeth and throat ache. She poured the rest down the sink.

She was anxious opening the bedroom door in case any of the moths had got in there. She turned the handle and opened the door quickly. It looked clear.

She got ready for bed, leaving her clothes in a heap on the chair. The duvet lay lumpily across the bed as she had left it that morning. Her mother wouldn’t have approved but making beds was for hotels and movies. She pulled back the covers and found a large Easter egg in its cardboard and foil wrappings sitting in the middle of the bed. Which one of them had hidden it there? Alan was most likely but it could have been Stella or even Jean. Any one of them might have snuck through during the meal, though perhaps not Mrs McQuarry who hadn’t been her speedy self today. She lifted the box and noticed a gift tag underneath from Alan, ‘Happy Easter, Eoifa!’ and he’d drawn a heart with an arrow.

Fucking Easter! She set the egg on the floor and sank back in the bed. How was she ever going to resurrect all this?

None of it would have happened if she hadn’t kept those photographs. That incriminating picture of her in the hospital gown, face varnished with her own sweat. Sean, not even an hour old, furious and full of possibility. Nothing yet ruled in or out. There, in that moment on that hospital bed, it had still been possible to imagine she and Euan might have muddled through.

‘I’m sorry.’ She whispered an apology to Sean. ‘I couldn’t stay.’

But he might find her. That was possible. She might see him one day or perhaps that day in Edinburgh. Walking with a group of school children in the Scottish Parliament, milling in Waverley station, busking on the High Street. Or perhaps he was lunching at The Dome with his odious grandparents. It was possible, and it was possible he might forgive her.
Her phone was charging at the side of the bed. She could text Alan. She could thank him, for the egg. Or never text him again. She ran over the available scenarios to see which endings she preferred. Very few of them started from here.

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Writing and not writing a novel called *Floating*  
(critical essay)

There is no possibility of taking a walk today.¹ I have a room of my own and must write.² My door does not yet have a lock but claiming the room is an important beginning. For years I wrote at the kitchen table, vulnerable to sudden interruption.

If I watch myself from the corner of the room,³ I see a woman who is resistant to thinking of herself as middle-aged sitting at her daughter’s cast-off desk on an unsuitable chair, hands poised above her laptop in the manner of a concert pianist whose fingers have forgotten the first notes. When the sunlight has dimmed and the curtains are drawn, this version of myself begins.⁴ ⁵

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¹ Refers to the opening line of *Jane Eyre*, ‘There was no possibility of talking a walk that day.’ Bronte 13.

² Refers to the title, *A Room Of One’s Own*, Woolf.

³ Refers to the opening line of *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing*, ‘I watch myself from the corner of the room’. Galloway 7.

⁴ In analysing her own work, Jeanette Winterson makes frequent reference to the idea of versions. I explore this throughout my essay.

⁵ A long-running BBC children’s television series, *Jackanory*, was designed to stimulate an interest in reading. Each episode of *Jackanory* began with the phrase, ‘are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin’.
Beginnings

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood identifies the three questions most frequently asked of writers: ‘Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?’ (xix). She traces their vocation back to the writers’ childhoods, noting:

they often contain...books and solitude
...A good many writers have had isolated childhoods; a good many have also had storytellers in their lives. My primal storyteller was my brother...’

I grew up in Wick, a town clinging grimly to the slate cliffs that fringe the North Sea seventeen miles from the end (or perhaps it’s the start) of mainland Scotland. For most of my childhood, Inverness was a good five hours away by road. Trips to Inverness meant being sick at the Berriedale Braes (twenty-one miles south of Wick) and eating chips at the Lady Ross roadside café in Ardgay. Improvements to the roads, including bridges over the Cromarty and Beauly firths, shortened the journey to around three hours by the time I left home in 1985.

I am the youngest of four children; I have a sister and had two brothers. My older brother died in 2010; there will be more of him later. Because my brothers were sent to finish their high school years at George Watson’s College in Edinburgh, my sister is the only one of my siblings I can remember living at home. My brothers visited but these sightings became increasingly sporadic. The only photograph in which all of us are present was taken at Christmas in 1976. My father set the timer on his Canon SLR so that both parents could appear in the shot alongside all four children. That year my sister was twice my age, every other year she is merely nine years older than me. It was the year she left to study at Aberdeen University, and the younger of my brothers graduated from the same place. By Christmas, he had moved to England. He worked in a research lab and lived in a thatched cottage in St Ives, Cambridge. It had a quince tree in the garden. He made his own beer, and kept two gerbils called Jimmy and Jemima. In one of his cupboards I found a wax model of a hand that had been created by filling a rubber glove with hot wax. The hand was fashioned
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into a two-finger salute; I think he hoped our parents wouldn’t see it. My older brother, Hugh, had studied Law at Edinburgh University but, by Xmas 1976, he was living in Munich, where he attended film school. I visited him there with my parents in 1977. His flatmates were surprised to discover he had a Scottish family because they had assumed he was German. He had several girlfriends in Munich, apparently simultaneously. I met one called Elsa and another called Suzie. I liked Elsa because our names were nearly the same and she didn’t mind when I accidentally made her bookshelf collapse, literally concussing myself with her collection of literature.

Hugh’s visits to Wick were rare and exquisite. I looked forward to them in much the same way as early astronomers awaited the appearance of a comet. I learned then what remained true throughout his life: you never could be completely sure Hugh was going to turn up until he was standing in front of you. If he made the journey to the Far North at all, he was usually alone, but sometimes he brought exotic friends who hung around the top floor of my parents’ house wearing kaftans and smoking foreign cigarettes.

During these visits, I followed Hugh around as he filled my head with tales of a life that didn’t involve completing homework, practising the piano or being in bed by 8pm. He played me bootleg recordings from a tour with the band The Police, gave me an ice hockey puck signed by the Cincinnati Stingers, and told me about how he was learning to ski backwards for a filming assignment.

On one visit, Hugh and I walked to an area of uncultivated parkland alongside Wick River, where there are two wooden-slatted footbridges over the water. At that time the bridges were closed for repair - some of the wooden slats had been removed and that part of the walkway was boarded up with a sign across the end of the first bridge saying, ‘No Access by order of Wick District Council’. Despite my protestations about the likelihood of the bridges collapsing under our weight or, at least, our falling through the gaps created by the missing planks, Hugh proceeded to swing his legs over the wooden barriers and help me clamber onto the first bridge, declaring: ‘it’s important to break at least one rule every day’.
Although both of my parents read to me when I was a child, my father stuck it out longer; his bedtime reading sessions continued all the way through *Mrs Pepperpot* (which he insisted on mispronouncing because he thought it was our in-joke but actually infuriated me), *White Fang* and *Kidnapped*. We were midway through *The Horse and His Boy*, which failed to capture my attention despite the inclusion of a horse in the story, when my dad asked if I was enjoying the book. I replied that it was boring. My father closed the book, left my bedroom and never read to me again. Occasionally, my sister would read with me. We read *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, *Heidi*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Black Beauty*, a novel I now consider much more tedious than *The Horse and His Boy* but, at the time, I didn’t think so.

*My father continued to be a voracious reader himself. He read fast and, when he liked a book, he would re-read it immediately. My mother, by contrast, read sparingly and slowly. An extremely active and hard-working woman while she remained vertical, she would fall asleep the second she sat down. This impaired her ability to read, since reading requires a certain amount of physical stillness, preferably sitting or lying down. My father frequently told a story of how my mother who, frustrated by the fact that she continually fell asleep while reading a particular novel and thus kept losing her place, had taken to ripping the pages out of the paperback as she read. Thinking back on it, I’m not sure whether this horrified my father more than he revelled in it as a tale to tell. In fact, if I were to recount the stories my father told about my mother, a reader could be left with a dim view of his regard for women. And yet my father was responsible for ensuring I was aware that I should not allow myself to be held back by anything, including my gender or other facets over which I had greater control, such as my own sloth.*

*My father had a list of books he liked to ask if I had read. He had used a similar list for my sister; she and I would recite it, mimicking him but only in his absence. He would ask after our progress in the following manner, ‘Have you read *1984* or *Under the Volcano* yet?’ If you said ‘no’ he would ask again in a day or so, adding new titles to the list. He introduced me to Voltaire’s *Candide*, which I read aloud to a group of ants in the bedroom of our rented villa during a holiday to Portugal, sunburn having forced me to remain indoors. He also*
encouraged me to read *A Clockwork Orange*, although when I pointed out that, in describing the book to me, he had conflated some concepts and language with *Riddley Walker*, he refuted this absolutely, in spite of my efforts to point out the textual evidence.

My mother wanted to be a reader but her narcolepsy prevented it. Despite this, she was a cheerleader for my reading, or most of it. She told me to wash my hands after reading books from the local library but nonetheless encouraged me to use the facility. (The head librarian of the Wick Carnegie Public Library was David Morrison, father of writer Ewan Morrison. My father and David Morrison were occasional friends and drinking buddies, although Ewan’s father was the younger by around twenty years.)

There was no shortage of reading material at home but I liked to visit the library to access stories which were more suited to my age - and maybe also to get out of the house. My father’s library (which wasn’t restricted to a single room) comprised what my daughter, who has had her own beginnings in another time and another place (Kesson, *Another Time*) would describe as a ‘random’ mix of literary fiction, biography, factual books, music (we had a huge collection of operatic scores) and maps, including a 1986 Marks and Spencer’s road map of Britain which my mother insisted on keeping in her car right up until the year of her death in 2005. There was plenty of work by Scottish writers. My father was an enthusiastic reader of Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. He wasn’t afraid of contemporary fiction, he read James Kelman and greatly admired the work of Alasdair Gray - we had early copies of *Lanark, Unlikely Stories, Mostly* and 1982, *Janine*. I can’t remember the first Julian Barnes novel to enter our house, but I have *Flaubert’s Parrot* to thank for introducing me to *Madame Bovary*. For a time, *A History of the World In 10½ Chapters* was my favourite book. I was excited by the self-contained world of each chapter, cumulatively hinting at a universe beyond.

*My father’s book collection was extensive in sheer volume, but there was a limited supply of what might be thought of as ‘classics’. We had virtually no Shakespeare, there was no Thomas Hardy, George Eliot or Jane Austen and none of the Brontes was represented. The only Dickens novel I recall seeing in the*
house was *A Tale of Two Cities*. It was a beautifully bound edition that was stored on a carved oak shelf in our sitting room. Every so often I would open it to marvel at the line ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’.

Female authors were under-represented. In fact I don’t recall any work by female writers that I didn’t buy myself or purloin from my sister, who was quick to tell me that ‘my’ copies of *Black Beauty* and *Anne of Green Gables* actually belonged to her. Books by female writers weren’t banned and, when I developed an interest in their work, both of my parents were happy to encourage me (or certainly they were encouraging of everything after my Enid Blyton and pony story era, Lucy Rees’ *Wild Pony* was a particular favourite). I read Muriel Spark (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, of course, but subsequently I enjoyed her other work including *Momento Mori* and *The Girls of Slender Means*), Jessie Kesson (the complete works), Francoise Sagan (*Bonjour Tristesse*) and, later, Sylvia Plath (prose mainly and, eventually, the Linda Wagner-Martin biography) as a result of which I was encouraged to try Simone de Beauvoir (I’m not certain if I ever finished *The Second Sex*).

The Scottish primary school curriculum in the 1970s centred on learning ‘times tables’ and Plasticine modelling, occasionally combined. Since there was a limit to the number of Plasticine snakes I could manufacture, writing stories was a useful way of filling the hours until I could get the bus home. When I first attended Hillhead Primary School in the spring of 1972, I could already read, presumably thanks to the wealth of reading material in the house. If only I had been similarly enthused about maths I might have avoided persistently being in the bottom group for Arithmetic. My parents did try. We had a set of wooden Cuisenaire Rods which my dad would occasionally attempt to interest me in using for counting, although I found them much more useful as fences to support my creation of imaginary farms in the space underneath the grand piano. My mother didn’t agree with the phonetic alphabet, which was the required manner of reciting letters in those days so, to stay out of trouble, I became bilingual. If I wanted to provoke my teachers, I’d use the letter names instead of their sounds. I recall a particularly fraught trip in Primary Two where we were taken for an outing on the train - we journeyed by rail from Wick to Watten, a distance of about twelve miles, and caught the bus back. While we waited for the train to
arrive, I read aloud to my classmates from the graffiti daubed around the station walls. Although I understood most of the individual words, I wasn’t sure what it all meant. I was equally uncertain why my teachers asked me to stop.

My first formal literary recognition came in 1978 when I won first prize in a story competition sponsored by the RSPCA. The brief was to write a story entitled ‘A town dog’s visit to the country’. Drawing heavily on my reading of *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, I was able to add detail of chewed wicker baskets to my tale of a town dog turning up and impregnating a friendly farm collie. The gestation period in my story revealed the lack of attention to biology in the curriculum but the judges were clearly willing to overlook that. My prize was a hardback copy of *A Children’s Encyclopaedia of Animals*. I still have it, lodged at the bottom of a bookshelf in my attic.

I continued writing, for my own pleasure and to amuse friends (I wrote a saga during my high school years involving my group of friends in which they each played the parts of hamsters and other rodents - the saga had a small but loyal following). Punishment exercises, of which I received a substantial number thanks to my tendency to talk during lessons, were an outlet for my parodies of school life. One of my English teachers, spotting that punishment essays were no hardship for me, gave me lines instead. I had to write ‘speech is silver but silence is golden’ 500 times. As a minor act of rebellion, I misspelt ‘speach’ in each line. She didn’t notice, merely scanning the sheets to check the requisite number of lines had been completed before consigning them to the bin.

As a matter of habit and prejudice, the reader I was in my late teens and early twenties decided that she would not read any of the introductory material accompanying fiction; prefaces, introductions, dedications, all of those were out. If the book really engaged me, I might glance at them after I had finished the main text. My memory tells me it had something to do with wanting to enjoy the art of the work without being prejudiced by any ‘additional’ material the author or the editors supplied. This practice changed, however, when on the 20th of August, 1991, I met Jessie Kesson who was signing books at Waterstones on Union Street in Aberdeen.
At that time, I had read The White Bird Passes, having first been introduced to her work by watching a 1983 television adaptation of Another Time, Another Place. I was intrigued by this film set in Morayshire, over a hundred miles from Caithness but still closer to my home county than anything I had seen broadcast at the time, other than the occasional news item about the fast-breeder nuclear reactor at Dounreay. The location made me pause to watch but the poetry of the narration and the clarity of the characterisation (particularly the central role of the young woman, Janie) prompted me to find more texts by the author.

The meeting in Waterstones was a chance encounter. I lived in Aberdeen, having graduated from the University in 1989 (at that time, there was only one university in the town) and happened to be in the bookshop. I am certain of the date because I have a dated, signed copy of The Jessie Kesson Omnibus which I purchased on that day. I actually asked if they had any unsigned copies, clinging still to the idea that the art was more important than the artist. I may have borrowed this notion from Yeats, overlooking his later poems in which he refuted that view, determining that friendships in life were of greater significance in defining a man than the literary work he might leave behind. I may have been influenced by Spike Milligan whose work I greatly admired and who, in various television and radio interviews, was scathing about autograph hunters, accusing them of hijacking the identity of the person whose signature they were seeking to own.

I was browsing the bookshelves and listening in as Jessie talked about her work. Writers’ visits to bookshops were even less heavily policed in those days; there was no requirement to have a ticket and other customers were not discouraged from going about their bookshopping business while the talk progressed. She had a smokers’ laugh which rasped and frequently lead to fits of coughing. Eventually I was drawn to sit and engage instead of eavesdropping, but I didn’t take notes or, if I did, I haven’t kept them. If I were to reproduce anything she said at the time, it would be fiction because I cannot recall her precise words. I do remember being drawn in as she told stories about her life and how she had crafted elements of these into fiction in a variety of forms.
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What stayed with me was the desire to find out more about this writer, Jessie Kesson. I wanted to read the rest of her work. That wasn’t unusual, but now I was also interested in how she had used her own experiences to inform her writing. Which elements were ‘real’, which were inventions and how were they woven together? Even the most rudimentary exploration revealed the number of other writers whose work I had enjoyed and who had drawn extensively on their own lives to inform their fiction.
The possibility in all of us

Virginia Woolf commented that, ‘a woman writing thinks back through her mothers’ (A Room of One’s Own 96). She also wrote that, ‘books have a way of influencing each other’ (107). Isobel Murray, who has written more about Kesson and her work than anyone else, produced a series, Scottish Writers Talking, in which she interviewed several writers including Jessie Kesson, Janice Galloway and Jackie Kay. In the introduction to her interview with Galloway, Murray highlights that she and Galloway, ‘shared an abiding admiration for the work of Jessie Kesson’ (3: 1). Both Kesson and Galloway have drawn on their own lives in their writing, and both authors have been quoted as having an ambivalent view of this facet of their work.

In the magazine, Laverock, Isobel Murray observed that Jessie Kesson dismissed the popularity of The White Bird Passes because,

it was ‘only’ her own story (and so by implication easy to write), and she was proud of Glitter of Mica because it had a male protagonist...and covered three generations and a wide range of characters, and of Where the Apple Ripens, because of its ‘normal’ home background, such as she had never known.

(Laverock)

In this way, Kesson appeared to judge her work on how fictional it was. In Jessie Kesson: Writing her Life, Murray indicated that reviews for The White Bird Passes were, ‘excellent, on the whole’ (228). Compton Mackenzie described it as, ‘Frank, honest and deeply moving.’ In the Aberdeen University Review, Nan Shepherd wrote of the, ‘bubbling immediacy’ of Jessie Kesson’s voice, and the, ‘terrible authenticity’ of the book. Some newspapers, however, chose to focus on more salacious readings, notably the Daily Record and Mail with the banner headline, ‘Daughter Shows No Shame’ (228). Murray quoted David Thomson, a fellow North East Scot who was working at the BBC in London, as having written:

...privately, I believe Jessie’s only hope of writing another really good script is to start on her own life...It is so dramatic and moving...but some ass has told her that a ‘real writer’ must be able to write about other people. My opinion is that she cannot, except in an autobiographical context. And what’s wrong with that?
However, Murray refuted this, highlighting that, with the publication of a variety of scripts and novels produced throughout the 1950s, Jessie Kesson had, ‘shown that she could write on subjects other than her own early years’ (225). This cluster of comments on Kesson appears to reinforce the idea that it is often perceived to be a greater achievement to write about something other than your own life. This interested me in thinking about my own writing practice because I had a strong sense that readers should not identify my fiction as repeating scenes from my life (Galloway, Blood, ‘Scenes from a Life’).

Keeping the focus, for now, on my practice as a reader, my discovery in Waterstones that Kesson had written her own life into much of her fiction prompted me to re-read The White Bird Passes. Furnished with the new knowledge that the main character, Janie, was a representation of Kesson’s younger self, I was intrigued that the little girl had ultimately achieved her ambition to become a writer despite opposition from the authorities and considerable hardship. I had a wistful sense of what might have been if Kesson had been born into a more privileged or simply less deprived environment. Kesson wrote about the ironies of her family tree which include her first cousin being Town Clerk of Elgin at the same time that Jessie and her mother lived in Lady’s Lane (a slum in the same town). Kesson is quoted as saying, ‘I’ve often been intrigued by the contrasting destinies - and lifestyles - of my mother and her youngest sister’ (Murray, Writing her Life 24). Perhaps I identified, not with the deprivation, but with the sense of Kesson’s main characters always being outsiders. ‘Every work I’ve ever written contains an “ootlin”. Lovely Aberdeenshire word. Somebody that never really fitted into the thing...’ (Murray, Scottish Writers Talking, 1: 58).

Perhaps I identified with the way Janie challenged the authorities, even though she was very far from holding a position of power. In fact, the opposite was true - the authorities held the power to determine her destiny. There is a moving scene in The White Bird Passes where the young Janie is of an age to leave the home (effectively an orphanage) where she has been staying. The home Trustees meet to consider Janie’s future and are told she has done well at Skene school; her English papers were the best in all of Aberdeenshire. The Minister explains to
the other Trustees that there is a particular essay (the life of an old woman on a single page) which is ‘astonishing’ in that it was written by one so young. The Trustees are surprised to hear that Janie is in any way academically gifted because she has also been troublesome in not adhering to the house rules. Supporting her to attend Aberdeen University is a possibility at their disposal, but they consider that she has a ‘disintegrated personality’ and that she is at too advanced a stage for her to benefit from further education. They suggest putting her into service or to work in a local farmhouse, given that she likes outdoor work. To their minor credit, they ask Janie what she thinks and she responds, ‘I don’t want to dust and polish...And I don’t want to work on a farm. I want to write poetry. Great poetry. As great as Shakespeare.’ And she dismisses herself from the room (Kesson, *Omnibus* 115-116). I admired Janie’s ambition and her refusal to have that squashed by the authorities.

When I read *The White Bird Passes* now, I find it difficult to avoid conflating the identity of Janie and Kesson. In an interview with Murray, Kesson described it as, ‘mainly autobiographical’ (Murray, *Scottish Writers Talking* 1: 78), and not as an autobiography.

Murray has said that Kesson toyed with the idea of writing an autobiography based around a reunion she attended at Skene when she was visiting Aberdeen University to receive an Honorary Doctorate in 1987. Kesson commented that it was strange to be honoured at Skene because the orphanage ‘bairns’ had been ‘Persona Non Grata’ compared to the local farmers’ children: ‘non-rooted’ compared to ‘hereditary in their background’ (Murray, *Writing her Life* 317). Kesson didn’t write an autobiography but did write a one-woman play called *Reunion* based on the Skene experience. She considered calling her proposed autobiography *A Different Drum* and, quoting from Thoreau, she said:

> On reflection, I realised that in my life, the root cause of all my joys - and in a way, all my woes - has been that I’ve ‘marched to the music of a different drum’. Never deliberately. Just that you can only ‘keep in time’ with the tune you hear.

(Murray, *Writing her Life* 318)
Writing about Kesson in *Doubling Back*, Linda Cracknell identifies with the idea of being an ‘ootlin’, describing it as, ‘the territory of the writer perhaps’ (49). She goes on to quote Kesson talking of her time in the girls’ hostel in Aberdeen where Jessie wrote of an association between the spring and rebellion:

> It was only when I began to ‘break a rule’ that the girls began to accept me and confided in me. But I didn’t break the rule for that reason. It was broken for no reason that I can give words to. I’d smelt spring. A different thing altogether from knowing it was there. I smelt it almost before it came, as if it had told me it was coming. (49)

Like Linda Cracknell, I find these notions of being an outsider and keeping in time with the tune you hear very appealing. I was brought up to challenge authority, although my father held a position of power in the community, he was also anti-establishment in his approach. My older brother was a committed rule-breaker. So how did this affinity I felt with Kesson’s work affect my approach to writing? Was part of the reason I shied away from writing autobiographically because of the doubts Kesson seemed to have about the value of her autobiographical work? I am sure Kesson’s views were part of the mix.

Many writers have an ambivalent view of any suggested linkage between their fiction and their lives. In an interview for *The Herald Magazine*, Janice Galloway said, ‘I get a lot of “did that happen to you?” as though I am working from a kind of domestic photography that is not about thought. It’s a long, weary tradition.’ (Devine 17). Another contemporary Scottish writer, Ronald Frame, has talked about being, ‘a little put off’ when people thought the first stories he had published, ‘must have been based on “life” (the tedious answer is that you don’t, you MAKE IT UP)’ (Goring).

Writing in *The Sunday Times*, Lynne Truss advised that inexperienced writers, especially, should avoid using autobiography in their fiction:

> One thing that creative writing students should always be told, I reckon, is not to use their own life in their first book. For one thing, you still won’t know, even when you’ve written it, whether you are capable of inventing things. For another, this stuff is often by far the best material you will ever have at your disposal, so save it up until you have the skill and
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wisdom to use it well. And thirdly: maybe it's better to wait for your loathsome, miserable and culpably heartless family to die before producing your child's-eye version of events?

Truss wrote these instructions in a review of Galloway's memoir, This is Not About Me, in which she went on to state, 'Luckily, the Scottish writer Janice Galloway took absolutely no notice of this excellent reasoning.' Acknowledging that part of Truss’s role in this instance is to be provocative, I’d like to highlight a number of points from the article. Truss implies Galloway used her ‘own life’ in her first novel whereas Galloway has always stated firmly that The Trick Is To Keep Breathing is a work of fiction. While it might be tempting to seek out individuals who are willing to state that the events of the novel are close to Galloway’s own life, I am not convinced that doing so would add value in terms of considering her approach to writing.

Truss is vague about the boundaries between Galloway’s fictional first novel and her subsequent memoir, not least in the fact that the novel is about an adult character while the protagonist of the memoir is a young girl, perhaps the author, Janice. However, Galloway did, in a sense, follow Truss’s final piece of advice because her mother and sister had died by the time she published her first memoir.

In fact there are many examples of writers who have successfully flouted Truss’s instructions, among them Jessie Kesson (with The White Bird Passes) and Janette Winterson (with Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit). In spite of that, the concern that my fiction should not be mistaken for autobiography had a strong influence on the storyline for my novel, Floating. I was determined to write about something I could never do, and this was the beginning of the idea for the main character’s story. Eoifa checks her child into a crèche and doesn’t return. She abandons her baby. It is, of course, possible that a reader who doesn’t know me could wonder whether I actually did this or wished to do it. It is even possible that my friends and family might wonder if I harboured such thoughts throughout my daughter’s childhood but kept them suppressed until I wrote this book. That is one of the challenges faced by authors who, having pushed a story into the limelight, find their own lives open to scrutiny. Anne Enright, who won the 2007 Booker prize for The Gathering, responded to the Daily Mail asking her
if the novel was autobiographical by saying, ‘I know the difference between myself and my fictions.’ (Enright). Around the same time, Enright was interviewed by Boyd Tonkin who wrote in *The Independent*:

> Enright’s novel is no sort of disguised confessional. In fact, she received a text from her sister which read: ‘Book very good and not overly autobiographical’. And she [Enright] compares the author’s and the actor’s art of honest fabrication. ‘We admire the generosity of actresses who bring a lot of themselves to their work, but we know it’s not them.’

It is interesting to compare writers and actors as Enright does. In each case, members of the audience might wonder about the extent to which the characters being portrayed do, in fact, reflect the writer or actor’s own experience or facets of their personality. Enright has commented that she comes from a much smaller, happier family than the one she wrote about in *The Gathering* but, to be provocative, I could point out that that, in itself, does not mean the novel is not autobiographical. Enright’s sister described the book as, ‘not overly autobiographical’ which isn’t the same as confirming that it isn’t autobiographical at all. Ultimately, the reader cannot know for certain the extent to which a writer has drawn on her own life in producing a text. In *Red Dust Road*, Jackie Kay recounts the reaction she received from her brother when she let him read the first short story she had written:

> My first short story was called ‘Blacker and Blacker’, about a young black girl who scrubbed her skin to make herself white. My brother read it and said, ‘If that story is about you, it’s shite, if it’s not about you it’s all right.’ I quite liked his peculiar brand of literary criticism. (197)

Kay neither confirms nor denies in *Red Dust Road* the extent to which ‘Blacker and Blacker’ was intended to reflect her own life. It is possible for a reader to interpret it in both ways, just as Kay’s brother did.

Ronald Frame has acknowledged his irritation at being asked if his stories are autobiographical but he also went on to say, ‘You can only write out of your own experience - so that what results must be your own unique take on life and no one else’s’ (Goring). In conversation with Janice Galloway, Muriel Spark was encouraging about the concept of a writer’s life influencing his/her fiction, ‘I don’t see what else you can draw on for fiction but your life...not only your own
life but what you've learned or read from other people's lives. It's one's own experience after all, don't you think?’ (Spark, ‘In Conversation with Janice Galloway’). Considering the link between herself and her fictional characters, Jessie Kesson told Isobel Murray, ‘It is the possibility in all of us’ (Murray, Scottish Writers Talking. 1: 59). Kesson discusses whether a sex scene in Where the Apple Ripens related to her own experience:

Indeed it could have happened to me, it could have happened, bit it didna happen because I make it interrupted by the postie. Actually it didna happen at all, it’s a bit like Another Time, it niver happened, but it could have happened...

(82)

This suggests to me that, whenever we tell a story, it reflects our own experience in some way or, as Kesson put it, it is the ‘possibility in all of us’. If all fiction draws on the writer’s experience in some way, what difference does it make whether a story is real or imagined? Surely the value of writing is how it works on the page and how it affects the reader?
A Secret Room of My Own

My writing has taken place against a backdrop of life’s punctuation points: birth and death. I decided to embark on a part-time MLitt in Creative Writing when I had recently returned to work following maternity leave. The course began around the date of my daughter’s first birthday. Because of my attempts to maintain a professional career, my writing time came primarily from the portion of my life I might otherwise have spent with my daughter. The preface to my MLitt dissertation, submitted in June 2003, described it:

I create in the twilight hours, the edges of my life - and not just my own but the lives of those around me. I write in time stolen from other places: days taken off paid work while my daughter attends nursery; in the evenings while she sleeps (and when I’m not catching up on work, domestic and paid). During the night while others dream, I steal hours from myself, rob them from my own sleep bank.

Like many (all?) parents of young children, I had little time for activities beyond work and childcare. Writing was an indulgence. I knew it but couldn’t give it up. One consequence of the amount of time I spent with my daughter or worrying about not spending enough time with her, was that the content of my fiction became heavily influenced by my experiences of caring for a young child. I was writing what I knew but I was scrupulous in not writing about my own life.

During the two-year period of the MLitt I experienced a series of bereavements: my brother-in-law, an uncle, an aunt, a close friend, and my cat. I also had a miscarriage. By the time I embarked on the PhD, my father-in-law, mother-in-law and my own mother had all died. It is a hazard of being a late baby and consequently having elderly parents. I had always known I would be left alone: my father died in 1992 and my mother outlived him by 13 years.

By the time my last remaining aunt passed away in 2009, death had seeped into my writing. I was working on a short story, ‘What Remains’, in which the surviving relatives argue over the division of money and artefacts from a deceased relative’s house. Aside from the legacy of cash and physical objects, the main character struggles to understand that her deceased aunt had relationships with other people who were also grieving - the lady was not only
her aunt, she was also a cousin, a God Mother, and a close friend to a number of people of whom the main character had previously been unaware. This story drew on my personal experience of death and the aftermath of managing the remaining estate, including acting as my mother’s executor jointly with my sister. ‘What Remains’ wasn’t autobiographical but it no longer felt entirely fictional.

On Saturday 17 July 2010, relatives on my mum’s side of the family gathered in Paisley to scatter the ashes of my Uncle, the last remaining member of that generation in my family. For many years my Uncle Willie (or Uncle Bill as some of the family called him) had lived in San Francisco, finally passing away on 8 September 2009. My brother, Hugh, who had lived in Los Angeles since the 1980s, had been active in travelling up to visit our Uncle while he spent his last few weeks in a San Francisco hospital.

My other brother, Greg, travelled from Australia to join the July family gathering and a number of our cousins had also made long journeys. Greg and I tried to persuade Hugh to cross the Atlantic for the occasion. I looked around each time a figure appeared in the garden of remembrance, hopeful that Hugh might surprise us.

The following Saturday, 24 July, my immediate family made a trip on the Waverley paddle steamer around the Kyles of Bute during which we scattered my parents’ ashes in the Clyde. My dad had been encased in his casket since 1992 and my mum had been cremated in 2006; it was time.

My family are notoriously difficult to pin down for visits and events. Finding a date and agreeing a route for the Waverley sail had been no small feat, even though there were only four siblings immediately involved. In the event, Hugh didn’t come. Greg was there with his partner, Sharon; my sister attended with her husband and two teenage children; and I was there with my nine year-old daughter. We released the ashes on the return trip from Tighnabruich at a picturesque point in the sail. My dad might have liked to spend eternity in the engine room, but I knew my mum would have remained on deck, admiring the scenery. I didn’t like the idea of simply throwing the ashes into the water,
equally we hadn’t sought permission to carry out the informal ceremony so didn’t want to take too long. Greg opened the containers and began sprinkling the grit while I read the Jackie Kay poem, ‘Darling’, which ends,

The dead don’t go till you do, loved ones.  
The dead are still here holding our hands.  

(Kay, Darling 228)

Four days later, Hugh was dead. He was found at his Hollywood apartment, apparently staring at the 27 inch screen of his Apple Mac. He was 58.

Twelve days later, I flew to Los Angeles. My sister, Lindsey, and her son, Calum, travelled with me. Greg was already there. That night we ate curry with Hugh’s girlfriend, Jody, his first wife, Wassy, and our niece, Zoma. It was the first time I had met Jody and Wassy.

What happened next was a three-day, multi-centre funeral. Days one and two gravitated around the Forest Lawn crematorium. Day three saw us gather in the garden terrace of the Cat and Fiddle pub in Hollywood.

On the first day, Hugh’s body was cremated. Without appreciating the cultural differences between Scotland and California, Lindsey and I insisted on attending. It quickly became evident that guests did not normally (or possibly ever) visit the business end of the premises. The public-facing parts of Forest Lawn resemble a plush film set, but there has been no attempt to disguise the industrial furnace in the actual crematorium.

Lindsey brought a sprig of white heather from Scotland, which we decided to place inside the coffin. Attempts at slipping the plant in one side were unsuccessful; we had to raise the entire lid at which point I came face to face with my dead brother. Enclosed in the cardboard coffin, he looked like an unhappy waxwork model of his former self. He appeared tired, and cross with the way things had turned out.

Day two was back at Forest Lawn but, this time, in one of the white chapels that are dotted around the extensive grounds. The funeral service was well-attended
with many friends and family members wanting to play an active part. Through his first wife, Hugh had been active in LA’s lively Ethiopian community, including doing promotional work with the charity Tesfa (meaning ‘hope’ in Amharic), which provides support for Ethiopian families in LA and Africa. Wassy’s family, particularly her mother and sister, were very fond of Hugh. They asked that an Ethiopian priest be allowed to bless his body and open the funeral service. Hugh was a devout atheist but he would have enjoyed the theatre of this send off.

Many people spoke, more than were listed on the order of service. Phillip Keel, Hugh’s friend and occasional business partner, was unable to attend because his mother was gravely ill in Switzerland. He emailed a speech which was delivered by Hugh’s girlfriend, Jody, with her husband sitting in the congregation. Hugh’s second wife, Andie, was heavily pregnant with her third child, having remarried since divorcing my brother seven or eight years earlier. Andie, a qualified nurse, doesn’t care for public speaking but Hugh and Andie’s 13 year old son, Alister, gave a brief vote of thanks outside.

Greg gave a speech. Lindsey opted not to. My eulogy began, ‘I would like to tell you a story of a little girl called Ailsa who had an older brother called Hugh.’

Reflecting on all those who spoke at Hugh’s funeral, it was remarkable how careful everyone had been to pick out the best in his character, skirting around any tricky or difficult areas. This is standard funeral etiquette, but it seemed unusual for Hugh whose Technicolor life was more vibrant than many of us could ever dream, with an edgy soundtrack to match. I loved my brother but I wasn’t blind to the more challenging aspects of his personality. I could sympathise with both of his former wives who had struggled to cope with the day to day version of this charismatic character.

Beyond the funeral, there were other texts to be written. I produced a number of drafts of Hugh’s obituary which we submitted on both sides of the Atlantic. Wassy provided me with details of Hugh’s work in Germany, where they had met in the late 1970s. The text she gave me was overwhelmingly positive about Hugh’s contribution and manner of engaging with colleagues, in stark contrast to the oral versions she told me in our extended conversations. Similarly, on return
visits to LA, his second wife, Andie, gradually began to talk to me about the realities of shared parenting. It was evident there was significant affection for Hugh; but I was increasingly hearing the less sanitised stories of his life. The different versions intrigued me, as did the new dimensions of Hugh’s life that I was discovering following his death. I had a strong desire to write about it. While I recognised the experience was likely to influence Floating, I also wanted to create a piece with its own identity. Who was Hugh? And how did someone born in Aberdeen, educated in Huntly, Wick, Edinburgh and Munich end up dead in LA at the age of 58? Making use of photographs, facts and stories, I created ‘Hugh As Scheduled’.

How does this relate to Floating? For at least a year after Hugh’s death I could write nothing of value in relation to the characters in my novel. I left Stella standing in front of a mirror trying on her sister’s coat, running her fingers over the lace edge of a cotton handkerchief she found in the left hand pocket. Eoifa wasn’t much better. I could not make myself inhabit that world of the bereaved and grieving. It was a warped version of my reality. I asked myself why I had written this storyline, yet I still wanted to finish it in the future. I read other literary works dealing with the subject of death and grieving. The Trick is to Keep Breathing was one but the author’s steadfast refusal to acknowledge an autobiographical element was problematic for me at this time. I re-read the short story, ‘A Poem Called Apostrophe’ by my friend Dorothy Alexander. (It won the 2002 Macallan/Scotland on Sunday short story competition.) The story is autobiographical on the subject of losing a close friend to terminal illness. The opening and the closing lines are particularly powerful for me: ‘Her friend died and she was heartbroken’ and, ‘in exile from a time with you in it.’

Even if I could have progressed the novel, I was paralysed by the idea that anyone reading it would always assume Stella’s story was inspired by Hugh’s death. During very late nights I allowed myself to wonder if I had caused this to happen by writing it down. This was the madness of the bereaved.

What helped me to write productively again? Looking in detail at the literary approaches of other writers to bereavement. I read Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Julian Barnes. I reflected on the fact that, beginning with the MLitt, I’d
been content to write autobiographical details into my essays, but scrupulously avoided doing anything of the sort with my fiction. The impact of the bereavements changed that. I had begun to draw on my life in more of my writing. ‘What Remains’ was the beginning and ‘Hugh As Scheduled’ was the next step. I was exploring my identity in these different places, trying different forms for size. Thinking afresh about *Floating*, I realised Stella didn’t need to walk away from the mirror; I could allow her to gaze on.
Writing down your life: an exploration of literary techniques in autobiographical writing

Given Janice Galloway’s irritation at being asked about the extent to which her fictional work is autobiographical, I was intrigued when she published the first volume of her memoirs, *This Is Not About Me*, in 2008. This decision necessarily invites questions about the links between her writing and events in her life. Two years later, in 2010, Jackie Kay published her memoir, *Red Dust Road*, and in 2011 Jeanette Winterson’s autobiography, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* was released.

As well as being contemporaries, these authors have all written in both fictional and autobiographical forms. I wanted to explore the extent to which close reading of the autobiographical texts would provide insight to each writer’s creative processes. Here, I compare the authors’ approaches, and consider the techniques they have used in writing their own lives.

**Defining the genre**

I started with questions related to the genre, looking at the definitions or markers of autobiography and then considering how the work of these three authors aligned with them.

Philippe Lejeune’s 1975 essay, ‘The Autobiographical Pact’, began with the question, ‘Is it possible to define autobiography?’ (*On Autobiography* 3) He went on to provide the following definition, which has been widely quoted:

> Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.

(4)

In addition, Lejeune stated that,
In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical (5).

Lejeune described this requirement as the autobiographical pact, indicating that the common identity of the narrator and principal character that is assumed in autobiography, ‘is marked most often by the use of the first person’ (5). Lejeune remained committed to the idea of the autobiographical pact even when he subsequently expressed some dissatisfaction with his original definition of autobiography, primarily because it did not distinguish clearly enough between autobiography and other genres such as biography and fiction.

A number of other commentators (including Linda Anderson, Paul John Eakin and Micaela Maftei) have criticised Lejeune’s definition and his concept of the autobiographical pact. Maftei identifies one of the limitations of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact as the fact that it requires the reader to believe in the author’s sincerity of intention (Maftei 51). Eakin addressed this limitation in the Foreword to On Autobiography,

> without some sincere basis in referential fact autobiography risks losing its status as a distinct genre and collapsing completely into fiction. To read autobiography in the manner of Lejeune, one must be both sophisticated, alive to its imaginative art, and naive, believing in the sincerity of the author’s intention to present the story of ‘a real person concerning his own existence.’

(xiii)

In 1986 Lejeune revisited his original essay, stating that he had never intended for his definition to, ‘take on the authority of the dictionary’ (On Autobiography 120). He said,

> In my mind the definition was a point of departure from which to set up an analytical deconstruction of the factors that enter into the perception of the genre. But, isolated from its context, cited as an “authority”, it could appear sectarian and dogmatic...a falsely magical formula that blocks reflection instead of stimulating it.

(121)

In this way, Lejeune encouraged us to treat his definition as dynamic, a temporary tool to aid discussion and analysis, to be refined, changed or even discarded based on future reflection or discovery.
While Lejeune refined some aspects of his earlier thinking, he confirmed that he still considered the authorial pact (or contract) necessary in order to reach a view about a piece of writing on the basis of the text alone. He recognised the challenge of producing a true autobiography,

> How can we think that in autobiography it is the lived life that produces the text, when it is the text that produces the life!...Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject - it is fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.

*(On Autobiography 131-132)*

Lejeune is not alone in considering that it is challenging, if not impossible, to find a definition for autobiography that distinguishes it from other genres. In *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson engages with the ideas of Paul de Man who considered it was highly problematic to conceive of autobiography as a genre in its own right because it was ‘plagued’ by a series of unanswerable questions:

> autobiography...reveals something which is in fact much more generally the case: that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes. Autobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek.

*(11)*

This is very similar to Lejeune’s revised position. Complications around writers telling the truth about themselves are recurring themes in studies on autobiography and related genres. A writer’s use of figurative language is sometimes interpreted as a deviation from the strictly autobiographical into a more literary (and therefore perhaps more fictional) realm. The nebulous place between the two genres, an autobiographical text that more obviously uses the techniques of fiction, with the necessary blurring of strict autobiographical framing this provides, is sometimes called memoir.

A range of subtly different definitions for memoir are available. Anderson notes that, ‘Memoirs have traditionally occupied a category of their own within the field of “life-writing”, and have been distinguished from autobiography as being more flexible and outward-looking’ *(Autobiography 113)*. Lejeune characterised memoir as a sub-category of autobiography, identifying it as conforming to some
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features of autobiography but not the requirement that the text focus on an individual life or personality (*On Autobiography* 4). Similar to the Lejeune position, Smith and Watson state that memoir may be concerned with one aspect of a life, rather than the whole story of a life (*Reading Autobiography* 3). Thomas Couser noted a range of interpretations from autobiography and memoir being used interchangeably, to highlight that memoir can also be considered as a sub-genre of biography (*Memoir* 18).

Linda Anderson commented, ‘The very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all the more urgent’ (*Autobiography* 1-2). She identifies autobiography, in its widest sense, as an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction, concluding,

> While autobiography supplies few certainties or answers, its study leads us to engage with some of the most intractable and important cultural questions of our time

(139)

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the challenges in arriving at a clear definition, autobiography remains a fascinating area to explore.
Fitting the genre definition

Winterson, Kay and Galloway all appear rather reluctant to explicitly identify the genre of their books. You have to explore the rear of the dustcover on Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* to find the description, ‘autobiography’. There is no further mention of genre inside the covers. My copy of Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road* has no explicit indication of genre, although in other editions the cover proclaims it is ‘An Autobiographical Journey’. It is described as a memoir in the majority of reviews and in marketing material.

In line with the Winterson approach, each of Janice Galloway’s two volumes, *This Is Not About Me* and *All Made Up*, is described on the rear of its respective dustcover as memoir although there is no introductory text within either book identifying a genre. Both are widely described as memoir in reviews and publicity. Galloway herself, often reluctant to categorise writing by genre, has referred to these volumes as memoir and even as anti-memoir (Bowden). Their titles appear, in a playful way, to deny the autobiographical nature of the text.

*Why Be Happy* meets the terms of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact in that the author, protagonist and narrator are the same. It is written in the first person, and predominantly uses the past tense. Structured in fifteen chapters plus a ‘Coda’, it presents the story of Winterson’s life (so far) in broadly chronological order. The title comes from a line attributed to Winterson’s adoptive mother who asks the young Jeanette why she is homosexual. When Winterson says that she is happy when she is with her female partner, her mother retorts, ‘Why be happy when you could be normal?’ (114).

Kay’s *Red Dust Road* could be regarded as meeting the terms of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact because the author, protagonist and narrator are the same. However, given that it is not about a whole life, *Red Dust Road* aligns better with Lejeune’s requirements for memoir. *Red Dust Road* is written almost entirely in the first person and the chapters follow stories rather than a
chronological order. The text is not exclusively produced from a retrospective point of view: most chapters use a combination of the present and past tenses, and a number of short chapters are written entirely in the present tense, parachuting the reader into a particular year as Kay presents her younger selves in a variety of significant vignettes.

In the case of Galloway’s memoirs, the playful nature of the titles creates ambiguity about the extent to which the volumes are her own story, although the narrator and protagonist are the same. *This Is Not About Me* opens in the present tense, ‘This is my family’ (1). It might appear that Galloway is addressing the reader directly. However, there is some ambiguity over whether it is Galloway or the narrator who is addressing the reader - they might be one and the same but it is not explicit - and this calls into question the extent to which her memoirs meet the terms of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact.
Writing their own lives: narrative perspective

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson ask, ‘What could be simpler to understand than the act of people writing about what they know best, their own lives?’ (1). However, they go on to emphasise that this apparently simple act is much more complex than it first appears. ‘For the writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation.’ (1) Lejeune referred to this as the autobiographer, ‘straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two’ (*On Autobiography* 11).

This notion of straddling is a good description of Winterson’s approach. The writer is present throughout, guiding the reader through the book. *Why Be Happy* opens, ‘When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib.”’ (1). *Why Be Happy* closes with a ‘Coda’ which addresses the reader directly, ‘When I began this book I had no idea how it would turn out. I was writing in real time. I was writing the past and discovering the future.’ (226). Winterson is referring to the search for her biological mother, who she finds and describes meeting towards the end of the book. *Why Be Happy* ends with the memorable line, ‘I have no idea what happens next.’ (230).

*Why Be Happy* is told mainly in the simple past tense, a reflective, organised mode of telling, and only moves into the present to recount significant scenes. The first example occurs early in the book when she writes about a telephone conversation between herself and her adoptive mother, Mrs Winterson, who is furious with Jeanette about the publication of her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The scene begins,

I went to a phone box - I had no phone. She went to a phone box - she had no phone.

I dialled the Accrington code and number as instructed, and there she was - who needs Skype? I could see her through her voice, her form solidifying in front of me as she talked.

(2)
Winterson takes us straight to the time when she phones her adoptive mother. The conversation begins with Mrs Winterson saying, ‘It’s the first time I’ve had to order a book in a false name.’ (3). Winterson tells the reader how she tried to explain to her mother what she had been attempting to do in *Oranges* as a piece of literature and as a feminist work. The text then shifts to the present tense and we are right back inside the phone box,

The pips - more money in the slot - and I’m thinking, as her voice goes in and out like the sea, ‘Why aren’t you proud of me?’

The pips - more money in the slot - and I’m locked out and sitting on the doorstep again. It’s really cold and I’ve got a newspaper under my bum and I’m huddled in my duffel coat.

A woman comes by and I know her. She gives me a bag of chips. She knows what my mother is like.

Inside our house the light is on. Dad’s on the night shift, so she can go to bed, but she won’t sleep. She’ll read the Bible all night, and when Dad comes home, he’ll let me in, and he’ll say nothing, and she’ll say nothing, and we’ll act like it’s normal never to sleep with your husband. And normal to have two sets of false teeth, and a revolver in the duster drawer... [ellipsis contained in the original text]

We’re still on the phone in our phone boxes. She tells me that my success is from the Devil, keeper of the wrong crib.

This extract illustrates how Winterson telescopes time for the reader, drawing us close not only to the immediate scene in the phone box but to a repeated scene from her childhood, of being locked outside the house by her mother. She gives us a resume of Mrs Winterson’s foibles (not sleeping with her husband etc) which were set out at greater length earlier in the book. Using the present tense in this way has been described by Nicola King as creating, ‘the illusion that this is a memory untouched by later experience, as fresh and immediate as its original occurrence’ (Bradford, *Life Writing* 235). Winterson’s use of the present tense has the impact of making the particular scenes more immediate, as though we are being taken right back to the moment they first happened, rather than having them recounted many years later. It prompts the practical question: to what extent can the writer remember the detail of a scene that occurred many years earlier in order to recount it truthfully.

Lejeune commented that the use of literary craft could make it harder for a reader to be clear about the author’s sincerity of intention which, in turn,
makes it harder to distinguish autobiography from fiction (On Autobiography 131-132). The question of truth in autobiography is worthy of further exploration but, for now, I will note that writers can use fictional techniques to ensure a scene works on the page without being insincere or untruthful. Winterson’s framing of the present tense passages with reflections on them acts as a reminder to the reader that these are her memories, with all that implies for reliability and subjectivity.

Within the structure of her text, Winterson talks about herself at a number of different points in time. She is the author addressing the reader, she is the adult talking on the phone to her adoptive mother, and she is the adolescent locked out of the house. Maftei describes writers of autobiography having to fulfil a variety of roles in relation to their text:

> Autobiography necessitates the removal of its author to a place outside the experience, in order to write about it. Yet it simultaneously illustrates his or her role in the experience, situating them within the described event. The writer must wear a multitude of masks in order to create the illusion of being both protagonist and recorder of the story, the character to whom we (hopefully) relate and have an interest in following, as well as the controller of the strings...Something like a splitting of selves is required in order to feature within the text while constructing it.

I like Maftei’s description of the ‘splitting of selves’. Use of the mask metaphor and, especially, the statement about creating ‘the illusion’ could be interpreted as calling into question the truthfulness of the writer’s endeavour. If a work is an autobiography, the writer is both the protagonist and the narrator; that aspect, at least, is not an illusion. However, because the protagonist and narrator are both constructed with words, there is an argument that the construction produces a mask. By applying writerly craft, the author can make the story work on the page in order to engage the reader.

The idea of multiple selves (or versions) is picked up by Joan Didion who suggested that she is not a unified version of herself but that she existed in different versions at different ages. She wrote,

> I have lost touch with a couple of the people I used to be...one of them, a seventeen year-old, presents little threat...the other one, a twenty-three
year old, bothers me more. She was always a great deal of trouble, and I suspect she will reappear when I least want to see her.

(107)

Writing in this way, Didion implies she has no control over her previous selves and limited (or no) ability to prevent their return. Implicit in what she writes is the idea that she remembers these earlier versions of herself which, in turn, suggests she would be able to write about them and, on the page at least, she would be able to control their influence. In Winterson’s case, she has chosen to act as an omnipresent guide for the reader, talking directly from the side of the stage, drawing back the curtain on her version of the past.

Jackie Kay has a different approach, for example making greater use of the present tense than Winterson. *Red Dust Road* opens in the present tense with a description of Kay meeting Jonathan, her biological father, for the first time.

Jonathan is suddenly there in the hotel corridor leading to the swimming-pool area. He’s sitting on a white plastic chair in a sad cafe....

‘Jonathan?’ I say.

‘Yes,’ he says, standing up and turning slowly to meet me.

(1)

Kay might have recounted the meeting with her father in the past tense but chooses to use the present. She then shifts to the past tense about half-way down the first page:

I hadn’t meant to meet him here. I’d been sitting in the swimming-pool area at a nice table by the bar, waiting for two hours, looking up at every elderly man coming through the opening in the wall.

(1)

Kay’s choice of the present tense for the scenes describing her meeting with her father has the impact of bringing the reader closer to this significant event. Kay moves between the past and present tenses in other chapters, for example much further into the book, during her second visit to Africa, Kay has a pedicure and considers whether to introduce herself to her father’s other children:

Tope put my swollen feet into very hot water and told me to be brave. She had a trolley full of implements that she was going to use on
my feet. My toes, I remembered, are his toes. I chose a bright red colour, the colour of my imaginary red-dust road, and Tope painted my toenails, carefully, patiently, with a steady hand.

In the beauty parlour in Lagos, I feel myself transforming. Tomorrow, I'll go to the Balogun market and pick some African prints, and then I'll go to the tailor and maybe have a dress made and tops and trousers. Of course, when I wear a dress, I always feel like I'm in drag. But even being in drag will be fun in Ukpor. The secret is mine now. I'm going to Ukpor and no one knows...I've taken matters into my own hands, and I'm going east.

(177-178)

In this extract, Kay begins in the past tense but moves to the present, ‘I feel myself transforming’, even though she is still in the beauty parlour in the same moment of time. Having moved to the present tense, she shifts to the future tense to discuss what she intends to do the next day. The tenses she uses to describe the events and her feelings bring into relief their significance. The shifts in tense underline the transformation she has undergone physically and mentally.

The reader cannot know from the text alone whether Kay remembers feeling herself transforming at the time or whether she subsequently identified that moment in the beauty parlour as pivotal. We do know it marks a decision point in her story - she decides not to remain a secret from her biological father’s family any longer. It also provides an example of Kay explicitly occupying her place inside and outside the text, just as Lejeune described the role of an autobiographer acting as the contact between the two (On Autobiography 11). Kay’s choice of tenses and the manner of the shifts between them allow the writer’s presence to appear less overt than in Winterson’s text, and Kay’s book is full of such transitions between past and present, notably during recounted conversations with her adoptive parents.

Kay also includes a number of shorter chapters that are written wholly in the present tense. The second chapter, ‘1969’, is an example of this. It tells the story of Jackie learning she is adopted:

I am seven years old. My mum, my brother and I have just watched a cowboy and Indian film...It suddenly occurs to me that the Indians are the same colour as me and my mum is not the same colour as me.

(12)
In this passage Kay identifies herself as the ‘I’ but it is Jackie aged seven who tells the story, or, more accurately, it is the adult Jackie telling the story in the voice she remembers and/or has created to represent her seven year old self. Continuing in that voice, Kay writes about discovering she is adopted. The young Jackie doesn’t want to believe her mum is not her ‘real mummy’.

Are you making this up? I ask my mummy. Is this one of your stories? She’s so good, my mummy, at telling stories. No, it isn’t, she says. She’s in tears herself too. It’s upset her. Your real daddy came from Nigeria in Africa and your mummy came from the Highlands. What, I say, so my daddy isn’t my real daddy either? No, my mum says. I’m distraught. I can’t stop crying...How long have you known about this? I ask my brother, furious with him for some reason because he’s laughing and finds the whole thing very funny. I’ve known for ages. I can’t remember not knowing, he says. So it’s good, isn’t it? You’re not my real sister. Ha! Ha! My mum...says, But your dad and I love you more than all the tea in China, more than all the waves in the ocean and will love you till all the seas run dry. And you are special. You were chosen. And everyone needs cuddles to survive. Everyone needs cuddles, so they do. Come here and let your mummy give you a big cuddle.

The technique Kay adopts in this chapter draws the reader very close to the seven year old Jackie receiving this significant news. As well as writing in the present tense and in the voice of her seven year old self, Kay renders her brother’s and mother’s voices. Given that Kay is unlikely to recall the full conversation precisely as it actually took place, we can assume the scene has been reconstructed from memories and traits known over a lifetime. The mother’s accent is hinted at with the inclusion of the phrase, ‘so they do’. The passage appears as a single stream without punctuating the distinctions between speech and interior thoughts. Kay credits her younger self with observing, not only that her adoptive mother is crying but that, ‘It’s upset her’. Meanwhile she is furious with her adoptive brother who, ‘finds the whole thing very funny’. There is no reported exchange between the mother and brother. The focus remains on Jackie, what she says and what she hears being said to her.

Kay does not telescope time like Winterson does. Instead, she allows these short chapters to stand alone as vivid vignettes.
Around a third of the way through *Red Dust Road*, the chapter entitled ‘Mull’ opens:

Remember the first time we went to Mull? You were four. Maxie was six and a half. You both had identical anoraks, yours was brown and Maxie’s was blue. I sang to you on the ferry from Oban to Tobermory….Remember your brother boldly feeding the seagulls with the rest of his chips?

(114)

It is the only section of the book written in the second person. After two pages, there is a return to the first person,

I’m at my parents’ house, the house I grew up in….Now when I go home, my parents and I like nothing better than sitting round the table going over past holidays. Or they tell me over and over about their days in New Zealand…

(116)

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for Kay’s use of the second person. How does it change the reader’s perception of the text compared to the passages presented in the first or third person? While the reader clearly knows they are not, in reality, being addressed directly, use of the second person encourages the reader to make a connection with the young Jackie. For the first (and only) time in the book, the narrator and the protagonist split. Use of the second person gives the initial impression that the person speaking is addressing the reader directly. The second and third sentences, make it apparent that Jackie is being addressed, ‘You were four. Maxie was six and a half.’ The manner of ‘speaking’ (calling Jackie’s brother ‘Maxie’ and knowledge of their childhood anoraks) make it evident that the person talking must be one of Jackie’s adoptive parents. The passage exemplifies the extent to which stories about young children are told to them by others and Kay’s use of the second person encourages the reader to remember occasions when they have been in the position of having a parent recount a story from their earlier lives. That is certainly the impact this technique had on me - but perhaps this is because I too visited Mull as a child and have memories of seagulls being fed from the deck of ferries on visits to the Scottish islands.
When the text returns to the first person and into the present tense, the narrator and protagonist are reunited. This shift enables the location to be revealed, ‘I’m at my parents’ house’. Prior to that, the parent’s voice was disembodied, locationless. Similar in some respects to Winterson’s approach, Kay’s use of the present tense gives the impression that she is standing on the edge of a stage on which the scene has just been played out. Once again, the narrator (who is also the writer in this case), as Lejeune described, has one foot inside and one outside the story.

Janice Galloway’s *This Is Not About Me* begins in the present tense, ‘This is my family.’ On page 3, Galloway switches to the past tense, taking the reader back to a point before her own birth, ‘My mother thought I was the menopause’. There follows a description of Buckreddan Maternity Home, which Galloway tells us she, ‘shot by on a bus’ when she was sixteen (4).

I tried to imagine it inside. I pictured artillery ranks of bloated women...Using garbled notions from the telly, I pictured babies in another room...I had to be among them somewhere, but that was as far as the picturing went. I couldn’t picture the absurdly named delivery suites, since I had no idea what delivery was or what such a suite might contain, but I could imagine bottles all right. Bottles and nappies, the standard shorthand for newborns...

They tried to make us breast-feed, my mother said once in a rare burst of revelation. It was horrible. I told them I was too old, but the Sister didn’t care...I told them, she said, but you’ve no dignity in these places. You canny do that sort of thing when you’re forty, I said. Anyway, you did fine on the bottle.

I could picture the insipid green wards and the Big Ward Sister not taking no for an answer. I could picture my mother, or someone like her, a small head afloat on a sea of white cotton...What I couldn’t picture was me, the little vampire in the midst of the melodrama, the source of worry and unease.

In this extract, Galloway takes the reader back to her own beginning and, in doing so, provides more than one version of herself. She is the adult writer narrating the sixteen year old Janice’s point of view. She is also a younger version of herself being addressed by her mother. Part way through the recollection (or reconstruction), Galloway includes a short section to indicate her mother speaking. This gives the reader insight into the mother’s point of
view and we are prompted to ‘hear’ her mother’s voice through the recounted speech. The phrase, ‘my mother said once in a rare burst of revelation’, ensures we see the speech through Janice’s eyes and ears. We haven’t shifted fully to the mother’s point of view. Galloway says she can’t picture herself, which could be emblematic of the difficulty of recounting memory, or she could be emphasising the memoir title, this isn’t about her. A further interpretation is the obvious truth that Galloway would have no memory of herself as a child at that age and she would never have ‘seen’ herself as a baby - unless in a photograph.

Like Kay, Galloway recreates the speech patterns of her family members.

Galloway also draws on similar techniques to Winterson to move the reader between points in time, although Galloway’s approach tends to draw the reader to the moment in a more immediate and visceral manner than Winterson. We can see this in the following two extracts in which both writers tell the story of their sixteen year old selves. In the first Winterson talks of leaving home:

When I left home at sixteen I bought a small rug. It was my roll-up world. Whatever room, whatever temporary place I had, I unrolled the rug. It was a map of myself. Invisible to others, but held in the rug, were all the places I had stayed - for a few weeks, for a few months. On the first night anywhere new I liked to lie in bed and look at the rug to remind myself that I had what I needed even though what I had was so little.

(Why Be Happy 63)

Winterson-the-writer is present throughout this vivid passage, showing us the sixteen year old Jeanette through the lens of her adult self. In the next extract, Galloway talks of passing the maternity home where she was born:

I was sixteen before I caught sight of the word [Buckreddan] on a sign as I shot by on a bus, and turned in time to see a small red sandstone house, a late-Victorian edifice with the look of a once-posh hotel. Buckreddan Maternity Home the sign said, to the sound of pennies dropping. All the way to Ayr on the worn-shiny double seat of a Scottish Motor Transport single-decker, I tried to imagine it inside. I pictured artillery ranks of bloated woman, thin sheets, the occasional nurse with an origami hat like Florence Nightingale...

(This Is Not About Me 4)
Galloway-the-writer is explicitly present in the first sentence only, using the term ‘I’. Later in the passage when Galloway uses ‘I’ she is conveying the sixteen year old Janice’s viewpoint, taking the reader right to the moment that she sat on the bus trying to imagine what the maternity hospital looked like inside. Shortly after, the reader is transported inside the hospital, without sixteen year old Janice ever having set foot in the place, and the narrative perspective shifts again. Galloway is no longer working from memory, she is moving into the realms of imagination if not fiction.

Winterson and Galloway have both adopted a technique of telescoping time by moving the reader to the moment particular events occurred. In the scene in Why Be Happy where the young Jeanette is in the telephone box talking to her adoptive mother, Winterson brought the reader right into the phone box and, from there, transported the reader to view the much younger Jeanette sitting on the doorstep, locked out of her home. A distinction between Winterson’s and Galloway’s approach is that throughout Why Be Happy Winterson frames these scenes with text in which the adult writer addresses the reader. In Galloway’s memoirs, no such framing occurs.

Galloway talked about this in an interview for the Scottish Review of Books. There were no, ‘adult reflections on the child’s life’ because she wanted the reader to feel what it was like to ‘be there’, indicating this was more important than letting readers understand her own conclusions about the events. Kay’s short chapters where she writes entirely in the present tense come close to Galloway’s approach. The writing in those vignettes brings the reader close to the young Jackie and, just as Galloway describes, there are no explicit adult reflections. Of course we should also be aware that all of the texts have been created by adult writers and, in that regard, perhaps the only distinction is the extent to which the adult reflections are explicit.

Writing in The Guardian, Lavinia Greenlaw described Galloway’s memoir as, ‘a model of how to write out of, rather than about, yourself…’. Does this approach suggest that Galloway’s memoir is less referential than the works by Winterson and Kay? Or does it simply mean Galloway prefers the reader to be close to the
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characters, while remaining safely distant herself? Before venturing an answer to these questions I will consider how the writers themselves described their work.

In an interview during a conference held at Nantes University in 2007, Galloway talked about working on the book that became *This Is Not About Me*, describing it then as half memoir and half novel. She said,

> Originally, I thought it would take off where *Foreign Parts* finishes, but I see it is really about a child. I guess it begins with looking at the place I came from, in a distant way and in a close way. What family is and what family means….The book is partly memoir, partly novel, and possibly partly something else by the time I finish.

The present tense is used in this quotation because Galloway was speaking in 2007 while she was still working on *This Is Not About Me*. The comment, ‘I thought it would take off where *Foreign Parts* finishes’, could be interpreted as implying that her second novel, *Foreign Parts*, contains elements of memoir. It could also be taken as confirmation that Galloway initially envisaged *This Is Not About Me* as another fictional work. Given Galloway’s emphatic insistence that her novels are fiction, I suggest she intended the latter. I note the ambivalence and hesitation Galloway has about identifying a definite genre for the book, from the point of its inception. This contrasts with both Winterson and Kay who were more definite about the genres of their texts while they were writing them. In an introduction to *Why Be Happy* on her author website, Winterson writes:

> I sat down to see what would come out, and 2 weeks later I had 14,000 words. That told me that there was a book ready to be written and that I should go with the flow of that energy….While I was actually writing the book I was in the process of tracing my birth mother. I had no idea what would happen there, and [at] a late point in the book I was writing in real time. I added the CODA after the Proof stage, which is pretty late.

It is evident that Winterson recognised she was writing about her own experience, in particular her search for her birth mother. Winterson’s comment about the comparative ease and speed with which she produced the first 14,000 words is similar to Kay’s experience. Jackie Kay was interviewed by Isabel Murray in 2006 and talked about writing the book that became *Red Dust Road*.
The book was finished two years ago. I wrote the book quite soon after I came back from Nigeria, while everything was still fresh in my head, and it didn’t take me that long to write: it only took about six months. But I probably would want to do other things, if I was going to publish it anyway, like go back to Nigeria again, go to Ibo country and see if I could find out brothers and sisters, and do all that kind of stuff.

(Murray, Scottish Writers Talking 4: 55)

Although in the interview Kay refers to the book as finished, we now know that she did return to Nigeria before completing the version that was published as *Red Dust Road*. As with Winterson, it is evident that Kay recognised she was writing about her own experience of having traced and found her birth parent, for example, elsewhere in the interview, she refers to the book as a memoir and not as a novel, in contrast with Galloway.

Looking closely at the way Galloway referred to the subject of her book, ‘I see it is really about a child’. This is a non-specific child, not identified as a young version of herself. She then talks about, ‘looking at the place I came from’; this time clearly locating herself within the book. In this way Galloway appears to mirror her own remark about, ‘looking...in a distant way and in a close way’, as she shifts the proximity of her identity in relation to the text.

In a later interview, published in the *Scottish Review of Books* in 2009, Galloway talked about writing herself as a fictional character in *This Is Not About Me*. She said, ‘I guess it’s as close as it’s going to get to being me, but it still has the protective edge of fiction and room for creative play.’ She described the title as a, ‘private in-joke in a way, but it’s also true...I don’t think that book is about me, it’s about that period in history, about childhood itself, about confusion, child-rearing, the hiddenness of most people’s lives then.’ She continued,

I was nervous about being judged on the basis of standard memoirs - why are there no interior thoughts, adult reflections on the child’s life...Why? Because the important thing was not to thrust my own garbled Penguin paperback conclusions on people, but to let them feel what it was like to be there. The goal of a novel, in part, is to allow direct sensation, an entering into the book’s reality....I wanted to write with that novelistic goal. It’s not fictionalising, it’s methodology...To say, this is in fact what I saw and it’s as truthful and down to the wire as I can get it through the skin.'
In contravention of the Lejeune criteria, Galloway invites the reader to join her in a ‘guessing game’. On the one hand saying she doesn’t think the book is about her and, on the other, appearing to confirm that it is a memoir, albeit written with her own methodology. Some readers will enjoy the intrigue and others may find the game-playing off-putting. Micaela Maftei has highlighted, ‘For many people, one of the main allures of reading memoir is the proximity they allow themselves to feel to the writer’ (49). Those seeking such proximity to Galloway may be disappointed. There is proximity to the characters but one is never clear about the extent to which Galloway, the writer, is present in those characters, even in her namesake Janice.

The absence of adult reflections means that Galloway’s memoirs could be read as novels in a way that Winterson and Kay’s books could not. Galloway’s methodology brings the reader close to the characters but puts a distance between the reader and the writer. Returning to the question of whether Galloway’s approach means that her works are less referential than those of Winterson or Kay, Galloway’s comments in the 2009 interview (‘it’s as truthful and down to the wire as I can get it’) suggest that her memoirs are a faithful reproduction of her remembered experience or, at least, as close to the truth as she could allow herself to write at the time. Ultimately, the reader cannot know from the text alone whether this is the case or not. We can, however, continue to examine the techniques she uses.
Photographs in the frame

Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir reflected on the use of photographs in autobiography indicating that they can serve a number of roles including, ‘as definitive documents to prove the referentiality of the text.’ (222). In this way, cover photographs can be regarded as establishing a link between the book and the author’s earlier life. In Winterson’s case, the photographs on the front and rear of the dustcover reinforce the definition of the book as autobiography. Similarly, the front cover of Red Dust Road shows a photograph of Jackie Kay as a child. The sense that this is an authentic reproduction of an original photograph is emphasised by the presence of a white diagonal line across the image, such as might have been created by a fold or crease in the original. The rear cover carries two more photographs of the author, this time with her adoptive family.

Like the works by Winterson and Kay, the cover of This Is Not About Me displays a photograph of the author as a child but, unlike the other authors, Galloway engages with the photograph in her text. The book begins, ‘This is my family’ (1) and Galloway continues in the present tense with what appears to be a painstakingly accurate description of the family photograph printed on the front cover, down to the bruising on her sister’s ankles. When Galloway describes her sister’s hands, she writes, ‘No rings though. For a number of reasons, rings weren’t Cora’s thing’ (2). Cora’s opinion of rings is suggestive of Cora’s views on matters beyond the wearing of jewellery. It conveys a message about her attitude to men, suggesting she is not the marrying kind or not the ‘commitment’ kind. These descriptions of Cora are expressed more fully later in the book. And yet the photograph on the dustcover definitely shows Galloway’s sister wearing a ring on the middle finger of her right hand. Not on her ‘ring finger’ but still wearing a ring. The description of the photograph continues,

Her arm-rest has two fag-burns and an ashtray with a full-strength on the lip, threading wispy ectoplasm across her knees. There was always a fag, always a fag-burn, so these details make the composition evocative. (2)
The photograph on the book cover does show marks that could be fag-burns on the armrest of the sofa but there is no ashtray, cigarette or smoke. So what can the reader interpret from the phrase, ‘these details make the composition evocative’, particularly when these details are not, in fact, in the photograph being shared? The writer could have been adding detail to make the aged photograph come alive in the present, perhaps drawing on her memory of that, or similar, occasions from her childhood. The description and the image are so nearly identical that I wonder if there was another photograph that did contain the smoking fag. It wouldn’t be uncommon for photographers to take more than one shot, after all. However, this would not explain away the description of Cora’s view of rings. While Galloway has given the photographic evidence, she has contradicted it in intricate but important verbal details. Galloway’s decision to have her text deviate from the photograph reminds the reader that Cora is a character in a book who is a bit like, but not the same as, Galloway’s sister (in the photograph).

The juxtapositions of the book intrigue me: the presence of the family photograph alongside the title appear contradictory. There is further contradiction in the verbal description of the photograph which is both painstakingly accurate and also clearly inaccurate or untrue. Galloway simultaneously asserts and denies that she is the ‘protagonist’. From this early stage, ‘the reader is warned of the rules of the game’ as Lejeune commented in relation to Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Maftei 81). In a 2002 interview with Isabel Murray, Galloway commented, ‘I don’t make hard and fast rules about anything’ (*Scottish Writers Talking* 3: 16) and that she, ‘always liked the idea of playing with form’ because it is closer to editing than, ‘breaking a white page’ (20). Examples of this playfulness are evident throughout Galloway’s work, such as the textual experimentation of her first novel, *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* and in the series of short stories ‘Scenes from the Life’ (published in *Blood*) which blends markers of a play or film script with the short story form. Given this, it is to be expected that Galloway would seek to experiment and test the rules of the memoir.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes the contents of photographs in minute detail. Unlike Galloway, Nabokov provides descriptions which accord with the
visual images. Nabokov claims that one particular photograph, ‘captures his life completely’ but, as Gudsmundsdottir points out, ‘the reader would not necessarily see it that way if there were no caption’ (Gudsmundsdottir 225). Gudsmundsdottir continues, ‘So not only does this example raise questions about the relationship between image and text, but also about how we read images; how details and objects can serve as clues, memory aids (and memorials) to the past’ (225). Galloway provides a ‘caption’ for her cover photograph that provides additional detail about her family’s life, except the details she provides are not all reproduced in the visual image, therefore raising questions, as Gudsmundsdottir says, about the relationship between text and image which lead to further questions about the identity of the narrator and protagonist and, therefore, the autobiographical nature of the text. Gudsmundsdottir emphases, ‘Nabokov does not claim that this photograph captures his “inner life” or some truth about his self. It captures the things he did at that time’ (225). Galloway does not reflect on her use of the photograph but This Is Not About Me continues:

There is a photographer present and we’re not at ease, not really, but if every picture tells a story we want this story to suggest we amount to something, that we are, at the least, getting by. In our best duds, our bravest faces, we’re trying our damndest to look right at home. (2)

In this way, Galloway provides a ‘caption’ which reveals much more about the inner thoughts of the photographs’ subjects than the reader might deduce without the text, from the picture alone. Gudmundsdottir noted, ‘Nabokov voices the widespread opinion that the ‘unposed’ picture must somehow be ‘truer’ than the posed one’ (225). Galloway emphasises that her family photograph was staged for the photographer and, as I have highlighted, is accompanied by a caption that is not quite ‘accurate’. The photograph and the verbal description provide differing accounts or ‘versions’ (to use a Winterson term) of the same occasion. If, as I suggested earlier, Galloway’s caption is how she remembered the scene (or similar scenes from her past) despite how it appears in the picture, that would accord with Galloway’s remarks about using a methodology that gave her enough room for creative play (Scottish Review of Books).
The device of describing photographs is employed throughout *This Is Not About Me* as the reader is given a sense of the narrator flicking through a box of photographs. No photographs are reproduced in the book other than the cover image. While there can be no further comparison of the ‘captions’ with the pictures, the reader is given a sense of the narrator, who might also be the writer, referencing a reality beyond the pages of the book. Given the game playing with the cover image, the reader can’t be certain whether these other photographs do exist or if Galloway is using her imagination to create them.

Early in *This Is Not About Me* Galloway writes,

> We had hundreds of photographs, hidden in an oilcloth bag under the double bed, but few that seemed much to count. We had black and white and sepias, hand-tinted colour. We had ends of legs and thumbs and heads beneath a mile of sky and studio groups where whole persons might emerge in odd surroundings...
>
> There are gaps and curious omissions, more hidden than revealed. There are no old men, a mere handful of domestic interiors, none of Christmases or birthdays, parties or pets...What we held as our own was brickwork and best frocks and prams in scraps of garden, faces with the features blotted out by sun. These, we led ourselves to believe, were the real story, and I believed it too.

(9-10)

Galloway’s vivid description of each photograph, using captions to draw them inside the book, gives the reader a strong sense of the pictures existing somewhere outside the text. Whether they really exist or are invented for it, Galloway addresses the telling of her story: the collection of vignettes, the gaps and omissions. The final phrase in the extract above describes the memoir itself as Galloway informs the reader that she might have focused on different vignettes or details but this is the real story.

At times, Galloway uses photographs as a device to evidence facets of the characters, for example:

> My father...didn’t smile much, at least not at home. We know he smiled outside sometimes because there’s a snap of him taken during the war doing it [smiling]. He’s in some kind of army uniform with his socks on display next to three other men dressed the same.

(10)
and,

That’s you at Granny McBride’s, she said, hauling out the box of snaps to prove it. Look. You’re nearly two and it’s the gravel path at the side of the house in Guthrie Brae.

(This Is Not About Me) ends with a description of two photographs. The first is of her mother on holiday in Blackpool,

I never got to see the photo Rose paid to have taken of my mother in Blackpool, but I remember her being there. I can picture the fuzzy edge of her lipstick…I can summon up the sickly smell of hot dogs and popcorn and cheap red sauce, Rose singing; the plastic smell of the car. Some things you remember whole anyway. Photos aren’t everything. They serve for when memory refuses; grey filler for the gaps. They don’t prove much save that you were there, but it’s something. You were there.

(338)

Even though Galloway states she never got to see the picture, she provides a vivid description of how she imagines her mother’s Blackpool trip might have been. This passage addresses Galloway’s use of photographs throughout the text. On the one hand, she has referenced photographs as proof of particular events, appearances or behaviours, but in this near-final passage she says they don’t ‘prove much’, reinforcing the ambiguity implied by the book’s title.

Although Galloway indicates that she does have a copy of the final photograph described in This Is Not About Me, she says she has no memory of it being taken.

This is a picture I don’t remember, but I’m in it all the same.

It’s a girl on the front step in tartan trews with stirrup straps, a home-knitted cardi with too-short sleeves and wild boy hair needing cut. Cold concrete presses beneath her thighs. She’s squinting up at whoever is taking the shot, not smiling, exactly, but open-eyed and keen. There are only six months of Jacks’ Road School left to run. She knows that too. She has no idea what the future will be like, only that it’s coming and there’s no escape…. She knows her name is Janice, that nobody chose it. She knows that some people die and that some people make mistakes and that there’s no changing it, no appeal…The cards would never change, not now, but with luck, they might be shuffled, cut, turned to best advantage. Inventiveness counts for something. She’s biding her time, waiting to play.

(338-339)
This extract mirrors the 2007 interview with Galloway, which I quoted from earlier (Nantes University), in that she describes herself from close at hand and from further away. The extract begins with Galloway identifying herself in the photograph but immediately she distances herself, describing the image of, ‘a girl on the front step’, and writes about the image of herself in the third person, ‘She has no idea what the future will be’. Although Galloway uses the third person, she draws the reader close to the character with the use of visceral detail, ‘Cold concrete presses beneath her thighs’ and the girl ‘squinting’ at the unidentified photographer. Before closing, Galloway writes that the girl, ‘knows her name is Janice’, in effect re-identifying herself with the character.

Galloway’s techniques here are evocative of the experience of seeing oneself in a photograph that we have forgotten or which we were never aware of being taken, so she encourages the reader to recognise something universal from her description. It gives the possibility of seeing oneself, not as an image in the mirror, but as others see us, in this way aligning with Galloway’s description of writing herself as a fictional character (Scottish Review of Books).

Galloway uses the present tense to describe this photograph, as she does for photographs throughout the book. It gives the impression of looking at the picture as an object in the present time but also brings the time in which the image was captured closer to the reader. It is particularly striking when she adds the detail of how the girl is feeling, ‘Cold concrete presses beneath her thighs’ and what she is likely to be thinking, ‘She knows that some people die and that some people make mistakes and that there’s no changing it, no appeal’. It is a similar approach to the way Galloway writes about her sixteen year old self passing the maternity home where she was born on the bus. In that instance, there was no photograph (or reference to one) but the literary techniques used to bring each scene to life are similar as Galloway describes the same event from different temporal perspectives. Galloway’s descriptions of photographs have elements in common with Kay’s approach to providing short chapters written in the first person, present tense. Galloway transports the reader directly to the moment the shutter closed, giving a literary snapshot in time.

Although Galloway asserts she has no memory of the particular incident during which the photograph was taken, she does, we can infer, have a memory of that
part of her life and the period of time - just as she was about to make the transition from primary to secondary school at around eleven or twelve years of age, often a time of puberty for girls, adding a biological transition to the mix. If we assume this particular photograph does exist outside the text, then Galloway has reconstructed the scene using a combination of memory and photographic evidence to fill the gaps where memory has failed (or ‘refuses’ as Galloway put it). When Galloway writes about not remembering the photograph having been taken, she identifies a central challenge of writing memoir. None of us remembers everything about our childhood. There will always be gaps.

Galloway continues with the device of referencing photographs in her second volume of memoirs. Like the first volume, *All Made Up* opens with a description of a photograph but, this time, not the one reproduced on the front cover. The photograph described is of the teenage Janice with her mum in their back garden. Galloway writes that Cora (Janice’s sister in the book), thinks she’s hidden but appears as a, ‘sliver of another woman’ in the ‘extreme right of the snap’ (2). Galloway spends several lines speculating on the identity of the photographer and, in doing so, introduces additional cast members,

It’s most probably Phillip, my boyfriend because the shade he casts is tall and thin and alluring. Then shadows are deceptive. It could be Duncan, my mother’s friend, a fireman near enough retirement, or even Sandy, Daft Sandy, with his back to the light, stretched to sci-fi dimensions with his quiff not giving him away. Sandy was Cora’s on-off affair since as far back as I remembered, a man who cried in my mother’s arms every time she ditched him then came back for another shot on the waltzer every time she changed her mind. In the end, who it is doesn’t matter. It’s someone and, without him, the evidence we were here together on this day would not exist, even if it’s partial. The shade he casts is huge and touches each of us in turn. It fills most of the frame and makes us one: the ghosts and the present-but-barely-correct, those doing our best not to be. Our stories mesh despite the gaps...

(3-4)

As well as providing an opportunity to introduce the reader to these three male characters, Galloway’s reference to the unknown photographer emphasises the unreliable nature of memory, even when it is supported with a clue (in this case, the shadow). Galloway interprets the shadow in a spectrum of ways from ‘alluring’ Phillip, through retired Duncan to Daft Sandy; she suggests quite different possible identities for the same shape. By referring to the person
outside the immediate photograph, Galloway again reminds us of life outside the immediate focus of the story, of the possibilities beyond the ones she has chosen to write about, just as she did in *This Is Not About Me*. A further connection between the two volumes is Galloway’s repeated reference to ‘gaps’.

*All Made Up* ends with the now-adult Janice waving Cora off at the train station. On something close to a whim but prompted by the birth of her son, Janice has written to Cora informing her of the baby’s birth and suggesting that they meet. Before Cora departed,

...she offered to pose for a photo. I’m the kind that keeps a camera in the glove compartment, and somehow, she knew. C’mon, she said. I’m in a hurry. I took a single snap of her holding her nephew and smiling her photograph smile....What I knew of her life or she of mine remained as little as either of us could make it. What pleased me most was that she was managing.

(309)

The phrase, ‘photograph smile’ is evocative of many of us who do reserve a particular expression for the camera, consciously or otherwise. It also provides a description of writing autobiographically: what appears on the page is the literary equivalent of a ‘photograph smile’, it looks a bit like real life but with an artificial veneer, an attempt to improve on the ordinary.
Different versions: writing it over

With Galloway, I compared two versions of the same scene: a photograph and her written description. Winterson and Kay have each published two written versions of their early lives. Comparing each author’s approach to writing these different versions is tempting. I wondered what it might reveal about their writing techniques.

On her author website, Winterson describes Why Be Happy as, ‘the back-story’ to her first novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (‘Introduction’). While the two books describe similar events, in that they cover a broadly similar period of her life, with Why Be Happy extending further into her adulthood, they do so in a markedly different manner. Winterson described Oranges as semi-autobiographical (Why Be Happy 1) and, in the introduction to the 1991 Vintage edition of Oranges, she wrote, ‘Is Oranges an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course’ (xiv). All of these descriptions reinforce the idea that her first novel was, at least, partly autobiographical.

In Why Be Happy Winterson indicates that she has often been asked ‘what is “true” and what is not “true” in Oranges’ and that she ‘can’t’ answer those questions (6). She does confirm that the character Testifying Elsie in Oranges is invented and that no such adult friend existed in her actual childhood. It is interesting that she says ‘can’t’ rather than ‘won’t’ as though she is not refusing but is simply unable to unpick the truth from the invention. This links to Paul John Eakin’s view that,

memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice.

(Fictions in Autobiography 6)

Winterson at least implies the reader should not cross-check her work for the ‘truth’. For me, comparing her books is not about acting as a ‘policewoman’ (a term used by Janice Galloway) or seeking to discover the absolute veracity of Winterson-the-person’s childhood. Instead, this close reading raises intriguing
questions about the way Winterson-the-writer has told her story in the different
genres and how fictional tools have been used in each book. I will consider the
way Winterson writes about books in each text and then explore the mother-
daughter relationship.

In *Oranges*, books in general and *Jane Eyre* in particular, have significant
symbolic and narrative value. The mother reads *Jane Eyre* to Jeanette,
identifying it as her, ‘favourite non-Bible book’ (73), largely on account of
Jane’s romantic connection to the missionary St John Rivers. This is relatively
straightforward, however, when the character Jeanette discovers her mother
has for years falsified the ending of *Jane Eyre* while reading it aloud, she
experiences a sort of epiphany:

what my mother didn’t know was that I now knew she had rewritten the
ending….she read it [*Jane Eyre*] to me over and over again, when I was
very small. I couldn’t read it, but I knew where the pages turned. Later,
literate and curious, I had decided to read it for myself. A sort of
nostalgic pilgrimage. I found out, that dreadful day in the back corner of
the library, that Jane doesn’t marry St John at all, that she goes back to
Mr Rochester…I have never since read *Jane Eyre*.

(73)

In *Why Be Happy*, Winterson asserts, ‘Books had been forbidden in our house’ (4)
this leads to a night raid on Jeanette’s bedroom when her mother discovers that
Winterson has smuggled books into the house and hidden them under her bed.

One night she [mother] came in and saw the corner of a paperback
sticking out from under the mattress. She pulled it out and examined it
with her flashlight. It was an unlucky choice; D.H. Lawrence, *Women in
Love*. Mrs Winterson knew that Lawrence was a Satanist and a
pornographer, and hurling it out of the window, she rummaged and rifled
and I came tumbling off the bed while she threw book after book out of
the window and into the backyard. I was grabbing books and trying to hide
them, the dog was running off with them, my dad was standing helpless in
his pyjamas.

When she had done, she picked up the little paraffin stove we used
to heat the bathroom, went into the yard, poured the paraffin over the
books and set them on fire.

(40-41)

In *Oranges*, a very similar scene of book burning is prompted by the mother’s
suspicion that Jeanette is having an illicit affair with a girl.
While I lay shivering in the parlour [because Jeanette had glandular fever] she took a toothcomb to my room and found all the letters, all the cards, all the jottings of my own, and burnt them one night in the backyard. (109-110)

In the novel, this scene is the point at which the mother character finds written confirmation that her daughter is gay. The brutality of the search and destroy raid marks a turning point in Jeanette’s view of her mother, she was, ‘not my queen any more’. (110). The mother-daughter relationship is changed forever.

In the autobiographical telling, the vignette is about the mother’s disapproval of Jeanette having books in the house at all. Unlike the novel, there is no suggestion that the incident was connected to the mother discovering Winterson’s sexuality, nor does it represent a turning point in Jeanette’s view of her mother; the unhappiness of the mother-daughter relationship is made clear from the first sentence in Why Be Happy, ‘When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib.”’ (1). The existence of the altered version of this part of the story gives insight into how a writer might use an autobiographical event in a semi-autobiographical fictional setting. Many of the emotions and fictional details of the scene are shared, but the needs of the different story, different characters and frame allow (or even require) the author to make the scene something new within a fictional context.

Both versions of the vignette remind me of the scene from Don Quixote in which the priest, the local barber, Don Quixote’s niece and his housemaid burn most of the books of chivalry from Don Quixote’s library before sealing up the room and pretending it has been removed by a magician (56-63). In the fictional version, the young Jeanette is ill (similar to Don Quixote) and unable to defend the papers that are uncovered and burnt in the backyard. In the autobiographical version, the scene is teased out a little more and the association with Don Quixote seems even stronger, with the added detail of the mother examining one of the books (in the manner of the priest in Don Quixote, although in the Cervantes tale, the priest saves some of the books). The books are thrown from the window (as the housemaid does in Don Quixote) and the scene has an element of farce with the dog stealing books and her dad standing about in his pyjamas. This struck me as similar to the farcical scene in Don Quixote with the
priest and barber debating the relative merits of various titles, while the niece declared that no book should be spared and the housekeeper, eager to complete the task, gathered piles of them before flinging them from the window to be burned in the yard.

Given the extent to which Winterson makes literary references in her fictional writing, it is likely that the allusion to Cervantes is deliberate. There are metafictional links in this reference as well, associated with *Don Quixote* being a quest and Winterson’s autobiography including her quest to discover her birth mother. Indeed, the nature of any autobiography could be characterised as a quest in search of deeper understanding of the self. Even if the specific reference to *Don Quixote* were not intended, the treatment of the text is an example of a fictional tool being applied to autobiography. Gudmundsdottir described it:

> Autobiography makes use of fiction not only on a superficial level but in its deep structure as well. I do not believe that it becomes fiction, but contend rather that it ‘makes use of’ fiction. Fiction in autobiography can be located in its structure, in the handling of memory, in self-invention, in structures of experience such as mother-daughter relationships and crossing cultures, in writing on someone else, and in the use of documents...all those elements, that we generally think of as fiction, can also be used as tools of knowledge and of self-creation. The autobiographers make use of these features for their own ends...One cannot ever completely take the fictionality out of autobiography and the often very inventive strategies of these writers both point to the ‘generic’ possibilities of autobiography...and reflect the cultural preoccupations of the postmodern era...

(272)

Gudmundsdottir identifies the distinction between the use of fictional techniques and the work becoming ‘fiction’. There are obvious similarities between this and what Galloway says about her ‘methodology’ which she distinguished from fictionalising. In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote about using elements of real life experience in his fiction:

> I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my
Nabokov suggests that the real life detail he has woven into his fiction, as a result of the weaving, takes on a new form so that it appears not to belong to him any longer but belongs instead to the fictional form he has fashioned for it. He gives the example of his own governess:

...the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle.

He takes the opportunity of writing his memoir to set down his personal memory of the governess,

Mademoiselle rolled into our existence in December 1905 when I was six and my brother five. There she is. I see so plainly her abundant dark hair, brushed up high and covertly graying...And now she sits down, or rather she tackles the job of sitting down, the jelly of her jowl quaking, her prodigious posterior, with the three buttons on the side, lowering itself warily; then, at the last second, she surrenders her bulk to the wicker armchair, which, out of sheer fright, bursts into a salvo of crackling.

I have quoted Nabokov at length here because this extract demonstrates an approach to telescoping time very similar to that employed by Winterson in the earlier passage about her telephone conversation with her adoptive mother. Like Winterson, Nabokov shifts from the past to the present tense, making his description of the governess all the more vivid, as though bringing the governess directly to the reader.

Winterson doesn’t indicate whether, like Nabokov, she feels differently about specific autobiographical detail, having previously used it in her fiction. However, in *Why Be Happy*, she does talk about having, ‘written over’ her past.

This extract relates to a time after the television adaptation of *Oranges* has
been broadcast and Winterson is irritated that she has not commenced a search for her birth mother,

> I have done nothing about finding my past. It isn’t ‘my past’, is it? I have written over it. I have recorded on top of it. I have repainted it. Life is layers, fluid, unfixed, fragments. I never could write a story with a beginning, a middle and an end in the usual way because it felt untrue to me. That is why I write as I do and how I write as I do. It isn’t a method; it’s me. 

*(Why Be Happy 156)*

Here Winterson suggests her ‘true’ story is not to be found in any single version she has written, but in the combination of them all. Again her views coincide with Eakin who wrote that, ‘narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity; it is an identity content’ *(How Our Lives Become Stories 100)*.

Winterson talks about her writing process throughout *Why Be Happy*. She likens the book burning experience to her writing technique:

> In the morning there were stray bits of texts all over the yard and in the alley. Burnt jigsaws of books. I collected some of the scraps. It is probably why I write as I do - collecting the scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative.

*(41)*

This is a striking image of the torn, charred pages fluttering around the yard and a literary technique rising, phoenix-like, from the ashes.

With Jackie Kay, as with Winterson, it is tempting to make comparisons between two written versions of her life story. Prior to publishing *Red Dust Road*, the extended poem ‘The Adoption Papers’ was Kay’s best known autobiographical text. First published in 1991, it is a poetic sequence presenting three narrative voices: daughter, adoptive mother and birth mother. At times these are presented separately and at other points the voices are interwoven. There are a number of differences in the details presented in ‘The Adoption Papers’ and those in *Red Dust Road*, for example the parents in ‘The Adoption Papers’ attempt to hide from the social worker visiting their home any details that
would identify them as Communists, whereas *Red Dust Road* indicates that Kay’s adoptive parents felt strongly that they should not lie about their politics or their lack of church attendance (*Red Dust Road* 20-21). There is a further difference between the two versions when, in the poem, the biological mother visits the baby at the adoptive parents’ house and, in Chapter 5 of the poem (‘The Tweed Hat Dream’) there is a suggestion that she abducts the child – neither of which are described as having happened in *Red Dust Road*. I do not regard these distinctions between the two versions as problematic. Just as *Oranges* and *Why Be Happy* can coexist in the published world, so the two versions of Kay’s story each work in their own contexts. It is important to recognise that, although ‘The Adoption Papers’ clearly draws on Kay’s life, it is not presented as an autobiography. This is also true of *Oranges*, which was not presented as autobiography but as semi-autobiographical fiction.

In an interview published in *Scottish Writers Talking 4*, Kay told Isobel Murray that she had originally written ‘The Adoption Papers’ as a collection of poems in separate voices. She was approached to have them performed on the radio before they were published and the radio producer indicated that she would like the voices to be more interactive for the performance. This prompted Kay to re-write the poems as a single piece with the three voices interwoven. In the interview with Murray, Kay described this as, ‘one of those chance things’ (17). Subsequently, Kay has used the structure of interweaving of voices in other work including *Red Dust Road* and, before that, in her novel, *Trumpet*. Kay interweaves stories as a method of structuring her work; she also weaves biographical and autobiographical detail into her fiction, as many authors do.

Paul John Eakin has written, ‘We readily accept the presence of autobiographical elements in fiction, and any reader with an interest in the life of an author takes pleasure in identifying them’ (*Fictions in Autobiography* 9). Since reading *Red Dust Road*, I have been able to identify a number of occasions on which Kay has drawn on autobiographical detail in her other writing. One of the main characters in her novel, *Trumpet*, Coleman, talks about his back story, which appears very close to the scene depicted on one of the photographs on the back cover of *Red Dust Road* in which Kay’s adoptive dad and brother are dressed up in the style of Zulu warriors.
In her memoir, Kay describes how her adoptive mother grew up in Fife and used to be, ‘offered a penny for washing the backs of her mining uncles when they sat in the steel tub bath’ (24). In her short story, ‘The Oldest Woman in Scotland’, the central character is described as having grown up in Fife and recalls, ‘washing the back of seven miners,’ each day (Why Don’t You Stop Talking 112). The Oldest Woman’s daughter (who is white) has adopted children who are black, which the home help remarks upon, asking, ‘How did that happen?’ (120).

Before reading Red Dust Road, I was unaware of the majority of these autobiographical details and accepted them in their fictional context. Having read Kay’s memoir, I recognise these small but arguably important details from her life that have been placed in her fiction. The fact that the Oldest Woman character shares backstory with Kay’s grandmother (her adoptive mother’s mother) prompts me to wonder whether the Oldest Woman shares other traits or behaviours with Kay’s grandmother. I find myself asking, was Kay writing her grandmother as a fictional character and exploring the ‘possibility’ (to use the Kesson expression) in her adoptive relative?

Talking to Murray about her approach Kay said,

...the reason that I like memoir and the short story form is that you can play quite close to the truth. I quite like to write quite close to the truth, or to give a semblance of the truth: I like the border country...that exists between these two things. And I like...the sense of authenticity that a reader gets from reading.

(Scottish Writers Talking 4: 56)

There are echoes of Galloway’s ‘photographic smile’ in Kay’s comment about providing a, ‘semblance of the truth’. It also intrigues me that Kay referred to, ‘memoir and the short story form’ as similar in their truth content, when memoir is generally regarded as autobiographical and short stories are generally regarded as fictional. Kay’s comment at least implies that her memoir and short stories incorporate a melange of fact and fiction or, as she goes on to suggest, that they inhabit the border country between fact and fiction.

Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir made a similar point about borderlines,
autobiographers come across borderlines between factual and fictional representations of their experiences. They navigate between the individual and the universal

Kay recognises the importance of readers being able to identify with her stories and the characters within them. After reading *Red Dust Road* I found that I was identifying Kay’s personal or family details in her fictional stories. In this sense there were some similarities with my early experience of reading Kesson after having the autobiographical content of her work identified. Like Winterson, Kay does not indicate whether she regards these details differently having given them a ‘home’ within her fiction, but she does say she enjoys the border country between fact and fiction which I take to mean she is comfortable with the mix she is achieving in her writing.
Naming the protagonist

According to Lejeune,

…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. That uncertainty is especially stimulating for theoretical reflection. Under what conditions can the proper name of an author be perceived by a reader as ‘fictitious’ or ambiguous?

(On Autobiography 135)

Lejeune’s question has relevance for Winterson and Galloway. Their identity as authors is not in question but each has created a protagonist whose identity is somewhat ambiguous.

Winterson used her own name for the narrator and protagonist in *Oranges*, prompting her mother to ask, ‘...if it is a story, why is the main character called Jeanette?’ (*Why Be Happy* 5) For Winterson, this naming choice heightened the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the text because *Oranges* is only partly autobiographical and yet she does identify herself as the protagonist and narrator. Winterson addressed the question of why she had used her own name in the novel during an interview in 2002,

In *Oranges* the narrator has my name, because I wanted to write myself as a fictional character. There has been some confusion around this, because people have thought, ‘Well, it must be autobiography.’ In part it is. Because all writing is partly autobiographical in that you draw on your own experience, not in a slavish documentary style, but in a way that transforms that experience into something else. I saw myself as a shape-shifting person with many lives, who didn’t need to be tied to one life. So it’s not been difficult for me to use myself as a fictional character. Other writers do it. Milan Kundera does it; Paul Auster does it. Of course, when they do it, it’s called ‘metafiction’. When women do it, it’s called ‘autobiography’. Unfortunate.

(Reynolds and Noakes 16-17)

There is a close accord between Winterson’s comments and the views of other writers about using their own experience in fiction. Winterson also touches on a possible gender bias to the way in which this use of experience is regarded.

Importantly, the passage above highlights that Winterson used her own name in
Oranges because she wanted to write herself as a fictional character in a way that was transformative and ‘shape-shifting’, matching her view of her own multi-faceted identity. In Why Be Happy Winterson again addressed her rationale for having used her own name in Oranges:

She [my mother] confronts me with the fact that I have used my own name in the novel - if it is a story, why is the main character called Jeanette?

Why?
I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t setting my story against hers. It was my survival from the very beginning. Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be; there is an absence, a void, a question mark at the very beginning of our lives. A crucial part of our story is gone...It’s why I am a writer - I don’t say ‘decided’ to be, or ‘became’. It was not an act of will or even a conscious choice. To avoid the narrow mesh of Mrs Winterson’s story I had to be able to tell my own. Part fact part fiction is what life is. And it is always a cover story. I wrote my way out.

She said, ‘But it’s not true...’

Truth? This was a woman who explained the flash-dash of mice activity in the kitchen as ectoplasm.

The final line in this extract highlights the humour of the book as well as the antagonism of the relationship between mother and daughter. Winterson openly states that Oranges is partly factual and partly fictional, emphasising that it is her ‘story’ rather than her mother’s version or another version. In the version that is Why Be Happy she wrote,

When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold.

Why Be Happy is Winterson’s retelling of her story, this time in autobiographical form, but she still identifies it as another ‘version’, writing in the Coda, ‘I had to know the story of my beginnings but I have to accept that this is a version too. It is a true story but it is still a version.’ (229). This allows the possibility of another retelling in the future.
Winterson goes further than identifying the genre of stories, saying that life itself is part fact and part fiction which suggests that any recounting is likely to include an element of fiction. This links with the views of Paul John Eakin who argued that, ‘the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure.’ (Fictions in Autobiography 3). James Olney, quoted by Claire Lynch in Life Writing, made a very similar point, ‘the self...is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an “autobiography”: all that is left are characters on a page’ (Bradford 213). I take this as confirmation that we can never hope to reproduce the ‘whole’ life in an autobiography, or autobiographical fiction: there will always be elements of the writer’s life that remain untold. It also suggests that the act of writing down the self in a form intended for publication inevitably involves the creation of a character who may be more or less like the self who created it, more or less bound to a singular story of what really happened.

Janice Galloway uses her own name for the protagonist/narrator in her memoirs but adjusts the names of others who appear in the book, for example, the sister character is Cora in the memoirs but Galloway’s actual sister was called Nora (she died in 2000). Gallloway described her approach in an interview with Stewart Kelly for The Telegraph:

‘I called everyone slightly different names’...’just to get them “there”. The only way I could write it was to make everyone a character. It’s almost like how a director stages an opera.’ Her publishers persuaded her to put her own name back in, which she describes ‘like rubbing out the tracing lines’.

Without reading beyond the text, the reader would be unaware that the characters’ names had been changed, although not using her own name would have been obvious. If she had not used her own name for the protagonist and narrator, that would have tested the boundaries of the genre even further. In The Telegraph interview, Galloway indicates she was persuaded her to put her own name ‘back in’, which suggests she had used it at an earlier point and taken it out. Again, her presence in the text is uncertain. In this interview she describes making everyone a character, which I assume includes herself. That decision raises the question of how the book differs from a novel. Does it
actually have more in common with *Oranges* as an autobiographical novel than with the genre characteristics of a memoir?

In a later interview (in 2009), Galloway provided a subtly different description of her reasons for changing the names,

> By shifting the characters’ names by one letter in *This Is Not About Me*, it gave me the licence to make them the characters I saw as a child, instead of requiring that I be a policewoman with a notebook of direct quotations, loci and timings.  

*(Scottish Review of Books)*

Here Galloway confirms that she wrote from her point of view and suggests she relied on her memories (in keeping with the memoir genre), rather than piecing together evidence or referential materials to confirm a precise order of events. She doesn’t mention her use of photographs in both memoir volumes, nor does she mention the precarious position of her own name, although I find it interesting to speculate on the significance of Janice being the only family member to retain her real-life name in a book titled *This Is Not About Me*. As I noted earlier, Galloway’s approach means that she does not have to step out of the story to address the reader directly but instead seeks to draw the reader close to the young Janice’s perspective. In this sense, the book really is about her.

Looking at the text, it is chapter two before the protagonist’s name is identified and it is attributed to her father’s whim, ‘Janice, my mother said in absent moments, addressing no one in particular. God knows where he got that from. Mind you, it could have been worse’ (*This Is Not About Me* 20). In this way, the mother distances herself from the name and, therefore, perhaps the person, Janice. However, Galloway goes on to indicate that she (herself) did not like her name and implies this was the reason her mother ‘blamed’ her father for the choice,

> If I hated it, my mother’s subtext ran, it was his fault. He had gone to the registry office and pulled this travesty from thin air. That’s the kind of father I had – a father who didn’t care enough to choose something nice.  

*(21)*
Writing and Not Writing a Novel Called *Floating*

But Galloway continues,

> I was in my forties and to terms with my forename before I saw a copy of my own birth certificate, and it’s there like a thud, two syllables, no middle names or initials to sound different, splendid or mysterious with. The signature on the foot of the document, however, is my mother’s. Hers, not his. I read it several times, grasping the implications, the meaning of this shift. It meant that what I’d been told, what I’ve moreover believed, the legend of my naming in the history of our family and its dereliction of care wasn’t true…Out of the blue, unaccounted for, unclaimed as anyone’s responsibility, I was Janice. No one, apparently, chose it. (21)

Galloway emphasises the unreliability of this family story that she had been told repeatedly by her mother. The passage escalates from Janice’s discovery about this version of events to an interpretation that, because the story of how she got her name was false, she herself was, ‘unclaimed as anyone’s responsibility’. The extract illustrates the way in which family stories create a sense of identity and how that identity can be challenged when the story is revealed as flawed. It also acts as a metaphor for the memoir itself: is the book about her? who is she? And is she who she thinks she is?

Winterson also wrote about a revelatory experience involving her name. After her adoptive mother’s death, Winterson explores the contents of a locked chest that contained her mother’s possessions. Underneath a piece of crockery is a little box, ‘a box hiding in a box’ containing some jewellery and, ‘a few papers carefully folded’ (*Why Be Happy* 159).

> The first bit of paper was a court order dated 1960. It was my formal adoption paper. The second bit of paper was a kind of MOT of Baby: I was not a mental defective. I was well enough to be adopted. I had been breastfed… [ellipsis in original]

> And I had had a name - violently crossed out. The top of the paper had been torn too, so that I could not read the name of the doctor or the organisation, and the names at the bottom had been ripped away.

> I looked at the court order. That too had a name - my other name - crossed out.

> Typewriters and yellow paper. So old. Those things look like a hundred years ago. I am a hundred years ago. Time is a gap.

> …There is a past after all, no matter how much I have written over it.
Like the name on the pieces of the paper - the name written over - my past is there - here - and it is now. The gap has closed around me. I feel trapped.

I don’t know why this matters. Why this feels so bad. Why did they never tell me or show me? Why would they? And a baby is a baby. The baby begins again. No biography, no biology.

(159-160)

In this extract, Winterson again addresses the passage of time. When she writes, ‘time is a gap’ and the, ‘gap has closed around me’, she provides an illustration of the nature of writing autobiography and the spanning of time that takes place. She also alludes to her previous literary work (specifically Oranges) as having written over her past in the manner of her birth name being obliterated, as though she feels a central part of her identity has been hidden or even taken from her.

The discoveries surrounding their names prompt each of the writers to question their identity. For Galloway, the untruth at the heart of her naming story prompts her to believe she is unwanted. For Winterson, finding she previously had a different name prompts her to question who she is. It also causes her to question the validity of the attempt she had made to write herself in Oranges. By raising these questions about identity, both writers surface a core theme for all memoirs.
Identity

Paul John Eakin wrote, ‘I believe that our life stories are not merely about us but in an inescapable and profound way are us’ (*Living Autobiographically* x). He concluded:

> We tend to think of autobiography as something created after the fact, at one remove from the experience that is its subject, as something over and finished. But...that experience itself, especially in its acts of arbitrage when we remember remembering, is already autobiography in the making. And this making, this mapping of our lives in time, I like to think, helps us to keep track of who we are.

(170)

The notions of mapping and keeping track come through strongly in Winterson’s autobiography, for example when she talks about adopted children being ‘self-invented because we have to be...A crucial part of our story is gone...It’s why I’m a writer’ (*Why Be Happy* 5). Here, Winterson acknowledges the importance of writing in establishing a story or identity. Maftei said, ‘...we can read much autobiography and memoir as deeply concerned with the events contributing to the formation of identity,’ (123) and that we write autobiographically as a way of getting to know ourselves. Isobel Murray has argued that, for Kesson, writing autobiographically was a way of defining and asserting her identity,

Kesson never had a father, or any siblings, her grandfather refused to recognise her existence, and she lived in an unconventional and largely female environment. She had to create herself and tell herself her own story, defining herself as best she could: this is what made The White Bird Passes in particular such an urgent and demanding task. She was completely orphaned at an early age...the [orphanage] Trustees declared that [a university] education would be wasted on a girl, and that a career in domestic or farm service would be more appropriate. She was decisively punished for her gender, and this determined much of the rest of her life, and of her writing. Apart from anything else, it taught her that she had to trust to herself in the last resort to establish and maintain her individual identity.

(Murray Laverock)

When Murray talks of Kesson’s need to ‘create herself and tell herself her own story,’ there is resonance with Winterson’s description of the need to tell her
own story, as distinct from her mother’s. Winterson talks of writing a version she could survive when she reflects in *Why Be Happy* on her mother’s charge that *Oranges* was ‘not true’,

There was a terraced house in Accrington...Three of us lived together in that house for sixteen years. I told my version - faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time. I told myself as hero like any shipwreck story...And I suppose that the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is Oranges, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. I could not survive it.

Unlike Winterson, Kesson never did publish an autobiography, commenting on this, Murray wrote:

[Kesson’s] projected autobiography, splendidly entitled *Mistress of None*, was advertised as forthcoming in 1981, but never written. In [an] interview with Hugh Macpherson she said *The White Bird Passes* had effectively ‘done’ her childhood, the most important part of her life, but I think she showed more insight into herself when she wrote to me in 1985:

You see, Isobel, the things that have affected me most in my personal and creative life ... are the things I cannot ... myself ... find ... words ... for ... or ... rather ... cannot ... myself ... utter.

*(Laverock)*

This suggests that, like Winterson, Kesson wrote a fictional version that she could survive in *The White Bird Passes*, leaving unwritten the elements she could not bring herself to utter. Although Kesson implied that *The White Bird Passes* was a version of her childhood, Murray warns against confusing writers with their characters. It is, ‘never safe to identify an author and her protagonist.’

Janie in *The White Bird Passes* does not ‘equal’ Kesson. She is the last of at least fifteen constructed versions of Kesson’s childhood, all notably different, and she is the one which most satisfied her author. But traditional literary criticism and contemporary theory and feminist criticism would all suggest the considerable dangers of identifying the two. *David Copperfield* was not Dickens, although they shared very painful childhood experiences. Ruskin wrote a vividly remembered autobiography, *Praeterita*, in which he did not include incidents that it gave him no pleasure to remember - including such details as his disastrous and much publicised marriage. He described its protagonist as ‘the “natural” me’ - only peeled carefully.

*(Laverock)*
There are similarities between Winterson’s and Kesson’s autobiographical fiction, but there are also important differences, not least that Winterson used her own name as the narrator and protagonist in *Oranges* and, unlike the warning from Murray above, Winterson does identify herself with the character, Jeanette, ‘I told my version…I told myself as hero’ (*Why Be Happy* 6).

In *Why Be Happy*, Winterson establishes her own identity by comparing it to (or ‘setting it against’, to use a Winterson phrase) that of her adoptive mother. This is made clear from the opening sentence, ‘When my mother was angry with me, which was often, she said, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib”’ (1). Winterson continues, ‘she adopted me because she wanted a friend…and because I was like a flare sent out into the world - a way of saying that she was here…she hated being a nobody, and like all children, adopted or not, I have had to live out some of her unlived life. We do that for our parents - we don’t really have any choice.’ (1). These lines indicate that the young Jeanette was wanted, not necessarily for herself, but to support the mapping and tracking of her mother’s identity. Much later in the book, Winterson sets out a conversation with a close friend who asks Jeanette, ‘What would you have been without her?’ (207). Later still, referring to her biological mother, Winterson writes,

> My mother had to sever some part of herself to let me go. I have felt the wound ever since. Mrs Winterson [her adoptive mother] was such a mix of truth and fraud. She invented many bad mothers for me; fallen women, drug addicts, drinkers, men-chasers. The other mother had a lot to carry but I carried it for her, wanting to defend her and feeling ashamed of her all at the same time.’

(220)

Winterson considers the life she might have had if her biological mother had been able to raise her, ‘But my other mother had lost me and I had lost her, and our other life was like a shell on the beach that holds an echo of the sea.’ (223). She continues,

> There is a big gap between our lives. She is upset about Winterson-world. She blames herself and she blames Mrs Winterson. Yet I would rather be this me - the me that I have become - than the me I might have become without books, without education, and without all the things that have happened to me along the way, including Mrs W. I think I am lucky.
I interpret this as Winterson acknowledging she is comfortable with her own identity, developed from all the events she has lived through. Of her adoptive mother she says, ‘Mrs W gave me what she could too - it was a dark gift but not a useless one’ (Why Be Happy 214). Near the end of the book she asserts she cannot be the daughter her biological mother wants her to be and she couldn’t be the daughter Mrs Winterson wanted either. Unlike the starting point of the autobiography, Winterson closes by asserting her own, separate identity distinct from the role either mother might wish her to fulfil.

Both Winterson and Kay have written about adoption but their experiences were very different. Winterson described pitting her story against that of her adoptive mother, and producing different versions of her story in Oranges and in Why Be Happy. In stark contrast, Kay describes her identity emerging from the loving environment created by her adoptive family. In Red Dust Road, Kay writes that she and her adoptive mother had a shared fascination about her biological identity.

In a way my mum and I loved it, the story of me. It was a big bond, the story....My brother’s story of adoption and mine were the first two big real stories I heard, and we found both stories fascinating

In an interview with Helen Brown for The Telegraph in 2010, Kay said, ‘I’m sure I’m a writer because of the way my mum told me stories.’ This suggests the storytelling was not only a way of capturing or commemorating past events but the storytelling had a role in creating Kay’s identity as a writer.

In this way Winterson and Kay’s stories of adoption are negative images of each other. Winterson has said that she is a writer because she had to tell her own story, ‘to avoid the narrow mesh’ of her adoptive mother’s version (Why Be Happy 5-6), forming a literary technique that results from her mother’s efforts to keep her from reading. Kay, by contrast, suggests she found her identity as a writer (and possibly as a person) emerging from her mother’s gift for storytelling. While Winterson’s adoptive mother ‘invented many bad mothers’
for her, Kay writes, ‘mum and I both thought about my other mother with compassion’ (*Red Dust Road* 45).

Despite the difference in the two writers’ personal experiences, there are similarities in the techniques and images they use when writing about adoption. Winterson wrote that adopted children have a piece of their story missing, ‘adoption drops you into the story after it has started. It’s like reading a book with the first few pages missing’ (*Why Be Happy* 5). Just as an autobiographer struggles to set down the whole story of a life on the page, Winterson emphasises that adopted children don’t even know the whole of their own story. ‘Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be...Part fact part fiction is what life is’ (*Why Be Happy* 6). Part fact part fiction is also how Winterson described *Oranges*.

Similarly, Kay wrote:

> The jigsaw can never, ever be completed. There will always be pieces missing, or the pieces will be too large and clumsy to fit into the delicate puzzle...You cannot find yourself in two strangers who happen to share your genes. You are made already, though you don’t properly know it, you are made up from a mixture of myth and gene. You are part fable, part porridge.

(*Red Dust Road* 47)

Kay returns to this idea when she describes telling friends the story of finding her birth father,

> I keep telling people the story to tell myself that it is real. That’s the strange thing about being adopted: the story of your own adoption seems like the story of some stranger, or even the story of a fictional character.

(134)

Ultimately, both Winterson and Kay suggest a degree of satisfaction in the resolution of their quests. Despite everything, Winterson concludes that she would rather be this version of herself: ‘...I would rather be this me - the me that I have become’ (*Why Be Happy* 228). Kay indicates that she did not need to find her biological parents in order to discover her own identity.
Finding a strange, nervous Mormon mother and finding a crazed, ranting, Born-Again father does not explain me...I have found them both now. But I have not found myself. I had already found myself. I already knew who I was, I think.

(Red Dust Road 47)

In stark contrast to Winterson’s experience, Kay writes that she was in no doubt about being loved by her adoptive parents, ‘My mum, my whole life, has never let me down’ (183) and, towards the end of the penultimate chapter, she says, ‘I feel flooded with love for them...’ (286). The theme of love runs throughout the book and it is easy to see why Red Dust Road has been described as ‘a love letter’ to Kay’s adoptive parents’ (Brown The Telegraph).

Like Winterson, Kay addresses the possibility that she might have had alternative lives to her upbringing with her adoptive parents. Kay introduces this to the reader through the frame of her adoptive parents talking to the adult Kay about how they met. Kay’s adoptive parents speak about how difficult it had been for them to be approved by the adoption agencies, in large part due to their political beliefs (they are Communists) and the fact that they didn’t attend church. Despite receiving encouragement from one social worker to miss out their political views on the adoption registration form, they decided they would not lie or cover up this aspect of their lives. During a family discussion, the adult Kay realises that, if her parents had lied on the form, they might have been approved as adoptive parents earlier and, consequently, might never have adopted Jackie or her brother (Red Dust Road 21). The possibility of not having known her adoptive parents is distressing for Kay. ‘The thought that I might not have had them, Helen and John Kay, as my parents upsets me. So much was down to chance and timing’ (21).

While recovering from a serious road accident, Kay reads voraciously, making connections (in the manner identified by William Zinsser) between her own life and those stories appearing in the various texts. Like Winterson, Kay makes explicit reference to Jane Eyre, which she describes as ‘an adoption story’:

[Jane is] adopted by people who don’t understand her fierce intelligence and put her in the red room, and then she’s sort of semi-adopted by Mr Rochester.

(Red Dust Road 235)
Jane Eyre is adopted by Rochester in the loosest of possible senses - she lives in his house and, later, they meet again and marry. By offering this reading of the ‘adoptive’ relationship, Kay uses stories beyond her family's own mythologies to explore her identity and these provide further opportunities to create links with the reader who is likely to have her/his own experience of reading these wider texts. Gudmundsdottir described this as navigating, ‘between the individual and the universal’ (270).

Linda Anderson analysed *Red Dust Road* making reference to the work of Adriana Cavarero who wrote,

> we yearn for the unity which we lose at the very moment we begin to commemorate ourselves…However, the story of beginnings, the story of…birth, can only ever come to the subject as a story told by others

*(Autobiography 121)*

Anderson observes that *Red Dust Road* is a set of interweaving stories, some told by Kay and some told by others. Cavarero described identity as, ‘from beginning to end, intertwined with other lives’, not by choice but by necessity. Anderson continues,

Kay’s complex layering of telling and retelling, of stories which are also forms of relationship, which she both tells and which are told to her, creates a family of stories, which hold her identity in their weave. It is the narrative relation, in both senses, through which identity is both enabled and replayed.

*(Autobiography 123)*

The notion of identity (or stories) being replayed without definitive end is hinted at by Kay’s inclusion of a quote from William Faulkner at the start of *Red Dust Road*, ‘The past is never past’. On the same page, there is a quote from Hélène Cixous, ‘All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another’ (*Rootprints* 178). Cixous uses the line at the start of an autobiographical essay, ‘Albums and Legends’ in which she writes,

The landscape of my childhood was double. On one hand there was North-Africa, a powerful sensual body, that I shared…with my brother. On the
other hand existed a landscape with the snow of my mother. And above the countries, the always present History of wars.

(Rootprints 196)

Cixous’s autobiographical tale is presented as an interweaving of stories and it is, therefore, easy to see why Kay would choose to reference it. Cixous refers to the landscape of her childhood being double; Kay spoke to Isobel Murray about her interest in the notion of doubles,

the reason personally that I’m interested in doubling, is because I could have had another life. Always to the other side of me is this other life that I could have had, and I think if you’re adopted there’s a very plausible reason for having this doubleness, because...You literally have two mothers, and two fathers. You have one real Mum: to me the real one was my adoptive Mum. And you have one imaginary one: and the imaginary one’s the birth one.

(Murray, Scottish Writers Talking 4: 34)

The Cixous line that Kay quotes in Red Dust Road is also a metaphor for adoption and the idea that one possible upbringing (by a child’s biological parents) is replaced by another.

Although Galloway was not adopted, there is some similarity with Winterson and Kay in that Galloway declares a lack of knowledge about her own past.

I was a late child - my mother was 40 when I was born and my grandmother was 71. I knew nothing about the family because they were all adults when I was tiny, adults not giving the game away, keeping their mouths shut. What I find when I look back is cover-ups, half-truths, lies and evasion.’

(Galloway, Nantes University)

As with Kay, who took the reader right back to the time before her adoption with stories of her adoptive parents’ challenges to be approved by the adoption agency, Galloway takes the reader back to the point of her own birth, which she describes in This Is Not About Me from her mother’s point of view, in the third person and in the present tense,
She’s in the kitchen when it starts...She pokes a towel with a wooden stick she’s been told not to because it might catch in the drum but old habits die hard. A rush of steam comes up and flushes her face and all the way to the base of her neck, chasing a sudden trail of sweat down her back. She can feel it, snaking. Then the pain that’s been dogging her all morning comes back, sudden this time, like a fist. Maybe a disk is slipping down there, a trapped nerve. She closes her eyes, looks down as the flush of warmth drives right down past her belly and opens them again to see the HOOVER sign wavering. And water.

Her feet, now she moves her toes in the slippers, are wet. Something told her they would be, but she hadn’t wanted to know. Now it has to be acknowledged. Her skirt is wet too and there’s a brownish puddle on the lino, now she looks, seeping between the joins of tile...Maybe I was small and didn’t kick, or not much. Not so you’d force yourself to buckle under, admit I was there...She cast me as the inevitable - the Change - and let it run its course. Whatever was true, this was the story. My mother thought I was the menopause...She must have mopped up the puddle, taking her time. Nobody else would. Maybe she cried. Maybe none of it happened that way at all...

If I’d kent, she’d say, her eyes narrowing. If I’d just bloody known.

(16-19)

This scene, which has to rely on Galloway’s imagination, draws the reader very close to the mother’s experience with visceral detail of the steam on her face, the pain spreading and her feet getting wet as her waters break. It also illustrates the writer’s detailed depiction of the point in time with reference to the brand and style of the washing machine. Galloway introduces herself to the text, ‘Maybe I was small’, referencing the fact that her mother had refused to acknowledge her presence. After drawing the reader so close to the scene, Galloway prompts us to take a step back with the sentence ‘Whatever was true, this was the story’, reminding us that this is the family folklore, her mother mistook her pregnancy for the menopause. Galloway writes about her mother ‘She must have mopped up the puddle,’ before softening to ‘Maybe she cried’ (my emphasis in each case). The quote ends with Galloway coming back to the perspective of a young Janice, watching and listening to her mother: ‘If I’d kent, she’d say, her eyes narrowing. If I’d just bloody known.’ One interpretation being that, if her mother had realised she was pregnant, she might have taken evasive action and Janice might not have been born at all. This interpretation is emphasised by a passage earlier in the book,

Decades on, when my mother was delirious and thinking she was going to die, she let slip she’d miscarried at least twice after me. There should have been, god help us, more. Maybe I’d put her on her guard...Maybe, on
the other hand, her body had made those decisions alone. It was never clear, never clarified, never referred to again. I was, as my sister reminded me every day of my childhood, bloody lucky to be there at all. If she’d kent you were coming, she’d say. Nobody needed to say the rest.

(5-6)

When Galloway highlights the precariousness of her survival, there are strong echoes of Winterson and Kay who both wrote about the possible alternative lives they might have had, had they been adopted by others or, in Winterson’s case, brought up by her birth mother.

Focusing on literary technique, Galloway ensures the smoke and mirrors playfulness of the memoir title continues throughout the text when she writes, ‘Maybe none of it happened that way at all...’ Whatever is true, this is a story, a version, as Winterson might have described it. Gudmundsdottir indicates:

The autobiographer interacts with the past, aware of how difficult it is to recapture it, and therefore uses all that fiction has to offer to let him or her effectively engage with that past. This means that in these texts there are retrospective possibilities, alternative lives and therefore alternative texts, an acknowledgement that this is not the only way the life could have been written, that there are other probably just as valid alternatives.

(273)

By writing from her mother’s point of view, Galloway can be regarded as recognising alternative possibilities, ones in which Janice was not part of the story. Winterson explicitly considered how her life might have been had she not been adopted by Mrs Winterson. Kay, too, wrote about the (for her) frightening possibility that she might never have met her adoptive parents. Galloway is bleaker than either Winterson or Kay in that she does not only consider alternative lives she might have had but suggests she might never have existed at all. In All Made Up, Galloway writes about the alternative lives her mother might have had if she had not given birth to Janice,

She’d have been an opera singer if it hadn’t been for me, a business woman, a factory owner with a car. Who knew? For years, I was nothing but grateful I existed at all.

(304)
The clear inference is these alternative lives were options her mother had mentioned to her. Nonetheless, in spite of the misery and in the face of this list of more enticing lives her mother might have experienced, near the end of the second volume, this is the first explicit indication Galloway gives of being glad she was born.
Leaving things out

Winterson and Kay have both written about deciding what to leave out of stories. Winterson said,

For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include. What lies beyond the margin of the text? The photographer frames the shot; writers frame their world

(Why Be Happy 8)

In discussion with Isobel Murray, Kay emphasised,

you always have to ask that question...what don’t you want to say? Because what you don’t say in a story is just as important as what you do

(Murray, Scottish Writers Talking 4: 56)

In fiction, what a writer leaves out remains mute to the reader. Provided the story works on the page, there is no reason to suspect the writer has left anything significant on the cutting room floor. This is not the case for autobiographical writing because the reader is more likely to have other material or information to compare an autobiography or memoir with. Despite Margaret Atwood’s pleas to ignore what writers may say beyond the page, we are bombarded with information about writers’ lives in newspapers and on the internet.

Kay has talked about the experience of ‘coming out’ to her adoptive parents in interviews and the story has been carried in a number of newspapers. From an interview with Susanna Rustin, it was reported in The Guardian:

aged 17 [Kay] asked her mum: ‘How would you feel if I told you I was a lesbian?’ She said, ‘I would be very upset,’ and I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Because you would be becoming somebody I don’t know or understand, you wouldn’t be Jackie any more.’

‘And that’s always stayed with me,’ says Kay. ‘The idea that by becoming a lesbian I would suddenly not be Jackie. It frightened me. Recently she said she had taken ages to properly accept me being a lesbian and felt bad about that, and it really moved me. I thought, how amazing that there you are at 82 and you’re saying you didn’t handle this right. Nobody handled it right in the 70s. I think they were actually fine; they were brilliant,’ she ends warmly.
From this, we can conclude that it was a significant experience. In an interview with Helen Brown for the Telegraph, Brown wrote that, as result of revealing her sexuality, Kay was, ‘seriously misunderstood by her adoptive mother for the first time’. In an earlier interview with Isobel Murray, Kay acknowledged, ‘It was hard telling my family,’ but when Murray asks if her family were upset, Kay said, ‘No; they were great; they were wonderful’ (Scottish Writers Talking 4: 11). This illustrates that writers, in common with all other humans, do not always wish to reveal the whole story and sometimes change their minds. The purpose of my exploration is not to point out inconsistencies in any of the writers’ testimonies as provided outside their published work. I am, however, interested in Kay’s decision to leave this aspect of her life out of Red Dust Road. She is very open about her sexuality in the book, including providing a description of informing her biological father that she is gay even though she knows he is unlikely to approve due to his religious beliefs. However, she doesn’t write about the experience of telling her adoptive parents about her sexuality.

Also missing from the memoir is any exploration of the teenage Kay’s growing awareness of her own sexuality. In one short chapter, entitled ‘1976’ (49), Kay describes her younger self as having a boyfriend. By the next of the short chapters, entitled ‘1977’ (57), Kay and a female friend are kissing. Each of these chapters is presented as a short vignette told in the present tense. There is no interior monologue or retrospective analysis of the apparent shift in the protagonist’s sexuality. The scene in which she breaks the news to her biological father takes place during their first meeting, but appears around a third of the way into Red Dust Road. In response to Jonathan’s prompts about her partner, Kay informs him that she is gay (104). Her father’s response (he is particularly keen to elicit details of how she satisfies her sex drive) reveals much about his character, as does the fact that he is more interested in details about Kay’s sexual practices than in other aspects of her life. This scene plays an important role in the book in a way that wider elaboration and reflection on other relations’ reactions would not.

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for Kay not writing more about this aspect of her identity within Red Dust Road. Gudmundsdottir described
autobiography as, ‘an active process of remembering’ and wrote about the role of the ‘forgotten’ in autobiographical text, quoting Virginia Woolf, ‘the things one does not remember are as important [as memories]’ (Gudmundsdottir 31). These are interesting thoughts but not quite right in the context of this example of Kay because the incident is not ‘forgotten’. However, Gudmundsdottir went on to comment that,

writing an autobiography entails choosing some memories and discarding others...it also means choosing a form for these memories, a narrative structure

This is closer to describing the decision Kay has made not to include the story of her coming out in Red Dust Road, that it didn’t fit the narrative structure. There are no reported serious arguments between Kay and either of her parents and, as I’ve noted, Kay has described the book as a ‘love letter’ to her adoptive parents. It seems likely that Kay considered Red Dust Road isn’t about that aspect of her relationship with her parents. It could be argued that the book would have been more complete if it had included an exploration of the author’s sexuality but I am reminded that it is a memoir – one definition for which is that it tells the story of one aspect of a life rather than a whole life (according to Smith and Watson, and Lejeune).

While being interviewed by Isobel Murray, Kay described her approach to structuring her texts:

I don’t think I’m naturally gifted at structuring things...it’s almost like a physical thing, a house, the house of fiction. It’s got to have a door, and you’ve got to be able to get in. You’ve got to be able to see out of it: that’s really important...And sometimes there can be a wee extra room, a surprise room, that you didn’t know was there.

(Murray, Scottish Writers Talking 4: 17)

Perhaps, like the notion in Don Quixote, there are also rooms that magically disappear. Or perhaps we should conclude that, with Red Dust Road, Kay has left scope for further versions.
Truth and invention: in conclusion

Paul John Eakin commented that the presence of fiction in autobiography...tends to make us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is - or ought to be - precisely not-fiction. We want autobiography to be true.

(Fictions in Autobiography 9)

He went on to ask,

Why would we bother to read it in the first place if we did not believe in autobiography as a primary expression of biographical truth? Realising this, most autobiographers refrain from any behaviour that would disturb the delicate entente between the writer and reader that Philippe Lejeune has described as the autobiographical pact.

(10)

We know, of course, there are writers who do seek to disturb the entente. Lejeune marvelled at Roland Barthes eponymous ‘autobiography’. Smith and Watson outlined a number of ways in which an autobiographer might fail to be truthful, including the possibility that they, 'may even perpetrate acts of deliberate deceit to test the reader or to suggest the paradoxical “truth” of experience itself,' (12). That is not the approach taken by the three writers on whose work I have focused.

Answering the ‘why bother reading it’ question is straightforward when it comes to literary autobiography: we read it because it works on the page - we can enjoy its literary merits irrespective of the precision of its autobiographical content. Nonetheless, the reader has certain expectations surrounding a book that carries the label ‘autobiography’. As Claire Lynch wrote, ‘Readers look to autobiography with an assumption that (some) truth will be told and that the text is essentially different from other genres because its origin is confession’ (Bradford, Life Writing 211). We can think of this as providing a way of distinguishing between Oranges and Why Be Happy. The reader is accepting of invented elements in Oranges because it is presented as a novel, albeit a partly autobiographical one, but the reader would be less accepting of invention in
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_Why Be Happy_ because it is presented as an autobiography, implying that it is the true story of the author’s life.

Micaela Maftei recognises a similar concept that, autobiography is, ‘commonly held to be “true” writing...understood to be based on events that occurred in reality’ (17) but she goes on to highlight that this apparently straightforward idea quickly becomes complex and many dimensioned. We get caught up in questions of whose truth is being told. Is it the writer’s view of truth? Is their version of events accurate? Even if the writer has a ‘true’ sense of the events, is s/he being truthful when s/he writes it down? Can s/he be trusted by the reader? In a similar vein Smith and Watson asked,

What is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying? And what difference would that difference make?

(12)

The reader cannot hope to address these questions without a sense of the author’s intentions. This is a theme picked up by Maftei who emphasised the difficulties for the reader in determining what the writer’s intentions actually were. She stated, ‘autobiographical writing necessarily involves the intersections between one’s own ideas of what is true and the ideas of others’ (21). She goes on to highlight that it is difficult for the reader to know whether the writer is (or was) being truthful on the basis of reading the text alone. She quotes John Barbour’s distinction between truth and truthfulness as an aid to understanding this facet of autobiographical writing:

Truthfulness must be distinguished from truth. Truth is usually thought of as a kind of correspondence between human thought and reality, or as a matter of coherence among different ideas and propositions. Truthfulness, in contrast, is a process or quality of a person, a virtue we ascribe to certain individuals and not others...the autobiographer may err; he is as fallible as any human being in interpreting reality. The autobiographer may, however, demonstrate truthfulness, which is an active search for the most exact and insightful understanding of past experience.

(22)
There is a clear accord between Barbour’s comment about the, ‘active search for the most exact and insightful understanding of past experience’, and the way Janice Galloway described her approach to writing *This Is Not About Me*, identifying it as a ‘methodology’ which allowed her to say, ‘this is in fact what I saw and it’s as truthful and down to the wire as I can get it through the skin’ (*Scottish Review of Books*). Although Barbour’s distinction between truth and truthfulness is useful, it still leaves the reader with the challenge of determining the nature of the author’s intentions.

In the *Scottish Review of Books*, Galloway spoke about not having included adult reflections on her younger self, indicating that this was to avoid thrusting her own conclusions on people, instead giving them space to feel what it was like to be there. There are similarities between Galloway’s desire to give readers space to form their own views and Virginia Woolf’s comments that,

> when a subject is highly controversial...one cannot hope to tell the truth...One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions...Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. *(Room of One’s Own 6)*

This does not help with identifying the truth content of autobiography, but it does link to the way Winterson wrote about the use of storytelling to explain the real world in *Oranges*,

> Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It’s a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it’s a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time. Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don’t believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots....People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious. *(91)*

Winterson outlined a similar position in a 2002 interview:
I think writers should always be trusted because they are rather...dubious characters with pockets full of ribbons and coins and some things of immense value, and some things that are entirely worthless, and you’re never quite sure what you might buy from them. You may do well, you may not. But it’s the trustworthiness of the unreliable narrator, in that nobody is going to pretend that this is objectivity. Nobody is going to say, ‘This is how life is.’ The writer will say, ‘Here’s a possibility, here’s a set of clues, here’s a pattern which may or may not be useful to you.’ And in those hesitations and gestures, I think, we come closer to a truth than in any possible kind of documentary objectivity. So we trust writers because they are untrustworthy, because they do not claim to have a map, passed down from hand to hand, redrawn, uncertain, but the buried treasure is really there.

(Reynolds and Noakes 21)

In this interview, Winterson was talking about her semi-autobiographical first novel, Oranges, and she was speaking ten years before publishing her autobiography. Winterson’s words here blur distinctions between genres and she cautions against trying to separate facts from stories. This way of thinking about the interaction between storytelling and history is useful when considering how authors construct autobiographical writing. The reader should not assume the writer of autobiography is saying, ‘This is how my life is’ but rather the reader should recognise it is just one possibility of how life is or might be, providing greater scope for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. It links to Jessie Kesson’s comments about her writing not necessarily being the way things actually happened but representing the possibility in her. In these examples Winterson and Kesson were referring to semi-autobiographical fiction.

In autobiography and memoir, a number of writers suggest there is a subtly different set of reader expectations concerning the balance of truth and invention in memoir compared to other forms of autobiographical writing. Joyce Carol Oates described memoir as,

the most seductive of literary genres...[and]...the most dangerous of genres. For the memoir is the repository of truths, as each discrete truth is uttered, but the memoir can’t be the repository of Truth which is the very breadth of the sky, too vast to be perceived in a single gaze.

(300)

Here Oates suggests that memoir is appealing because the reader (and perhaps even the writer) believes it to be true but that it is still only one element of the
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bigger story – which fits Lejeune’s distinction between autobiography and memoir. In contrast, Couser suggests that,

calling a narrative about yourself a memoir usually signals that it is based primarily on memory, a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty. In turn, this creates expectations that the narrative may be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact based.

(19)

In Couser’s view, the very use of the term ‘memoir’ can be regarded as the author signalling to the reader that what follows may not be true in a strictly factual sense. There are echoes of Lejeune’s comment that the reader is warned of the rules of the game.

Both Kay and Galloway have included a number of subtle messages to the reader within their memoirs. The role of storytelling in the Kay family is made explicit throughout *Red Dust Road*. From the second chapter it is evident that ‘stories’ do not necessarily represent the truth. When the seven year old Kay learns that her mummy is not her ‘real’ mummy, her reaction is to check whether her mum is telling a story:

> Are you making this up? I ask my mummy. Is this one of your stories? She’s so good, my mummy, at telling stories.

(12)

Subsequent chapters recount the stories Jackie’s mum told her, encouraging her to imagine endless possibilities for the kind of person her biological father might be and pondering how her, then unknown, biological mother might be feeling on significant dates, such as Jackie’s birthday. ‘There was always something mysterious in the story of our adoption, mysterious to my mum, something made up about it’ (29). The final phrase echoes throughout the text as *Red Dust Road* contains other reminders about the unreliable nature of stories and memory. Early in the book Kay’s adoptive mother tells her that, when Jackie was a baby, they received, ‘a wee knitted yellow cardigan...in the post that had been knitted by your birth mother’ (27). When Jackie says she doesn’t remember her mother ever telling her that before, her mother says,
No? Probably just forgot. Maybe I’ve even made it up. Maybe I thought she should have knitted you something. You get all mixed up with what’s the truth and what’s not.

(27)

The final sentence hints strongly at the unreliability of stories that have been guessed at and recounted until they assumed mythical proportions (as Gudmundsdottir cautioned). If we interpret the sentence as having wider implications for the memoir itself, it suggests even the writer is unclear which are true and which are not. Eakin described this,

memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice.

(Fictions in Autobiography 6)

Later in Red Dust Road, Jackie and her adoptive dad are remembering incidents involving Kay’s son, Matthew, who was brought up by Kay and her female partner, Carol Ann Duffy. Jackie says,

‘And remember that time when you got into the car to drive and Matthew was about three and he said to you, “Men don’t drive,” and you said, “Aye they do, men drive!” And then you said to me, “You’ll need to be careful you’re not bringing up that boy in too esoteric a household.”
‘Is that what I says to you?’ my dad says, laughing. ‘I doubt I said that. You bloody writers, you make so much up.’
‘No, you definitely said it,’ I say, ‘because I remember the phrase. It’s memorable, esoteric household.’
‘Ah well, I said it if you say so,’ my dad says, reluctantly, wryly.

(284)

As with the passages relating to Kay’s adoptive mother, the statement about writers making so much up could be interpreted in the immediate context of the reported conversation or as a wider acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the memoir itself. It has resonance with Winterson who cautioned us against trying to separate facts and stories. Both Winterson and Kay acknowledge the challenges of memory and interpretation. Winterson used the construct of telling different ‘versions’ of events, each of which is true in its own terms. Kay, through the use of storytelling and recounting specific incidents, recognises a role for individual interpretation and acknowledges the fallibility of storytellers,
as well as the possibility of the writer inventing elements in order to recount the story in a literary form.

In a review of *All Made Up*, Ian Rankin addressed Galloway’s use of literary technique:

Throughout *All Made Up* the narrator seems able to recall screeds of dialogue between mother and daughters. Is this believable, or is there a level of playful artifice at work?... While the question of veracity is intriguing, what is more important is that Galloway remains a brilliant writer, capturing mood and character, time and place, with seeming effortlessness...

There is a forensic level of detail throughout: a description of Cora’s makeup routine, or even of a biscuit tin, can take up a whole page... We...are left with the puzzle of books that read like memoir while proclaiming themselves ‘anti-memoir’, books stuffed with character and incident, any number of which may be fabrications or exaggerations - all made up, just as the author has warned us in this latest title. If [Cora] never quite existed in reality as she is described in *All Made Up*, I’m still glad Janice Galloway shaped her and gave her such vibrant, hideous life.

*(The Guardian)*

The observation Rankin makes that, ‘the narrator seems able to recall screeds of dialogue’, could also be applied to Winterson and, especially, Kay both of whom reconstruct conversations including those going back to their early childhoods. Rankin refers to the, ‘level of playful artifice’ which may be at work but concludes that, although, ‘the question of veracity is intriguing’, veracity is less important than the fact of having brought these characters (and he singles out Cora in particular) to life in book form.

William Zinsser provides a useful way of thinking about the use of fictional technique in memoir:

A good memoir requires two elements - one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention. Memoir is the best mechanism that writers are given. Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own.

The other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction. We like to think that an interesting life will simply fall into place on the page. It won’t...Memoir writers must manufacture a text,
imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events.

For Zinsser, ‘integrity of intention’ involves an alignment between the writer (who ‘seriously embarks on that quest’) and the reader (‘bringing along many associations with quests of their own’). The requirement is simply that the reader should be able to identify with the text or, at least, parts of it. If we apply Zinsser’s two required elements (craft and integrity of intention) to Rankin’s review of Galloway, Rankin places greater significance on the quality of Galloway’s crafting. He is less concerned whether the particular incidents Galloway describes actually happened in the way she sets them out on the page or whether the characters bear an accurate resemblance to Galloway’s family in real life. Rankin’s conclusion suggests he has decided not to engage with the two volumes as ‘memoir’ necessarily but to enjoy them as literary creations.

Rather than focusing on the writer and reader as Zinsser suggested, Smith and Watson describe a relationship between the narrator and reader, indicating that,

...autobiographical truth...is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life

Of course, if the text meets Lejeune’s definition for autobiography or memoir, the narrator and the writer would be one and the same person. However, if we interpret the focus on the narrator as emphasising that the relationship should be between the reader and the text, rather than anything outside those pages, then the challenge becomes one of interpreting the text rather than second guessing the author’s intentions. This fits with Maftei’s view when she said, ‘Once we move beyond the page and into intention, desire and belief, we are no longer only reading.’ (57). It also accords with Margaret Atwood:

The writer communicates with the page. The reader also communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate only through the page. Pay no attention to the facsimiles of the writer that appear on talkshows, in newspaper interviews, and the like - they ought not to have
anything to do with what goes on between you, the reader, and the page you are reading.

I am interested in Atwood’s use of the term ‘facsimiles’. It suggests she believes these appearances are copies rather than the real thing. The rest of the passage indicates that the ‘real thing’ is the text and not the writer talking about it. Implicit in what Atwood says is the view that additional engagement with the writer will not (and should not) shed more light on the reader’s interpretation of the text.

Introductory text that is published inside the covers of a book might be regarded as a grey area as far as Atwood is concerned - it is not quite the text but it is inside the covers. A distinguishing feature would be if the writer herself provided the introductory material. Maftei emphasised that, in autobiographical writing, introductory text,

can have an enormous influence on how we approach the rest of [a book]...such initial pieces of writing (prefaces, introductions, acknowledgements) offer the seductive image of even more direct contact with the writer...because they appear to speak from some closer, more immediate space than the rest of the text.

Other than brief dedications or acknowledgements, Winterson, Galloway and Kay did not provide prefaces or other introductory text within the printed versions of their books - Winterson provides an ‘Introduction’ to Why Be Happy on her author website. I regard the absence of wrapping material as encouragement to focus on the substantive texts. It aligns with my teenage approach to reading, which I set out earlier, where I studiously avoided any introductory words at the beginning of a book.

While I retain some sympathy with this view, it can be difficult for readers to focus only on the text, given all the opportunities that now exist to hear writers talking or writing more about their work, for example through social media. Once we have heard from a writer, we cannot un-hear it and inevitably this will influence our reading of their work. I am reminded that my chance encounter with Jessie Kesson in a bookshop in Aberdeen was a revelatory experience for
me, changing my thinking about reading and, ultimately, changing my approach to writing.
Coda: Writing Floating

I titled my thesis Writing and Not Writing a Novel Called *Floating* on the grounds that much of our time as writers, especially writers with full time jobs and families, is spent not actually writing. Nonetheless, the experiences we gather during those non-writing times do still influence what we write. This was certainly the case for me.

In this Coda I examine the decisions I made which affected the writing of *Floating*. I have used the headings that I adopted for my analysis of the writers Galloway, Kay and Winterson.

**Genre**

In the essay chapter ‘The possibility in all of us’, I state:

> the concern that my fiction should not be mistaken for autobiography had a strong influence on the storyline for my novel, *Floating*. I was determined to write about something I could never do, and this was the beginning of the idea for the main character’s story. Eoifa checks her child into a crèche and doesn’t return.

(185)

I wanted to explore why I imagined it mattered that I should write about something I could not do or was not my own life. I found that several writers whose work I admired shared my sense of ambivalence about autobiography in their fiction, including writers who have engaged extensively in autobiographical genres. Later, in the essay chapter ‘A secret room of my own’ (188), I emphasise that reading work by authors who drew on their own lives freed me to make progress on *Floating* after a period of inactivity. Indeed I recognised that I was increasingly referencing my own life in my written work.

While initially I wanted to write a novel that was determinedly not autobiographical, my view relaxed as a result of the reading and analysis I undertook. This does not mean that *Floating* is autobiographical. The narrative is not my story. Eoifa is not me. However, the novel draws on my life experience
as well as my analysis of literary autobiographical texts. Through close reading of literary autobiography and memoir, I identified a number of factors or challenges that are particular to writing in that form. I adapted those to the writing of *Floating*.

The title ‘Floating’ was originally inspired by a scene in a very early draft, subsequently dropped from the novel, in which Eoifa was in the bath allowing her mind to drift to other, happier, times. ‘Floating’ has endured as the title because the term gives an accurate sense of the novel in which Eoifa is making her way through this portion of her life without obvious drive. I could have chosen ‘drifting’ as the title but I prefer floating on the grounds that it has connotations of buoyancy which, ultimately, Eoifa does possess. She keeps on getting by, to borrow a concept frequently used by Galloway.

I am attracted to gerundive titles and the notion of movement they convey. They point to activity taking place in the borderlines between other, more definite locations or concepts. Eoifa is in transition between parts of her life and the novel makes repeated use of transitions between points in time and between characters’ backstories.

**Narrative perspective**

Given the extent to which my underpinning reading has drawn on autobiographical work, an obvious choice might have been to write Eoifa in the first person. I considered this briefly but rejected it and selected third person. Nonetheless, the primary narrative in *Floating* is told entirely from Eoifa’s point of view. The narrator in *Floating* is very close to Eoifa, to the point that the reader might wonder whether they are one and the same entity - which is also a feature of autobiographical writing where the reader might be uncertain about the separation (if any exists) between narrator and protagonist. This creates what I regard as a useful tension between Eoifa and the narrator.

Despite the close proximity between the narrator and the main character, writing in the third person gave me greater flexibility to write about Eoifa’s
interior thoughts and her actions compared to writing in the first person. I found this particularly useful because of the amount of time Eoifa spends alone. Writing in the first person would have involved Eoifa in an artificial narration of her thoughts and, especially, her actions.

*Floating* is told in the past tense. This is in line with the primary approaches adopted by Galloway, Kay, and Winterson in their autobiographical work and which I analyse in considerable detail throughout the essay chapter ‘Writing down your life: an exploration of literary techniques in autobiographical writing’. Unlike those authors, I did not use the present tense for any part of my novel in its final version. In an earlier draft, I considered adopting the present tense to tell the parts of Eoifa’s backstory which related to her time as a mother. In that early draft, I interspersed short excerpts of backstory with the primary narrative. This worked well in some passages but, over time, the short excerpts became repetitive. Rather than building narrative tension or adding to the narrative drive, they tended to work against those because, as a collection, they provided multiple examples of the same phenomenon: Eoifa was unhappy as a mother and possibly had postnatal depression.

From the opening, *Floating* provides a layering of narratives each presented in the past tense:

Eoifa stood by the threshold of her new Glasgow home, suitcases at her feet having eventually wrestled them away from the taxi driver. My God they were persistent here.

‘I can get the car right in that drive there, darlin…I don’t like seein a young lady strugglin wi they heavy bags.’

This passage opens in the immediate past tense and moves to a, marginally, earlier point in time, retelling how Eoifa wrestled her suitcases from the taxi driver. The use of direct speech is intended to add authenticity by ‘showing’ aspects of the scene rather than ‘telling’ all of it.

There are frequent instances throughout *Floating* where Eoifa recalls her backstory and where the two other main characters, Mrs McQuarry and Stella, recount their stories. These instances are framed in the primary narrative with
reference to the actions of those listening to the story. Notably when Mrs McQuarry is recounting her memoires of a Hogmanay from her youth, she makes reference to slogans and adverts that her parents had used:

“Bols Advocaat - it’s a lovely little drink!” Mum and dad would recite in unison. It was a cinema or television advert at the time

Mrs McQuarry’s memories serve a number of functions in Floating. They provide that character’s backstory and illuminate her motivations. They also provide an opportunity for Eoifa to remember events from her own past:

‘Mother would put the net away somewhere and I assume the lemonade company took it back - presumably with the empties. We recycled everything in those days. We’re back at the recycling now, of course, but then, you never imagined throwing anything away. That all started in the ‘70s.’

It had never started in Eoifa’s house. Her mother didn’t throw a thing away. She even had a wee plastic contraption that she used for gathering the nub ends of soap. ‘Waste not, want not!’ she’d exclaim before highlighting the plight of starving children in Africa.

Here we see a continuation of Mrs McQuarry’s memory of Hogmanay which moves on to her observations about recycling through the decades. That, in turn, prompts Eoifa to recall her mother’s approach to recycling. I include the use of direct speech to give the reader a sense of Eoifa’s mother’s character. This is an approach used by Galloway and, especially, Kay.

This extract also provides an example of another character’s viewpoint being glimpsed, in this case Mrs McQuarry’s opinion on recycling. Retelling the backstories provides these brief opportunities for the reader to see other characters’ viewpoints, while the primary narrative continues to be told from Eoifa’s point of view.

From the outset, and in all versions of the novel, Eoifa has been the primary character. Hers was the non-autobiographical story I wanted to tell. When I initially began writing Floating, there were only two main characters: Eoifa and Stella. Stella’s story was given greater weighting in those early stages than in later drafts. Much of the text was concerned with Eoifa helping Stella to identify
her sister’s killer (the cause of death was the same). In the case of Kay and Winterson, narrative drive arises from their respective searches for their birth parents - there is an element of quest in both of their books. Crucially, that quest derives from the main character in each case. I discontinued the detective element from *Floating* because the narrative drive it created was overpowering Eoifa’s story in the novel.

When I reengaged with writing *Floating* after a break prompted by my brother’s death, Mrs McQuarry’s character began to play a much larger part. This provided the shape of the final novel with the three main female characters each presenting a different ‘model’ of motherhood. Stella and Mrs McQuarry allow Eoifa’s character and story to be revealed to the reader. I believe this version has a better balance and it underlines the theme of motherhood more firmly than the version with only Stella and Eoifa.

Woven throughout is a love story and that is where Alan’s character comes in. He allows us to see that Eoifa is an attractive woman (not a monster) and, although flawed, she has redeeming character qualities. Alan shares less of his backstory than other characters but I like the fact that he challenges clichéd expectations of a removal man by having an interest in literature. Alan provides the possibility that Eoifa could recover from her self-imposed exile. By the end of the novel it is more likely that she will recover than that she will not. However, I preferred to leave the ending open to some interpretation around Alan and Eoifa’s relationship. It is equally possible that they will get back together and that they will not.

**Photographs and other plot devices**

Galloway makes extensive and creative use of photographs in her memoirs (page 213). In *Floating*, two photographs in particular provide the turning point in the book - the point at which Eoifa is revealed to have had a baby. The idea for this plot device was prompted by my reading of Galloway’s work and Jon McGregor’s *So Many Ways to Begin*. In earlier versions of *Floating*, Eoifa simply confessed to
Stella that she had abandoned her baby or the confession was made accidentally, by Stella overhearing Eoifa.

The use of the old photographs fits well, I believe, with the fact that Eoifa has all the boxes that she has taken to Mrs McQuarry’s from storage. It provides the opportunity to engage with the boxes again after their sitting idle in the house. It is important that the photographs are revealed by a young child - a precocious one with whom Eoifa has clashed earlier in the novel.

I want to discuss the role of the secret room and the moths in *Floating*. They act as a metaphor for Eoifa’s ‘secret’ backstory spilling out and damaging the new relationships she has formed. My model for the secret room at the top of the stairs was a linen cupboard from my childhood home. The architecture of the cupboard in *Floating* is grander than my childhood cupboard but it’s what sparked the idea.

There is also a serendipitous alignment with a comment made by Jackie Kay in her interview with Isobel Murray where Kay talked about an approach to structuring her work as the ‘house of fiction’ with a ‘door’, an ability to see out and, ‘sometimes there can be a wee extra room, a surprise room, that you didn’t know was there’ (*Scottish Writers Talking* 4: 17).

The secret room plays an important role in *Floating* although Eoifa only enters it once, it is referenced repeatedly and acts as a metaphor for Eoifa beginning to share her story with the other main characters. The metaphor is emphasised by the room providing the source of the moths which begin to appear around the house before infesting it on the night Eoifa’s full story is revealed.

**Naming the protagonist**

Naming the protagonist in *Floating* was less fraught than might have been the case if the work were autobiographical. I would not have chosen Ailsa as the protagonist’s name because, as I have already stated, *Floating* is not autobiographical. The storyline is not from my life and, other than some very
basic details like gender and the fact that we have both given birth, I do not believe the main character and I have much in common.

The name I did choose is Eoifa which is an unusual name and that presents some challenges, for example most readers will be unsure how it should be pronounced. That meant I needed to include reference to its pronunciation early in the book. What I like about the name is its similarity to Eve, with the connotation of ‘everywoman’. Eoifa is and she is not every woman in that she shares many of the worries and joys that all woman have but she has also lived her life in a particular way that not many woman would have chosen - most woman do not abandon their children.

Different versions

The concept of different versions has particular resonance in autobiographical work where the literary text can be compared (rightly or wrongly) with other texts about the author’s life. Although there is not an autobiographical truth consideration for Floating, given that it is fiction, the concept of versions is a theme within the novel. Eoifa, in particular makes explicit reference to different possibilities and different versions. I explore this further (below) in relation to ‘identity’.

Identity

Paul John Eakin wrote, ‘I believe that our life stories are not merely about us but in an inescapable and profound way are us.’ (Living Autobiographically x). In Floating, Eoifa is the combination of her backstories. She is an unreliable narrator of those stories, for example during dinner with Alan, Eoifa’s interior monologue reveals that she lied to him about how she travelled to university (page 134). In this case, not the most consequential lie she could have told but the intention is to alert the reader to her preparedness to construct a different version of herself (or identity) by changing the stories she tells about her past.
Throughout, Eoifa makes explicit reference to different versions or possibilities, for example near the end of the novel she considers which version of the ‘baby story’ to share with Stella:

Eoifa finally managed to look at her friend. Stella’s face was full of concern. Perhaps something could be salvaged. But she needed to say something, give her something. Tomorrow would be too late for the truth. She’d have to tell a different version.

(164)

Throughout *Floating* there is reference to layer upon layer of narratives, from memories of advertising slogans to wider stories of place, for example about the rivalry between Glasgow and Edinburgh, the story of the Glasgow airport attacks or the arrival of the Asian population in Pollokshields. In this way, the novel is formed of stories that reflect the identities of the main characters.

**Ending**

It is important that *Floating* ends on the night Eoifa’s principal backstory is revealed. It is the climax of the novel and there would be no narrative value in continuing. Up to that point, all of the action and narrative drive relies on a variety of backstories. It is the single significant occasion on which the story is forward facing. Despite what we know about her earlier unreliability, Eoifa surprises herself and chooses to tell the truth. It is also the first occasion on which Eoifa shares her reflections on having abandoned her child, having spent most of the book refusing to think about what she has done or its consequences. This allows the reader to see how Eoifa has been changed by her interactions with the other main characters. There is the suggestion that, having spent the duration of the novel in a state of suspended animation, perhaps paralysed by her earlier action in abandoning her child, Eoifa could now begin to conduct herself at a more rapid pace.
Bibliography


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