Living Like Common People

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Christine Bellotti

Associate Diploma Social Science, Carseldine QUT
Bachelor of Arts - Justice Studies, Kelvin Grove QUT

School of Humanities and Social Science

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Philosophy.

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Abstract

*Living Like Common People* is a collection of seventeen fictional, interlinked, short stories focussing on the protagonist Kevin Sullivan. The characters within Kevin’s circle of intimate and professional associates provide accounts of his life. His decline into recidivism, the unravelling of his relationships and the increased brutality of his crimes are set within the gloom of the prison walls and the small community he inhabits during the short periods of his release. The stories explore these relationships and provide a description of the sub-groups which make up the prison population. The aim is to explore the nature of character motivation and the essence of violence. The exegesis explores the sociological ideas of punishment and sexual violence, as well as the themes of retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation and recidivism evident in the short stories. It also examines the role of prison narrative as a vehicle of reform, which makes it a compelling and vital genre.
“Out beyond the ideas of
Wrong doing and right doing
There is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

Jalaluddin Rumi

Dedicated to:

Rebecca Kochanski who gave me the confidence to find my ‘field’.
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LIVING LIKE COMMON PEOPLE
SWEETPEA

It’s Friday the 17th of March, St Patrick’s Day, and Maggie Sullivan is squatting by the front fence, poking the last of the sweet pea seeds into the damp soil. She wipes the dirt from her hands onto her striped apron and heaves herself up. Warm fluid flows down the inside of her thighs and trickles into the garden. *Holy Mother of God, the little bastard’s early,* she thinks as the first small contraction quivers through her body. Maggie calls to her next-door neighbour who is pegging out some washing. “Shirley, can you watch the girls until Dan gets in from work?”

Shirley drops a wet sheet back into the wash trolley and walks over to the fence. “Has it started?” she asks, nodding at Maggie’s belly. Maggie grimaces, “Yes, and judging by the others it won’t take long. I packed my bag last week. I just have to call a cab.”

“I’ll be over in a jiffy.” Shirley yanks the plastic rollers from her hair as she heads for the back door. By the time Shirley has gone inside to lock the house, the cab is waiting in front of number 27 Murphy Road, Zillmere and Maggie is struggling down her front path.

On Friday afternoon Dan goes to the pub after work and he is half-tanked by the time Shirley’s husband, Bill, seeks him out to let him know that he’s a father again and this time it’s a boy. Dan is a popular client at The Stag and Hunter; he is quick-witted and sociable and will burst into a rendition of “Amazing Grace” or “He’s My Brother” with little encouragement. He has a beautiful baritone voice, wide shoulders and fine dark features. Dan is what the residents in North Western Ireland’s County Mayo, where he was born, refer to as “black Irish”; according to the local mythology his ancestors were Spanish gypsies.
Dan met Maggie, who is from adjoining County Sligo, at a fair. Maggie was dressed in a white peasant blouse and a full skirt, her hair loose on her shoulders. Dan caught her eye as she was about to step onto the Ferris wheel and swung himself into the seat beside her. The attraction was immediate and the timing right as Maggie had just had an argument with her boyfriend. The couple married within months. They made the joint decision to migrate to Australia under the post war immigration scheme, which attracted large numbers with the prospect of a brighter future in a new land where work was readily available. Time travels rapidly when you are in love and before they realised the gravity of their plans, the couple were aboard a ship and on their way to a new life. Maggie was pregnant and seasick for most of the journey. On arrival in Australia she delivered a baby girl, Kathleen and eighteen months later the twins, Mary and Ruth. The family moved to Zillmere, on the outskirts of Brisbane. It took four years for Maggie to conceive again and, prone to morning sickness, she suffered through most of the pregnancy even though she had a firm footing on the soil of Australian suburbia.

Dan’s pleased the baby has arrived, even if it is early. He doesn’t like to think of Maggie as pregnant and sick. He prefers his wife to be cheerful and competent. “She was probably mucking around in the garden and that’s what’s brought the kid on,” he says to Bill. “It’s a double celebration, St Patrick’s Day and after three daughters I’ve got a son at last. Shout the bar, Frank.” Frank the hotelier is an old friend.

“I’m going to name the kid Danny, after me and my dad. It’s a family tradition.” His mates clap him on the back and congratulate him. “Who’d believe it, a boy and on St Pat’s.”
Dan is feeling worse for the wear when he visits Maggie at the hospital the next day. He hugs her and then examines his progeny. In the cold, harsh light of sobriety, the grin slips from his face.

“He doesn’t look like the girls. He doesn’t look like any of us.” He hands the small swaddled bundle back to Maggie. The baby has wispy blond hair, blue eyes, dimples and a distinctive cleft in his chin. Maggie and her girls are fair complexioned brunettes with dark eyes and not a dimple among them.

“I don’t give a damn, he’s beautiful and I love him.” Maggie holds the child close. “I’m going to name him Kevin.” She glances defiantly at her husband.

“For all I care you can call him Sweetpea.” Dan replies, as he walks away.

Maggie is aware the dates are all wrong. She was hoping the baby would be late and that Dan wouldn’t realise. Kevin has arrived early and he looks like his father, Mike, the Rawley’s man.

Mike usually arrives in the neighbourhood every couple of months; he drives a white van and sells household goods and groceries. Maggie’s girls, Kathleen and the twins, Mary and Ruth, like his tapioca pudding. Mike enjoys flirting with the women customers and always takes time to listen to their problems.

“Sometimes I feel so isolated and lonely.” Maggie had told Mike one morning after she paid him for a jar of chicory and a dustpan and brush. “I miss my mum and family back home and Dan’s never here when I need him. I know the shifts are long at the Golden Circle cannery but then he goes to the pub.”

“He shouldn’t neglect a beautiful woman like you.” Mike put his arm around Maggie and she sobbed into his chest. He smelt of eucalyptus and tobacco. She moved away and took his hand. “Come in and I’ll make you a drink,” she said as she wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve. One thing led to another. As Maggie
dressed and shooed Mike out the back door she felt sick with guilt. It will never happen again, she promised herself.

Maggie felt desperate when she realised she was pregnant and devised a plan. She waited until Dan came home from the pub and greeted him as he walked in the front door.

“What’s up? Is one of the kids sick?” he asked, immediately suspicious.

“I miss you when you’re gone for such a long time.” Maggie had brushed her hair and was dressed in the only provocative article of clothing she owned, her best silk, and ‘going away’ dress: wrapped in tissue paper since her wedding night.

“What’re you doing, dressed up like a dog’s dinner?”

Maggie didn’t answer. She took him by the hand and led him through to their double bed where she seduced him. What else could she do? She was terrified he would discover her infidelity and this way at least there was a chance he would believe the child was his.

*

Maggie is tentative when she comes home with the baby. The girls love Kevin. They squabble over whose turn it is to cuddle him and Kathleen revels in the small task of dressing him in the white voile nightdresses that Maggie had originally sewn for the twins. Kevin’s plump soft body feels delicious beneath the crisp starched voile and Kathleen rocks the freshly bathed child and whispers to him, “You’re my little Sweetpea.”

Dan ignores Kevin and treats Maggie with contempt. “I should have listened to Shirley when she warned me that bastard with the van was sniffing around,” he says to her. Maggie doesn’t reply, she calmly resumes her duties: cleaning the house,
cooking, shopping (though not at the Rawley’s van), and gardening. The sweetpeas sprout, the green plants thrusting upwards toward the wire fence. With all the running around Maggie rapidly regains her hourglass figure.

Dan notices the change in his wife’s body; she’s back to her normal weight and he realises after the extended break in spousal relations that he is a man with a man’s needs. Apart from this, Maggie is a damn good cook and housekeeper. When he arrives home from the pub one evening a few weeks later, he says to his wife, “You’re a beautiful woman: no wonder that bastard took advantage of you. I still love you and I’ve punished you enough,” and he takes Maggie into his arms and buries his face in her soft brown hair.

By August the sweetpeas are in full bloom. Maggie picks bunches and distributes them in glass jars throughout the house. The vibrant red, purple and pink blossoms exude a sweet perfume which drifts through the rooms. The flowers give the house a soul. Kevin crawls across the kitchen floor and clings to Maggie’s legs as she scrapes the carrots for the evening meal.

Three months later Maggie collects the brittle pods from the vines and pulls out the brown remnants of the sweet peas. She puts the seeds in a paper bag and stores them away for planting on Kevin’s first birthday. Since she has been living in Australia it has become her tradition to plant the flowers on St Patricks Day and the results have been pleasing. Shirley, Maggie’s neighbour, taught her all she knows about gardening. Maggie is house-proud and she loves being able to grow flowers and vegetables in her own small yard.

When Maggie arrived in Australia she never expected to be living on the outskirts of Brisbane in such a rough area. She is grateful for the fact that her house is
on a small incline above the main street and not with all the other Irish and German migrants on the large housing commission estate down the road.

Kevin is a lively child and he is walking by ten months. He receives plenty of attention from his sisters but Dan refuses to touch the boy. “Sweet pea, you’re a big sook,” he tells him when he cries for attention. Kevin learns to keep his distance from his father.

Kevin’s first day at school is an omen. Kathleen, Mary and Ruth walk him down Murphy Road to Zillmere State School; take him to the classroom and wander off to catch up with their friends.

At recess, Kevin sits in the dim concrete area under the school. Green painted planks which run diagonally along the two brick walls provide seating for the children. Dust has gathered under the seats and in the corners, and there is a dank smell, reminiscent of years of rotting school lunches. Kevin bites into his apple and observes his classmates. A boy named David, who has a small head, is running around in circles making a strange shrieking noise. Some kids with yellow hair and leather shorts crouch in a huddle playing marbles. They are each in possession of a cotton draw-string bag which contains their aggies, tors and glassies. They are playing “little ring”. Kevin throws his apple core in the bin and sets out to try to join them. As he approaches, Jon, a tow haired, thick-set fellow, stands up, “Give us a look at what you’ve got.”

Kevin digs deep into the pocket of his grey cotton shorts and pulls out a couple of dibs and an aggie. Marbles cost six a penny but Kevin’s supply of them is meagre. He has only played with his sisters before and they usually win.
“I’ll have the aggie,” Jon says, with his hand cupped in front of Kevin’s face.

“Now boot off, ya big sissy.”

During the lunchbreak a tall girl, Frieda, with a vacant expression, watches as Kevin flounders in the new environment. She has been kept back in the first grade for three years now and although she is still having problems with the curriculum, she is streetwise in the playground. Frieda beckons Kevin to follow her away from the shouting jostling crowd of children. She leads him across the wide sunny sports field to a clump of wattle trees where there are more big girls. Kevin sits next to Frieda and listens as the girls exchange stories about Kevin’s teacher, Miss Dawson, who has a yellow sundress which exposes plenty of cleavage.

“She drops the chalk and sometimes it lands down there,” Frieda pulls the front of her school shirt open and points at her flat chest.

“Did ya offer to get it for her?” a lanky girl with glasses asks her.

“You’d never find it,” Frieda replies.

After lunch the children return to their classroom. They are hot and grubby and too tired to study the alphabet. Miss Dawson observes the room and thinks; thank God David’s in the class next door. His hyperactivity must have something to do with his small head. It’s difficult enough coping with Frieda again without having that little monkey distracting the other kids.

“Put your arms on your desks children,” she directs her class. “Now rest your heads on your arms and try to have a sleep.” Kevin remains bolt upright as the others doze off. He is gazing at a picture above the blackboard. In the picture, a boy is sitting in front of a table piled high with cakes and sweets; he has tears streaming down his face. Kevin is trying to understand why the boy in the picture is crying.
“Come here little fellow.” Miss Dawson, feeling sorry for the small boy, picks Kevin up and settles him on her lap. He is asleep in minutes.

At three in the afternoon the school bell rings and Kevin goes out the front gate and waits for the twins to pick him up and walk him home. He sits on his brown port, his blond fringe flopping across his forehead as he picks at the scabs on his knobbly knees. The twins don’t appear but Frieda does. “What’re you doing here? All the kids have gone home.” She takes him by the hand, “come on, I’ll show you where I live.”

Kevin doesn’t resist and he accompanies Frieda across the road, past the corner shop and down a narrow street to where the weatherboard houses all look the same. The houses are painted a cream colour and have small side-porches.

“We’re here.” Frieda pushes the wrought iron gate, which is hanging precariously by one hinge, and Kevin follows her around to the back where the door is ajar. Inside, a baby lies squirming on a wet grey army blanket; the air is acrid with tobacco smoke and the stench of stale urine.

“You home Mum?” Frieda calls down the hall.

“I’m in bed. Got the rags on,” a woman shouts.

Frieda disappears into her mother’s room. Kevin timidly peers into the darkened area where a woman lies naked on a mattress, a wash cloth between her legs.

“Holy crap, I’m out of here,” he mutters and takes off. He skids towards the door and bumps into Frieda’s brother who has been raiding the fridge in the kitchen. Jimmy is ten and built like the proverbial brick shithouse. “Geez, what’s the hurry?” he says.

“Yer mum’s naked.”
“It’s alright mate, she’s like this every month. She feels the heat when she gets the curse. I’m Jimmy. Come on; let’s go down to the station.” With a bread and suet sandwich clutched in one hand Jimmy grabs Kevin by the elbow with his free hand. “Why do you want to go to the station?”

“Just for something to do. Did you know a kid jumped on the tracks in front of a train last week?”

There is only one house on the ten minute walk to Zillmere train station; a squat red weatherboard building with a long front yard. “Beryl Tanner lives in there, it’s a great yard for playing cricket,” Jimmy says, as the boys wade through the knee-high grass on the foot-path.

A row of sad shops with peeling paint and faded signs line the road that leads up to the white overhead bridge straddling the tracks. “I haven’t been here before.” Kevin’s feeling nervous; teenagers dressed in black with slicked back hair, thick with brylcreem, are standing around their motorbikes parked outside the milk-bar. They exude an aura of danger and excitement. A thrill of fear streaks down Kevin’s spine. “Who are they?”

“Bodgies and widgies.” Jimmy knows everything. He will make a precious ally at school. Unlike his sister, he is smart and in Grade Five.

Best friends now, the boys climb the stairs and wait on the bridge until a freight train rattles past beneath them. Kevin chucks one of his remaining marbles at the roof of a carriage. They run back down and wander in the direction of the school.

At home, Maggie is serving up tea. She ladles the mutton stew and potatoes out and the girls come in to eat. “Where’s Kevin?” Maggie asks. Mary and Ruth exchange horrified looks. They’ve forgotten to bring him home. They bolt out the door, their glossy, brown plaits flicking as they run down Murphy Road. Approaching
the school, the girls spot them. Jimmy is carrying Kevin’s port, his arm carelessly thrown over Kevin’s shoulder.

“Where’ve you been? You’re supposed to come home when everybody leaves,” the twins scold.

“You said you’d take me home.”

Ruth and Mary ignore Kevin’s protests. Mary retrieves his port from Jimmy, and taking an arm each, they escort Kevin home.

After tea the children sit around the table, eyes lowered, the girls diligently concentrating on their homework. Kevin draws a picture of Miss Dawson, her tits pointing out, right to the edge of the paper. Dan walks past to check on the kids. “You dirty little bastard,” he says and clips Kevin across the ear. “Get off to bed.”

Kevin’s bed is in a small alcove at the rear of the two bedroom house. The space affords little in the way of privacy as it adjoins the lavatory. Kevin has a chest of drawers for his clothes and toys. The girls share a room and the parents sleep in the second bedroom.

Kevin changes into his pyjamas, tucks himself into bed and thinks about what he has learnt that day. He wonders why the boy in the picture was crying when he had so many good things to eat. He realises that the world is full of strange and interesting people and he is happy he now has a friend in Jimmy. He likes Frieda and the big girls and their stories, and he loves Miss Dawson, that’s why he tried to draw her. He decides he is not going to be an artist when he grows up. He hates his dad for ruining his drawing of Miss Dawson.

Kevin can hear the hushed murmur of the girls playing scrabble and Maggie cleaning up in the kitchen. He is lonely and he wishes his mum would come and tuck
him in. He squirms in his bed and longs for sleep which feels like an inaccessible faraway place.

Kevin’s face flushes with embarrassment and he is filled with crushing shame as he remembers the other thing; his voice had been among those taunting and jeering at David as he fled the playground during the lunchbreak. David’s small pinched face haunts him as he falls into a restless sleep.
It’s Christmas Eve, 1969: Kevin’s first night in prison. The door clangs shut behind him and he looks across at his co-offender, Jimmy, perched on the edge of his bunk as if he’s just paying a visit to the place. Jimmy hugs him, “Good ta see ya, Sweetpea.” Kevin blushes at his childhood moniker. “Kevin, call me Kevin,” he says as he pulls free of Billy’s embrace. He checks out his new digs. There’s a double bunk, a tin jug and a washbasin: some buckets in the corner, a wooden stool and a metal cupboard complete the furnishings. He frowns. “This isn’t too good. How long do you think we’ll be stuck in here together?”

Jimmy glances at his wrist where his watch used to be. “Could be months,” he says as he flings himself back on to the top bunk.

The boys share a history spanning twelve years. Kevin shivers in the dank air of the cell and the past rushes forward to greet him. He remembers Jimmy wearing black stovepipe jeans, leather jacket and his dark hair falling across his face as he drags deeply on a fag. John, Ross and Kevin huddle around him attempting to emulate his casual stance. Jimmy was always the ringleader and instigator of most of their activities. It’s as clear in his mind as if it all happened yesterday.

“All’s clear. Pull ya beanie down and go.” Jimmy nodded to Kevin, who slid around the side of the parked Fairlane and smashed the driver’s window with the spanner he pulled from under his jacket. He checked the console, under the seats and in the glove box and emerged through the passenger door with a packet of Marlboro cigarettes and a handful of change. He met up with the others around the corner.

“Better luck next time,” Jimmy said as he examined the meagre plunder.
His heart still thumping, Kevin offered the fags around and the boys moved on. They had enough cash to see a movie and that’s where the girls were. Back in those days, Kevin remembers Jimmy watching him. It’s as if Jimmy needed to be aware of what the others were up to all the time. As Kevin stood at the ticket window chatting up the girl behind the counter he felt self-conscious and hoped his black eye was not too obvious in this light. He was always sporting bruises and welts. He didn’t talk about it but it was common knowledge that when his old man came home tanked from the pub he took his anger out on Kevin. Jimmy did notice the black eye and after the movie he pulled Kevin aside, “Home life’s not what it’s cracked up to be is it mate?”

Kevin avoided his eyes.

“Your dad uses you like a punching bag and as much as I love her, my mum is driving me up the wall. What d’ya say we get out of this rat hole?”

Kevin nodded in agreement. He thought about the conversation with Jimmy for a month or so. He felt reluctant to leave his mother and sisters. However, after a particularly violent clash with his father, he found Maggie sobbing in the kitchen. She looked at his bruised and battered face and begged him to escape from a situation which was never getting better.

“I don’t like to leave you here with the old bugger,” Kevin told her.

“You’re the only one he turns on. The girls and me will be fine. I’ve some money I’ve hidden away. It’s not much but it will help you to get out of here.”

Kevin reluctantly accepted the hundred pounds his mother pulled from an old biscuit canister, packed his clothes and with a tearful goodbye hug from Maggie set off to Jimmy’s place. He walked through the open back door and found Jimmy leaning back on a kitchen chair having a smoke. Jimmy took one glance at the packed
bag and beaten face. “You’ve finally found the guts to clear off out of here old matey. I was ready to take off without you.”

Kevin spent a restless night on the floor next to Jimmy’s bed. The boys talked well into the early hours making plans for their future. The next morning they hitched a ride to Sydney and booked a room at the first hotel they came across, The Great Northern. Kevin paid for the room and then Jimmy took possession of the remaining money. “I’ll double it for you,” he said as he headed out the door of their musty room. He woke Kevin at two when he staggered across the floor and fell into his bed.

“You smell as bad as my dad when he comes home loaded. Where’s the money?”

“Sorry mate, some wanker stole it,” Jimmy slurred before he passed out. Bereft of possessions and without accommodation, they graduated from stealing cars to doing break and enters. Jimmy had a few acquaintances at the Cross and it was only a matter of time before he acquired a gun and the boys started doing stick-ups together, mainly Commonwealth banks. A Credit Union was their downfall and the cause of them doing time. Jimmy is still dirty that Kevin didn’t use his sawn-off 22 on the armed guard who held them up until the police arrived. The boys were sentenced to seven years with a five on the bottom.

“Stop day-dreaming, it’s time to hit the sack,” Jimmy says as he pulls the blanket over his head. “Good night.”

Throughout Kevin’s first long night in the cell, Jimmy’s restless muttering interrupts his dreams of freedom. He drifts in and out of sleep until he realises that the rhythmical creaking isn’t the sound of the small boat in his dream, drifting on the harbour. as he casts his line into the sparkling water. “What the fuck! Cut it out.” He gives the top bunk a kick. The creaking stops.
Turning to face the wall, Kevin pulls the coarse grey blanket up around his shoulders. It stinks of piss. He stares wide-eyed at the bricks willing the hours to pass as the walls close in on him. When he eventually hears the jangle of keys, as a screw unlocks the door, his heart beats heavily with apprehension.

“Wake up girls; it’s seven, time for morning muster.”

Following Jimmy’s example, Kevin grabs his shit and water buckets on the way out the door. In the rush, the contents swish against the sides of the bucket splashing his feet. They leave the buckets under the stairs and exchange them for fresh ones when they return at nine with a bowl of porridge. They are locked in for most of the day as there’s a staff shortage. The screws like to spend Christmas with their families.

On their second night, back in the cell after picking up their supplies, Jimmy and Kevin plonk their booty on the bottom bunk. They have each got a half-a-loaf of bread wrapped in pink waxed paper, a ration of butter and a couple of tea bags.

“Stand aside mate,” Jimmy says. “I’ll knock us up a nice piece of toast and a cuppa.”

“How’s that going to happen? There’s no power fucking outlets.”

Jimmy produces a razor blade slotted between a couple of matches with cotton.

“It’s a jigger, a makeshift element,” he murmurs under his breath, as he attaches it to the light socket with a bedspring and drops it into a cup of water from the bucket. When the water’s boiling he rolls back the mattress, places eight slices of bread on the bedsprings and heats them from underneath with the lighted rolled up wax paper.
They tuck into their Christmas night dinner. They have each been issued with a packet of Convair tobacco and they relax with a rollie before they hit the sack.

Five years is a long time, especially when you’re a teenager. Kevin’s long, curly, blond hair is chopped off by a screw wielding a pair of blunt shears. He is sad to see it go but is grateful that his ears survived the process. He swipes a smudge of blood from his neck with the back of his hand and gives the screw a baleful glance. “It doesn’t pay to get nervy in here,” the screw warns him.

Kevin is issued with heavyweight green denim trousers, shirt, jacket and a hat. The clothes are exchanged for clean ones on a weekly basis. Kevin polishes his shoes; wears his hat at the correct angle and salutes the governor at muster. There’s lots of marching and formality. To avoid these grand but useless performances, Kevin gets a job folding papers and is paid 26 cents a week. Lockdown after work is at three-thirty so the days are short and the nights are seemingly endless.

Finding the living quarters too close for his liking, Kevin puts in a request for a one-out cell. He is called up to see the Deputy Governor. When he returns to his cell, Jimmy asks, “How’d it go mate?”

“Got turned down but look at this,” Kevin pulls an engraved letter opener from his waistband.

“Good score, how’d ya get it?”

“The Gov turned his back to answer the phone and I nicked it off the desk.”

Kevin scrapes the utensil against the concrete to sharpen it. “Not a bad shiv, huh?” He has already reached the conclusion that the few acquaintances he has in the prison are as close to family as he will find; that prison is his new home and the sooner he adapts the better. It is not the strongest among us who survive. Nor is it the most intelligent: though Kevin is not lacking in intelligence. It is those who are the
most adaptable to change who live, and this is Kevin’s forte. He is making sure that he always has access to a weapon for his own protection, as some of his new family members are a bit too friendly and too eager to help themselves to his meagre belongings.

Prisoners are allowed one visit a month. On her first visit, Maggie stands in a line of people a few feet from the fence and Kevin is with the inmates on their side. Maggie’s wearing her good red hat. She sees Kevin, waves and calls his name. He smiles and lopes over to where she is standing. Maggie moves closer and clings to the fence. Obviously physical contact is out of the question and conversation is difficult as they have to yell to hear each other over the din as visitors and detainees attempt to communicate across the barrier. Maggie appears small and out of place and it hurts Kevin to see her brave smile. Behind his lopsided grin, Kevin attempts to hide the pain he feels at the sight of Maggie. He wishes she hadn’t moved down from Brisbane so that she could visit him. At eighteen, with his long skinny legs, oversized clothes hanging from a short torso and bad haircut, he looks more like a twelve-year-old than an adult convicted criminal. He knows he has broken Maggie’s heart.

“I’ll be back in four weeks. Stay safe.” Maggie pushes her way back through the crowd.

A couple of months into his stint, Kevin is sitting in the square of the Central Industrial Prison with Jimmy and about a hundred other blokes. *This is as boring as all shit*, he’s thinking. A fellow emerging from 3 Wing stands out from the crowd. His face is contorted and he is shouting obscenities. “Hey Jimmy, what’s Freddy making such a ruckus about?”

“Ya right mate, Fred is looking even wilder than usual. He turned up here
about a week after you Kev. He’s another new boy.” Jimmy’s eyes widen as he continues to observe Freddy. “He’s had trouble mastering the concept of survival in here: keep ya head down and mind ya own business. A couple of the hocks, Mark Gentile and Sam Wade decided it was their business to pull him aside and teach him the ways of the real world. He’s been walking around with a limp for days.”

Freddy’s standing at the entrance to the square fumbling with his fly.

“Shit, look at that Kev, he’s yanking his dick out from his trousers. Fuck, he’s got a knife and he’s cutting it off.”

Freddy’s screaming and blood’s gushing all over the place by the time the screws get to him and carry him away. Jimmy notices that Kevin is shaking, “Settle down Kev.” He throws a reassuring arm around Kevin’s shoulder. “A lot of fellows are into self-mutilation. If they’re not cutting themselves, they’re chucking themselves down the stairs so that they get taken to hospital and get a shot. Hanging out for drugs, they are. Cutting off your dick, that’s something else though. You’ll get used to it mate and hey,” Jimmy nudges Kevin. “It did help to relieve the boredom of the day.”

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The boys are separated when Jimmy finally gets a transfer and four months into his sentence Kevin is sent on escort to Goulburn. He is inducted, handed his allotted set of sheets and escorted to his cell. At last a cell all to myself, Kevin thinks as he places the bed sheets on a bench. The foam mattress on the bed has a hole in it so he flips it over. He discovers he has company. A woman with long blonde hair cascading over her bare breasts stares back at him her eyes wide and vacant. Her arms welcome him. Her legs are akimbo exposing the offending hole. It’s amazing what a desperate man can achieve with a few coloured felt pens.
The prisoners at Goulburn are locked down most of the time. The food is rotten and they have inadequate protection from the cold. In the morning the water’s frozen in the pipes and there’s no glass in cell windows, so that when it rains the clothing and blankets get soaked and stay that way. The crims decide to riot.

During the afternoon works muster the ring leaders, Gerry Hobson and Jack Manners are the first off rollcall and they chain the exit gate to the cells. When one hundred and fifty prisoners are corralled in the yard they chain the back gate. Kevin looked around in panic. There was no escape from the protest even if he did want to chicken out. The inmates sit out in the open until ten. By then they’re so cold that they just want to go quietly to their cells. Order is restored and Kevin is locked up in his cell. The whole prison is in full lockdown and the screws come around and bash all of them. I might as well be back at home with my dad, Kevin thinks as he drags his bruised body onto the bunk.

In 1972 Kevin is transferred to the Central Industrial Prison (Long Bay). He’s given special accommodation on the second floor in C4 Wing, the death cell. Unlike the other cells it has a grill door as well as a solid door. The complex was built in 1898 and there are galleries on the second and third floors with rope nets spanning the space in the middle to catch anyone who might accidentally fall or be pushed off. At Kevin’s end there are tall arched windows which cast a strange yellow light throughout the whole complex. In front of the windows is a big wooden beam (the gallows) with a trap door for the body to fall through at the end of the landing. Kevin is fortunate that capital punishment was abolished in New South Wales in 1955. The last execution was in 1940.

Sometimes at night the screws leave the solid door on Kevin’s cell open and he can peer out through the grill at the feral cats as they emerge from the prison
drains. They have more freedom than he does. Stoney, the sweeper on Kevin’s floor takes one of the kittens as a pet. It’s black and white with a smudge on its nose. He calls it Smutty. The cat follows him around as he does his chores, collecting plates and keeping the place tidy. Stoney is not a popular fellow, he’s too impatient and won’t wait for people to finish their meals before he demands their dishes so he can clean up and get back to his cell. The cat suffers. A group of the inmates kidnap it, put it on trial and find it guilty. They sentence Smutty to death by hanging. He struggles and claws and hisses on the end of the rope. They chuck the body on top of the bin where Stoney finds it in the morning. They blame the screws.

That night Kevin thinks of the cat dangling lifeless from the noose and finds himself sobbing uncontrollably into his pillow. It’s the first time he has had a good howl since he was a kid. Attracted by the noise three screws enter his cell. A hand grabs him roughly by the shoulder and he lands on the floor where he curls into the foetal position to protect himself against the blows as they flog him with their batons and sink their boots into him. It’s a tactic he learnt years ago when his father first started beating him up.

In a lot of ways, living at Long Bay is like being in a freak show, and Kevin becomes desensitised to the cruelty through day-to-day exposure to the bizarre behaviour of screws and inmates.

Most weekends are spent in the yard. On a warm Saturday morning in October he dawdles over to where a circle of men are jeering and catcalling. At the centre of attention is Ivy. The prisoners named him after the brand-name on the white blocks of prison soap because he’s a chat (someone who doesn’t wash). He’s crouched down in the middle of the circle doing his performance of acting like a chook and laying eggs. It’s a popular act and the boys are urging him on but something’s wrong. He’s turning
red in the face with the exertion of pushing but nothings coming out. He’s lodged one of the eggs too far up his arse and can’t lay it. The screws intervene and Ivy’s taken to the prison hospital to have it removed. The fun’s over. The inmates drift off.

Activities on weekdays are more productive. Kevin takes up an apprenticeship as an electrician and attends Tech. As part of the maintenance team he has access to most of the prison. He’s friends with the head cook who calls him down to the kitchen at six in the morning under the pretext of a fused element and he has the luxury of bacon and eggs for breakfast. He’s starting to feel like he belongs.

In November 1973 Kevin is transferred over to the MTC (Metropolitan Training Centre) which is in another section of Long Bay. It’s not difficult to pick Jimmy out from among the men in the yard. He has a distinctive walk. He glides with his head and shoulders angled forward. The back of his head is sloped, his dark hair combed down flat. He reminds Kevin of a cockroach slipping along beside the wall. Kevin sneaks up behind him and grabs him on the shoulder. Jimmy swings around, an ugly look on his face. “Fuck, don’t ever do that ya stupid cunt. Yah lucky I didn’t stab ya.”

“Good ta see you too.” Kevin smiles and gives him a hug. “Got a smoke?”

Jimmy nods and removes a pinch of tobacco from his packet. You wouldn’t want to be hanging out for a fag; he draws out the process of rolling the durry like it’s a ritual. He mightn’t have anything better to do but Kevin’s got people to see. “I’m getting out in January. What about you?” he says.

“I got done for drugs which is holding me back a bit. I’ll see if I can get a taste for ya.”

The siren sounds, musters up and they go their separate ways. Kevin catches up with Jimmy on a few occasions. Each time, Jimmy rewards him with a hit. Kevin
rapidly becomes addicted. He gets into drug dealing so that he can pay Jimmy back and finance his own habit. To run an efficient business, a drug dealer requires the ability to instil fear. Kevin’s not into torture, unlike Jimmy who uses electrocution as a reminder of unpaid debts. Kevin uses threats and follows through with them. It may take a while but he’s good for his word.
MARRICKVILLE

Kevin is released on the 18th of January 1974 and he gets stoned to celebrate his first night out. He has no intention of going straight but his mum has other ideas and lines up a job for him as a kiln setter at Fowler Potteries in Marrickville. He rents an old house around the corner from his mum’s place and before long is lined up with a girlfriend. Ross, a bikie mate, wants him to take Shirley off his hands. She’s a skinny fair-haired girl and Kevin thinks that she seems all right although he hardly knows her. There’s one thing about her that’s a bit different. She squeaks when she walks. Kevin learns that she was a pillion passenger when Ross totalled his Harley and she ended up with an amputated leg.

Kevin picks up Shirley and her gear from Ross’ place in Terrigal. She sits close to him in the car and places her hand on his knee. “I know he’s a good mate of yours Kevin but it’s a relief to get away from Ross’s place. We haven’t been hitting it off since the accident and he’s got a bad temper.”

“That’s all right Shirley. Where do you want me to drop you off?”

Shirley twists a strand of her long hair between her fingers. “I don’t have anywhere to stay. Do you mind if I hang out with you until I can find work?”

Kevin drives to his place at Tempe and carries Shirley’s overnight bag and guitar inside for her.

“It looks like it will scrub up all right,” she says as she surveys the overflowing ash trays and sink piled with dirty dishes.

“Yes, I suppose it could do with a woman’s touch.” Kevin places the guitar on the frayed couch and takes her bag into the bedroom. “I’ll leave you to unpack. I’ve got to see a man about a dog,” he says as he leaves. When Kevin arrives home at
eight he finds Shirley in the kitchen mashing potatoes. She gives him a tour of his own house which she has tidied up and they sit down at the Laminex table where Shirley serves the potatoes with lamb chops and some canned peas. Kevin eats the meal in silence. He has spent the afternoon scoring dope and hasn’t had a chance to hit up. He can’t wait for Shirley to go to bed so that he can relax and do his stuff.

Shirley clears the table and puts the dishes in the sink. “I’m going for a shower,” she says as she shuts the bathroom door behind her. There is a sink attached to the wall and no bench in the bathroom so Shirley puts her towel and pyjamas on the toilet seat.

She’s taking hours; Kevin is hanging out to take a piss. He enters the steam-filled room, removes her gear from the toilet lid and takes a look around. Something is missing; her prosthesis. “Hey Shirl, do you wear your artificial leg when you take a shower?”

“Yeah.”

“No wonder the bloody thing squeaks. Take it off and let it dry out. I’m not scared of your stump and I don’t want to sleep with you if you’re wearing that sodden thing.”

Shirley doesn’t answer. She doesn’t remove her prosthesis until she’s sure Kevin is asleep.

Apart from popping a few pills, a legacy from the amputation, Shirley’s straight. For a short while the relationship grows and Shirley learns to trust Kevin enough to let him see her without her prosthesis. They occasionally make love.

Kevin doesn’t take her with him when he goes out at night to score because she doesn’t use heroin and she’d just hold him back. They argue and Kevin tells her that he will give up using the shit but she catches him hiding in the wardrobe trying to
shoot up in the dark because he doesn’t want her to catch him out. Shirley cries and begs him to give her a shot. “I want to share the high with you. It will make us feel closer.”

“Fuck that Shirl, I love you. I don’t want you going on the nod. You have enough trouble getting around on that artificial leg as it is.”

“I miss you. You’re out all day and even when you are here you’re not really here.”

“I’m sorry love. I’ll make it up to you and buy you a dog. You can cuddle it when I’m out at night.”

Shirley is happy that Kevin has admitted to loving her and she likes the idea of the puppy. Kevin arrives home with a black and white bundle of fluff the next afternoon. It shits on the kitchen floor and when it howls during the night she takes it into bed with her. She wakes up in a puddle of warm urine. As much as she loves the animal it doesn’t take her long to realise that the dog doesn’t fill the yawning hole of need she has to be wanted and cared for. She feels alone in the world except for Kevin.

Things really go belly up when Jimmy’s released. He starts stealing stuff and leaving it at Kevin’s place; making Kevin a target for police interest. Kevin and Shirley wake at five to the sound of their front door being smashed open. Police enter the bedroom. “This is a raid. You have been under surveillance and we have evidence that you have contraband.” They drag the blanket away and demand at gunpoint that Kevin and Shirley lie on the floor. Shirley attempts to conceal her stump by clutching at the bedclothes. Kevin is lying on his back with two police holding him down. He watches Shirley sobbing as she is pulled naked from the bed.
They are permitted to dress and are then taken into the police station. The police were disappointed with the results of the raid and search. They found some cheap jewellery, two stolen cameras and a pair of binoculars. Shirley was released without being charged. Kevin has a two-year bond allotted to him.

Kevin’s good at his job and he manages to keep his position at Fowlers until they relocate and he finds himself unemployed. He tells Shirley, “I’m out of work and you haven’t managed to find a job. I’ve got a habit, a dog and a girl to support. I’m going to have to go back to doing armed robberies.”

“You don’t have a gun, do you?”

“My sawn-off 22 is in the roof space above the toilet at Mum’s place. I’ll pay her a visit when she’s not at home and get it.”

Shirley is not happy and their domestic situation goes from bad to worse. She objects to Kevin being away from home for a couple of days at a time and he comes back one morning to find she has cut all his clothes to shreds with a pair of scissors. His Levi 501’s, good white shirts and leather jacket are all destroyed. He’s devastated. She accuses him of having another woman. She has noticed that he comes home with lipstick smudged on his cheeks.

“You silly bitch. I’m not interested in having an affair with any of the working girls I sell speed to. I’ll admit they do try to pay me in kind which explains the lipstick. They’re appreciative of what I do but, shit, don’t you realise that with the amount of drugs I’ve been sticking up my arm there’s no way I can get a hard on, so it follows that I haven’t been rooting some other sheila. You should know that I love you. I wouldn’t have bought you the bloody dog if I didn’t care.” Kevin finishes his rant and Shirley apologises for cutting up his clothes.
Kevin makes the mistake of working with Jimmy again. He should know better after the last fuck-up but he’s desperate. Jimmy’s still on the run and the wallopers come looking for him at Kevin’s place one morning. This time Kevin’s luck has run out. He is caught red handed with nine grand and a couple of guns. The police are jubilant as they cart Jimmy and Kevin away in the bum wagon. Their surveillance of six months has finally paid off. The boys are locked up on remand and after the case is tried they both go down for twelve years, with a six on the bottom for Armed Robbery and Possession. Shirley doesn’t keep in touch.
Cessnock Prison is packed. There are three of us squashed into a two-out cell. My cell mates greet me as I enter my new home by pointing at the mattress on the floor. “Tough luck mate. First in best dressed. I’m Eddie,” the Asian fellow introduces himself. “There’s no space for personal belongings. Just chuck your stuff in the corner.”

“G’day Eddie, I’m Kevin.” We shake hands. I know Frank, who’s lying on the bottom bunk, from my last stint. We’re not great friends and he nods in my direction and then turns his face to the wall.

We can’t move without getting into each other’s faces. We’re locked in most of the time because there aren’t enough screws to control us. The best they seem to be able to manage is to come in and give us all a flogging when the brawls get out of control. Apparently it’s the same state-wide. I was shooting the breeze with one of the screws and he reckons there’s been a huge increase in the prison population since 1970. There must be a hell of a lot of us bad bastards, when you take into consideration the ones who don’t get caught.

Riots are commonplace now. We’re all looking forward to the big one the fellers have planned for Bathurst. I get wind of what’s going to happen through the grapevine. By this stage we have running water and toilets in our cells. To communicate with our mates when we’re locked in is a simple matter of pushing the water out of the toilet and using the pipes to conduct our conversations. I hear that at Bathurst the inmates are stealing petrol from supply vehicles delivering to the prison. This has been happening for months and the screws have only recently twigged to the rort. On a warm Sunday in February 1974 all hell breaks loose. The prisoners set fire
to the buildings with mattresses and clothing soaked with petrol. The arsonists have a field day.

I almost wish I was there. The thought of the “Red Steed” out of control sends a buzz of adrenalin through my body. I had a close encounter with a burning timber yard when I was eleven and it remains vivid in my memory. The dry timber exploded into fifty-metre-high flames. By the time the fire brigade got there it was too late to save anything. I hid behind a fence to watch. The sense of power was unreal.

There must be well over two hundred prisoners involved in the riots. Police and screws armed with pistols have difficulty controlling the crowd and continue to fire indiscriminately even when the prisoners hold up the white flag of surrender. I suppose the screws think that they’ll get a few of the bastards while they have a free rein. Eleven of the prisoners are wounded by gunfire. Obviously the screws aren’t happy with their quota because in total, fifty prisoners are injured, thirty-nine of the injuries inflicted by the screws in beatings during or after the riots. These events filter through the system and most of us become aware of them eventually.

The gossip was that cost of repairs to the gaol exceeded 10 million dollars. Any of us with half a brain were aware of the resultant Nagel Royal Commission in 1976 which criticised the ugliest aspects of the system and made a huge number of specific recommendations, the most famous being, “incarceration as a last resort.”

It takes a few years to initiate the new rulings; eventually prisoners are allowed to have televisions and the spend goes up on buy-ups. Tea and toast are now supplied along with a hot breakfast. The weevils are still present in the mush but this protein content is now supplemented with bacon, sausages and powdered egg.

I personally notice a huge improvement in our conditions. I have a one-out cell and we’re allowed posters on the walls of our cells and I’m granted permission to
keep fish in a tank. This becomes a much sought after hobby and guppies are particularly popular. Those little creatures will nibble on just about anything.

Utopia doesn’t last forever. Before the commission, the screws had enjoyed complete power over us inmates. Even when what they were doing was blatantly illegal, they were immune to the laws of the country. We had a champion in one of the Commissioners, Professor Tony Vinson, who organised an inquiry into some of the worst incidents. The public inquiry resulted in the edict that the Law should apply equally to all, including correctional officers. The screws weren’t happy with the result, a loss of power, and industrial action in the form of strikes became common. Four years on, with the screws out on strike we were back to being locked down 24/7 and prison conditions were as bad as ever.

I have two years to go before my release date and I’m shanghaied to Goulburn because the Governor from Cessnock takes a dislike to me. He suspects me, and rightly so, of being party to the prawn episode. The craving for seafood becomes overwhelming when you’ve gone without for years. Word got round that the officers were planning curried prawns and rice for their evening meal. The temptation was too great and the plumbers, electricians and painters, all prisoners, banded together and raided the officer’s mess of a considerable quantity of prawns. They left enough to flavour the curry-and-rice meal planned for the officers and I don’t think that anyone starved. Evidence of those prawns was discovered in many of the unit’s refrigerators and reprisals were heavy.

I hate the cold and in a Goulburn winter the temperature drops down to below -5 degrees. We’re allocated one flimsy tracksuit for day wear. I get caught wearing my pyjamas under mine to the early morning muster and am rewarded with three months segro.
After I’m released from segro I get together with Tommy, Pedro and Blue. The four of us plan to go over the wall. It takes some planning. Jake, a weedy little fellow who has a job in the plumber’s shop, procures a hacksaw blade for us from the works department. He’s too worried for his life not to follow through with our request. I suppose he heard the gossip going around that I’m one of the two white guys who stabbed the “Black Rapist” to death in the yard last week. There was a lot of media attention when he was found guilty of raping nurses in the Sydney eastern suburbs so we all knew he was a weak cunt. He should have been on protection but the screws set him up on purpose. They knew he wouldn’t be safe in mainstream. We may be criminals but we don’t like scum of that calibre living among us.

Suicides, slashing-up and murder are common in prison, so Jake had a credible reason to comply with our demands. The thing about murder in prison is that there may be plenty of witnesses but not many of them are willing to come out in the open and report to the authorities. They tend toward releasing information in a sneaky manner, where it’s difficult to know who’s been talking.

On Saturday night the screws are on strike again. We’re not locked into our cells as usual. The police have taken over our surveillance and, not familiar with the routine, they don’t know that our wing, which houses mainly farm hands, is supposed to be locked down at night. I’m nervous but I know we can take advantage of the situation. I keep a watchful eye on events as they pan out in our favour.

The wallopers are doing circuits of the perimeter of the compound in their van, the lights arcing across the fence as they drive past. I’m lucky my cell’s on the first floor. The lights move ahead. My heart is in my throat as I decide the time’s right and I put all my energy into cutting the bars on the window with the hacksaw blade. The blade is noisier than I expected and it seems to take forever to cut through the last bar.
As soon as the police van passes our area we’re out of the window and making a run for it across the yard towards the high fence topped with barbed wire which looms ahead. I climb up and rip my legs on the wire as I throw myself over. I’m oblivious to the pain. We head off through the scrub with no consensus as to what we’ll do next.

Quite a few inmates knew of our plans to boot-off and we must have got a few of them off-side. Maybe Jake didn’t appreciate us standing over him for the hacksaw blade. As the sun rose on our first morning of freedom the police only had to glance up at our cell block to know we’d gone. I heard many months later that someone had hung a white sheet with the words “THEY’VE ESCAPED” from the window. Even with this warning the police failed to catch up with us as we ran through the bush.

My sole preparation for survival on the outside is a straight razor I’d stolen from the barber shop and a contact phone number. It’s bloody cold and after the first day of walking we’re thirsty and hungry. We come across some sheep in a paddock. I don’t have to say anything; I can see the look in Pedro’s eyes as we take our places and scramble to corner one of the sheep. I slit its throat and cut its leg off. We light a fire and burn off the wool before we singe the meat. It’s not the best roast lamb dinner I’ve had but I wouldn’t swap it for a date with Tom Cruise. After the meal I decide to go my own way. I give Pedro my contact number and leave Tom, Bluey and Pedro to their own devices.

I follow a railway track for a while. I’m parched and the dew on the metal tracks glistens, inviting me to crouch down and lick it off. It’s so cold that my tongue sticks to the tracks. I’m glad I don’t have an audience. I feel like a dope.

I can hear the sound of cars in the distance and head toward the highway. The lights of a truck-stop beckon to me in the distance. I’m wearing a green track-suit. The stains from the sheep’s blood aren’t that obvious in the dark. I decide to sneak up
to the servo and hide in the bushes where I can observe the truckies and hopefully choose a likely looking head to cadge a lift from. An Indian fellow, he looks like he’s in his early thirties, attracts my attention and I stride up to him and ask him for a lift to Sydney. He nods and I jump into the passenger seat. We don’t talk much. He’s just a truck driver minding his own business. I’m enjoying the warmth and comfort of the truck cabin when a road block looms up ahead.

“They’re looking for you, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.” I don’t know why he decides to hide me from the police, whether he likes me, feels sorry for me or is scared, but handing me a jacket he indicates that I should get down on the floor and cover myself. He has a couple of words with the police and we continue on our way.

He drops me off at Liverpool where I locate my mate Cam. He drives me to his place at Minto where he lets me stay while I set myself up. I still have the emotional impetuous of the escape coursing through my veins. It’s an energy that won’t let me slow down. I trust no one. The old cliché, “keep your friends close and your enemy’s closer,” has never been so true. I sleep intermittently at night and stay fully clothed, right down to my runners. I wake at two every morning and wander the neighbourhood on the lookout for any suspicious police activity. When you’re on the run a raid is never far away.

I give Pedro a call and amazingly enough he’s hiding out a couple of streets away in the same suburb. I’ve made plenty of contacts in the nick and have no trouble acquiring some ID to fit my new alias. Out of necessity Pedro and I set to work straight away. We need cash to pay for our addictions and somewhere of our own to stay. It’s back to the night shift, stickups in clubs, a shot of heroin for breakfast and sleep during the day. We make plenty of money and I rent a house and buy a Torana
We use stolen cars for the robberies but it’s handy to have a vehicle of your own.

I’d been out for three months when the manager of one of the clubs we rob is shot and dies. The wallopers don’t catch up with me this time. Pedro and I head off in different directions and the sirens echo through my ears competing with the whir of helicopters overhead. A high fence blocks my way and two pellets hit me in the head as I scramble over it. I keep running and I can hardly believe my luck. They’ve lost me. I huddle under some bushes in a back lane. It’s so quiet.

My time out is only on loan. Eventually an associate dogs on me and I’m rounded up and returned to the clink. I’m found guilty of Robbery Whilst Armed, Escape From Lawful Custody and Murder. I’m thirty-two-years old and I face an “Indefinite Life Sentence.”

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Back at the Central Industrial Prison (Long Bay) the now familiar classification process is about to begin. I’m strip searched, given clothes and shoes and put into the segregation unit. I can be held here for a month or so while I’m assessed by a welfare officer and a psychologist or psychiatrist. Classification begins at 0 in the segro wing and I’m allowed nothing other than two phone calls a week and a $20 buy-up. I need to work my way up to a C1 for the privilege of a $25 buy-up, a kettle, a radio and access to a fridge. I can also apply for association, which means that I can be in the library with one other prisoner. Exercise, association, phone calls and even reading a book are privileges which can be withdrawn as punishment.

I’ve a long way to go before I get back to a medium security prison and during the process I’m repeatedly sent on escort to destinations unknown to me until I reach
them. From Long Bay, I’m sent to Goulburn and then on to Cessnock and I end up in Maitland where I have a long-standing feud with the Governor.

If you’ve ever visited a dog pound you’ll have an idea of how my exercise cage is constructed. There’s a short covered area at the rear and a rectangular wired space at the front where I can pace six steps. My cage is in a row of five. This particular section of the prison is referred to as ‘the tracts’ because the felons housed here have been diagnosed as intractable. Inmates on protection, usually pedophiles, are also held in this area. The cage adjoining mine is larger and four rockies are in there by eight in the morning when I’m escorted to the open air dunny and adjoining shower which take pride of place in the middle of the yard. I perform my ablutions in public.

On the short walk to my cage I acknowledge the rock-spiders next door. “How ya going Red?” I grimace widely at him. “Hi Freddie Funnel Web.” I take a couple of steps towards their cage. “Nice morning for it, Davie Long Legs.” I wave as I approach my own cage and shout, “Come out of yer corner Terry Tarantula.” They don’t seem to appreciate the trouble I’ve gone to in finding these nicknames for them. They chuck their soap at me, through the wire, as the screw jostles me along. I’m not an easy target and they haven’t hit me yet. The screw locks me in for the next three hours.

At nine the bell from the school next door to the prison peals out, calling the children into class. The noise is a deep jangle in my ears. I’ve become particularly sensitive to sound during my time in the tracts. I whisper through the wall, “Hey Freddy Funnel Web, can you and yer mates hear that bell? So close and yet so far. All those little kiddies, yer big perverts, just out of reach.”
“Watch out for yer own family, I’ll be out before you.” Terry snarls from his corner.

The Governor strides past my cage at ten on his daily inspection and I usually give his entourage a bit of a show. “I’m not an animal!” I scream as I cling gorilla-like to the wire. That’s my Monday performance. On Tuesday, I’m a Vietnam Veteran.

“Incoming! Watch out for the gooks!” I shout, my hand shading my eyes as I gaze skywards at imaginary choppers. Wednesday I decide to go surfing. I ride those waves and skim across the water.

The Governor usually pauses for a moment or two to observe my antics. I pretend I’m oblivious to his presence. The bastard may be able to lock up my body; he can’t control my brain. Sensory deprivation only works if you let it.

I’m back in my cell by eleven. The stench of unwashed bodies and urine pervades the small concrete and brick enclosure which is my new home. Graffiti on the walls is a graphic memorial to the desolate existence of previous inmates. Being imprisoned for nineteen hours a day with no natural light in a cold musty cell, which is about the size of your average bathroom, is not conducive to good mental health. I don’t think the Governor had my health in mind when he breached me and gave me three months in segro for what was a small indiscretion on my part. I have history with the Governor at Maitland and it’s not the first time I’ve been unfairly confined.

It’s very quiet and I’m constantly on the alert for the jingle of keys secured to a lanyard. All my senses are heightened in the still atmosphere. I can smell the residual stink of screws in the air. A whiff of cabbage stewing in the prison kitchen can set my salivary glands watering.

The food here is worse than mainstream tucker. There’s no contact with other prisoners and minimal communication with staff so I can’t rely on old matey to sneak
me any extra. In the morning a carton of milk and a half bowl of mush (porridge), along with the week’s ration of jam and sugar, is pushed through the meal inlet in the cell door. I know how to preserve the milk. A touch of salt stops it from going off. Mush is served twice a day.

I’m starving and its lunch time at last. Not surprising, it’s the “gray death” again. Lumps of left-over shit in runny gray gravy. It smells like mucus.

After three weeks in the tracts, I run out of new scenarios to taunt the Gov. Lying on my bunk, focusing on nothing, a movement catches my eye. Not sure what it is I get up and turn on the light. Up in the corner of the cell, near the ceiling, is a spider building a web. I’m fascinated. I’ve had no contact with a life form for weeks, unless you regard the minimal interaction I have with the screws and the rockies. Compared to them, a spider has the social graces of a debutant. He’s large and grey with unusual markings on his back. My knowledge of arachnids is limited and this one might be venomous, but at least it doesn’t hunt down small children for sex. I feel an incredible connection with it as we’re both confined to isolation. I decide to name him Racky and I’m sure that when I first speak his name I see him move in acknowledgement.

I wonder what I can feed him and decide a fly would be nice. Flies are hard to come by in segro and it takes me two days to catch one. The thrill I get when I throw the fly into Racky’s web and watch him run down and secure it with fine, silk thread, is unbelievable. When I ask him, “Did you like it Racky?” I’m almost sure he grins at me and his eyes glow.

Maybe I’m a little stir crazy. I lie here and watch Racky do his aerial stunts with his silk rope and he keeps me amused for hours. I know it sounds stupid but I talk to Racky as a means of keeping my sanity. Although I know he can’t understand,
it’s a very therapeutic exercise, even better than taunting the Governor. I catch several cockroaches; we have abundance, but he seems to prefer flies.

My time in segro is finally drawing to an end and I decide to take the spider with me. I pack my cell gear, catch Racky and hide him in my spare shoe.

While preparing to leave the tracts, I overhear Clive and Brenda gossiping in the corridor and my name is mentioned. I’ve good hearing and I’m not averse to eavesdropping, especially when I’m the subject. Clive is one of those old style Pommy screws. The only good quality I can attribute to him is at least he doesn’t whistle. We inherited our penal system from the English but did they also have to lumber us with their whistling gatekeepers?

At least Brenda’s well and truly an Aussie. She’s a new recruit and we were all a bit excited when she started. Screwesses are far and few between. Unfortunately she fits the stereotype. Part of the job description must be that they’re either butch or plain ugly. The boys refer to Brenda as Kanga. She has such a large arse that the fellers reckon she has a kangaroo tail tucked away in her pants.

“We’re getting rid of Sullivan today, the shifty little ferret. He looks harmless enough but don’t trust him. It goes without saying, don’t trust any of them.” That’s Clive, postulating for Kanga’s benefit.

Kanga says “Yeah. Why’s that?”

“It’s not something you’d know about. Intel have connected him to some nasty subterfuge here at Maitland.”

“How old’s Kevin? He looks too young to earn that sort of reputation.”

“They all look young when you get to my age. He’s in his thirties. Don’t let that boyish grin fool you.”

“Why’s he doing time in solitary? When I asked him he told me he had
committed a small indiscretion.”

“Don’t bother asking the crims your questions. I’ll tell you all you need to know. I organised a ramp on Sullivan’s cell. It’s regulation that we follow up information about the crims concealing contraband. Sullivan has a reputation for enjoying a puff of the hooch and there’s a rumour that he conceals a shiv on his body.” He pauses to clear his throat. The cough echoes down the empty corridor. “We didn’t find anything during the ramp. He’s a sneaky bastard. He took a swipe at me during the ramp and I had him charged with Assault on an Officer.”

“Geez, were you hurt?”

“I’ll survive. Come on, the sooner we pack him up and get him out of here the sooner we can have a break. Don’t worry, he’ll be back.”

“See ya Clive.” That screw’s got his head so far up his arse he can’t see the light of day. He didn’t organise a ramp. It was a mundane cell inspection. I was just sitting quietly on my bunk when Clive walked by glancing into each cell he passed. He noticed a sheet on the end of my bed and came in and grabbed hold of it. I protested and took hold of a corner. He had a firm grip so I said, “You win,” and let go. He exited the cell on his arse.

In C Wing not much has changed. The place still has its complement of gooses, both in uniform and out. A screw shows me to my cell. I release Racky. I wish he could find freedom in a dewy garden but you’d be hard put finding a dandelion struggling to grow through a crack in the concrete in this place. I’m free to catch up on who’s in the compound and cadge myself a smoke. I shoot the breeze with a couple of mates. Keeping up with the gossip can be a matter of life and death.

I don’t have time to become too familiar with my new surroundings. The Governor calls me up and gives me a choice of spending another three months in

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segro at his prison or being transferred to the new Parklea prison. Is he kidding? What a choice! I know why he has given me the opportunity and it’s not out of altruism. He doesn’t want me at Maitland unless I’m well and truly secure in the tracts.

When he was the Governor at Grafton his sadistic practices came to light in the Royal Commission. Historically, Grafton has been the home to the State’s incorrigibles since 1943. Prisoners were sent to Grafton where the repressive regime was encouraged to control criminals who were deemed incapable of rehabilitation. This particular governor relished his job and was renowned for his innovative methods of torture. He ordered inmates to be spreadeagled and tied to a wall where they were flogged and left as an example. Deaths were not uncommon. The punishment was administered for misdemeanours such as looking at an officer. It was one of the Governor’s rules that prisoners always keep their heads down and eyes to the ground.

I was in Long Bay at the time and a friend of the headman in the Prisoner’s Action Group. He needed someone to corroborate evidence against the Governor of Grafton. You can’t use Royal Commission evidence in a normal court so we tried to have it heard in a sneaky manner. I found myself in court with the opportunity to verbal the Governor. Not many crims. get a chance like this for revenge. It obviously put the wind up him.

Naturally I choose Parklea. It’s based on a new model of prisoner management where twenty-four inmates live in each unit. There is less supervision as one or two screws can keep an eye on us from their protected “fish bowl” in each unit. They turn a blind eye, not bothering to intervene if there’s a scrap. This doesn’t cause too much of a problem because they’ve grouped us recalcitrants together and most of us know each other through our time in the other state prisons.
We have our own kitchen and are provided with ingredients. There’s a cook and an assistant cook. The cook is paid $15.00 a week and the rest of us get $12.00 for our contribution to the running of the unit. We all have our assigned jobs such as washing up and being the sweeper. If you can’t find yourself a job they ship you off to Goulburn or one of the other less desirable prisons where you can twiddle your thumbs away for nix. I get a chance to try out my culinary skills on Friday night. Some of the fellers prepare separate concoctions from ingredients they purchase on the buy up. The Lebs make yoghurt and have given me some good tips on how to spice up our food. A mix of yoghurt, tahini, garlic and lemon juice is a great accompaniment to our meal.

Compared to the old days, there’s a wealth of ingredients including condiments like chilli powder. Friday night’s tea is traditionally fish. I examine my ingredients and find frozen fish fillets (probably shark), salt, pepper, chilli powder and honey. I don’t reckon this chilli powder is going to go over with the boys — besides I can think of a better use for it. A job for the sweeper; a quick smear around the toilet seat in the screws’ toilets. They won’t even notice it with those black toilet seats.

I brush each fish with a little honey, sprinkle with salt and wrap it in newspaper in individual parcels. The parcels are dampened with water and put into a moderate oven. When the paper is dried, the fish is cooked and ready. It’s very tasty compared with how Johnno, our regular cook, normally does it in that rancid oil.

The fellers usually appreciate their Friday night supper. We eat in the dining room, twelve of us on each side of the table. It’s a relaxed atmosphere as the screws are usually up in their ‘fish bowl’ and supervision is minimal. We talk about whether there is any pot available and if so, who has it and what’s on after tea. We’re allowed into each other’s cells and a good meal can be followed by a sociable evening. It’s not
lock down until nine. Unlike Parramatta, Long Bay, Bathurst and Goulburn, where we eat in our cells, the sweeper isn’t impatient for our plates so that he can complete his cleaning up. I’ve learnt to polish off my meal in record time or have it taken away from me by a belligerent sweeper standing over me. Believe me, it’s a difficult habit to break and I can still spend ages in preparation of a meal only to gulp the food down in minutes. You can’t blame the sweeper. He has to finish his work. Who knows, he may have a really good book waiting to be read. I’ve been in the same situation myself. I’ve done a surprising amount of reading over the years and have found it one of the best ways to forget about my whereabouts and pass the time. I’ve even read the Bible a number of times. I haven’t been converted yet.

Not surprisingly there were repercussions for my innovative use of some of the ingredients, and chilli powder and pepper were withdrawn from our supplies. The general consensus was that it was worth it to see the puzzled and uncomfortable look on the screw’s dial for the rest of the shift.

Prisoners aren’t the only ones shipped all over the state. The screws do their share of travelling for the sake of job promotion and experience. Kanga seems to be following me around the prisons and is now here at Parklea. I’m tired out after working a hard day in the fields. A marrow under my arm, I’m heading home at dusk to the seclusion of my cell when I notice Kanga waiting in the shadows.

“Like to introduce me to your girlfriend, Kevin?” she enquires, nodding in the direction of the marrow. Brenda’s a good old girl however she’s turned caustic since she found out why we nicknamed her Kanga. She had thought it was a term of endearment. I glance over my shoulder and notice a few of my mates scurrying by with their marrows. For the romantically challenged, and I suppose you could categorise us thus, the marrows represent a good fuck. I just warm it to room
temperature, calculate what size aperture I need for a snug fit, turn the light off and root it.

“Yeah, hi Kanga. This is Melanie. Not jealous are you?”

Conjugal visits are not one of the privileges allocated in Australian prisons. All the same you would be surprised at what some couples achieve on a non-conjugal visit. Wearing short culottes or an even shorter skirt, fresh-faced young girls manage to arrange their seating, on their boyfriend’s lap, to the purpose of either delivering contraband or having sex. Prison visit conceptions are not rare. The presence in the visiting area of young children, mums and dads and clergy, never mind the scrutiny of officers on duty, does not deter. One of my mates has three kids, all under the age of five years and he’s serving an eight-year lag.

I arrange to have female visitors through my mates. There’s no shortage of girls out there and they are willing to bring drugs in. I haven’t felt attracted to any of these women. They take the risk of being banned from visits, and charged for bringing in contraband, for a number of reasons. A lot of them are doing it for the money. They bring in the drugs and money is mysteriously deposited in a bank account for them. A few enjoy the thrill of going into a prison and consorting with violent offenders; prison groupies, I call them. Some girls do it out of love, as a favour for a boyfriend or brother, or they may be blackmailed and threatened by a greedy or desperate partner who is in debt through his addiction. It’s not unusual to find a number of family members, fathers and sons, brothers, in prison at the same time. Crime can be a family occupation like any other business venture.
ON THE RUN

Ryan Neal has been locked away for thirty years. He’s an armed robber and drug dealer who is serving life for murder. Ryan is interested in Natalie, the new parole officer. He has a sharp eye for detail, and, checking out Natalie’s car, has taken note of the Queensland number plate, BCI 579. He reckons the BCI stands for Bureau of Criminal Investigation (it doesn’t). Ryan’s deduction is not a sign of paranoia; it’s more to do with the fact that he lives in an environment where it pays to be careful.

There are few women to gossip about in prison and Ryan’s decision, that Natalie may be more than your average parole officer, makes for a good story.

While Natalie is unaware of Ryan and his surveillance of her, he has the advantage of already knowing that he’s on her case list. The inmates generally know what’s going on before the staff realise. Prison is their whole life.

Ryan’s hazel eyes gleam through the bars of a window on the second floor of a cell block Natalie passes on the way to her office. In the distance he can see men walking the perimeter of the prison, huddling in small clusters and tending to the gardens. Stocks and carnations perfume the crisp morning air. Ryan nudges his mate Alfie, “Hey, she’s talking to old Jock,” he says.

Natalie is smiling at an elderly inmate who has ceased his weeding to offer her a pink carnation. She knows that it’s a prison rule; accept nothing and she hesitates before tucking the bloom into the handle of her briefcase.

“I’d like ta give her more than a bloody flower, look at the arse on the bitch,” says Alfie. “She’s begging for it.”

Ryan winces. He’s been attracted to Natalie since that first morning when she pulled into the visitor’s car park, and, wide-eyed, walked the gauntlet to the Assistant
Superintendent’s Office. Although she’s a dignified-looking woman she seems approachable. Sensing her fragility, Ryan’s biding his time before his first meeting with her. He would be amused to learn her history.

Natalie has run away, to a prison. Through a telephone interview she earned the position of part-time parole officer at a rural correctional centre. With trepidation, she packed a bag of clothes into her prize possession, a two-cylinder Sherpa, and began her journey down the New England Highway. Never having driven further south than Brisbane, and rarely at night, the semi-trailers careening past in the early hours of the stormy morning appear to her like modern-day dragons. Truck drivers, high on amphetamines, leave their lights on high beam, blinding her. They douse her vehicle with cascades of water as she struggles to keep it on the road. “Bugger off!” Natalie shouts at the cowboy tailgating the Sherpa as it crawls along the dark unfamiliar highway.

The “fight or flight” syndrome has kicked in and the accompanying rush of adrenaline results in Natalie being impervious to that other beast, grief, hounding her down the freeway, ready to pounce when it senses any weakness in her. There are sleet and snow at Armidale. Yellow icy sheets are whipped by driving winds across the windscreen. Shaking with cold, Natalie listens to local stations as she passes through towns and villages, the Country and Western songs on her tinny radio depressingly appropriate.

As evening approaches, she reaches the township and her destination, the Nurse’s Home. Her new manager has booked her in through an e-mail and explained some basic information about her accommodation. He expects it to be a temporary stay as the days when nurses lived at the home are over and public servants, council workers and occasional drifters stay there now.
She is nearly bowled over by the familiar stale odour of cheap antiseptic, dust and desolation. It takes her back to how lost and homesick she felt when she left home at seventeen to start a nursing career. At the time she was saved from the doldrums of depression by a girl with lurid pink hair. Her name was Lola. “Call me Pinkie,” Lola introduced herself to Natalie. “You’re not from Brisbane, are you?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t think so. You look a bit lost. So where do you come from?”

“Cherbourg. It’s north-west of here.”

“Is it a mission?” Pinkie asks in her forthright manner.

“Sort of. It’s way out in the country and there’s not much to do there but I’ve got a kid living with Mum and Dad so I miss the place.”

Lola takes this information in her stride. She grabs Natalie by the hand. “Want to share a room?”

“Thanks, I’d love to. I’ll be away most weekends catching up with Matilda.”

“Wow, it’s a girl, maybe you could bring her down here sometime.”

“Probably, when she’s older.”

Lola wore her starched uniform belt low on her hips and her winged cap pinned to the back of her head. The rules in the nursing profession were strict and Pinky was a rebel. She was late for work one time too many and sacked within three months. Natalie finished her training and then, motivated by the urge to do something about the shocking violence in Cherbourg, made a switch to the part time study of a Bachelor of Criminology. Matilda came to Brisbane and Natalie found work as a social worker at a Community Correctional Centre, structured for the rehabilitation of indigenous men.
Pinkie is a distant memory as Natalie dumps her suitcase in the corridor at the base of a steep flight of stairs. Voices carry in the still air and she follows them to the kitchen. A couple of girls look towards the door, surprised to see her. A short plump one has dimples in her round pink cheeks as she smiles a welcome. “I’m Pam and this is Josie,” she says. “You’re new? How long are you staying?”

“Hi, I’m Nat. I don’t know how long I’ll be here. My boss booked me in. I’ve a job out at the prison.”

They give a cursory explanation of how the kitchen space is shared. The two large fridges are full with remnants of past meals. The food in the freezer is sealed with ice. It’s obvious that the itinerant boarders don’t clean them out or defrost.

Pam and Josie continue discussing their Weight Watcher’s plan. Pam’s getting married in a couple of months and is determined to lose weight before the wedding. Josie doesn’t look like she needs to diet. She’s wearing a pair of miniscule white shorts and has her hair tied back in an untidy bun. They’re physio-students acquiring work experience at the local hospital.

Natalie goes to her room. It has a single bed, a built-in wardrobe, dressing table, a chair and a small table. Exhausted, she lies back on the pastel chenille bedspread feeling relieved to have made the distance. Natalie dozes off to sleep. She wakes at one, momentarily disorientated by the unfamiliar surroundings. It’s cosy tucked up in bed but she’s busting to go to the toilet. Pulling on Ugg boots, she shuffles down the corridor listening for sounds in the building. It’s very quiet. Back in bed she drifts in and out of sleep. Bad dreams flit behind her eyelids.

In the morning Natalie gathers soap, towel and shampoo for her trip to the communal bathroom. The toilets and showers are situated in the same room and there are no separate facilities for men and women. As she heads for the shower, a toilet
door slams behind her followed by a guttural moan. A pink plastic shower curtain is the only barrier between Natalie and prying eyes as she waits for the icy water to warm up. When she emerges from the shower, the toilet offender is standing at the basin combing his thin ginger hair back from his receding forehead. He catches her eye in the mirror, and turning, extends his hand. “G’day, I’m Pete.”

She nods in his direction and makes a quick exit.

With a few days before she starts at the prison, Natalie’s determined to find somewhere else to live. She walks into town and has coffee and a croissant at the bakery and then calls into the local real estate agent to enquire about rentals. The agent is a large patronising man. A beer-belly protrudes over his low-slung belt. He looms over her.

He has nothing on his books. He reminds Natalie that this is a country mining town and rental accommodation is not always available. As a last resort she asks, “Do you organise share accommodation?”

“Look my darlin’, if you go for a drink at the Washington over the road, you’ll have offers of share accommodation before you know it.”

Natalie leaves the office feeling worthless. She reflects on how she is dressed. Are her low slung jeans and T-shirt too casual? Does she look like the type of person who would pick up a stranger in a public bar and take the risk of hooking up with him? She’s a parole officer, not a prostitute. She walks down the wide, hostile, unfamiliar street to the newsagent and buys the local paper to scour the Share Accommodation column.

There are three options, all of them sharing with a male. She chooses a property fifteen kilometres out of town and phones to arrange a meeting that afternoon.
The corrugated road winds past old mining sites and small dairy farms. The house proves to be small and neglected. She drives down a rutted track and parks her car under a tree. Two large German Shepherd dogs appear. At the sound of their barking, a man with unruly dark hair and a ruddy complexion emerges from the veranda door. He asks her what she wants, then introduces himself as Geoff.

“You did say you’re the new parole officer out at the prison? I was expecting someone a bit, umm, older.”

“Yeah! I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m Nat.” She extends her hand, which Geoff ignores. He places his arm around her shoulder and explains that the dogs are harmless. He seems kind. They go inside where he shows her through the house.

“There’s no bathtub and we’ll be using bore water as the tanks are low,” he explains.

When Natalie visits her new hairdresser, Kerry, a couple of weeks later and complains to her about having to wash her hair in bore water the young woman shrieks in horror, “She’s on bore! Lisa, come and check this out.” Lisa abandons her job of sweeping up hair and hurries over. The two women discuss conditioning treatments as they pick over Natalie’s dry lifeless strands of hair. Country hairdressers take their work seriously and through circumstance are competitive.

When Natalie checked the local phone directory there were eleven listings for hairdressers. The local women are fastidious when it comes to their grooming. “You simply cannot wash your hair in bore water. It’s hard because it’s laden with minerals, like salt,” Kerry lectures. “We’ll make a weekly appointment for a shampoo and blow dry. It’s worth the twenty dollars.”

Natalie reluctantly agrees.
A double bed with a carved bed head dominates the space in the room Geoff has allotted Natalie. “I found this cupboard out in the back shed.” Geoff nods towards the lowboy. “You can put your clothes in there. When do you plan to move in?”

He doesn’t look like an axe murderer, not that you can tell by appearances. One of the sweetest-looking men Natalie worked with in Brisbane at the Community Correctional Centre was found guilty of decapitating his wife while on weekend leave. Statistically, a large percentage of men are opportunistic rapists but this place is no more dangerous than the Nurse’s Home really, there is only one potential rapist here compared to who knows how many drifters.

“If it’s ok with you I’ll move in on Sunday,” Natalie says. Geoff looks relieved to have found a tenant and shakes her hand when she leaves.

On Sunday evening, Natalie unpacks after cleaning most of the mould out of her makeshift wardrobe with a rag dipped in Pine-O-Cleen. The house is full of other people’s lives and expectations. She lies on the large bumpy fibre mattress. The ceiling, once white, is mottled with age and the residue of many flies. The walls are roughly painted in an ugly green and the curtains are acceptable only in that they provide privacy. From the window she can see up the driveway to the mountains in the distance. Natalie is overcome by a terrible loneliness. She’s fled hundreds of kilometres to find grief waiting for her. She is filled with the guilt experienced by most mothers who out-live their child.

Although she was an easy child to live with at home, Matilda didn’t adjust well to the school regime and Natalie changed her school a number of times as she kept walking out of class. The principals usually found this behaviour unacceptable. Matilda retained her links with Cherbourg. She spent school holidays with her
grandparents and her friends in Brisbane were predominantly related to kin from Cherbourg.

Matilda was an exceptionally pretty girl however, for the last two years of her life, she dressed as a boy. She pulled her curly hair into a tight knob and wore an American baseball cap low over her long-lashed eyes. She refused to wear a dress, no matter what the occasion, and even wore trousers when she was bridesmaid at her auntie’s wedding.

Natalie and Matilda used to walk everywhere. There were some areas in Brisbane that Matilda refused to go. She was frightened. She told Natalie, “I’m not going across that bridge Mum. The sisters have warned me they’re going to chuck me off it.”

“Don’t be silly, Mattie. I’m with you. You’re safe with me,” was Natalie’s reply.

When Matilda was fifteen years old she was with some teenagers and she either fell or was pushed from the seventh floor of an inner-city car park building. A security man found her at two when he was doing his early morning rounds. He threw a bucket of cold water on her to wake her up, and then called an ambulance when he couldn’t revive her. She died of internal injuries before she arrived at the hospital. The police investigations were futile. The coroner eventually ruled “Death by Suspicious Circumstance.”

Left with only memories of her daughter, Natalie attempted to escape the pain of loss by running away. Although she’s read through it dozens of times, tonight Natalie takes out Mattie’s notebook. The cardboard cover is blue-and-white striped. Printed on the front is “Matilda Jackson, Keep Out, Top Secret.” She has beautiful round writing. Natalie sifts through the fragments of writing.
When I first met and got with Mel Cobbs:

Mel asked ‘can I see you.’ I said, ‘I can’t because I’ll get my head bashed in. I’ve got too many people after me as it is and I don’t want another person added to my list.’

Mel says, ‘Me and Jackie are finished!’ and I answer, ‘I know, but even though those Cherbourg girls are finished with their man they still go straight for the person that he’s going with.’

Tabbita asked me over and when I got to her house she said, ‘Mel’s waiting for you in the shed.’

I went out and pushed the door open and it was pitch dark in there. Mel said, ‘grab my hand,’ and I did, and tripped over, and fell on to a mattress on top of him. I go ‘Ow’ and Mel goes, ‘Are you all right?’ I told him I’m alright and climbed off him and lay down beside him. After a while he asked ‘How old are you?’

I go, ‘thirteen, why?’ He goes, ‘You’ve got big boobs for a thirteen year old,’ and I thought ‘oh thanks a lot’ and he said really loudly ‘HAVE YOU BEEN BROKEN IN YET?’ I said ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ He goes, ‘Are you a virgin?’ I go: ‘Isn’t that a bit of a personal question?’ After that we both took our hats off and he started kissing me.

Each foolscap page is covered with Matilda’s writing. She has two pages at the back of the book with lists of possible names to call her baby if she ever had one. Natalie gave the book to the police. They let her have it back. Natalie falls asleep with the book clasped to her chest.

Geoff didn’t warn Natalie that she wouldn’t need an alarm clock. At five-thirty a herd of calves, right outside the window, are making a horrible racket. ‘They’re probably bawling to be fed,’ Natalie decides. ‘Oh, well, plenty of time to get ready for
work. ’ Dressed in her best suit, she drives to the prison listening to Christine Anu sing “My Island Home.” She appreciates the change from Country and Western.

She travels a short distance down the New England Highway and takes a left turn through a railway crossing onto the unsealed road, which leads to buildings nestled among the rolling hills. God’s Country the locals call it. A tall wire fence mars the tranquillity of the scene.

Natalie is accustomed to working with male offenders. She enjoyed providing pre-release programs, interviewing the men and report writing at the Community Correctional Centre. She has never been inside a closed prison. When she applied for the job as parole officer she was expecting the work to be in the community. She is not worried about the inmates so much as about her capacity to perform the job within the prison regulations. She has been told that the men here are at varying stages of their sentences. Their offences cover the spectrum from white collar crime, stealing and armed robbery through to arson, rape and murder. They form a similar cross-section of the community to the men she worked with in Brisbane, who were generally polite and amenable. She realised back then that not all the bad men are locked up, only those who make the mistake of getting caught. A disproportionate number of people with psychiatric and mental disorders and from disadvantaged backgrounds are incarcerated.

Natalie has found that although she thinks she knows how to perform a task, staff in a new job invariably do it differently. It pays to be flexible. As a parole officer, she will be interviewing inmates, writing reports, making referrals and attending the Parole Board. Team work was stressed as being extremely important during her interview, so she is hoping to get on well with the full-time parole officer.
When she reaches the prison, she’s feeling nervous and conspicuous so she parks in the first available place she sees. It happens to be in the visits area. Jane, the full-time parole officer, is waiting for her in the office they will be sharing. She looked friendly enough until she opened her mouth. “Where’d you park your car? I hope it’s not in the visits area.” The officer on the gate must have phoned through.

“Um, Hi, I’m Natalie. Yes, I did park it in the visits area.”

“That was really stupid. We have our own parking spaces. You’d better go and move it.”

_Bugger off._ Natalie would like to tell her exactly where to shove her car. Instead she says, “I don’t think there’ll be a problem with leaving my car where it is until my lunch break. I’ll move it then.” Jane’s a bully and Natalie might as well let her know from the start that she is not a push-over.

“Yeah, whatever. It’s your car. Don’t blame me if one of the crims damages it on his way out to the farm.” She shrugs and gestures towards a desk facing the door.

“You can sit there. We have to share a computer. I hope you know how to use it. The Correctional Services program is complicated and I won’t have much spare time to help you out.”

_The woman’s obviously a dummy_, Jane thinks. She couldn’t even work out where to park her car. Jane had been hoping for someone more familiar with the system who would be a help rather than a hindrance.

The psychologist Frances takes Natalie under her wing and gives her a tour. The female toilets are tucked away under the wide staircase. Concrete and iron railings dominate the area and the atmosphere is utilitarian and cold. The recreational room is bursting with male Correctional Officers.
As the days pass, Natalie becomes less conscious of the abnormal prison environment, the high fences, the glass observation room and the predominantly male population (a ratio of approximately two hundred men to ten female staff members). Although she struggles with the correctional computer system, she is getting to know her parolees.

Settling in with a cup of tea behind her desk, Natalie admires the view from the second floor. Her window looks out onto the muster area and across to the paddocks, the orchard and the hills in the distance. Jane is early this morning. Natalie has hardly had time to open her mail when she hears her knock and glances up to see wide cornflower-blue eyes blink at her through the glass in the door. Laden down with files and fumbling with her bunch of keys, Jane manoeuvres her ample bottom past Natalie. Jane has a perpetual smile etched on her face, white teeth gleaming through parted lips. Natalie is jealous, she’s sick of strangers in the street telling her to “cheer up”. She can’t help it that her default expression involves pursed lips.

They engage in their morning ritual of friendly-sounding banter. “Look at these;” Jane shoves a pile of Automatic Release Forms under Natalie’s nose, “this is just half of what I have to do this morning.” Jane feels that she has a disproportionately large share of work allotted to her and is not backward in making Natalie aware of this on a daily basis.

“Get on the turps last night, did we?” Natalie is aware that Jane struggles to meet deadlines, often battling a major hangover, the result of partying hard. Natalie has her own problems and suffers from the cocktail of alcohol and sleeping pills she consumes on a regular basis, in an attempt to cope with the stifling grief that robs her of sleep most nights.
Their office is small and cluttered. Jane’s desk and shelves are covered with personal paraphernalia and she has large stashes of lollies in glass jars, which she uses to sweeten up the officers. Inmates, who enter their office for interviews, gaze longingly at the array of chocolate frogs, jelly snakes and liquorice all sorts. Natalie’s aware of their spartan diet and small buy-up allowance and this display irks her. She’s also surprised that Jane gets away with having all this stuff. There are strict contraband rules governing the prison and they apply to officers as well as inmates.

The women argue over who gets to use the computer first. Jane wins. They agree to interview the prisoners separately, which means Natalie will be interviewing in the small, windowless box room. A funny thought occurs to her and her lips twitch as she unlocks the door. When she was a trainee nurse she had gone to a similar room to retrieve a patient’s belongings. He had followed and stole a kiss.

It is classo day and the first time that Natalie has attended one of these meetings. During the classification process, prisoners are assessed and decisions made regarding their future. A man may have put in a request to move to a prison closer to his family, another may be in jeopardy of losing his phone and visit privileges. This happens when an inmate is found guilty of a breach such as Drugs in Urine. Files are examined and the staff make decisions on recommendations. A reduction in classification from C2 to C3 will allow more freedom and better living conditions.

At eleven, Natalie enters the board-room. Seated at the table are May from education, beautiful young Dawn the new psychologist, Frances her senior, and Sandra and Dorrie who are the Drug and Alcohol counsellors.

There are two correctional officers present. Shane is new. He’s young and very good looking. Barry is fair, fat and forty. His face is flushed in anticipation of the role he will play in this morning’s meeting.
The long table has plates of dip, savoury biscuits and rich layered chocolate cake placed at intervals down the centre. Natalie is hungry. Her eyes are fixed on the swirls of creamy chocolate icing. Staff sip on their tea and coffee as files are passed around and given a cursory examination. Natalie tries to concentrate on the detailed sentencing record of inmate Hughes. Two more files are passed along to her and she realises that there isn’t time to give the prison records the required attention. Barry checks out the photo ID of inmate Wright’s sponsor: “Hey look at Ernie Ferret’s ugly sheila. You wouldn’t want one of the pups from that union.”

“She’s better looking than you, Barry,” Natalie says.

The inmates have been summoned through the P.A. system and are lined up outside the door. Jason Wright, a pale thin man swamped by a large green tracksuit, is directed into the room. His offence is “Possess Prohibited Drug” and he is under review because he has requested a transfer to Long Bay Correctional Centre, so that he is more accessible to his family. His wife is pregnant and it is difficult for her to visit, as it means travelling for a couple of hundred kilometres with three kids under five.

Jason looks intimidated and bewildered by the row of judgemental faces in control of his destiny. Barry booms the order.

“Stand at the end of the table Jason and look smart.” The classification team toy with the young man, their behaviour reminiscent of a cat with a mouse. Jason attempts to state his case, “Angie my wife is pregnant and it’s hard for her to visit me up here.” Interrupting the discussion, Dorrie passes the chocolate cake across to Natalie. “Have some. It’s delicious. Jane picked it up from the bakery this morning.”

Natalie glances at Jason, anxiety etched on his face. She has lost her appetite. Eventually a decision on Jason’s future is reached. Barry tells him that he will go on
escort to Long Bay Correctional Centre where it will be easier for his family to visit him. He looks relieved. He leaves. Sandra and Dorrie disagree with the decision. They think he would have a better chance of rehabilitation at the prison farm. A slanging match ensures before the next victim can enter.

Classo drags on until one, leaving Natalie no time for a break, so she eats her Vitaweeets and Vegemite in the office. Jane returns from her lunchtime social tour of the Welfare Unit and the Assistant Superintendent of Industries Unit. She does her best to keep up with the prison gossip and her networking seems to pay off.

They both have paperwork to catch up on. The office is quiet until the sound of a siren fills the air, calling the inmates to the four pm muster. One hundred and fifty men line up for roll call. Some have been waiting alone; others amble towards the assigned area, arms draped across their mate’s shoulder in careless camaraderie.

“Muster’s over! I’m out of here.” Jane starts to bundle files into her briefcase. Natalie waits until the last stragglers have left the area, and then wanders down the stairs to turn in her keys at the Assistant Superintendents Office. The room is packed as officers prepare to change shifts.

Shane, the new young correctional recruit, escorts Natalie on her way out. He is an attractive lad, tall and slim with a boyish face. He looks fresh and clean in his blue uniform. The cool autumn change has resulted in an epidemic of flu among the inmates and Natalie steps carefully; avoiding the large gobs of phlegm insolently hacked up on to the path. Cacophonies of wolf whistles grow louder as they progress towards the gate. The sound emanates from the darkened windows of the two-story cellblock. The source jumps to a group of men standing to one side of the walkway and then to a couple walking the perimeter, further out.
The whistles don’t bother Natalie. She is not their target. She turns to look at Shane. A dark flush suffuses his naturally pale complexion at this public assault on his masculinity.

Natalie places her briefcase in the boot and climbs into her car. She doesn’t notice Ryan, in his green singlet and shorts, as he strolls past on his way back to the compound, after a day working on the farm. He slaps his hand on the roof as she passes through the gates, making her jump with fright. Natalie looks up to see a weathered face grinning at her through the car window. “This could do with a good clean. I’ll do it if you bring it in early in the morning.”

Natalie shakes her head.

“It’s alright Missus, I clean most of the screws cars.”

“Nope, I’ll do it myself. It’s my day off to-morrow.” Natalie accelerates down the bumpy unsealed road leaving a trail of dust.
NEW BEGINNINGS

Unless you have a visitor, or an extra-curricular activity like Alfie, Saturday afternoons in the nick stretch on forever. Alfie’s a compulsive gambler and he is content to spend the time listening to the races and examining the local form. You can be lucky, and I’m not referring to Alfie here, but to Anil, another inmate who shares our cell block. Anil is a personable Fijian Indian with dread locks to his waist. He has visits from his solicitor every Saturday. She fell in love with him when she was reviewing his case. I’ve not been blessed with many regular visitors. The prison farms are too far out for Mum to travel from Sydney. Anil came up with an idea, “Kev, you don’t have to miss out. Give the Sameritans a go.”

“That seems rather extreme. I don’t want to look like a loser.”

“Those charity women do the rounds of the prisons every week. Look at it this way; you’d be better off than Brett.” Brett’s mother visits him. They publicly display their incestuous relationship. Anil reckons he’s seen Brett sucking his mother’s toes. I give my situation some thought. At least I’d be out of the yard and in where the action is happening. I make some arrangements with Father Neville.

“Kevin Sullivan.” I’m summoned over the speaker and I report to the screw on duty. “Your friend’s waiting.”

I’m expecting to see a middle-aged woman; probably fat, with a grey perm and strong Christian beliefs; someone who is inspired to save me from myself. The screw points me in the direction of a table between the canteen and the drink-vending machine. She’s not what I expected and I feel nervous as I approach the young woman. She hasn’t noticed me yet. Her face is obscured by a tangle of red curls.

“G’day,” I slip into the plastic chair across from her.
She jumps up. “Sorry, you gave me a fright. Allan, my supervisor, was supposed to be with me but one of his grandkids was sick and he couldn’t make it.” She is out of breath.

“It’s OK, I’m Kevin.”

“I’m, umm, Emily.” She blushes and fiddles with the broad gold band on her ring finger.

“What’s hubby do?” I say.

“Oh, he’s a truck driver.”

“Got any kids?”

“Three boys.”

She’s a hopeless liar. She’s exhibiting all the signs. She’s tapping her shoe on the floor and touching her face. I’ve learnt a little about body language during my time in here.

“Enough about me,” she says. “What’s it like here? The visits area is nicer than the other places I’ve been to.”

“Yeah, it’s a real holiday camp.”

She picks up on my sarcasm. She looks down at her hands. Her eyelashes are like feather dusters, brushing her soft, pink cheeks. “I’m sorry if I sound flippant. It can’t be too much fun being locked away. I suppose that is the reason I decided to join the Samaritan volunteers who visit the prisons.”

She’s like a sacrificial lamb. Whose idea was it to let her come in here and team her up with a wolf like me? I do my best to make casual chat with her which is difficult under the circumstances. She looks surprised every time I address her by her name.
“I lied,” she eventually confesses. “My name’s Libby and my husband’s a parole officer and my only child is a daughter, who is four. During the induction process we’re told to lie for our own protection in here but I hate it, especially to someone like you.”

We swap some more information; she’s twenty-four and doesn’t have a lot of experience. I know eighteen-year-olds who are more worldly then her. Libby’s parole officer husband isn’t keen on her new interest in visiting the prisons. I don’t blame him. In parole officer jargon, Libby is at risk of being ‘contaminated’ and this would be an embarrassment to Steve, her husband. She told me that he gets together with his mates from the prison at the local pub and they reckon that ‘if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas’.

True enough, we share that idea in here. Prisoners just have a different interpretation of what constitutes a dog.

A siren shrieks and the visit comes to an inevitable end. We agree to write to each other. She turns back to wave as she is passing through the door. I blow her a kiss.

The second life-changing intervention happens when I finally earn a recommendation to the Special Care Unit. The unit is run by a psychiatrist and he provides counselling and self-development programs. I have a great deal of respect for Ira as he can see through all my bullshit. I actually enjoy the group work because I can tell when the other crims are trying to pull the wool over my eyes. I’m a people-watcher and I’ve seen a lot during my time in the nick. It’s a survival strategy to observe, and to be a step ahead, of what’s going on.

One of these groups did prove to be somewhat of a disaster. It was a warm afternoon and Ira decided it would make a nice change for the group to sit out in the
courtyard. George brought his mate’s budgie, Casper, out to enjoy the sun. Casper was scratching around on the ground while we worked though our problems when, out of the blue, a hawk swooped down, grabbed him in its claws and disappeared over the buildings. Kingie, Casper’s owner, came out looking for him. We didn’t have the guts to tell him what happened. He wouldn’t have believed it.

Getting to the stage where I’m accepting some of the rehabilitation strategies has been a long journey. For years I’ve been classified as intractable and not amenable to this process. Ira called me up to go through my old reports. In 1984, my parole officer described me as “taciturn and lacking the openness required for any worthwhile discussion.” The only good thing he had to say about me was that I had “an unusual capacity for sustained effort.” I’ll admit that it has taken masses of discipline to achieve my current status. Giving up heroin was a tremendous effort. Most addicts find this goal unobtainable. If I had remained addicted, I doubt that I would have survived this long and I never would reach my goal of being released.

Ira acknowledges the changes in me and is optimistic that I’m benefiting from the intensive therapy offered at the Special Care Unit, so I expect he will write me a positive report. If I also receive good reports from the Drug and Alcohol counsellors and detention officers, I have some chance of having my Life Sentence redetermined. This is possible under the Sentencing Act of 1989. The object of the act is to ensure that prisoners who have served their minimum term of imprisonment, and who are of good behaviour, may be released on parole for the rest of their sentences.

I’ve used a gram of heroin a day from when I was 22. I’ve continued to use in prison. I realise I have to change and along with heroin, I’ve given up coffee, sugar, salt, meat, tobacco and even pot. I decided that if I’m going to give up heroin, I might
as well give up all the other substances that are contaminating my body. I’ve taken up yoga and meditation.

A man named Aldo Genaro, who teaches Art Therapy in the Drug Unit, is motivating me to continue with the progress I’m making in the Special Care Unit. He’s the most memorable person of my life. I spend many an hour talking with him and I’m amazed and touched by the beauty of his spirit. He had emigrated from Chile and when he first came to Australia he found work at institutions for people with mental disability in Victoria. The conditions were appalling and the emotional sides of these people neglected. He’s told me about the segregation of the sexes and how he tried to change this by fostering interaction between the sexes. The authorities were not happy with these attempts at change and banned him from the institutions. He moved to New South Wales where he taught drama to people with Down syndrome and autism, and his vision came true when he staged a successful production, Madame Butterfly, at the Sydney Opera House. This man is nothing special to look at but he has an inner beauty and he radiates peace. He has a profound effect on me, which is a direct contrast to my inner turmoil and anger.

Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t gone soft. I do, however, have the capacity to appreciate a kind spirited man in the same way as I’d appreciate a fine woman or a vintage wine. It doesn’t make me a paragon. I still worship Satan in favour of Christ.

I continue to make progress with my rehabilitation and I’ve a recommendation for a transfer to Windsor. It’s another step towards release. Prisoners do a lot of travelling; it’s a large part of our lives. Some of the moves are forms of punishment. The last thing a prisoner wants is to go ‘on escort’ to a remote prison. If he’s causing problems to management this is not an unwarranted expectation and has happened to me numerous times. The screws come to collect you at any time of the day or night
and before you know it you’re in the back of a prison van on your way to an unknown destination. It can be very disorientating.

Other moves are a reward and related to changes in classification. I have progressed from a C1 (high security), to a C2 (medium security) and my aim is for a C3 (low security).

* A week or so after I arrive at Windsor, I realise some of the benefits of living on the prison farm: more variety to my diet being one of them. There’s a drought and the dam is reduced to a muddy crater. With the use of an old car tyre, I catch an eel, which I hand over to Rod, who grins broadly as he chucks it over his shoulder and wanders off to prepare it. Rod’s Vietnamese and he’s an expert when it comes to eels, red-bellied black snakes or any other protein-worthy quarry I can catch. A couple of hours later I find Rod working in the shade of a towering eucalyptus. The carcass is nailed to the tree and Rod’s skinning it with pliers. He sections it into cutlets and we eat the white flesh curried with rice. The meal is served with fresh steamed garden weeds tossed in home-made yoghurt, prepared by Mustafa.

My contribution to the meal is a fruity white wine. Personally I don’t imbibe. My drug of choice was hammer, and alcohol just doesn’t do it for me. Heroin is available here at a price; trouble is you can’t always get hold of a clean pick. Back in 1982, feeling desperate, I made the mistake of sharing needles. As a consequence I’m stuck with Hep. C. Lucky I’ve given up the shit as Hep. C is more debilitating if you’re also on the gear.

My mates appreciate a drink and I’m renowned for my brews. The quantity depends on the type of container I can get my hands on and the availability of space to conceal it. To prevent detection and so that it doesn’t explode, if using a cordial bottle
I put a pinhole in the lid and secure a plastic bag over the top. I quarter fill a container with seasonal fruit, or a block of frozen fruit salad from the kitchen, and add sugar and water until the container is at the three quarter level. I add more sugar daily for a fortnight. By this time the fermentation process is well underway. The liquid is strained before serving.

I once made a brew in my pillowcase. I used a plastic garbage bag inside the cover. It would inflate with gas during the day, where it was positioned on my bunk. To any screw walking past and having a quick check of my cell, it looked like a normal pillow. I let the gas out at night.

The best brew I ever made was with a watermelon. The product was strong and clear and we named it White-Lightening. One of the crims was trying to sneak a bottle into the wing when he was caught by a screw and it was confiscated. I heard that the Governor, who had a reputation for not turning down a drop, sampled it and said it was far superior to any other confiscated brew he’d come across.

These brews are particularly popular at Christmas time. When the alcohol content is high, tempers flare and there’s usually a brawl, which livens things up for the festive season.

The best thing about Christmas in the nick is the little present which the Salvation Army provides for us inmates. The cake of soap, bag of lollies, hanky and diary is much appreciated.

The New Year is looking great. I’ve been transferred again, this time to Cessnock. I’ve replaced my old friend Racky with a new pet. Sugar Ray is the champion fighter of Cessnock Correctional Centre. The Stick Insects turn up in spring and they don’t have a long life span. We spend our spare time out in the compound
searching for a good specimen. Some of them are huge and their colour varies from green to brown hues.

Sugar Ray is not particularly large. He’s a good fighter because I have a few tricks up my sleeve that the other managers are not aware of. For one thing, Stick Insects like a drink. I have water available for Sugar every night. Also, we spend some time together on my bunk each evening. I have a hand-mirror and I train Sugar up by allowing him to fight his own reflection. We hold the fights weekly, usually on Saturday afternoon. The winner gets to eat the loser. Sugar is a true champion. He has won twenty-nine consecutive fights. When he finally carks it, I’m going to send him down to the lacquer shop and have him preserved for posterity. Sugar's not going to end up being a meal for any of those losers. They simply don’t have the technique.

Libby will be visiting on a regular basis now that I’m at Cessnock. She’s moving to Newcastle. I feel as if I have progressed to a new stage in my life. The following poem is an expression of my fears and anticipation:

AS TIME GOES BY

The Doppler Effect they call it:
The distortion of sound and light.

When an ambulance car approaches
and the siren expands in the night.

When it passes into the distance
the wail gets quieter fast.

It’s the same with a prisoner’s heartstrings
looking back at the years that have passed:
The past rushes forward to greet me
an eager sweep of years.

The future collapses ahead
crawling sleepily round my fears.

The present, the NOW that is with me
have these forces at work on both sides.

So time grips me tight in her teeth
and shakes her head just in play.

The future must wait for the right time
if I’m to find my way.

O Future! Be kind and support me
it’s forward I have to go.

With myself, my soul and my body
to make of my life a new go.
LIVING LIKE COMMON PEOPLE

Mum’s in hospital - something wrong with her kidneys - and Dad has given my big sister, Amy, the car keys. We’re at the beach house at Cronulla. It’s late. We pad around the empty streets, barefoot, looking for a sign of life. The only place with lights on is the bakery. A young fellow is sitting out the front having a smoke.

“Are you open?” I ask.

“Naw. But hang on.” He goes into the back room and returns, smiling, with a bulging brown paper bag. “Take these.”

We walk a few steps down the street and open the bag. Five iced finger buns. We walk home so we can sit down and eat them with a glass of milk. Amy unlocks the front door and I immediately sense that something is not right in the house. She turns on the light and I go into the bedroom to change into my pyjamas. Someone is under the bed. He pokes his head out. I let out a small squeal. It’s Steve Newell. I’ve seen him around; his family own the convenience store on the corner.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

He has a big soppy grin on his face and his speech is slurred as he explains, “There was a party at the surf club and when it finished a bunch of us were wandering around and I noticed the open window and climbed in so that I could have a sleep.”

I look over at the gaping window that’s open to the street and feel a pang of guilt. Dad would have a fit if he knew we left the house without locking everything. Steve doesn’t seem to be at all concerned that he’s been caught in an unlawful act. As he walks into the kitchen he pulls a flat-bottle of Bundaberg rum out of his jacket pocket. “Got any Coke?” he asks. Of course we’ve got Coke. I sit opposite him sipping my drink. I’m in love.
Love is never equal. I was fourteen and Steve was eighteen when I developed a huge crush on him. Being painfully shy, it was pure luck if I managed to utter a sentence when I was in his company. I was always surprised when he asked me out, which wasn’t very often. Plenty of girls liked him: he was a top board surfer. Weekends were spent at the beach, chasing the perfect wave. I tried my hardest to fit in with his friends; but it was difficult to compete with Lisa, who swam out among the boys, her long blonde straight hair a halo for her even-featured face as she fearlessly rode the waves. I’m a slightly built redhead and my complexion turns crimson if it’s exposed to even the faintest ray of sun. I emerged from the surf with red eyes and a shiny nose, swiping at the frizzy strands of hair clinging to my face and attempting to extricate the clumps of sand trapped in the crotch of my bathers.

As the years went by we continued to see each other from time to time and eventually Steve decided I was the right girl for him, probably because I was still a virgin. Steve asked my dad for my hand in marriage and we were engaged, and a year later married. By the time we were married I wasn’t a virgin anymore and I was pregnant.

I found it difficult to keep the relationship romantic as my stomach grew and the rest of me seemed to shrink. I still loved Steve, more than he loved me.

I’ve heard the saying that “she or he who loves most is the loser.” At the time I didn’t realise that it was a competition.

As the wage earner Steve made all the family decisions. I devoted myself to the role of wife, and then of mother after the birth of Sophie. I love cooking and gardening and even housework. I was close to my mum. We spoke on the phone every day and then she went and died. She never fully recovered from that kidney problem. I lost my confidante and role model.
Steve’s a workaholic. He started patronising me. I missed the fun we had before he started acting like my dad. With Sophie in day care I decided to look for voluntary work in the same area that Steve works, so that we would have more in common. I applied for a position and, after an interview and some training; I was accepted as a visitor to the prisons.

I loved the freedom of jumping on a bus with a bunch of like-minded women and travelling around the state visiting inmates who were happy to talk to me. I felt appreciated and accepted. Steve wasn’t happy. He discussed my new activities with some of his workmates and decided that it was a conflict of interest for him, as a parole officer, to have a wife working as a volunteer in the prisons.

A couple of months after I started work in the prisons, Steve was late home. On Friday nights he drinks with the boys from work, so I don’t expect him until after eleven. I kept his dinner warm on a plate over a saucepan of simmering water. When I heard the front door open, I put the plate on the table and he walked in, sat down and started to eat, in silence. When he was finished I was washing the dishes and chattering away as I usually do in the face of his silence.

“I want you to give it up,” he says out of the blue.

“But…”

“They’re not good men who’ve just made a mistake.”

“I know that.” I place a dish heavily on the bench.

“You’re leaving yourself open to manipulation and you’re compromising me.”

His tone is cold.

“I realise that they’ve done some bad things. I don’t condone that.”

Steve pushes his chair back and says, “I’m going to bed. Try to come to your senses by the morning.”
I stay up and watch a bit of TV until I can hear him snoring. It doesn’t usually take long for him to pass out after he has been drinking.

I don’t think that my work is compromising to anyone. We’re all capable of doing things that can tip the balance towards good or bad, and I’m confident that I’m striving towards the good. I know that some people need to be locked up for the safety of the community, but I also share the sentiments Angelina Jolie has tattooed on her body: “Say a prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages.” There are all sorts of ways that we can lose our freedom: being locked up is only one of them. I know that, in a manner, I’m caged by my relationship with Steve. I feel that he’s withdrawing his approval not for what I’m doing but because I’m his wife. He’s right about me not having a lot of experience, but I know I don’t want to be thrashing around in a stifling relationship, created by my own ineffectual personality and Steve’s urge to dominate me. We only have one life, and it’s short, and I want to live mine.

Steve gives me an ultimatum: either give up the work or get out. I don’t want to give up the work. He gets really angry.

“Libby, people think I’m a good guy. If you continue down this track, you’re going to find out just how nasty I can get.”

With his “crim lover” tag for me, Steve makes sure I become alienated from my family and friends. His family come to hate me. They believe that I want to leave the man who gave me everything, the good provider.

Our marriage goes from bad to worse. We’re sleeping in separate beds and I stop using contraception. I get drunk one night and we have sex. I miss two periods and tell myself it’s due to stress. When I finally do a pregnancy test, and the result is positive, I burst into tears. Steve tells me to get rid of it. When I protest, his response
is: “Don’t be melodramatic Libby; it’s just a cluster of cells. No different to stepping on a cockroach.”

I phone around and organise some counselling for myself. The agency I go to is pro-abortion and I make an appointment for a termination. On the day, I sit in a waiting room with a number of young women. Some of them are with their boyfriends, chatting quietly, or reading magazines. It’s similar to waiting in reception for a hairdressing appointment.

Talk about melodramatic: Steve doesn’t know the half of it. Now I’m here, I know I don’t want to go ahead with the abortion, but I feel powerless to stop it. I’m waiting for a miracle, for someone to rescue me, like Mary Pickford in the old black and white silent movies. The villain ties her to the railway tracks and, just as the train appears around the bend, the hero arrives and unties her. No one comes to save me though, and I go into the adjoining room and lie down on the vinyl-covered bench and wait patiently for my turn.

I make the decision to leave and tell Steve. The next morning I’m in the kitchen tidying up after breakfast when he enters the room behind me. He doesn’t say anything but I know he’s there. I wipe down the table and pick up Soph’s Barbie bowl to place in the sink. I hear the whoosh of his hand. He whacks me across the back of the head, sending me sprawling across the floor into the cupboards on the opposite side of the room. He leaves without a word, driving away in his new Ford Fairlane.

I try to understand his actions. I don’t know if it’s his hurt ego or if he’s shitty about our conversation the previous night. It could be a combination of the two. He hates it when he can’t control me. All I know is that now he has hit me there is no way that I’m changing my mind about leaving. I think of that saying “she who loves the most is the loser.” I guess I don’t love the most anymore.
To be honest, the volunteer work has provided me with a taste of freedom since meeting Kevin, one of the men I visit. I write to Kevin occasionally and see him when the bus goes to the prison he’s in. He is very attentive. I need the attention and I’m naturally interested in how someone, who has been locked away for such a long time, continues to function in what appears to be a normal manner.

*  
Kevin has been transferred to Cessnock Correctional Centre. It’s a move towards his freedom, even if he is still classified as a serious offender. Soph and I’ve moved up to Hamilton South in Newcastle and settled into a weekly routine. One reason for my move was to have easier access to Kevin. He is constantly on my mind and seeing him even once a week doesn’t seem enough. I think he misses me too. Soph spends Saturdays with Steve and on Sundays, visits Kevin with me.

It’s Sunday morning and I ask Soph, “Do you want to go to the farm?” She’s eager. Soph, her small luminous face excited between her tight plaits, jumps into the Starlet. I’m glad I have a car. Most country prisons are practically inaccessible without your own transport.

We pass the Sandgate Cemetery. Soph looks at the concrete monuments and for some reason thinks it’s a chicken farm. I explain about cemeteries and she asks, “Are those blocks of concrete to hold the dead people down?”

I tell her that they have stories on them so that people don’t forget the ones they love. She’s only four and she still has problems pronouncing cemetery and it becomes the ‘lemon tree’. Next we have a competition to spot the big mosquito outside the Hexham Bowls Club and then random conversations about cows, horses and trees fill in the time until we reach Kurri Kurri. The most exciting feature in Kurri
Kurri is the shop with two Maltese terriers asleep in the morning sun in the shop window. We stop at the corner store for change for the vending machines at the farm.

“When are we going to be-ee there,” Soph moans.

“Not long now. I see the big mountain where the farm is.”

We hit the outskirts of Cessnock and within minutes navigate our way through the town and pass into the wide farm gates. The countryside is beautiful; we’re in wine country now. There are vineyards on the prison property.

I manoeuvre the Starlet along the narrow bumpy road and park the car in the visitors’ area. We scramble out into the crisp, clean morning air. Men in blue uniforms approach and request us to stand in a line along with three large men and an elderly woman with a baby. A sniffer dog is led past us. Soph stands to attention and giggles at the dog.

We enter a vast reception room with grey linoleum, rows of plastic chairs and a large desk. I fill out a form; find my driver’s licence and line up to register at the high desk which forms a barrier between visitors and staff. A surly, corpulent officer checks my details on a computer and with a grunt passes me a key to a locker. I deposit my handbag in the locker and clutching a small plastic bag of change, we wait in a room predominantly full of young mothers and children.

There’s the shriek of a siren and it’s time to line up in front of the security gates. A scanner is passed over us and we’re checked for contraband paper money, cigarettes, documents, weapons or drugs. Soph has to remove her hat so that the officer can check she’s not concealing any of these articles on her small head.

We go through the door to be enclosed in a small cage-like area until all of the visitors are processed and the first door is shut. It’s freezing out here and we’re exposed to the elements. If it’s raining you get soaked, as umbrellas are not permitted.
Ten minutes later a bell rings and we are able to push the massive gate open to where we congregate in an even smaller area. High fences topped with razor wire surround us. The children eye each other inquisitively and crowd together impatiently. An officer with a large bunch of keys escorts us through two more gates. He greets us rain, hail or shine, engaging in friendly banter with the more communicative of the visitors.

We follow the path past the education unit and the little chapel. Roses, gardenia and flowering natives perfume the air. In the distance men are pacing, waiting, alone and in small huddles. Soph is first to see Kevin. She waves and breaks into a run. We enter a room and hand our visit slips to the officer at the desk who directs us into a large round hall with plastic tables and chairs.

Sitting at our usual place near the door, we wait for the officer to call Kevin to the visits area. Soph checks out the line of men waiting to enter. “Is this a farm for boys?” She doesn’t wait for an answer; she’s too busy looking for her friends among the regulars. Two tiny girls with blonde ponytails approach us, ice cream dripping from their hands. Soph demands change and they accompany her to the canteen. Tom, a large Scandinavian man serving time for drug dealing, lifts her onto the counter and asks in a quiet voice, “What do you want to buy today, Soph?”

Soph has great respect for Tom; she thinks he must be boss of the farm because he is in charge of the canteen. They research the list of ice creams and Soph chooses a ‘Buffalo Bill’, because she knows I like the bubble-gum nose.

Meanwhile the men are searched and released into the visits area. Families are reunited in a flurry of excited children and emotional wives and mothers. Indigenous Australians mingle with Vietnamese, Chinese, Lebanese and a diverse range of other cultures. Kevin sneaks up on me and with a ‘pinch and a punch’ declares it the first
day of the month. Ah yes! So it is, the 1st of August, another month closer to his release if he obeys the rules.

Soph comes back from the outside playground and barbeque area and climbs up on to Kevin’s knee. “Why are you at the boy’s farm Kev?”

“I didn’t do what my mother told me. I didn’t eat my vegetables.”

Kevin takes some money from me and orders bacon and eggs to cook on the barbeque. He likes to get in early, so that we can use the barbeques before the lunchtime rush.

Outside there’s a carnival atmosphere. Children play and chase each other, young couples walk arm in arm, and families sit beneath umbrellas in what could be a beer garden setting. Over brunch, we discuss the week’s events.

“Nothing different this week love. We were locked in most of the time. There was a stabbing in Wing 1 and the usual staff shortages. The footy is on tonight and I’ve got a packet of chips so it should be a good night.”

I don’t think he experiences the same loneliness as I do after a visit. I’m sure he loves me, but he has been conditioned to prison life and he has the company of his mates before lock-down.

Officers stroll in pairs or sit at tables chatting. A pretty girl and her partner are requested to move along when they sit on a wall in the sun. It’s against the rules for prisoners and their guests to sit on the walls, or the grass, or anywhere except at the tables.

The shriek of the twelve midday siren orders the inmates to muster up. Men in green form a crocodile so that they can be counted and issued with lunch. This meal is for those who don’t have the money to buy ‘special’ food from the canteen to cook on
the barbecues. Some of the men double up and have two meals. Young children cling to their legs.

Kevin is on a vegetarian diet. “What’s under the alfoil today, Kev?” Soph asks.

“Yumm, meaty bites and salad, and a banana.” It’s the same each visit. The vegetarian choice strongly resembles canned dog food. Maybe it’s some type of tofu prepared to resemble meat.

Soph picks flowers and attempts to make a daisy chain. Over endless cups of tea we check out the other visitors and gossip about a young man who alternates visits with his wife and another woman. Then there’s the sugar mummy who visits a different prisoner each week. Her men are very attentive and caress her rotund lace-and-satin-clad body. Her attire always shows a large extent of cleavage, and she has ‘Rob’ tattooed on one breast and ‘Bill’ on the other.

We share a lemonade ice block, have our last cuppa and wait for the ‘churchies’ to turn up. The ‘churchies’ are two elderly men who wear formal hats and have a very conservative appearance. Kevin believes that they’re members of a religious organization and visit men who have no family. The churchies arrive on cue at 5.30 and it’s time for Soph and me to leave.

“I don’t want to go,” Soph protests. She’s tired and grubby, and it takes promises, and then threats, to convince her that our time’s up.

Kevin says, “here take the banana, I won’t eat it and it’ll be wasted.”

We hug in front of the officer at the desk and then Soph and I trapse down the path, as Kevin waves from behind the fence. I recognise the officer at the gate from a Christmas party I attended with Steve. I glance away but she nods at me and smiles.

“Hi Libby, taking the banana home with you?”
PSYCHOBABBLE

‘How long’s this one going to last?’ Natalie’s young and pretty and black and she reminds me of my first girlfriend, Leticia. I’ve been working as a psychologist at the prison for six years and have witnessed a number of parole officers come and go. Just as I become accustomed to working with someone, they leave. Natalie puts on a tough front but she doesn’t have experience in this type of institution.

She’s kind to the inmates. That’s not going to be useful to her if she wants the respect of the prison officers. She had a word with me the other day about a young inmate, Liam, “Have you seen that poor fellow in the glass box? I collected my keys when I came in this morning and as I passed the observation cell I noticed that it was occupied. Under the fluorescent light, a camera was monitoring his every move. He was sitting naked on a concrete slab. The only other furniture in that cell is a steel toilet.”

“Yes, that’s Liam. He arrived on escort yesterday afternoon and, during the reception process, complained of feeling depressed. The officers decided he was a potential suicide risk and put him under observation. I’ll talk to him when I get a chance.”

“It’s cruel.”

“You’re new. You’ll get used to it.”

Later that day, Liam was cleared of the suicide risk, given back his clothing and released from the observation cell. Liam has developed a crush on Natalie. He waits outside the clinic for her to arrive each morning and makes a nuisance of himself trying to see her during the day. I can understand Liam’s obsession.
Dark-eyed with expressive eyebrows, a small straight nose and a generous mouth, Natalie has a natural dignity which allows her an air of authority while still being approachable. These are qualities I associate with Leticia, whom I met at university. She singled me out at the overcrowded student cafeteria. I was having my usual lunch of hot chips with tomato sauce and a coffee. She sat down and offered me a bite of her apple. I’d noticed her at the statistics lecture that morning. It was difficult not to. She stood up in the lecture theatre in front of a couple of hundred students and, in a low husky voice, challenged the professor on his approach to the lecture. I had a problem following her argument, but it must have been spot-on, because the professor conceded to her and exited with a red face.

At the time I met her, Letitia had a strong attraction to women. When I realised that she liked me in a romantic, or should I say sexual way, I was flattered but confused. She kissed me on the lips and it sort of felt like kissing myself, all clean and soft. I liked her too but couldn’t see how the sex would work. For me it didn’t, but I enjoyed the intimacy and I fell in love with Leticia. It was exciting and we had fun wandering around the campus arm in arm. She was proud to be gay and vehemently denied wanting a male in her life. It eventuated that, as much as she protested at that time, Leticia was bisexual. In the subgroup I was now party to, being “bi”, was par to being a cowardly lesbian. Like most people, lesbians are prone to jealousy and the idea that their woman may be tempted to run off with a man was galling, twice the competition.

Leticia discovered that she liked sex with men when her friendship with one of the professors developed into a love affair. She completed her engineering degree and married him.
Back to Natalie; she has a woman’s name tattooed on her inner arm which makes me wonder. No way would I let her know of my interest. I keep my sexual orientation private, though not because I’m ashamed of my bisexuality. I reckon ninety percent of the world’s population are bisexual given the right circumstances. My reticence is related to my lack of trust in the prison staff who are openly homophobic. I don’t need the stress.

Liam’s made the mistake of confessing his love for Natalie to Jane who is the full time parole officer. Jane had no qualms about relating the incident to the parole boss. Jane’s been a menace since she started here. She’s young, so maybe she’ll grow out of her conniving little ways.

Sue Bullock, the parole boss, relishes the sobriquet, ‘bitch from hell,’ which gives an indication of her response to the news. Jane told her that Natalie accepted jewellery from the inmate and that he’s infatuated with her, implying that the situation definitely poses a security risk. All hell broke loose for Natalie. She had to write explanatory reports to her supervisor and the governor and send Liam’s parole report to both parties. Fortunately she hadn’t recommended release to parole for Liam and had documented all of her conversations with him, expressing her concerns regarding his co-dependency on professionals. Natalie’s only mistake was to accept the red, black and yellow beads Liam gave to her in a gesture of condolence. Natalie’s fifteen year old daughter died early this year and as with any gossip, the inmates are aware of her circumstances.

A week later, Liam is transferred to another prison and Natalie receives a letter from him. It worries her, so she brings it to my office to show me.
Dearest Nat

Hi how are you? I got a job as soon as I arrived here so I wouldn’t get bored. I’m working in the metal shop as there is no vegetable garden. I know plenty of people from the prison farm here.

So, what have you been doing with yourself? Are you working hard? I’m seeing D and A and psychology and parole regularly. The parole lady is nice but not as good as you. How was mother’s day? Did you spend it with your family? Say hello to the other staff members for me. I am playing touch football on weekends and I’m slowly getting back into shape. The food is good here.

My mother and sister are happy that I’m back in Sydney and visit regularly. I can’t wait till I get a better job so that I can pay mum back.

I hope you don’t get offended if I ask you out when I’m released. I consider you a friend and don’t want to scare you off or make you angry. If I can see you again I will take you out to dinner and whatever else you want to do, my shout. I hope you can write back soon when you are not too lazy, Bye for now,

Liam

I take Natalie for a walk around the prison farm.

“Frances, you are the only person I feel I can confide my problems to in this place. I would never show that letter to anyone else here.”

“I can understand why you feel that way. It could be easily misconstrued.”

“It’s not only that. Liam’s immaturity is so obvious in his writing. I would feel disloyal to expose him.”

“You are going to have to toughen up if you expect to survive in here. You are more at risk than Liam in this situation.”
Natalie decides not to reply to the letter. We return to our offices to find there is another lockdown. The rumour is that an inmate has been stabbed. I had interviews planned for this afternoon. Kevin Sullivan presents himself at my door at the scheduled time of three-thirty.

“I thought you fellows were locked down?”

“They made an exception for me because I had an appointment with you.”

“That was good of the officers. I suppose it gets boring, spending the day in your cell.”

“It was OK. I got to have a sleep in and watch the footy on TV.”

“Who got stabbed?”

“It wasn’t a stabbing. Norm got bashed. The silly old coot. He reckons he ducked when he should have weaved but I heard they threw a blanket over his head and hit him with a shovel.” Kevin puts his book on the desk and sits down. “He had it coming to him. He was standing over some of the young fellas and he owes money.”

“I’ve heard those stories about Norm but I don’t approve of this cowardly attack.” I frown at Kevin. He doesn’t appear perturbed. Kevin knows that I have a soft spot for him. I find him easy to talk to. He loves reading and enjoys discussing the books. He’s just finished *The Road Less Travelled* and is currently reading *God, the Interview*. Kevin has been involved in so many self-help and personal development groups that he practically has the skills of a professional, though he doesn’t always act on those skills.

“Show me how much you care and help out with the Alternatives to Aggression group on Monday,” I ask him. He agrees reluctantly. Kevin’s working as a clerk to the Inmate Development Staff and has been allotted a small room with a desk, chair and computer on the second floor. It’s useful because I know where he is
when I need him. I hate it when I have to call the inmates over the P.A. system. I have a small voice. When I announce “Kevin Sullivan, Kevin Sullivan, report to the psych office,” I sound like an eight-year-old.

“I organised this interview for a reason. It’s time we had a discussion about why you think you ended up in prison Kevin? You’ve wasted most of your adult life in here.”

“That’s harsh,” he replies. “It’s my life and I’ve made the most of my time in the nick.” He gives me a penetrating look; his eyes are deep-set and grey. I have been told that he uses this glare to warn off the prison officers when they annoy him, but it doesn’t work on me. I meet his gaze and he continues, “I grew up in a rough area and the kids I hung out with took some keeping up with. I was stealing cars and riding motorbikes by the time I was fifteen.”

“That doesn’t explain the armed robberies.”

“How else was I going to support a six hundred dollar a day heroin addiction?”

“You’re still irresponsible. I hear you were caught for smoking Marijuana last week.”

Kevin looks embarrassed. Last week he swore he was clean. The Inmate Development staff have been supportive to Kevin and worked hard to provide his reports on schedule.

“You’ve jeopardised your parole by smoking dope and if you’re not careful you’ll lose the trust of the people responsible for your release.”

Kevin doesn’t reply.

“You can go back to your cell and watch TV if you like. I don’t have much else to talk to you about today and I need to write up this report.”
“Thanks Frankie. I’ll catch up with you on Monday then.”

“Try not to get into any more trouble.”

I stayed in town at the Nurses Home for the weekend. I keep a room here, to use during the week, and normally go home to Newcastle for the weekend. A number of the employees, from the prison and the hospital, use the Nurses Home in this manner. A couple of women even live here permanently which I think would be sad. The rooms are small and gossip is rife.

Natalie didn’t last much longer than one weekend when she booked in here. She hated it. That doesn’t stop her from visiting me during the week. We catch up on work issues. She checks on whether her parolees have been attending my psych. workshops and we compare notes on the inmates.

As much as I love my home in Newcastle, I find it really useful not to have to commute every day. My room here is spartan and I like it that way. There’s not much to tidy up. I have two grown boys from my mistake of a marriage. The marriage lasted four years; long enough for me to have the babies. Their father Donald has a short fuse and had problems containing his anger when the boys disrupted his rigid routine. He was happy for us to part and we remain friends. He is closer to his sons now they are older, although rarely sees them. The boys still live at home with me so it’s also good to have my own space. They don’t need to know everything about my life. They have met a couple of my closer friends since my divorce, including Leticia. They liked her, especially when she mowed my lawn for me, topless. Leticia is tall and brown with a boyish build, and she didn’t look obscene or anything, but her gardening apparel of just a small pair of khaki shorts was a bit out of the ordinary in our neighbourhood. The boys should have been doing the mowing, not sitting around
spying on Leticia. I’ve had a number of relationships since then and reached the conclusion that until it’s serious, I’ll conduct my affairs away from home.

My friend Annette, who owns a cottage in town, has invited me to a Tupperware party on Saturday afternoon. She’s reassured me that I don’t have to buy any food containers, just partake in a nice afternoon tea and socialise with the local girls. She’s using me to boost the numbers. There should be at least five of us if it doesn’t rain. Of course, that number doesn’t include the kids.

I arrive at the Tupperware party with a sponge cake from the local bakery, just in time for the games. A spare chair awaits me in the circle of ladies and merely by claiming the space I win a set of measuring cups. That’s enough fun for me. I spend the rest of the afternoon making tea and coffee and passing around sandwiches. Stacks of kitchenware are piled on Annette’s dining room table. There must be something wrong with me; I’m happy enough to pop my leftovers in an empty ice cream container. By mid-afternoon, the ladies gather up their children and Tupperware and head home to start preparing tea. Annette and I scrape the cake icing from off her carpet and chatter about what we will wear this evening.

It’s a far cry from the social life I enjoyed in Brisbane with Leticia. I loved the clubs she took me to. I liked the colourful entertainment provided by the gays. We used to go to the Waverly pub for girl’s night on Tuesdays. I thought there must have been a mistake the first time I walked into the dark club with Leticia. Young thugs with bulging biceps sprawled on bar stools in groups. A heavily made-up girl wearing sequins and jeans was tongue-kissing her partner at a corner table, and the dance floor was crowded with gyrating couples. One of the thugs waved Leticia over, “Hey, Leticia, who’s the new girl?”

Leticia beamed and held my hand high like I was a prize. “This is Frank.”
“Well, isn’t she a camp little twat.”

“Fuck off Heidi and get us a beer, will ya?”

So, these are the girls.

In comparison, Annette is completely straight. She’s a Maggie Tabberer look alike and works for a government department. She has tons of common sense and is an ardent Christian. Her greatest love is singing in the church choir. I accompany Annette to church sometimes; the congregation sing and clap and walk out into the aisles, and some of them speak in tongues and fall to the floor in a faint. I attempt to join in (the clapping and singing but not the falling over part, they’d probably just think I was drunk).

As a child I was well schooled in the High Anglican Church where the order of the day was humility. On my knees I would intone, “I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table,” and I was deadly earnest. Being humble in the face of Christ is sensible; however, I described myself as humble during a job interview and later felt embarrassed that I thought of myself as ‘umble’, like Dickens’s Uriah Heep, a real hand-wringing sycophant (I didn’t get the job). These days, politicians and performers freely admit to humility, even brag about it, which seems like a contradiction to me.

At Annette’s church, I open and close my mouth to the strident hymns of praise but no sound emerges. I explain to Annette that I have a terrible voice and absolutely no ear for tone. There’s no way I can hold a note. She objects and insists that everyone can sing if they have the right tuition and encouragement. She tells me that I have a beautiful soprano voice. Now I know for sure that she’s lying.

Annette’s fond of my supervisor, Pete, who is divorced, and who also stays temporarily at the Nurse’s Home. Pete has invited Annette to dinner and, probably
feeling sorry for me in my single status, has asked if I will accompany them. Social options are limited out here in the country, so Annette and I agree to go. Pete has a dry, wicked sense of humour. I’m never sure if he’s a kind man hiding behind a tough exterior or a bad man with a thin veneer of the genteel.

Annette is excited by the invitation. She dreams of changing Pete into someone she could live with. They have lengthy conversations. Pete enjoys the mental stimulation; he would probably enjoy some physical stimulation even more. We meet Pete at the restaurant at eight-thirty and work our way through the menu and three bottles of wine. The food is good and we are all voracious eaters. The wine is excellent and Pete and I drink most of it.

Pete offers to pay for the meals but I insist on paying for mine because Annette is his date and I’m just the gooseberry. We walk down to the General Washington where there’s a band playing and Pete and Annette dance. I catch the eye of one of the local scoundrels. He has a wide smile, sparkling, brown eyes and dark, curling hair. He’s also well on the way to being legless on alcohol and E’s or speed.

We gravitate towards each other. I ignore the nagging voice in my head that’s trying to warn me that the deities plan our lives through our sexual experiences, no matter how brief they are, and if I end up with this fellow tonight it’s certain to be brief.

It’s too noisy to talk in the pub so we walk out into the street, our arms across each other’s shoulders. We stumble up the hill together, creep down the corridor to my room and I pass out. I wake up in my narrow, single bed in the morning. Harry, at least I remember his name, is curled up at the bottom of the bed like a puppy. I wish I could keep him.

I give him a shove. “Wake up Harry, you can’t stay here.”
He yawns, smiles and asks where the bathroom is. I give him instructions on how to find the communal bathroom and he takes off with one of my white hospital towels. Half an hour later he hasn’t returned. I find him on the veranda; smoking a Marlboro, wearing nothing but the towel wrapped around his waist, in earnest conversation with Pete. There goes my reputation and I don’t even know if I had a good time!

I work in a small town. When Harry invites me to dinner with his parents that night, I refuse. He accepts the rejection graciously. He gives me a hug and a passionate kiss and swaggers away down the hill.

It’s a lovely, sunny Sunday morning and I sit in the sun and daydream. My mind goes back to my childhood. I’m standing with my three sisters (Mum had us dressed in matching pastel-coloured, home-sewn dresses, our hair tightly braided in thick plaits), quietly waiting, while Dad knocks tentatively on the green door of his mother’s house. My impatient ears distinguish the echo of approaching footsteps and then Mater, blue-eyed, agitated and arrogant, opens the door. Inside, walnut panelling, richly carved furniture and forbidden treasures of china and crystal, gleam in the sunlight filtering through leadlight windows. The familiar aroma of baked potatoes, cooking alongside the beef roast in a gas oven, belie the latent tensions and furtive secrets of adult lives. Disciplined to formal greetings and appropriate responses, “children should be seen and not heard”, we blend into the room. I squabble quietly with Charlotte, my little sister, over the only permitted ornament, a small plastic donkey that grasps for a magnetic carrot. Behind the facade of gentility and hospitality, unreconciled grief permeates the dark recesses of the house. A closed door conceals Uncle Tony’s room. He was shot in New Guinea in World War 2. His gentle,
boyish face is in a gilt frame on the panelled wall. My childish enquiries are met with hushed disapproval.

There’s a window seat and, beyond the leadlight glass, a magic garden beckons. Down the rickety back steps, along the overgrown path where the Cecil Brunner roses grow, through the bougainvillea and wisteria, is a glasshouse shrouded in greenery. How could this mysterious domain exist in Gellibrand Street, Clayfield, a sedate suburb in Brisbane?

“Hi Sweetie, you’re looking nice and relaxed. How did last night shape up?” Annette has called around on her way home from church.

“Come on up to the kitchen, I’ll make you a coffee,” I say. “Pete’s not here. He’s gone to Newcastle for the trots. We have the place to ourselves.”

Annette looks around and up at the closed windows and says “It’s quiet here on the weekend. Where is everyone?”

“The only people who get stuck here are those physio-students, who do their practical assignments at the hospital and who live too far away to go home for the weekend. They’re generally here for three months and then go home to Sydney. We’re between intakes at the moment.”

I’ve run out of coffee so I rummage around for some instant in the cupboard under the sink. All sorts of nasties lurk here but sometimes you can be lucky. Someone has left a couple of sachets of Nescafé, like the ones you find in motel rooms. We’re in luck, definitely superior to home brand and thankfully not decaffeinated. We take our coffee downstairs into the sun behind the old laundry and Annette tells me that she enjoyed the meal the previous night, but she’s beginning to realise Pete is a lost cause. He’s never going to cut back on his drinking and start going to church.
Annette presses me for more information on my night and I finally confess to my wanton behaviour and expect a lecture. She’s surprisingly broadminded but doesn’t approve of my drinking. She advises everything in moderation and tells me that she would always be there for a friend but then goes on to suggest that only a bad friend would get drunk. She has no sympathy for my hangover, which is getting worse sitting in the sun. I agree; everything in moderation, even moderation. I’m not going to beat myself up over one night out on the town. I make the excuse of having to catch up with a supplementary report on Kevin, that Natalie has requested, and Annette kindly leaves me in peace.

* 

There was a floral delivery to the prison this morning. Moses phoned me from the gatehouse and asked me to come and see him when I could. I was in the middle of an interview with Kevin. The Inmate Development staff gave him good reports, even though he had the “dirty urine”, and Natalie has recommended conditional release. He leaves in a few weeks. I’m going to miss him. He gave me his copy of God, The Interview by Terry Lane and explained to me why he wanted me to have the book. I had confided to Kevin how much I hated using the PA system because of the lack of timbre in my voice. In the book, God is portrayed as a woman with a very soft voice.

We filled out the forms necessary for Kevin to attend Kirkwood House in Newcastle, for Drug and Alcohol counselling, and arranged a referral to a psychiatrist in preparation for the future. I wound up the interview and took a stroll across the compound to the gatehouse. Moses held out a bouquet of twelve long-stemmed roses. They are of the variety known as ‘Mr Lincoln’, the petals a dark red, the buds just starting to open, and the fragrance delicious.
“You’d better open that little envelope and check what’s in there,” Moses says. Always aware of the conveyance of contraband into the prison, the officers are chronically distrustful. I open the envelope, no suspicious white powder! And read the small card. Not much information either; it just reads “from an admirer.”

“I’ve checked with the Governor, you can take them up to your office if you like.”

I feel conspicuous walking back through the compound with an enormous bunch of red roses. Jane and Natalie stick their heads out of their office as I walk past.

“Are those for me?” asks Natalie.

“Ahh! Who’s sending you red roses?” Jane wants to know. I have no idea. The only person I can think of is a Correctional Officer who invited me out a couple of months ago. I turned him down because he has a wife. Whoever did send them has gone to some trouble and expense. He would have had to order in advance as I can’t imagine that the local florist would normally order this particular rose through her supplier. I go down to the lunchroom and find a jar, fill it with water and arrange the roses in my office.

I have a cosy little office. It has two windows, a bookcase and is at the end of the corridor. The roses add an almost decadent atmosphere.

Six new inmates have been transferred to the prison this morning and I need to talk to two of them, to make sure they’re not in the “at risk” category. It’s all just a part of the induction process. I’m expecting a knock on my door.

“Come in, you must be Robert Walters.” The man looks tired. “How was your journey?”

“Alright if you don’t mind being treated like a sardine.”
The inmates are sometimes sent on escort as a form of punishment. They are loaded into a white van. It has no windows and for security reasons there are no markings on the outside to distinguish its purpose. There’s a metal bench on either side of the square box. The prisoners are handcuffed but they don’t have seatbelts. They can’t see where they’re going and, most of the time, they don’t know their destination. There are no toilet breaks; only a bottle is available. The trip may take hours. There’s no air-conditioning and prisoners have been known to pass out with the heat. There have been deaths.

“Now you’re here how do you feel about the place?”

“I’ve seen a couple of familiar faces so I’ll settle in alright. I’m worried about the missus because she won’t be able to visit. She lives in Sydney and we’ve got two kids.”

“If you call in at Welfare, and talk to an officer, she’ll arrange one of the Prisoner Support Groups to help out. A lot of people travel here from Sydney to visit each weekend and your wife and the kids may be able to get a lift with one of them.”

I don’t detect any signs of risk in Robert’s demeanour so I let him leave to sort out his cell. On reception, all of his personal items will be taken and stored until his release and he will be issued with three blankets, two sheets, one pillowcase, one towel, one dinner plate, a dessert bowl, a knife, fork and spoon and toiletries. He should be settled in no time.

I’m meeting Natalie for a meal at a local restaurant after work. She’s been having a bit of a struggle lately and looks like she could do with a good feed and a chat. I might as well leave the roses here. They’ll look out of place in my room at the Nurses’ Home and I like having something beautiful in this stark environment.
I bought a dockworker’s cottage in Stockton. There is a little garden estate here with the houses set out like a toy village. The corner houses on each block are identical and the others are similar to each other, but positioned to fit onto the irregular shapes of the allotments. The round green centre of the small estate was formerly the opening to a coal mine. Originally an island, Stockton is now a peninsular into the busy Newcastle harbour.

“What! across the water, in the country, out there in the sand dunes on the far side of the Hunter Estuary. You’ll hate it; a couple of hundred kilometres to Newcastle from Sydney and then catch the ferry to nowhere.” This was the reaction from old Doc Tanner when I told him during my last appointment. Most of my friends share his sentiments.

The house is in very poor condition, with no kitchen and filthy. It has been unoccupied for nine months, the previous owner having died without a will and the property going to probate. Squatters had been coming and going, sleeping on piles of dusty, old mattresses and using the outhouse to defecate even though there was no longer a toilet installed there.

If you like retro, the décor is to die for. Each wall has at least three layers of wallpaper, the most recent being applied in the seventies. Large lime green daisies compete for attention with purple swirls and circles. I’ve spent days just cleaning and trying to make it habitable for Soph, who is happy that she’s allowed to draw on the walls and has been practicing writing her name in large crayon letters. It’s lonely here at night so I bought a puppy for company. He’s a Blue Cattle Dog and when I brought him home he was scared to come in the house. I don’t blame him. One look at the
wallpaper would turn anything off. I found an old laundry basket for him to sleep in. He’s too big for it, however he doesn’t seem to mind, and when I squeeze him into it at night he stays put.

I work five hours a day stripping off wallpaper. After experimenting with a professional steamer which I hired from the local hardware store, I found that the most efficient process was to fill a bucket with hot, soapy water and saturate the paper. When it has softened I scrape it off with a spatula. Some of it peels off in lovely long strips. This proves very satisfying compared to scraping at the nasty little bits that are so heavily glued to the wall that they’re yellow with the oozing paste. Soph helps with the lower sections and I climb to the top rungs of the ladder trying to reach the area near the ceiling. I take a break in the afternoon to watch the soapies.

By five pm, The Bold and the Beautiful has come to an end. It’s cosy sitting in here in front of the open fire, though there’s a bone-chilling westerly whistling around our little cottage. My conscience gets the better of me and I drag myself, Soph in tow, out the backdoor and struggle with Floyd and the choke collar. He’s grey and spiky, a full breed blue-heeler and typical of his breed, he loves nipping at heels. He pauses for his gratuitous ‘sit’ before he leaps out the gate, only to be choked into submission. In thirty seconds we are on the short overgrown path leading to the beach. A huge blue and white container ship is advancing towards us on a turquoise, white-capped wave. The ocean is a soft violet mist blending into the sky.

A few more steps and we’re on the beach. It’s the most beautiful spectacle, Stockton Beach, in the twilight of a winter’s evening. The sand is warm gold. Small waves withdraw in swirls to the tinkle of seashells. Lights etch the break wall where the ship is now entering with the assistance of the tugs.
All’s clear, there are no other people on the beach, so Floyd is unleashed. He joyously rolls and gallops across the sand, a wide grin splitting his face. The sand is welcoming beneath my feet. As the water changes to a grey and pink ripple, reflecting the sky, I thank God for this beautiful evening and wonder why we live in houses.

An old log has been washed up on to the beach; Floyd and Soph climb on it and jump onto the sand. I mark the spot where Soph lands to measure the length of her leap. Each time she reaches further. When they tire of the game, the three of us head home where the aroma of roast chicken gives the house a homely smell. We have a tiny little portable oven in our makeshift kitchen. It does the job. Soph makes the gravy and sets the table, while I serve up. We eat our dinner in front of the TV. Meal times can be a bit quiet with just the two of us. I wait for Kevin’s nightly phone call. He’s a prison inmate and is permitted one call a day. When I answer the phone an electronic voice warns me that the call is from the prison and enquires if I will accept it. I can’t phone Kevin, it’s against the rules. Our conversation doesn’t vary greatly from night to night.

“Hello Love, how are you? What have you been doing and what’s for tea at your place?”

I answer the questions and then Kevin gives me a brief outline of his day.

“There’s a staff shortage at the moment so we’ve been locked down most of the day. Gotta go now love, there are others waiting to use the phone. Have a good night. I love you.”

It doesn’t sound like much but we both find the call reassuring. I so look forward to him coming home and pray every night that he gets approved for weekend leave before too much longer.
Lucky I’ve been cleaning the place up; I had a phone call from Kevin’s parole officer and I’m booked to have a home visit from a man called Allan Bright. I haven’t met Allan but he’s sure to have heard about me. News travels fast on the parole grape vine. Soph and I love living here but I feel a bit embarrassed about the parole officer visiting. The bare plaster walls badly need painting and the amenities are practically Third World.

Allan is arriving at eleven so I’ve tidied up the house and straightened my hair. I read somewhere that you appear to have more authority if you have straight hair. I need all the help I can get. I’m very nervous about this visit. I have the usual dilemma as to what to wear. We don’t have many visitors here so I haven’t bothered to upgrade my wardrobe. People dress for comfort in Stockton and I don’t own any trendy casual wear. I settle for a grey dress with tiny sprigs of red flowers embossed in the fabric. I feel comfortable in this old favourite.

Soph has taken the day off school. She said she was sick this morning but she seems all right now. She can afford to take a day off now and then as she’s an intelligent child. I’ve settled her in a corner, with some beads and fishing line, and she’s busy making jewellery.

Allan arrives ten minutes late and introduces himself. I offer him a cup of tea, which amazingly he accepts. From what Steve, my ex-husband, has told me, the parole officers, including him, usually decline any offer of refreshment. “No one wants to catch crim germs. They probably have Hep C” was Steve’s advice.

I ask Allan if he would like to sit down but there is only one couch, and Soph and I are occupying it. He puts his cup on the mantelpiece and leans against the wall.

Allan asks me a few questions but seems to be too embarrassed to delve deeply. He explains some of the difficulties we will face on Kevin’s release and asks...
me why I have become involved. I tell him that I love Kevin. He wants me to tell him why I have these feelings. I have trouble explaining and come up with some lame story about how I’m impressed by Kevin’s spirituality, the fact that he’s a vegetarian and also he reads a lot like I do. Kevin is very kind and supportive to me.

“I hope you’re right Libby, because you have moved into a whole different world and Kevin is the only person you know there.”

Soph is still busy with her beads but I know she’s been taking it all in. When Allan turns his attention to her she is prepared.

“How do you feel about Kevin?” he asks her.

“Kevin’s the big boss and I’m the little boss and if you don’t watch out he’ll give you a knuckle sandwich.”

She clenches her fist and puts on her thundercloud face.

I’m not sure if he approves of her answer but Allan seems to get the message that Soph knows how to stand up for herself. Heavens only knows what he will write in his home visit report. Kevin will phone this evening, wanting to know how it all went.

Kevin doesn’t like the idea of living in Stockton but I’m sure he will change his mind. He can go fishing anytime he wants and there’s plenty of space if he feels he needs to get out and about. Another good thing about it, which he probably won’t appreciate, is that it’s a long way from Sydney and his old mates. I don’t have any friends here either, so that’ll make two of us. It’s difficult to explain to new acquaintances that your boyfriend is in prison, especially when it’s for something like murder. Imagine the reaction if I told my neighbour, “I’m not single. Kevin, the love of my life, has been in prison for years. I’d tell you why except it’s not my place to do so.” It’s also an unspoken prison rule; never ask an inmate what his offence is. I feel
I’m being dishonest if I don’t let potential friends in on this information, so I tend to just nod politely at the neighbours and keep to myself.

The only places I go, besides visiting the prison, are to the library and to drop Soph off at school. I will need a job in the not too distant future and having a criminal for a partner won’t help. I may have taken on more than I realised with that volunteer position at the prison.

I’ve been applying for employment in the assisted accommodation area, with welfare organisations. I’ve attended a whole round of interviews. For the first one I went out and purchased a smart jacket from Millers. I wore it with a straight black skirt and a white blouse, thinking that this was appropriate apparel for a job interview. I arrived ten minutes early. I’m an early sort of person. The receptionist took my name and instructed me to wait. Before long another applicant turned up. She was all soft and cuddly-looking, in a casual jumper and tweed skirt. Endowed with deep dimples, and flashing white teeth, she chatted confidently with the receptionist. I felt like a penguin in the koala bear enclosure. I wanted to explain that I never shop at Millers, or dress like this.

It was all downhill from there. The interview panel consisted of three trendy-looking women dressed in jeans and T-shirts. I’d spent days rehearsing answers to questions they didn’t ask. I shoved the offending jacket in the back of my wardrobe. I’m never wearing that again.

For the next interview I attempt “soft and casual”, which on me equates frumpy housewife. I attempt to meet the criteria to the best of my ability and come out looking like a “try hard”. I walk away feeling like I’ve compromised all my principles and sold my soul.
Kevin has finally been given a program where he’s able to have day leave and then weekend leave. It was touch and go for a while. He was caught with a dirty urine and came close to ruining his pre-release program. I tried to find out what was happening but his parole officer was very abrupt with me when I phoned her. My home visit was successful and I’m approved as his sponsor. I haven’t seen him for a while but he has his first weekend leave coming up this month. He had his day leave with his parents. Apparently they took civvie clothes for him to change into but he preferred to wear his prison greens. He’s been receiving visits from friends. I suppose I’ll meet them when he gets out.

To pass the hours I read a lot and the beach has been gorgeous. I’ve seen the mullet fishermen come for their three months. They set up a day camp near the break wall in March and at least a dozen of them sit there with their utes and dinghies and wait for the mullet to run. They have a spotter up at the end of the break wall - rain, hail or shine - and keep a fire burning on the beach near the car park. I drove down there one day and there were large refrigerator vans and more trucks than usual. A film of oil on the water, and the swirl of fish on their way out to sea to spawn, created havoc. Boats circled the fish with nets and tons of flapping fish were hauled, glassy eyed, on to the sand. For a while there, mullet were very cheap at the co-op and I could buy mullet roe, which doesn’t seem to be very popular in Newcastle and is also inexpensive.

The mullet men disappeared overnight and a month later the Australian salmon were running. I walked over to the beach one morning and the birds were working right near the shore in front of me. The water was boiling as large, predatory fish pursued the baitfish. Four or five fishermen were hauling in the fish, using just a lure. They were throwing them back in, so when I was offered one I took it. The fish
were in so close that the baitfish they were feeding on jumped right out on to the shore. I always carry a spare plastic bag so I gathered up enough for a meal. You can’t get whitebait fresher than that.

In my excitement I give Kevin a running commentary of all this action during our evening phone calls. I think he’s jealous.

The month passes rapidly. It’s Saturday morning and I’m on my way to pick Kevin up for the weekend. I had to leave at seven because it takes an hour and a half to get there. At the prison he smiles when he sees me but he seems sort of distant. The weary officer on duty hands me some documents to read and sign they are the “Sponsor’s Responsibilities and Obligations”. There are seven pages of fine print. I give it a cursory glance and sign the bottom of each page. We’re finally out the gate and I show Kevin to my car. He slides into the passenger seat and looks decidedly uncomfortable.

“You drive till we get out of town love and then we’ll swap over.”

I know there are all sorts of rules that apply when he’s on temporary leave and I don’t think he’s supposed to drive. I should have been more careful reading that paperwork. I don’t comment. We swap over when we get past the big steam towers outside of town and Kevin appears much happier. He wants to stop at Cessnock for a bacon and egg roll at Mc Donald’s.

“It’s a ritual, Love. All the fellers stop for Maces when they get out. I didn’t eat breakfast and I’m hungry.”

I’m surprised because he told me he was a vegetarian. He lets me take over the driving again when we reach the outskirts of Newcastle. We pass a bottle shop and he says, “Pull in here, we’ll pick up a bottle of bourbon and some Coke.”

I protest; I know for sure he’s not supposed to drink.
“Don’t worry so much. If we have a couple this morning, it’ll be out of my system by tomorrow night when they test me.”

I feel like such a prude. Finally I park outside my house. We go inside.

“Jesus, you didn’t tell me it was this bad. Your living conditions are nearly as bad as mine.” He dumps his overnight bag on the floor and gives me an enormous hug. “It’s good to be here, let’s get settled in.” He takes a cursory look around. “I’d pour you a drink if I could find anything that resembled a kitchen. Where do you keep the glasses?”

If I were Kevin I’d want to get outside and run along the beach. I’d want to be free in the sunshine. He seems more than content to settle inside. I’ve stocked up with food and a couple of videos, hopeful there is one that he’ll like. I pour us both a double bourbon and we settle down to watch Pulp Fiction.

I put the drink on the bedside table and kick my shoes off. I lean back against the pillows and take the pins out of my hair, so that it tumbles down the back of my prettiest dress, which is silky and pink and has small covered buttons down the front. I don’t usually drink at this time of the day; but this isn’t a normal day and I feel nervous.

I’m feeling apprehensive because I can sense how strange it is for Kevin to be out. He doesn’t look as if he even feels comfortable wearing civilian clothes. I’d like to know what he is thinking.

Libby has every right to feel nervous. Kevin is feeling strange being out. He is thinking, I’m not dressed right, I’d rather be wearing prison greens then these putrid second hand clothes that mum picked up from Vinnies for me. I need a couple of pairs of Levi’s. Libby isn’t in a financial situation to help out, not that I’d expect her to. She needs all her money for the house which is even worse than I expected. Four huge oleanders
have taken over the front yard, the fences are falling down and it looks like the house isn’t far behind them.

“Ahh, bourbon and coke, like angels pissing on my tongue.”

Kevin glances over at Libby, posing on the bed. She has long hair and a perfect body. She’s a natural redhead. His first. He sculls the glass of spirits and they climb under the blanket. Kevin lies behind her and enfolds her in his arms. She wriggles her round bum against his cock. He gets hard pressing through the silky dress. He can hear her fingers grasping for a hold on the mattress. He holds her tightly ripping open the dress and pulling off her blue cotton pants. Her red pubic hair glows against stark white skin. Later he says, “I didn’t get the gist of that movie you put on love, how about rewinding?”

* 

“Bloody Pulp Fiction we’ve watched it half a dozen times this weekend and I still don’t get the plot. I’m not sure the bourbon was a good idea. It was either the spirits or the Maccas, I feel sick in the guts.” Kevin throws up and lies down to have a kip. When he wakes up Libby’s in the shower. She comes out with drops of water sparkling in her tangled hair. He twines it around his hand, yanking her backward and kisses her violently, their teeth grinding together. She tries to pull away but he holds on tight, mounting her doggie style and thrusting straight to her core. He withdraws and watches the spunk arc across her shoulders.

Dripping with sweat he sits up and rolls a ciggie. He’d do anything for a puff and could easily find one, though he can’t risk being caught out with the urinalysis when he gets back.
I felt wonderful when I left for work this morning. On Saturday, I treated myself to a new dress from the local boutique. Variety and quality is limited when shopping for clothes in town. There’s no DJ’s or Myers, just a couple of small dress shops and Best & Less and Kmart. When there’s less to browse through, I find I’m more discerning and probably dress better here in Muswellbrook than I did in Brisbane.

My new frock has a “Made in India” tag. It’s very pretty and appears to be of better quality then a lot of the Indian stuff I’ve bought in the past. It’s white, with some embroidery on the bodice and mid calf in length. I’ve worn a full slip underneath so that I don’t upset the Inmate Development boss at the prison, where I work as a parole officer. I think my dark skin looks great against the soft white material. My hairdresser is very clever. My hair swings with a nice swish against my shoulders.

It’s going to be a busy week. Kevin Sullivan, one of my parolees, faces the Parole Board on Wednesday, which means I’ll have to travel to Sydney. The trip entails waking at five, driving ten kilometres to the neighbouring town and boarding a very small aircraft at the tiny airport. It’s always freezing on the plane and, when I reach Sydney, it’ll be a mad dash to get to the Parole Court before nine thirty. It’s necessary to take notes and files so I’ll be laden down with Kevin’s categorised history. When I started the job, I thought it would be a great adventure and quite glamorous flying to Sydney. I soon changed my mind. It’s just a hard slog.

I’ve spoken to Libby, Kevin’s sponsor, since his Weekend Leave, and she sounds positive about their relationship, though she did express some surprise that he included meat in his diet. He had led her to believe that he was a vegetarian and, for
some reason, this seemed important to her. With his history, I imagine he will surprise her in more ways than lying about being a vegetarian. I feel mean about treating her abruptly on the phone when she was upset about Kevin’s breach of prison rules a couple of weeks ago. She’s a polite girl, even if she is a bit soft in the head. Jane told me some interesting gossip about her. She used to be married to Steve Newell who’s a parole officer at the Chatswood Office in Sydney. I’ve met Steve a couple of times at workshops and he seems like a really decent fellow. It beats me why Libby would leave someone like Steve and hang around the prisons visiting Kevin.

Kevin’s mother will be present at the parole hearing, which is good. He can do with the support. He told me he would be borrowing a dress-suit from a mate and felt confident in his legal advisor, who was recommended and paid for by Charlie, one of his criminal mates. Charlie boasts that he’s a career criminal, not a very good influence for Kevin, but more or less what I would expect.

I can’t believe my eyes when Jane arrives at her desk at ten. She’s later than usual this morning and she’s wearing the same dress as mine. It’s when we’re going down the concrete staircase to the lunchroom that I realise how bloody ridiculous we look, like a couple of pious nuns, which is far from the truth of the matter. We both have a fit of the giggles, then Jane slips and the heel snaps off her shoe. I feel sorry for her, sort of. She’s a large country girl and made a huge effort wearing heels to work. She hasn’t mastered the art of walking in them. She’ll either have to hobble around on the broken shoe all day or get permission to go home and change her shoes, and hopefully also her dress.

I spend the afternoon finalising my paperwork for the Parole Board and interviewing. My last interview of the day is with Alfie. He’s hard-core. He is friends with Kevin and has been in the system nearly as long. Alfie never takes his sunglasses
off. I’ve asked him to a few times and he point blank refuses. It’s either because he doesn’t want the officers to detect the effect of drugs, by observing the state of his eyes, or because it’s easier to disguise how you feel when talking to someone at close quarters if your eyes are covered.

I prepare for our interview by reading back over my notes of previous encounters with him. Alfie is highly distrustful of prison staff and resents anyone who represents authority. I’m lucky if I can extract a monosyllabic response from him during our interviews, so I was surprised during a previous interview to be rewarded with a full sentence when I enquired: “What are you most looking forward to when you’re released, Alfie?”

“I wouldn’t mind lifting a bit of skirt.”

According to his files, he’s the product of a dysfunctional family. He was violently abused by his father and neglected by his mother. I have a soft spot for him, which I can only put down to my ‘rescue the injured animal syndrome.’ Unfortunately, injured animals often lash out.

I expect Alfie to be angry this afternoon. I thought I could recommend his parole and had informed him of my decision, but during a random test he was caught with “Drugs in Urine”. He has been using heroin and there’s no way my boss will now support a recommendation to release.

At five, the door to my office swings open. Alfie is late for his appointment. He knows I’m alone on the second floor at this time of day. I expect the inmates to knock and wait for an invitation to enter, not just barge in. He looks pissed off. He’s a large man and he’s standing between the door and me, blocking my escape.

“Have a seat”, I offer, pointing to a chair opposite my desk. Alfie prefers to stand. He’s obviously trying to intimidate me. Alfie has a record of violence towards
women. The inmates joke about a story that he hit his ex-wife across the head with an iron. The inmates obviously have very sick senses of humour.

“You told me you were recommending parole Missus and now I’ve been informed by the screws that’s not happening.”

“I’m sorry Alfie, I wanted to recommend but I can’t. You got a dirty urine for heroin last week. There’s no way my boss will support a recommendation.”

“Well you fucking recommended Sullivan and everyone else in the place.”

“I didn’t recommend anyone who was caught using heroin.”

“If I was you I’d watch that car of yours doesn’t get burnt, ya fucking cunt.”

Alfie leaves the office, slamming the door behind him. I’d heard he was getting aggro on the drugs and notice some signs. He has sores on his face and hands, which are aggravated through compulsive scratching. I don’t take the threat to my car seriously. I think he was just letting off steam but I will be more careful about being up here by myself in future.

I’ve been invited out to dinner tonight. Frankie, the prison psychologist, a close friend of mine, introduced me to Brett, who teaches at the local TAFE. We don’t have a lot in common but he’s good-looking, owns a car and has a job. He’s also respectful, all qualities that I admire in a man. We’re going to the “Hill Top” restaurant, which is lovely. I’m meeting him there. I reach the restaurant just on dusk and find Brett sitting at the bar. He kisses me on the cheek and hands me a red rose in a cylinder.

“What would you like to drink, Natalie?”

“A gin and tonic thanks. I really need it.”

The restaurant looks inviting with tiny candles alight on the tables and white linen table clothes. A wood fire crackles in the grate on the far wall. I’m seated facing
the fire. Ahh! This is more like it. Stuff the Alfies of this world. My days of saving wounded fledglings are over. Those fledglings, they die, stay sick or fly away when they’re healed. There’s no winning with them. I feel I deserve to go out with nice men in good suits and be fed delicious food.

Rather than sharing a bottle of wine with Brett, I stick to a glass of the house chardy. I’m tired and want to drive myself home and sleep in my lumpy bed by myself.

I wake on Wednesday morning to the sound of rain pounding on the tin roof. It’s still dark outside as I gulp down a cuppa and dress in a claret-coloured trouser suit. I arrive at the airport after an unpleasant drive to Scone, with the rain beating down on my little car. The makeshift building appears deserted and uninviting, so I wait in my car until the pilot arrives. There are only two other passengers. We board the aircraft and are warned that it will be a bumpy ride this morning. Usually there’s a view over the undulating hills and the unsightly devastation caused by the open cut coal mining. Today there is thick cloud. The white-faced woman, sitting across from me, throws up in a brown paper bag and then apologises profusely. There’s no hostess to take the bag away and no toilet, so we’re stuck with the sickening smell.

I have a last minute perusal of my notes before we arrive in Sydney. The plane taxis into the airport about a kilometre from the main buildings. A small bus transports us across the tarmac. It’s still bucketing down rain when I board the bus to the city.

When I reach the court, there are groups of people gathered outside and the foyer and steps are crowded. I work my way up the stairs and notice a short woman, dressed in a red suit, standing on the small landing. She exudes strength and
personality. Instinctively I know it is Kevin’s mum. I introduce myself and show her inside, where she can be seated.

A worried-looking woman with a very lined face approaches me. She introduces herself as Grace Pearson, Sullivan’s solicitor, and asks if I know where she can find his parole officer.

“You’re looking at her.”

“What are you recommending?” she enquires.

Doesn’t sound like she’s done her homework; she should know. Oh well, it’s just the ninety-nine percent of lawyers who give the rest of them a bad name. “I’m recommending release.”

She looks very relieved at my reply and asks me if I need to speak to Kevin. He’s in the cells. I don’t take her up on the offer.

It’s a relatively informal court. There are nine members on the Offender’s Review Board. Three of the members are either a Judge of the District Court, or a retired Judge of the Supreme Court, and the others reflect as closely as possible the composition of the community at large. When making a decision on a parole order, the Board determine that the release is appropriate; their main consideration is public interest. They take into consideration the comments of the sentencing Judge, the antecedents of the inmate and the inmate’s ability to adapt to a normal community life. I glance at the nine faces and I can tell that they have done their homework. They appear calm and serious. They’re not flicking through papers or muttering asides. It’s a very professional looking row of people and the message they project as a group is “Don’t mess with us.”

A request is made for the prisoner on review to come to the stand. Kevin is usually fastidious about his grooming. He shaves off his moustache when his mother
is due to visit him. I expect him to look neat and to be dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and tie.

I hardly recognise the man who is escorted by a Correctional Officer into the court. What is he wearing? I can only describe it as a gangster suit. It’s iridescent mauve. The colour does nothing for his complexion, Kevin’s naturally tanned face is yellow and his eyes look haunted. He appears to be a man who has been isolated from a “normal lawful community life” for a long time. He trusted his mate to supply him with an appropriate suit. I can only surmise that he realises that his suit doesn’t reflect the seriousness of the occasion and this is contributing to his anxiety. The court decision will have a huge bearing on his future and he’s finding the situation very stressful, to the extent that he has stage fright. Where’s the confident man who has won over most of the female staff at the prison? When questioned by the Board members, his answers are monosyllabic. His solicitor takes the stand and she isn’t much better. She flips through her notes looking for the information, which she obviously doesn’t have. I don’t see that he has a hope in hell of being released; all my hard work for nothing.

The saving grace is Mrs Sullivan, who is articulate and convincing in her story of her son’s history and her reasons for advocating his release. When it’s my turn, the Judge is harsh in his questioning. Kevin Sullivan’s girlfriend, who is one of his sponsors, has not been able to make the trip to Sydney. Although she has been approved through the Newcastle Office, I haven’t personally met her. The judge is not happy. I explain that I have had numerous phone calls with Libby Newell.

“What does she have in common with Mr Sullivan?”

“They both like to read a lot.” It’s all I can think of. I’m feeling as nervous as Kevin looks. Eventually I’m dismissed.
We’re all surprised when the Board return from their break with a decision to release to parole. The release is not for three weeks and there will be numerous conditions on the order. Kevin is jubilant and his mother is very happy. I’m relieved that the hearing is over and that I’m free to go. I recommended conditional release for Kevin and that recommendation was accepted by the court, so I’ve achieved my goal and the day has been a success. It’s up to Kevin now to prove that he can live a law-abiding life in the community. He will have supervision through his community parole officer who will check that he attends interviews and programs.

It has been an emotionally draining day for me and I don’t experience any of the exultation obvious on the faces of Kevin and his mother. I catch a cab back to the airport and have a long, cold wait for my plane, which doesn’t leave until five. Airports can be sterile, lonely places when all you want to do is get home.
LIFE ON THE OUTSIDE

As I pushed the door to my room at the Nurses Home open, I found a note at my feet. The message read, “Hi Frankie, Some fella has been annoying the crap out of us by phoning you every hour, Pete.”

There’s only one public phone in the Nurse’s Home. When it rings, a loud bell resounds throughout the whole building and the person who’s closest, or who is expecting a call and is usually in the kitchen or TV room, runs down two flights of stairs to answer it. It really pisses Pete off if he’s the sucker who’s roped into answering. To make it worse, he had no idea where I was or when I’d be back. I go up to his room to find out if the caller had left a name. He hadn’t, and Pete wasn’t happy about this further disruption to his night’s sleep. I didn’t expect him to be in bed. He normally sits up eating pizza and watching sport on the small portable TV in his room till all hours.

When I wake the next morning, it’s to Pete hammering on my door.

“What do you want?” I shout. ‘It’s early.”

“Just paying you back for keeping me up half the night. Have a good day.”

I’m feeling hungover and sleep deprived by the time I arrive at work. I muddle through the papers on my desk, trying to plan the easiest way to get through the day, when my phone rings. Amanda up at reception says, “Some man wants to speak to you but he won’t give his name.”

“Put him through, I’m not busy at the moment.” I hear a click, than a voice says, “Hi, is that you Frankie?”

“Who’s this?”
“Don’t you recognise my voice? It’s Harry. Remember our exciting night in the Nun’s Quarters?”

“Harry!”

“Yeah.”

A vague memory of a one-night-stand, I’ve been trying to erase from my mind, pops up like a cartoon balloon.

“Please don’t call me at work,” I ask Harry.

“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Can I make it up to you? How about meeting me at the Beaches hotel on Saturday arvo? You’ll be in Newcastle, won’t you?”

I agree to meet him.

“See you there about three.”

On Friday night I arrive home at seven thirty. John, my eldest, is cooking potato chilli. “G’day Mumsy, how was your week?” He ducks down to give me a kiss. John is six foot five. Must have inherited the genes from his dad, as I’m five foot three and a half. Cyril, my second son, is out in the garage having a jam session with his mates. “Have some chilli with us Mum. We’re going to sink a few ales and catch a couple of bands later.”

The boys and I share an old colonial at Mayfield. The yard is overgrown with grevilleas and the lawn usually needs mowing. My room is at the back of the house, behind the living room. This suits me because I never know who they are going to bring home and we live fairly separate lives.

It’s good to be back in my own big comfortable bed and I sleep well. Saturday is warm and dry. I plan to make the most of my time in Newcastle and start the day with a swim at the Ocean Baths, a shower and then a wander around Myers. I find a white-knit, summer dress with a square neckline that fits perfectly. I’ll need some new
underwear. I can’t wear my old daggies under the white dress. Not that anyone is going to see them of course.

John emerges from his room at midday looking decidedly under the weather. He downs a couple of Beroccas and prepares a large bowl of Cornflakes.

“I’m meeting a friend at the Beaches hotel this afternoon. Have you got plans?” I ask him.

“Gotta catch up on some study.”

Our old house boasts a huge bathtub and I fill it with steaming water, add bath oil and luxuriate for an hour. I’m lucky with my hair, it’s thick and straight and a silvery blonde, no need to fuss over it. I splash on my favourite perfume “Fragile” and the fragrance of spring flowers fills the air. I dress slowly, enjoying the new clothes. There’s no rush, it’s a short drive to the hotel.

I feel nervous as I park my car at the back of the pub. What if I don’t recognise Harry, or worse, what if he has forgotten how old I am and pretends he doesn’t know me? My guess is that he’s not much older than my son John. I walk through the restaurant and out to the small beer garden overlooking the Merewether seascape. It’s very crowded, mainly with young people. I glance around, feeling lost and out of place when I notice a group of men under an umbrella in the far corner. One of them looks vaguely familiar. He gives me a wave and walks over to escort me to the table, where he introduces me to his friends. Oh my God, I hope they don’t know John or Cyril. Newcastle can be a very small place.

I smile politely at the introductions, though I can’t recall a single name. I’m always too busy studying the face to concentrate on the name. Smiling broadly, Harry addresses his mates and me, “Frankie, from what I remember, you drink bourbon and Coke. Do the rest of you want anything from the bar?”
The young fellow sitting next to me is leering down my front.

“Hey, Luke, keep your eyes off my girl.” Harry teases. This is ridiculous. One of Harry’s friends (I think his name is Tom) says, “Nah, we’re right for drinks, thanks Harry. We’re going to push off. There’s a wave running at the break wall. The conditions are good and we don’t want to miss out.”

Harry orders our drinks and his friends head off.

“Nice to meet ya, see you again some time.” Luke winks at me as he trails after his companions.

“You look gorgeous. I love the dress.” Is Harry flirting or genuine? He’s still wearing that wide grin. I’ve got to stop worrying and enjoy this beautiful afternoon.

“Thanks,” I say. “I was scared I wouldn’t recognise you.”

Harry’s relaxed and at home in the beer garden setting. I glance at his handsome face and realise I don’t know much about him at all. “Harry, help me out. Tell me about yourself. I’m feeling a bit of a loss here. You know where I live and what I do for a living, but you’re practically a stranger.”

“I can’t think of a better way to spend the afternoon than to fill you in on my boyhood secrets, Sweetheart. Just don’t try any of that psychobabble shit on me.”

Thankfully Harry is older than he looks. He’s thirty-five which still makes him fifteen years younger than I am. He grew up in Kurri Kurri, with a single mum who was usually too drunk to worry about him. He remembers coming home from school and finding her asleep on the couch in front of TV. He didn’t like the men she bought home with her from the pub, so he spent most of his time exploring the bush at the rear of their rented home.

By the time he was ten, he had built himself a shelter in the scrub, the wild lantana providing a thick screen from the elements and prying eyes. He furnished it
with old blankets and a pillow, and arranged a circle of rocks in a nearby clearing for a fire. He doesn’t seem to bear any resentment about his mother’s neglect.

“It was good for me. I learnt to cook and look after myself. I grew up quickly. It’s probably one of the reasons I feel more comfortable with older women. I live on my own now and work at the mines. Now it’s your turn to expose some home truths. I don’t really know that much about you.”

I start with my age, which is a sensitive area for me but it doesn’t seem to bother him at all. I tell him how I met my husband and how strict we were in those days about not having sex until we were married.

“What a waste that was! I wish I’d known you then.”

“Yes, well you would have been six years old, so I suppose I could have babysat you.” I ask him if he knows either of my sons. Fortunately he doesn’t. “What was it like for you growing up in the olden days?” He gives me a cheeky grin.

“Shut up, I’m not that old. I was a very spoilt little girl. My dad loved me, though I think he loved boats even more. He used all of his spare time either maintaining or building them. We spent our holidays travelling around Moreton Bay. Dad was in charge. Mum was kept busy organising the food in the galley so that the cups and cans of soup didn’t come crashing down when the boat started to roll. It was scary when an unexpected wave did hit and everything fell off the racks.”

“Is that what’s wrong with you? You got hit on the head with a can of soup, didn’t you?”

“That’s not nice. There’s nothing wrong with me that can’t be fixed. Just because I was a little isolated in some of my childhood activities. My sisters and I didn’t play sports on the weekends or join the scouts or marching girls like most of the kids in my class. I spent most of my time on the top deck, trying to keep out the
way of dad. Us girls probably drove him mad, scrambling all over his boat like an army of soldier crabs. I saw whales, waterspouts and wild storms. I remember how my little sister Charlotte and I, grateful that we hadn’t landed in the drink trying to jump across the yawning space between jetty and boat, would perch quietly on the back deck while Dad unlocked the cabin. Just the thought of the musty odour of salt eroded brass fittings and vinyl seat covers transports me back to those days. Do you find that the sense of smell is probably the most emotion provoking of your senses?”

“Nah, men are different to women. I like the ocean but mainly when there’s a decent surf.”

I’ve done enough of a trip down the old memory lane and Harry is losing interest. He stands up. “Do you want another drink and something to eat?”

“I’d love a mixed dip plate and some flat bread. How about sharing?”

“Sure, I’ll just go and order.”

I take the opportunity to go to the toilets and check in the mirror that my nose hasn’t gone shiny and red, which it tends to do if I sit in the sun drinking spirits. Harry is waiting at the table with a bottle of chilled white wine and two fresh wine glasses. I sit down and in no time a waitress is placing bowls of hummus, eggplant dip and avocado salsa before us. A large platter of warm flat bread takes pride of place in the middle of the table. I’m starving and try not to chomp down all the dips before Harry gets a chance to share.

We sit close together and he rests his hand on my knee.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish in public,” I joke.

“I don’t plan to finish it in public. I’ve booked a room here for the night. It’s a typical hotel room and there’s no ensuite. I hope you don’t mind. It gets noisy with the bands after ten but the rooms are clean.”
Harry kisses me, his breath hot on my cheek. I stand and Harry puts his arm around my waist and leads me up the stairs to our room. I’m not sure how the evening ended last time I spent a night with Harry. It doesn’t matter, I feel comfortable and at ease taking off my clothes and I’m impressed by his muscular chest coated in a healthy pelt of thick, dark hair.

He reciprocates by admiring my body. “You’ve got great tits. I thought at your age you’d take your bra off and they’d drop down to your waist.”

“Yes, that breast augmentation I invested in was well worth the money.” I give my well-developed knockers a shake. Harry looks aghast.

“Only kidding you dope.”

Harry takes me by the hand and lies on the bed. He pulls me on top. The sex is brief and intense. I settle back among the sheets and listen to the noise of the waves, breaking against the rocks. I feel like I’m on holiday. We sleep for a while and later walk on the beach. I’m in another world.

That evening at dinner, we sit close together in the restaurant. Harry orders the wine with care. He touches my hand as we talk and laugh. Harry is thoughtful and courteous. I look forward to spending the rest of the night with him.

We have to be out of the hotel at eleven am. I’m still wearing my white dress and feeling more than a little dishevelled. We walk out to the car park together. Harry drives a ute. At least he can afford a vehicle. The first night I met him, he looked like he would have trouble paying for a pair of runners. First impressions can be so wrong.

He writes down his phone number and address for me and suggests I meet him at his place next Friday. We’ll discuss details over the phone during the week.

When I arrive home, the house is quiet. The boys have either gone for a surf or are still asleep. I have some scrambled eggs and a cup of tea, followed by a nice long
bath. I don’t know what I would do without the luxury of a bathtub. I feel sorry for Natalie, in her little farm house with its tiny shower cubicle and bore water.
Kevin Sullivan is sorting through his possessions with the impatience of a gambling addict on his way to the casino. His heart is thumping, his goal focused, and he thinks that this is how his mate Neil Elliott must have felt the last time they were at the track together. With three days to go before his release, time seems to be speeding up for Kevin and he has some housekeeping to get out of the way before he leaves.

“Hey Neil, I was just thinking about you. Come in and give us a hand.”

“G’day Kev. Heard you were leaving. What a mess.”

The cell bunk has Kevin’s life possessions strewn across it. “What’re you doing with this lot? I like the jacket.” Neil picks up a green wet-weather jacket with a fleece lining.

“Alfie’s got his eye on that and on the jug.” Alfie is Kevin’s closest ally. Taciturn by nature, Alfie is an ex-merchant seaman who, apart from Kevin, rarely communicates with the inmates. He mistrusts and avoids all prison staff like the plague. Kevin and Alfie are the same age and have crossed paths at numerous prisons. They are both staunch followers of the prison code: loyalty to mates, down with dogs and avoid the gooses. Their relationship is common knowledge and Neil realises that he doesn’t have a chance where the jacket and jug are concerned. He nods. “What about the TV?”

“John hasn’t got one.”

“Fair enough.”

Kevin pulls a long black velvet glove and a tattered piece of towelling from under his mattress.
“You can have these,” he says as he pushes his fingers into the glove and levers it up his arm. ‘Thought you’d want to look after her. We were close for a while there.”

“Chuck it in the bin mate along with your filthy lizard rag. I’m not that hard up. My right hand works well enough without the props. Got any stick books?”

“They’re a bit out of date but they’re yours.” Kevin hands a small pile of dog-eared magazines over to Neil.

“So why were you thinking about me; obviously you weren’t contemplating giving me any of your good stuff?”

“I was remembering that day we were at the track together, last time we were both out.” On the day, Neil had placed a bet on a black gelding, God Speed, for a win, and handed $500 to the bookie. They watched the race in high anticipation. God Speed came in second. “Stay right where you are,” Neil said as he took off towards the exit gate. He was back within the hour, his wallet stuffed with green notes. The next bet was a $1000 on Black Shadow. The horse came in fifth. Neil took off again. Again he returned with a wad of cash.

“Where ya getting it?” Kevin asked.

“Armed robberies mate.” By the end of the day Neil had made his return trip five times.

“You did five armed robberies and still went home broke,” Kevin reminded him. “I expected better from a man whose dad is a chiropractor to the jockeys and also a bookie.”

“Yeah, you’re an addict, you ought to understand. It’s the adrenaline rush as much as winning. For you, with heroin your drug of choice, it was probably scoring; the ritual and love of the steel as much as the actual drug.”
“Finding the cash was part of the ritual. I’ll admit it was a buzz being driver of the getaway car when Mark held up the armoured truck. The adrenalin kept me alert. My downfall was when the pigs turned up at the wrong moment. Mark started shooting and, in the crossfire, a walloper hit a bystander in the leg. Mark hightailed it to the car but we were surrounded.”

“Happens to the best of us. When the wallopers eventually cornered me, I ended up sharing a cell with my dad. The whole racing scene is crooked; from the owners and the vets, to the jockeys, bookies and even Ian Wallace in the next cell down, the farrier. Inside information was too much of a temptation for dad with his connections.”

“Gambling’s supposed to be the hardest addiction to cure.”

“I spent years of counselling at Long Bay. Eventually the psychiatrist resorted to behaviour modification. During the sessions, any niggling sensations of excitement I experienced at the prospect of placing a bet triggered an electric shock. The treatment failed. The electric shocks were a blast; as gratifying as a win at the horses.” Neil picks up his magazines, “I’ve got to go. Got a bet on this arvo’s game with Alfie.”

Alone in his cell and with the prospect of freedom looming, Kevin realises that Doris, his Drug and Alcohol counsellor, may have been right. He told her he was cured; that he didn’t use heroin any more. She warned him, “Heroin changes the parameters of your brain Kevin, and they never return to their original state. You’ll need professional guidance when you’re released.”

Kevin is already experiencing a combination of exhilaration and panic at the thought of a major change to his lifestyle without drugs to cushion his anxiety. His mate Ronan, who was released a couple of weeks ago, has already offered him some
interesting propositions through the grapevine. Fifty-grand for a start. Payment if he will deep-six that big prick Ian Jones. Kevin shares a hatred of Jonesy along with most of the inmates. Ian Jones has been out for six months and his freedom has done nothing to dispel his reputation as a sadistic stand-over merchant. He made the mistake of ripping off Ronan and his pack: took his stash of amphetamines, cash and even his ute. He should have known better than to muck around with the bikies. Kevin’s tempted by the offer.

Kevin’s almost through packing when he hears his name paged on the P.A. system. The psychologist, Frankie, wants to see him in her office. He crosses the compound and climbs the concrete steps to the Inmate Development area on level two.

“G’day Frankie, what’s with the dead flowers?”

A tuft of Frankie’s blonde hair bobs comically behind a huge bunch of wilting red roses. The petals have dropped among the files and papers strewn across her desk. She looks up at Kevin with a frown of concentration marring her normally smooth brow.

“Hello Kevin. They are somewhat the worse for wear. Will you clean them up for me please?”

“Sure. Do you want me to bring you back a cup of tea?”

“Thanks.”

Throwing out dead flowers is the sweeper’s job not the clerk’s, which is Kevin’s status, but Kevin doesn’t mind doing it for Frankie. He has had some interesting fantasies about this slim, blonde woman and feels a tug of physical attraction to her. He kneels down in front of the desk to retrieve some rogue rose petals and cops a good peek up Frankie’s skirt; white cotton panties and is that a
glimpse of pubic hair? It takes Kevin a few seconds to recover from this unexpected treat. With his hands full of dead flowers, he takes off to the rec room to dispose of them. No one’s around, so he has a quick wank before he makes the tea and returns to Frankie’s office.

“Here’s your cuppa.”

She takes the cup from him. “What are your plans for today?”

“Natalie’s taking me into town to open a bank account and renew my licence. I’ve never had a traffic infringement so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“How can the getaway driver, at an armed robbery, still hold a driver’s licence?”

“Just lucky I suppose. That’s how the law is. I never actually got caught breaking any road rules.”

“Going into town will be a nice change from your usual routine. Are you looking forward to it?”

“All except for the drive in there and back. I’m not confident with women drivers and have you seen Natalie trying to manoeuvre that work van?”

“Oh come on Kevin, a big tough fellow like you can’t be afraid of a short drive into town with his parole officer.”

“I didn’t survive years in the nick, to die in a car crash a couple of days before I’m due out. I might look like a common crim but I’m not stupid.”

“Don’t take me the wrong way. You’re a clever man and your intelligence shows in your eyes and your attitude. I’m sorry I offended you. You’ll be right. I wish I was coming.”
“Aw, thanks. Enjoy the cuppa. See ya later.” Kevin smiles, exposing deep dimples, and the years of hardship slip from his face, leaving a bemused boyish expression.

Natalie is at the gate waiting for him, with the “Order for the Temporary Removal of a Prisoner”, and Kevin jumps into the passenger seat of the van. Natalie looks nervous. “I hate driving this thing, especially when I’m being watched. I wish that lot would bugger off and mind their own business.” She grimaces at the group of inmates, waiting for a screw to escort them out to their work on the farm, and reverses out of the car park, spraying the onlookers with gravel.

On the fifteen-kilometre trip into town, Kevin removes his hand, which has been braced on the dashboard, to wave to the boys on work relief at the war memorial park. It takes a while for Kevin to open a bank account and they have to wait for ages at the R.T.A. They don’t have much time left to shop and Kevin can’t believe Natalie is so straight; she won’t even let him buy chewing gum. It’s a banned substance but he thinks that he’s not likely to get caught with it. Natalie goes to the toilet and Kevin ducks into the Coles bottle shop and grabs a bottle of Jim Beam, which he shoves down the front of his pants, under his jacket.

On the drive back to the prison, Natalie discusses Kevin’s release plans. He tells her that his mother will be picking him up and that he will stay at her place in Sydney. Natalie explains that he will need to report to a Parole Officer in Sydney.

Back at the prison, Natalie goes up to her office and Kevin returns to his cell to unpack his shopping. He’s exhausted after the day in town. Everything has changed over the years and he feels old. He had to get Natalie to show him how to use the “hole in the wall” when he opened his account at the ANZ bank. People were lined up behind them, waiting their turn, and he felt like a real goose.
Doris wants to see Kevin at ten the next morning to finalise his release arrangements. When he enters her office, Doris and Frankie welcome him. On Doris’ desk is a cake cut into four slices, a plate of Tim Tams and cups laid out for morning tea.

“What’s this?” Kevin says.

“We wanted to give you a little farewell morning tea, to wish you all the best in the future,” says Doris.

“Wow, this is very thoughtful of you, thanks. I’ll be mother and pour the tea, shall I?” He looms above the two ladies, as he clasps the china teapot and carefully fills the cups.

As he leaves the office, Kevin realises that there are some things he will miss; there’s always somebody to cadge a cigga from and shoot the shit with in prison. People know how to show respect in the system. There’s no line-jumping and it doesn’t take long for the new young fellas to learn the rules.

Kevin has admitted to Frankie that he has an anger problem.

“I’m not looking forward to returning to Centrelink,’ he reveals to her on their final session before his release. “My last visit didn’t go well.”

“Tell me about it.”

“My dole had been stopped and, when I paid Centrelink a visit to find out why, they treated me like a dog.”

“I know the staff can be pedantic but surely it wasn’t that bad?”

“I lined up, waited my turn for eons and, when I finally reached the counter, I was told to go get a ticket and line up again.”

“That sort of thing happens to most of us at some stage.”
“Not me. I jumped the counter and threatened the staff. I heard one of the other employees phone the police so I shoved my dole form in the wooden box meant for that purpose, planning for a quick escape. The problem was that, when I posted the form, I accidentally dropped my car keys in to the box. I yelled at the staff to get them out for me so that I could get out of there, but they wouldn’t help, just screamed. I had no choice, I kicked the box to splinters, grabbed my keys and belted downstairs. I ran straight into the wallopers who were taking two steps at a time on their way up.”

“I’m hoping you have learned to control your temper. To be on the safe side, I’ll organise for you to attend an Anger Management program in Sydney.” Frankie prints out a referral for Kevin and passes it across the desk, along with a yellow post-it note. When Kevin looks puzzled, she explains, “It’s my mobile number. You can call me if you feel the need.”

The note burns a hole in Kevin’s pocket as he goes about his business that day. Maybe Frankie’s not as professional as she appears.

Kevin has already spoken to Jenny the Welfare Officer. It was his first appointment with her and will be his last. It’s common knowledge that, as a rule, Welfare are rarely helpful. At almost any request from a new prisoner, an inmate will answer, “Ask Welfare; they care,” or “Who do you think I am, bloody welfare?”

Kevin was already aware of the advice Jenny had given, ‘When inmates exit the system they are given $120 gate money and I’ll organise a half payment from Centrelink.” Kevin’s going to spend his on clothes. It’s embarrassing being seen on the outside wearing prison greens.

On his last night in prison, Kevin dreams of the coming day. It’s a sunny afternoon and he walks out the gate at three, just as the screws are swapping shifts.
Waiting for him at the wheel of a black Porsche, is Frankie. They drive away toward the mountains in the west. The screws watch in amazement.

In reality, Kevin wakes at six, and by seven he is out the gate, where his sister Ruth is sitting in a beat up old kombi. He climbs in, pecks her on the cheek and prepares himself for a slow trip to Sydney. Ruth’s a nurse and she has a late shift. Before she drops Kevin at his mother’s, Ruth hands him the phone he had asked her to pick up for him. “It’s your getting-out present from me. Try to stay out of trouble love.”

“Thanks, don’t work too hard.”

Maggie is so happy to have her boy back that her joy is contagious. Kevin feels safe, as he eases himself into life on the outside. His mum roasts a chook, like the old days. The only difference being that she does the vegetables in the microwave. She takes off her floral apron and sits with Kevin, at the round table in the kitchen. Bowls of cashews and potato chips are carefully arranged on the embroidered cloth; an attempt to create a festive air to this special occasion. Maggie seems oblivious to the small cockroaches, which have infiltrated the kitchen and are scurrying up the walls and along the benches. The tap in the stained, enamel kitchen sink drips constantly; the only background noise to their muted conversation. They have a lot of catching up to do. Maggie has not been able to visit Kevin since he was transferred to the prison farm two years ago.

“Is that girl with the artificial leg still visiting you?”

“Shirley? She dropped me years ago. I’ve had a couple of girls interested since then.”

“I had a call from Carmel, you know, Doug’s wife. She offered to give me a lift up to the prison farm but I wasn’t feeling up to it on the day.”
“Yeah, Doug told me. Carmel usually puts me on her visits list and I share the time with Doug.”

“I’ve been so concerned about you Kev. Your sisters don’t like to talk about you being locked away. I suppose they feel ashamed. It’s been lonely for me not having anyone to talk with.”

“I’m sorry Mum. You shouldn’t worry so much. I know how to look after myself.”

Maggie’s inhibitions drop, as she consumes her third glass of cask Riesling, and the pain and fear she has borne over the years begin to surface. At eleven, she hugs Kevin tight and retires to her bed in tears. Kevin finishes off the cask in front of the TV. He tries to phone Frankie and reaches her message bank, “I’m not available right now. Leave your name and number after the beep.” Frankie’s voice sounds soft and sexy. Kevin leaves a brief message, telling her his new mobile number. Before he turns in for the night, he checks that the doors are locked and switches off the lights.

Kevin wakes to a loud banging noise at five and runs to the window to see what is going on. The strangest thing he can imagine is happening out there on the footpath. A truck, with a long mechanical arm, is picking up their dirt bin and emptying the contents into a hole in the back of the truck. Times have changed. What happened to the garbo with the tin on his back, racing along beside the truck?

The excitement of freedom becomes a reality when Maggie lends him her car the following night. The boys have planned a welcome out night. Manny owns a club just down from the Cross and they’ll start off there. Kevin used to know Sydney like the back of his hand, but now there are one-way streets and no-through-roads everywhere; makes it nearly impossible for him to get around.
Not another bloody no right turn. “Fuck off, you stupid old geezer,” he shouts, as he finds himself edging along behind a BMW, with a hat on the back window ledge. Feeling the sweat pouring from his face, Kevin pulls into the kerb to cool off and find his bearings.

When he reaches Manny’s club at nine, the doorman shakes his head and tells him his attire doesn’t meet the dress code. He requests to see the manager and five minutes later Manny greets him at the door.

“Come around the back mate. I’ll fix you up in no time.” They go down the side passage and enter the club from the rear. There’s a dressing room where Manny keeps a few changes of clothes for himself. Inside, Kevin notices a long bench with a lighted mirror and stools. A huge arrangement of cosmetics is laid out across the bench.

“For the girls,” Manny explains. “They like to keep tidy. Here, try this on for size.”

The jacket is fine. For some reason Manny looks worried. “Did you hear about Cloghead?” he asks.

“Not lately.” Cloghead and Kevin go way back. They are both electricians and pulled a few stunts when they were in Cessnock prison together. There are not many places an electrician is excluded from when he is needed in a prison. They have access to roof spaces and can climb around undetected for hours. Kevin’s lost contact with Cloghead since their time in Cessnock. He feels curious that his old friend is back in the can. “What’s he been up to?”

“He got twenty years for something he didn’t do.”

“Yeah! That sounds like Cloghead. What didn’t he do?”

“He didn’t run fast enough.”
“Aw, get fucked Manny. You’re right though, Cloghead couldn’t even run faster than his missus. She clocked him over the head with one of those cork-soled shoes when she caught him playing around with her young niece.”

Manny drapes his arm around Kevin’s shoulder and they enter the club through the kitchen.

“The boys will turn up a bit later. Take a seat and check out the menu. I’ll get you a drink. Choose anything you like. Tonight’s on the house.”

A handsome woman is singing “Mac the Knife”, accompanied by a blue’s band. The only other customers are gorgeous girls, sitting in pairs at the tables. Manny notices Kevin looking at them.

“They’re backpackers from the local hostel,” he says. “I pay them ten bucks an hour to sit around and look pretty. It’s good for business; attracts the men and unaccompanied women are more likely to come in if they see other women sitting on their own.”

Kevin checks the menu and orders a whole bream, cooked Thai style. Manny’s beautiful Asian wife serves the meal and welcomes him to the club. Groups of people start to file down the stairs. Before he can finish the meal there are ten people crowded around the table.

“Hi, I’m Ann.” A skinny young brunette squeezes in beside Kevin. She arrived with Carlos and is clutching a red rose in a cylinder. “I haven’t known Carlos long. I’m a teacher at his kid’s school. I don’t know what the principal would say if he could see me here with you guys.”

Carlos pulls Kevin aside. “It’s my shout. Give us a hand carrying these drinks Kev.” On the way to the bar he says, “Don’t take Ann too seriously mate. Women suppose us crims to be men of raw tastes. Ann likes being seen out with us. It affirms
the potency of her sex appeal and gives her a taste of excitement. She’s harmless enough.”

Carlos is a career criminal and Kevin understands why Ann is feeling proud to be in his company. He feels the same way.

The action is slow at Manny’s and a consensus is made for the group to walk to another nightclub, The Basement. The dance floor is packed. Kevin gyrates to the music with Ann. It’s hot and Kevin unbuttons his shirt and throws it on the floor. The men cheer him on. The mobile in his trouser pocket rings. He moves away from the dance floor to answer it and spots Ronan sitting in a corner at the back of the club. He presses the end-call button, retrieves his shirt and walks toward Ronan.
It’s a relief to get out of the Sydney traffic. The drive up the F3 to Newcastle is a breeze, compared to the chaos on the roads between the airport and the Newcastle turnoff. I’ve cut my time in Sydney short. Ronan paid me well for the job we planned, back when I was in the nick. Ronan lent me a Mauser, a sniper’s rifle with high optical telescopic sights, and gave me a time and a place. I carried out his instructions and Ian Jones had so many enemies that I was not even on the police list of suspects when his body was discovered on a deserted road west of Sydney. Ronan had lured him there on the pretext of a drug pick-up.

The early morning drive helps to clear my head of any doubts I had of knocking off Ian, and I’m feeling magnanimous when I turn into the front yard of the little Stockton house at ten. I knock and Libby opens the door. She’s dressed in an old, white nightdress. Her hair is a mop of tangled, red curls. Her nose matches her hair; it’s red and chafed. Surprise and delight register on her face. She looks at me as if I’m her own personal Jesus.

“I’m here to cheer you up and look after you. You look like you could do with a friend.”

“I’ve been in bed with the flu. I feel such a wreck.”

I plonk my bag on the floor and zip it open. “I’ve bought you a present.”

Libby takes the gift-wrapped jeweller’s box and carefully opens it. “It’s an engagement ring isn’t it?”

I nod.

“It’s beautiful, thank you.”
She puts the ring on her finger and hugs me. The diamond solitaire ring suits her. She doesn’t usually wear jewellery, except her watch. I chose the ring because it was similar in style to the one my mum wears. It’s simple and old-fashioned and that’s what I like about it. “There’s more.” I pull out an old notebook and hand it to her. “I’ve been collecting recipes since I met you. I’m going to cook you something different every night.” It’s a gesture that she didn’t expect and she seems suitably impressed. She pushes me on to the tangled pile of sheets on the bed and flings a leg across my body, slowly rocking back and forth. I pull the nightie off, over her head, and feel that I’m truly at home. A sweaty half hour later, Libby gets up to take a piss and asks if I want a cup of tea. “No thanks love. I bought our breakfast on the way here.” I pull out a white, paper parcel and a bottle of wine. Unwrapping the parcel Libby wrinkles her nose. “You bought prawns for breakfast?”

“Yeah, I thought we could eat them while we’re watching the video.” I hand her a Sylvester Stallone movie. Libby cuts a lemon in two and we settle on the crumpled bed, with a couple of wine glasses and a bowl for the prawn shells. After the movie is over she says, “It’s gorgeous outside. Come for a walk on the beach?”

“Nah,” I say. “Hop in and have a shower and I’ll take you for a drive in my new car.”

“Where did you get the money for all this?”

“I’ve got a job in Sydney. It’s only two days a week. My mate, who owns the club, is taking me on to provide security. He has a friend with a garage and that’s who I bought the car from. I’ve paid a deposit and he’ll take instalments from my pay.”

“When are you going back to Sydney?”

“Not till the weekend. Don’t worry; I’ll stay at my Mum’s, when I’m there. You can come along as well sometimes.”
We drive down Mitchell Street and stop to buy fresh rolls and salad stuff for tea. We park the car near the breakwater and watch as the tugs escort a ship out to sea.

“Kevin, come on, let’s get some fresh air.”

“Nah, I’ll go for a walk later this evening, when it’s a bit quieter.”

* 

Having Kevin home is different to what Libby expected. When he’s in Newcastle, he visits friends most days. For someone who has been locked up for twenty-five years, it’s amazing the number of people he knows. He takes Libby out to dinner at the Little Swallows once a week. It’s their favourite restaurant in Newcastle. They don’t need to see the menu to order. They share garlic bread and crumbed eggplant. Over a bottle of wine, they watch the colourful parade of pedestrians. On their walk down Beaumont Street after the meal, Kevin always runs into some acquaintance or another. He rarely introduces Libby. She feels like the recluse in the relationship.

Libby feels resentful when Kevin goes out in the evenings and doesn’t take her with him. He’s usually home by nine, however she still feels left out and rejected.

“You wouldn’t have anything in common with my friends,” he says.

This is probably true. If Libby still saw her old friends, they wouldn’t accept him either. Not if they were aware of his history.

Libby’s relationship with Kevin is like any relationship. You have to learn to take the good with the bad. Kevin has some good qualities and Libby knows he loves her, even if she does complain about some aspects of their life together.

Kevin is visiting someone called Harry tonight. He lives at the Junction and Carlos is coming up from Sydney for some sort of business discussion with them. He says he may be later home than usual and not to worry about cooking anything for
him. Libby had an early tea of scrambled eggs and salad, a couple of whiskies and settles in for a night of reading and TV. She won’t bother waiting up.
I love Friday afternoons. I feel like I’m escaping from all the responsibilities of the prison, and my work as a psychologist there, as I throw a few things for the weekend into an overnight bag, chuck it onto the backseat of my Mazda and head off down the highway to Newcastle.

Before I know it, I’m at Rutherford and checking my make-up in the rear-view mirror, while I wait at the traffic lights. I’m not heading home to the boys. Harry, a man I met on a wild night out in Muswellbrook, is having a barbecue for some friends and has invited me.

As I park my car in the wide driveway, Harry beckons to me from the balcony where he’s sitting with a couple of men. I can’t hear the voices of any other women as I make my way through the open backdoor and up the internal stairs.

“Frankie, I’d like you to meet Carlos and Kevin.” Kevin looks as surprised as I feel. “Hi Kevin, how are you? It’s a small world.” I say.

“Very well Frankie, and yourself?”

I feel compromised. There are all sorts of issues here, including those of confidentiality. “Kevin, where do you know Harry from?” I ask.

“Oh, Harry and I go way back,” he says.

I sit in the only available chair, between Carlos and Kevin. With a nod of his head, Carlos has dismissed me and is speaking quietly with Harry. While he talks, he’s mulling up and rolling a reefer.

“Relax Frankie,” Kevin says. “You’re with friends. Here, have a glass of champagne.”
I take the flute from Kevin and an experimental sip proves it to be the real thing. I’m more familiar with the sparkling wine my small group of women friends call champagne. I could get used to this. The sun is slowly dropping towards the mountains in the west. It will be a beautiful sunset. A drift of cloud across the blue sky is rosy with the promise of a fiery crimson display as the evening progresses.

It’s difficult to maintain a professional stance in this setting. I’ve always felt a bond with Kevin, even though he was on my case list, and now he has me in stitches as he relates some of the situations he has encountered since his release from prison.

Carlos interrupts our conversation as he refills my glass. He says, “I’ve been having a few personal problems lately Kevin.”

“That’s not like you, Carlos. What’s up?”

“I caught my wife in bed with my best friend.”

“What! What’d you do?”

“I gave her a gobful of course.”

“What about your best friend.”

“I told him BAD DOG.”

Kevin grins and says, “Alright, you got me on that one,” and takes a long sip on his drink. Carlos returns to his conversation with Harry and I look around for something to eat. The best I can find is a packet of Kettle chips as Harry hasn’t started on the barbecue. The men are drinking bourbon and don’t seem worried about eating. It’s pleasant sitting in the open as the sky darkens.

Carlos takes his leave. “Promised the missus a night at the club.”

With Carlos out of the picture, Kevin moves closer to me. He reassures me that he’s been attending the appointments I organised for him and complying with his parole orders.
“That psychiatrist you referred me to is something else. I reckon he’s on the bottle. He usually looks hung over during our sessions and I swear I can smell alcohol on him. Apart from that, everything’s going really well. I’ve even found a job.”

Harry has not joined in our conversation and he seems edgy. I’ve nearly finished the bottle of champagne and don’t want to drink any more. Apparently unaware of the growing tension, Kevin downs more bourbon. I notice him slip some white powder into the drink. Soon Kevin has a new excitement in his voice. I haven’t seen him like this before and he’s making me nervous.

Harry takes the chair Carlos has vacated and says, “You two seem to have a lot in common.” It sounds like a challenge.

“Yeah,” Kevin says. “Frankie knows all about me and I’m catching up with what I don’t know about her.”

I’m out of my depth. Harry has criminal connections and I’m not just referring to Kevin. With his black shirt, thick, gold jewellery and arrogant attitude, it’s obvious to me that Carlos is a drug dealer. Harry seems to be oblivious to my discomfort.

“She’s a bit out of your league, don’t you think, Kevin?”

“Get fucked.”

Within seconds, the two men are grappling against the balcony rail. I scream when I see a glint of steel in Kevin’s hand. Blood darkens the front of Harry’s shirt.

I’m very frightened now and, not wanting to get involved in a stabbing, I run downstairs, call triple 0 and ask for the police.

*  

I’m fiery when I’m on the Speed but Harry had it coming to him. He swung at me when I told him to ‘butt-out’. I always carry a knife, for protection. I only nicked him, nothing serious. Trust Frankie to panic over a little scuffle and call the wallopers.
I’d expected the prison psychologist to exhibit a little more restraint. I did my best to exit from a nasty situation with some dignity. I’m still as agile as I was in my teens, when I perfected my skills at scaling buildings during my spider man stint following the discovery there was a living to be made out of entering high-rise units. The owners rarely locked their balcony doors through a false sense of security. They don’t bother to hide or lock away money or jewellery. It was as easy as taking candy off a baby.

The minute I hear those sirens, I plop to the ground from Harry’s balcony and I’m on my feet and running. I feel like an easy target on the road, so climb a fence and take to the backyards. Unfortunately, in my exertions, I lose my wallet. I retrace my steps, too late. Blue lights flashing in the back lane warn me that I’ve no choice other than to abandon the search for this evidence of my identity and the remnants of my Speed, or risk being caught. I’ve no idea what Harry told the wallopers and for all I know I’ve been charged with malicious assault using a weapon.

A dark-coloured tracksuit, begging to be snowdropped, is pegged to the clothesline in a yard I’m passing through. Fortunately it fits and I dispose of my once white, linen shirt and new Levis and the bloodied blade in a wheelie bin. My best bet is to hitch a ride to Sydney while it’s still dark. Before I was released from the nick, Errol gave me the name and address of his missus who works in a pub and lives at Bankstown. He told me that Chelsea would put me up if I needed a bed in Sydney.

I’ve always been lucky at cadging a ride and, within minutes of putting out my thumb on the freeway, a car screeches to a halt ahead of me and I’m beckoned in. The young driver and I engage in some idle chitchat and he readily accepts a smoke. He drops me off in the city and I head to Mick’s place. Mick is an old prison inmate. He’ll give me a lift and I’ll have a chance to retrieve my weapon. I had the foresight
to purchase a 410 sawn-off shotgun and bury it in his backyard last time I was out. It’ll come in handy. In this predicament I’m going to need cash.

Mick drops me off at Bankstown. Chelsea lives in a neat, little bungalow in a quiet street. I ditch the gun in among the flowering azaleas where it’ll be safe for the time being, and ring the doorbell. Chelsea’s younger than I imagined. She’s a pale woman, her black hair pulled tightly back from her face with an elastic band. She’s wearing tiny pyjama shorts and a tee shirt that exposes her midriff. The wing of a blue bird on a downward spiral shows above the broad elastic of her pants. The tattoo promising further delights on exposure.

“Hi, sorry to disturb at such an early hour. I’m Kevin Sullivan. I’m a mate of Errol’s.”

“Come in Kevin. Errol said you may turn up here some time.” Chelsea invites me into a country-style kitchen. The place is well appointed and scrupulously clean. A jar of nasturtiums decorates the round pine table. It reminds me of my mum’s place.

“Sit down. Would you like tea or coffee?”

“Tea thanks. Very weak and black, no sugar.”

I explain to Chelsea that I’ve had some bad luck and need a room for a week or two. I can’t pay her upfront but I’m good for my word and will have the money before I leave. I’ll keep out of her way. I won’t attract any trouble and I’m happy to help out around the house and yard. Oh, and as an added bonus, I can cook. Chelsea is sipping strong, black coffee laced with sugar. An ashtray between us on the table is rapidly filling up with butts. She lights a cigarette, drags on it a couple of times, extinguishes it, and lights another fag.

“Where’s your kit, Kevin?”

“This is it; all I have are the clothes on my back.”
“You look like you could do with a shower and a sleep. You can use the spare room and I’ll find some of Errol’s gear for you to change into. I don’t start work until later tonight but I’m going shopping with a friend this morning. Do you need me to pick anything up for you?”

“Nah, I’ll make do with Errol’s old gear, thanks.”

“If I’m out when you wake up, help yourself to some lunch.”

My room has floral wallpaper and a doll collection on a shelf above the dressing table. I lie on the doona and wait until I hear the door close and the sound of her car reversing out of the front gate. As soon as she’s gone I whip out and retrieve my gun and hide it under my pillow. I’ve landed on my feet. After a hot shower and some bacon and eggs I go across the road to the public phone and try to call Libby. She must be out. She’s not answering the phone. I’m exhausted. I flop on the bed and pass out.

Hours later the sound of giggles and murmuring from the living room intrude on my uneasy sleep. The room is hot and the row of dolls witness my discomfort with unblinking stares. When I locate the toilet, another doll, it’s skirt covering a toilet roll, watches indifferently while I piss. I find Chelsea divvying up some loot with another girl.

When she said she was going shopping she wasn’t kidding. Bottles of perfume, underwear and cosmetics are in neat piles between the girls. I recall Errol telling me that Chelsea did some professional shopping (shop lifting) to supplement her income.

“Kevin, meet my business partner, Linda.”

A plump mousy haired woman turns and smiles at me.
“I bought you a surprise.” Chelsea tosses a pair of Calvin Klein jocks in my direction. They’re not my style, or my size, and I need them like a hole in the head, but I smile graciously and thank her.

“Aren’t you going to try them on and give us a show? We could do with a bit of entertainment for our trouble.”

“Sorry girls, my fashion parade days are well and truly behind me. I’m handy in the kitchen though if you would like me to knock you up some dinner.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kevin.” Chelsea says, “There’s not much in the way of ingredients here and I’d hate you to mess up my clean kitchen.”

Linda looks disappointed. She doesn’t give the impression that she’d say no to a good chow down. The girls spend the afternoon sorting through a tray of jewellery and trying on the pieces they like. Chelsea looks like a Russian princess, decked out in all that finery. I reckon she’s giving me the come-on and she looks like she’d be a good fuck. I’m not interested though. No way would I root Errol’s missus. He’s a mate and, apart from that, he’s locked up and it wouldn’t be right.

Eventually they tire of the sorting through and sharing out of their booty. Linda fiddles with the remote until she finds a “make over” program and the three of us marvel at the wonders of modern-day cosmetic surgery. With enough money, you too could eat all you wanted, do no exercise and then have liposuction to suck all the fat globules out of your big fat arse.

With this reassuring thought, Chelsea orders a couple of pizzas and we eat in front of the TV, washing the food down with a lager. The pizza doesn’t come close to the standard of the ones we cooked up in the nick and it’s nowhere near as healthy. I’d prefer a bourbon and Coke, I’m not a beer drinker; however, beggars can’t be choosers.
When Linda leaves, Chelsea does herself up like a to go to work. Full war-paint, stiletto heels and a revealing evening dress. “It must be some classy pub you work in. I don’t see many barmaids dressed like that.”

“Can you keep a secret?” she says. “I told Errol a small furphy. I found the pay was a lot better working at Naughty Knickers as an escort and I have financial commitments which he can’t help with while he’s in the nick. Did he mention our son Lennie to you? I’ll be having a late night and Lennie’s due back from his Gran’s in the morning and I’d appreciate it if you could keep an eye on him.”

With that, she’s out the door in a flash and gone. I spend another long night in the heat of that polyester covered doona.

“Mum, let me in, I’m back.”

Some wakeup call! I pull on my trackie daks and open the door to bright sunshine and Lennie. He’s a freckle-faced, skinny little kid of about eleven.

“Where’s Mum? Who are you?”

“Your mum’s at work and I’m Kevin, a friend of your dad.”

Lennie stomps past me into the kitchen, where he loads a bowl with six Weetbix, half a bottle of milk and a small pyramid of sugar.

“You’re gonna have ta take me to school,” he splutters though a mouthful of cereal. I suppose I am. At least it’ll get the little bastard out of the house.

“Give us some money for lunch.”

“I’m short of change,” I say. “I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

“I don’t want no poxy sandwich.” He throws a kick in my direction as he shoves his way past me to his bedroom. Ten minutes later, he emerges dressed in a black hooded jacket and jeans. He has a knapsack on his back.

“Ready to go?”
“Don’t bother, I’ll find my own way.”

“Whatever. See ya later, Lennie.”

After a quick clean-up and a shower, I close the door behind me and head for the Cross. The usual motley crew of street frogs are hanging in the park, waiting to use the public phone. I recognise a familiar dial. “Luke!”

“Hey Kev, how long you been out?” he says. “Where you staying? We’ve some catching up to do?”

Yeah, as if I’d trust that dog. “I’m in Sydney for a visit. I’ve got a van up at Coffs Harbour. You’ll have to come and visit. Give us your mobile number.” There’s always a market for drugs and I’ve got the contacts. All I need is some cash.

When I arrive back at Chelsea’s she’s waiting for me.

“Lennie’s not home yet. He’s two hours late. I thought you were keeping an eye on him. Did you take him to school?”

“Umm, no.”

“You fucking lazy pig. I’m feeding you, clothing you and giving you free rent and you can’t be bothered to help me out.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

She won’t listen. Ten minutes later, Lennie lobs in.

“Where the fuck have you been? You know the rules you little bludger.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he says. “I was walking through the park by myself on the way home from school and some dirty old man stopped me and tried to drag me into the public toilets. I got away and hid in the bushes. I was too scared to come out until he was gone.”

Lennie’s lying but Chelsea believes his trumped up story.
“That’s it. I’m reporting this to the police. What’s the place coming to when an innocent child can’t walk home from school without being accosted?”

Chelsea’s dialling triple 0. This is all I need, some greasy wallopers on my case. I’ve got to get out of here.

I grab Errol’s denim jacket and use it to hide my gun and before I exit out the back door I notice Chelsea’s car keys on the table. She won’t mind me borrowing her car. I’m sure she won’t dog on me. The darlin’, she’s left nearly a full tank of fuel. I’ll thank Errol when I catch up with him.

I decide to head up to Newcastle. I’ll find a small suburban shopping centre to target when I get there. The car’s an old VC Commodore but it’ll have to do for now. I’ll ditch it as soon as I get a chance. Chelsea’s overnight bag is perched on the back seat. When I reach the outskirts of Newcastle, I pull over in a secluded spot and raid the bag. Not much of interest; no cash or cards. I can find a use for her black stockings though and the bag itself may come in handy.

It looks like I’m going to have to go back to stick-ups in the short term. Monday morning’s the best time to do business. Get in early at the bank before the armoured car comes to pick up the money.

I spend the afternoon on the prowl looking for a worksite and when the crew leave at six I use the tyre lever to break into their shed and steal a sledge hammer. If it’s to prove successful, this exercise has to be about preparation and foresight, not easy when you’re on the run. I sleep in the car; I’m too hyper to worry about food, and in the morning I search out my perfect mark, a bank which I can see into so that I know when the night safe is opened.

I park the car in the shade of a tree, where I’m not too obvious, and wait. It’s just a matter of keeping an eye out now. The time’s right! No holding back, I’m out
the car and pulling the stocking over my head. The door shatters when I hit it with the sledge hammer and I enter the bank. A woman shrieks, “He’s armed!”

The security screens shoot up, protecting the staff behind the counter. Too bad about the men emptying the overnight safe.

“Stand and deliver!” Yeah, I did steal that directive from Ned Kelly. What robber worth his salt wouldn’t? I hold Chelsea’s open bag out for them to fill with notes. I can hear sirens. I’m out the door and putting in the long ones. I left the keys in the car. A getaway driver would have come in handy, but then the fewer people involved in this occupation the less complicated the end result.

As I pull out from the kerb, the police cars roar up. Fuck! I’m surrounded. I’m too old for this shit. I emerge from the car, my hands raised above my head. They’re on to me like a colony of stinger ants. I’m on the ground. Steel capped boots are kicking me in the gut. At a safe distance, a captivated audience excitedly watch the string of events until the handcuffs are clipped on and I’m hauled into the back of a paddy wagon. One of the officers recognises me.

“It’s Kevin Sullivan, the stupid old cunt; give him one for me will ya?”
It’s four-thirty and I’ve just settled down to watch the soapies with a scotch and dry for company when the phone rings. *That’ll be Soph*, I think, as I go into my bedroom to answer. “Hello darling.”

“Hello Libby, it’s Kevin. I’ve been locked up.”

It’s a shock to hear from him. His voice has a nasal quality I don’t remember. He sounds different to the man I thought I knew. I hesitate before I reply: “What happened?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll be in Newcastle court in the morning. You can see me in the cells first thing. I have to go now. Love you.”

I have a restless night. I know that if I have any sense I won’t go. I wake early, have a hot shower and dress in my most conservative outfit, a charcoal suit. I catch the ferry across from Stockton and walk to the courthouse. It’s another rainy day. Barb, a court volunteer I met through my volunteer work, greets me as I enter the foyer. “Hello Libby, you’re not working today are you?”

“No, I’m here to support a friend. Any chance I’ll be able to see him in the cells?”

“You’ve left it a bit late. Check the list and see what court the hearing is in.”

“Thanks Barb, see you later.”

The Salvation Army lady is sitting at her small table outside the courtrooms. She provides tea, coffee and biscuits. People pay a coin if they have one. She always has a smile and a kind word. At nine-thirty I join the people who file into the Courtroom.
Kevin is the first on the list. He enters the court accompanied by a police officer. He looks awful. He has a black eye and there are bloodstains on the front of his shirt. He’s handcuffed. His eyes seek me out and he acknowledges me with a smile and a nod.

I learn that Kevin has been charged with Armed Robbery. The police have not granted bail. He faces the magistrate, who peruses his criminal history and also denies bail. He will have to go before the Parole Board when a hearing can be arranged. He waves to me as he’s led away. I’m suddenly completely alone, with no chance of being close to him or talking to him. He doesn’t belong to me anymore. He belongs to the system. They’ll be holding him at Silverwater Correctional Centre. I don’t want to go back to trekking around the state visiting him in prison.

In a stupor I walk back to the terminal in the rain and watch the ferry cross the harbour towards me. I board and return to Stockton. I walk over to the Washtub, order a Bundy and rum and sit on a stool facing a window looking out over the harbour. The water is grey and a curtain of rain nearly obscures the buildings on the other side.

A man with dark curly hair tied back in a pigtail takes the stool next to mine.

“Hi, can I buy you another drink? I’m Jake.” He offers his hand.

“Yes thanks, I’m Libby, and it’s a Bundy and coke.”

Jake orders the drink and then sits opposite me and tells me about himself. He’s a licensed fisherman and owns one of the trawlers moored opposite the Boat Rowers hotel. He usually drinks there but got a bit boisterous the night before and has been banned for a week.

“I’ve seen you somewhere before. Do you walk a blue heeler on the beach?”
Shit, I hope he didn’t see me trying to train Floyd with that ridiculous long lead. I’m attempting to maintain some dignity here. It’s difficult enough with my soggy suit and frizzy hair.

“Sometimes,” I say. “I love to watch the boats going out. I’ve always felt romantic about fishermen who go out to sea in trawlers.”

He smiles.

I feel encouraged to go on. “When I was fourteen and we went on family holidays to the beach, I used to watch the fishing boats crossing the bar, the boat running-lights dancing in the salty mist, and I wished I were on one of them. To be honest, I think I was attracted to the young deck lads as much as to the sense of adventure.”

Jake places his weathered hand over mine. “What are you doing here, dressed up in your good suit, soaked by the rain and drinking on your own?”

For the first time I confide in another person and tell him what has been going on in my life with Kevin. Jake listens with interest and then says, “How about we pick up some wine from the bottle shop and go back to my place. It’s just down the road and it’ll be warmer than here. We can have a proper conversation and some privacy.”

Jake has a bike which he unchains from a post outside the pub. We stop at the bottle shop and buy wine and he walks beside me, wheeling his bike through the muddy puddles caused by the rain.

He lives in a Housing Commission flat. There’s only one room. The fridge, stove and kitchen sink are in a small alcove against one wall. A double bed takes up most of the space. The toilet and shower are in a tiny enclosed area near the door. The room is chock-a-block with nautical paraphernalia. Paintings and prints of seascapes and sailing ships vie for space on the walls. Driftwood and shells fill every corner.
There are fishing nets, rods, tackle, anchors and compasses. Plaster mermaids and fish hang from the ceiling. The place reeks of fish.

I perch on the end of the bed and Jake opens the wine, it’s a rough white. He pours some into a tumbler and passes it to me. “Cheers! Down the hatch.”

I’ve never seen anyone drink wine that fast. It’s like he’s taking medicine. He sits at my feet and removes my shoes. Taking one foot into his lap, he massages the instep, ankle and calf with a tight grip and then gives each toe a tug. I’m in a euphoric haze. I realise that my need for companionship and love precedes my need for any one person in particular.

As I sink slowly into the mattress, Jake produces a bottle of baby oil and offers to massage my back. I don’t mind at all when he unbuttons my top and removes my bra.

“You better take off the rest of your gear. I wouldn’t want to ruin your good suit with the oil.”

My eyes are heavy and I feel completely relaxed. Jake must have taken off his clothes; his chest is warm against my back. His arms encircle me and his fingers fumble as he attempts to push his limp penis inside me. A couple of lurches and I’m aware of a damp stickiness between my thighs. He rolls over on to his back and starts to snore quietly. That must be “it”.

I gaze at the mermaids and fish swirling above me for ten minutes and then slowly edge off the bed. I retrieve my clothes from the dusty floor, dress quietly and slip outside. The rain has stopped. The last of the frangipani leaves are shivering in the trees as I walk home in the dripping dark night. I take my shoes off and run the last couple of blocks. It’s good to be home.
Although I was hurt and disappointed with Kevin and for some time had a sense of betrayal, we still have a strong bond and I resumed visits a month after he was locked up. I'm friends with some of the other women visitors and we take turns to drive to the prison. One of the girls, Claire, an innocent looking, fragile blonde is, at twenty-six, a seasoned prison visitor and wouldn’t dream of going to see her man without the requisite small plastic bag of white powder concealed in her body. Marg has four kids under six and dresses them beautifully each weekend for their dad. My life seems relatively trouble free.
I’ve been described as a recidivist, a career criminal, a bad bastard and a stupid old boob-rat. I accept that I’m all of the above. I’ve spent thirty years of my life in prison. My most recent sentence is for fifteen years, with seven on the bottom, for Armed Robbery. It’s taken me three years to work my way from Long Bay back to the prison farm, where I was incarcerated in 1993. It feels familiar here, like I’ve never been away, but obviously some things have changed, an example being the staff members. There are a few die-hards still here but most have fled to greener fields.

I’m standing having a smoke while waiting for the muster siren when I see a vaguely familiar woman walking through the compound. She stops abruptly in front of me and before I can nick off she recognises me. I feel goose-bumps on my skin when I feel her gaze on my bent head as I try to turn away. She put a lot of work into helping me through my parole period when I was last at the farm and I stuffed up.

“Kevin, what on earth are you doing here? I thought we had seen the last of you years ago.”

I grimace. “G’day Natalie. Don’t worry I’m not on your case list this time. Had a minor hiccup with my parole. Nothing serious.” I check out her expanding waist-line. “Looks like you’ve been keeping busy yourself.”

Natalie blushes and places a protective hand over her small bump. “You’re right Kevin. I’ve found a life for myself outside work at the prison.” She flutters the fingers on her left hand and exposes the band of gold and a blue sapphire engagement ring. “Just as well you’re not one of my parolees because I’m leaving in a couple of weeks.”
I stub out my cigarette and wander off to join a huddle of men outside the kitchen.

Now I’m here my history is catching up with me. I have a dilemma with my old mate Errol. I heard rumours at Silverwater and Cessnock, when I was passing through, that he has it in for me. Errol has a philosophy similar to my own, *revenge is a dish best eaten cold*.

Chelsea, his wife, wasn’t happy about me taking her car when I left her place in a hurry, way back when I was on the run. She told Errol that I’d stood over her for money and also raped her. I knew she would be dirty at me but I didn’t expect her to be so viciously dishonest. I may have borrowed her car without her permission but it was an emergency. I pride myself on being a loyal and honourable friend and I would never rape a woman or even have a sexual relationship with a mate’s missus.

Errol believed what she told him. She’s lucky I didn’t reciprocate and let her little secret out. She’s on the game and not the sweet prison wife she pretends to be.

Errol’s an Islander and a big fucker, built like a bloody mountain. He was a good back-up when he was on my team. He now makes a formidable enemy.

I’ve been doing my homework and learned that he’s the head-man in a gang of ten up here. He always has a bodyguard with him. This isn’t unusual behaviour in prison. There is always someone out to get you. It does however make my task more difficult.

I’ve sent out a few scouts of my own who have given me an outline of Errol’s daily habits. At two, Errol’s usually down at the concrete wall on the western perimeter. We call it the squash court. The fellas get down there and toss a ball against the wall in the afternoon sun. After his game, Errol goes to the communal shower in 2 Wing within a half-hour of muster. On Tuesday we’ll be waiting for him.
Blood splattered on the tiles and swirling down the plug hole in the steamy shower room. For once in my life, I’ll be grateful to see a screw. Errol and his mate Gerard went down with a fight. The four of us will survive but we’ll keep the nurses in the health clinic busy for a while.

I was looking forward to seeing my fiancé Libby this weekend but my fracas with Errol will put a damper on that. I’ve been breached and put off all privileges, including phone calls and visits, so I can’t even let her know not to make the trip up from Newcastle.

It’s my worst nightmare. I wake to the sound of a key in my cell door.

“Pack up Kevin Sullivan. The crew’s waiting for you.” I’m handcuffed and I limp out to a van. It’s not an unusual situation. The Governor of the prison has the discretion to remove a prisoner if he sees him as a security threat. He perceives any criminal who doesn’t suck up to him as a security threat. I’ve been chosen for this journey and Errol’s safe in his cell asleep. He’s a good farm worker and popular with the screws. I’m not dirty on him. We all have our demons to face and I wouldn’t want Chelsea as my missus.

I’m being hijacked out of here. Sitting on the cold metal seat in the dark, I have no idea of my destination or how long it will take.
KARMA (2)

If you’ve spent thirty years of your life in prison and been described as a recidivist, a career criminal, a bad bastard and a stupid old boob-rat you might as well accept that you are all of the above. Your most recent sentence is for fifteen years, with seven on the bottom, for Armed Robbery and it’s taken you three years to work your way from Long Bay back to the prison farm where you were incarcerated in 1993. It feels familiar here, like you’ve never been away, but obviously some things have changed, an example being the staff members. There are a few die-hards still here but most have fled to greener fields.

You are standing having a smoke, while waiting for the muster siren, when you see a vaguely familiar woman walking through the compound. She stops abruptly in front of you and, before you can nick off, she recognises you. You feel goosebumps on your skin when you feel her gaze on your bent head as you try to turn away. You feel ashamed. She put a lot of work into helping you through your parole period, when you were last at the farm, and you stuffed up, again.

“Kevin, what on earth are you doing here? I thought we had seen the last of you years ago.”

You grimace. “G’day Natalie. Don’t worry I’m not on your case list this time. Had a minor hiccup with my parole. Nothing serious.” You check out her expanding waist-line. “Looks like you’ve been keeping busy yourself.”

Natalie blushes and places a protective hand over her small bump. “You’re right Kevin. I’ve found a life for myself outside work at the prison.” She flutters the fingers on her left hand and exposes the band of gold, nestled close to a blue sapphire
engagement ring. “It’s just as well you’re not one of my parolees because I’m leaving in a couple of weeks.”

You stub out your cigarette and wander off to join a huddle of men outside the kitchen.

Now you are back at the prison farm, your history is catching up with you. You have a dilemma with an old mate, Errol. You’ve heard rumours at Silverwater and Cessnock, when passing through, that he has it in for you. Errol has a philosophy similar to your own, revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

Chelsea, his wife, wasn’t happy about you taking her car when you left her place in a hurry, way back when you were on the run. She told Errol that you stood over her for money and also raped her. You knew you had done the wrong thing in taking her car and that she would be dirty on you. You felt at the time that you had no choice. The wallopers were on their way because of some cock and bull story about a paedophile her twelve year old, Lennie, had conjured up to get her off his back when he came home late from school. She believed him. That’s why she called the police. You couldn’t afford to be at the house. You were on the run for God’s sake. You didn’t expect her to be so viciously dishonest. You pride myself on being a loyal and honourable friend and would never rape a woman or even have a sexual relationship with a mate’s missus.

Errol believed what she told him. She’s lucky you didn’t reciprocate and let her little secret out. She’s on the game and not the sweet prison wife she pretends to be.

Errol’s an Islander and a big fucker, built like a bloody mountain. He was a good back-up when he was on your team. He now he makes a formidable enemy.
You have been doing your homework and learn that he’s the head-man in a gang of ten. He always has a bodyguard with him. This isn’t unusual behaviour in prison. There is always someone out to get you and if you have the money, or the power, and Errol does, you’d be crazy not to have the protection of a body guard. It does however make your task of keeping yourself safe more difficult.

You have sent out a few scouts of your own who have given you an outline of Errol’s daily habits. At two, Errol’s usually down at the concrete wall on the western perimeter. The inmates refer to it as the squash court. The fellas get down there and toss a ball against the wall in the afternoon sun. After his game Errol goes to the communal shower in 2 wing within a half-hour of muster. On Tuesday, you will be waiting for him.

Blood splattered on the tiles and swirling down the plug hole in the steamy shower room. For once in your life you will be grateful to see a screw. Errol and his mate Gerard went down with a fight. You will survive but you will keep the nurses in the health clinic busy for a while.

You were looking forward to seeing your fiancé Libby this weekend but the fracas with Errol will put a damper on that. You’ve been breached and put off all privileges, including phone calls and visits, so you can’t even let her know not to make the trip up from Newcastle.

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with the screws. You are not dirty on him. You all have your demons to face and you wouldn’t want Chelsea as your missus, the conniving bitch.

You are being hijacked out of here. Sitting on the cold metal seat in the dark you have no idea of your destination or how long it will take.
EXEGESIS
Introduction

The personal, experiential context

My interest in prison fiction stems from my experience as a probation and parole officer. My first position was in the Gwandalan Community Correctional Centre. This is a Community Correctional Centre where mainly Indigenous prisoners lived in several adjoining houses in the Brisbane, inner-city suburb of Wooloongabba. Wherever possible it was staffed by Aboriginal people, who worked as correctional officers, management, social workers and probation and parole officers. It was owned by the Brisbane Tribal Council. Pastor Don Brady, a Palm Islander from the Kuku Yalanji tribe and a strong supporter of Indigenous rights, believed that society was changed by outsiders not those on the government payroll. With Denis Walker, Cheryl Buchanan and others, he formed the Brisbane Tribal Council, which became a legal entity incorporated in 1974. Gwandalan was opened in 1991. The goal was to integrate Indigenous inmates back into the community. The Centre complied with the view of the Queensland Corrective Services Commission that positive self-development programs for inmates assist in preventing recidivism.

The Brisbane Tribal Council was aware of the substandard conditions, consisting of “reserve” environments (missions), in which Indigenous people were living. These reserves had virtually non-existent infrastructure: people were isolated; there was inappropriate placement of people from different tribes within the one area and lack of community facilities. These conditions had existed since assimilation in 1937 when the Commonwealth Government held a national conference on Aboriginal affairs and agreed that Aboriginal people not of “full blood” should be absorbed into the general population.
Partial release from these conditions was achieved when the 1967 Referendum was passed; this gave the Federal Government power over the states to enact legislation that would discourage racial discrimination. The release was ‘partial’ because of a five-year delay before the administration of the legislation of the 1967 Referendum. Many Indigenous people spent long periods behind bars for crimes that may not have been committed had their social conditions been comparable to those of non-Indigenous Australians.

The Gwandalan Community Correctional Centre was unique in Queensland. Its inmate population included men who had committed violent offences such as armed robbery, murder and rape. These men had been transferred from secure prisons into a community facility. A large percentage of inmates had been incarcerated for up to 14 years and were heavily institutionalised. The population ranged in age from 17 to 60 years and residents were received from throughout Queensland. Additionally, or rather as a consequence, people from different tribes were housed together, which posed problems of social incompatibility. Men were often openly hostile because of opposing cultural and territorial mores.

In March 1993, I contributed to the facilitation of a pro-feminist education program run by men for male offenders at Gwandalan. I had several aims in mind when I approached M.A.S.A. (Men Against Sexual Assault), a nation-wide organisation of “pro-feminist, gay-affirmative, male-positive men.” The organisation affirmed positive male qualities and was attempting to help men to come to terms with the masculine propensity towards violence. It seemed appropriate to these men to use pro-feminist thinking as a context against which the male experience of patriarchal oppression could be explored.
Feminism helps men to understand how their violent behaviours develop and how they are linked to socially constructed conceptions of masculinity; it also holds them responsible for the violence they have committed. According to Roderick Broadhurst and Ross Maller, pro-feminist programs can be effective if they are personalised and routine: “The understanding between men and women about sexual relationships is central and we need not look for special biological or psychological explanations” (74). Their study focuses especially on seeing sexual aggression, with emphasis on rape, as an inappropriate expression of male cultural norms. Family therapist Ann Ganley summarises the ways in which feminism can be deployed to educate men. In ‘Feminist Approaches for Men in Family Therapy,’ she notes:

Central to the philosophy is the assumption that ideology, social structure and behaviour are interwoven. Hence, women’s and men’s behaviour stem more from socialisation and institutional sex roles than from biology…. A feminist analysis highlights the harmful effects of such sex role stereotyping for both women and men while also being clear that women’s economic and political status is more negatively affected than men’s (5).

What emerges is a standardised sociological image of male and female types and roles in society, which is harmful to both sexes. For Ganley, therefore, men and women differ in their behaviour because of the effects of cultural mores rather than as a result of biological make-up.

Pro-feminist education proved difficult at Gwandalan. It was a challenge to engage men as they often denied links between violence and masculinity. M.A.S.A. was not alone in experiencing problems with prisoner self-development programs.
The efficacy of programs is reduced by limited social interaction with the community. The process of rehabilitation involves an acceptance of the values of the society, faith in people who uphold these values and the ability to reproduce these values. Long periods of incarceration alienate people from those values and the results of self-development programs are discouraging because, as outlined above, imprisonment is based on an inappropriate model of behaviour. An example can be found in the writing of Jack Henry Abbott *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. Abbott describes the lack of love and the aggression of the system: “I have never come into bodily contact with another human being in almost twenty years except in combat” (63). He is expressing the isolation he feels and the physical adversity he confronts in the harsh prison environment. Reformists such as Neitenstein, Nagel and Vinson have fought against the inhumane practice of depriving inmates of the most basic human rights.

Prison is an aggressive system. Staff have the power and this power is frequently abused. The prison population has a strong representation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds including minority cultures and physical, psychiatric and mental disabilities. With colonisation, Australia inherited not only British convicts but also the system to contain and control them. Physical punishment in the form of sensory deprivation and flogging still exist within our criminal justice system. An example is conditions at Goulburn SuperMax prison. At the request of Commissioner Ron Woodham the journalist, Rhett Watson spent time a cell at the complex to experience firsthand how prisoners live. In his article in The Daily Telegraph Wason describes the conditions. “The 32 currently inside are rarely let out of their cells.” When they are allowed out they are “locked in leg irons and handcuffs that are strapped to your waist by a thick leather belt. In another incident at Cessnock
Correctional Centre, Dan Proudman reports in the Newcastle Herald: “A Corrective Services spokeswoman confirmed on Thursday two officers had been charged in relation to an alleged sexual assault while using force to search an inmate for contraband.” John Ramsland reasons “people are a product of not only their family but of their community and of the historical circumstances that created that community. Since colonisation a theme of violence and brutality has permeated the penal system” (16).

In “Dark Places: Writing True Crime in Australia”, Rosalind Smith discusses the way in which crime has been central to the Australian national identity since its settlement as a British penal colony. She further notes how this settlement necessarily had violent repercussions in terms of the survival, and adaptation, of Indigenous culture. Many Indigenous people were murdered as a result of British colonisation of Australia. In A Child’s Book of True Crime, Chloe Hooper suggests that novels on colonization suppress the truth: “Between each line in these books there must be another story, which is imagined written in blood” (237).

These unresolved relations between settler and indigenous cultures eventuated in an additional stressor during my work at Gwandalan. There is a strong relationship between race and violence in Australia and the rates of homicide and assault are notably high amongst Indigenous people. The starting point is economic deprivation. Linked to this are the effects of colonisation, dispossession and racial discrimination. In “Aboriginal Offending”, Robyn Lincoln and Paul Wilson stress the negative response of Aboriginal culture to white Australia. This is obvious when the manner in which the British took possession of Australia, under the doctrine of Terra Nullius, is taken into consideration. Add to this The Assimilation Policy, which resulted in Indigenous children being taken from their families and from speaking their native
languages, along with The White Australia Policy and it prevented becomes clear that Britishness and whiteness formed the foundation of Australian identity. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, the population of Indigenous Australians is 460,000 or 2.4 percent of the total Australian population. It is the most disadvantaged in Australia and one of the most disadvantaged groups in the world.

Indigenous people are over-represented in the Criminal Justice System because they have lost their culture. They have been dislocated from their homes and their children have been taken from them. They have not conformed to white Australian norms for a number of reasons, including racial discrimination, which makes finding employment and housing difficult.

* 

Following my employment at Gwandalan, I successfully applied for a position in a New South Wales mainstream correctional facility. The razor wire, uniforms and predominantly male environment were daunting. I clung to the idea that had been reinforced during my induction and training courses, according to which the “good” people are in charge of the “bad” people. This training coached me to erect a protective barrier, another wall, behind which I was to show no emotion, weakness or fear. My training proved to be ineffective when it came to dispelling the myths that are common in this coercive system. I have given an example of my experience in one of my short stories, “Psychobabble”, in which a new parole officer at the prison is confronted by the image of a young Indigenous man under observation at the prison. She talks to the prison psychologist about her concerns:
Have you seen that man in the glass box? I collected my keys when I came in this morning and as I passed the observation cell I noticed that it was occupied. He is sitting completely naked on a concrete slab under the fluorescent light, a camera monitoring every move he makes. The only other furniture in the cell is a steel toilet (88).

The parole officer admits that she thinks the manner of treatment of the inmate is cruel. The psychologist replies: “You’re new. You’ll get used to it”.

This is an accurate description of an event and a room in the prison I was working at as a parole officer. The observation room had glass walls on four sides. The occupant was on full view to any person entering the building including visitors, officers, inmates and Inmate Development Staff. The young Indigenous man was 18 years old and had a history of dislocation from his family and culture. He had an intellectual developmental disorder. He was in prison because he was found guilty of stealing a small amount of cash from his foster mother. He was considered a suicide risk on reception and was stripped and placed in the observation room for 24 hours.

The controlled environment of the prison population presents an ideal situation for the study of dehumanisation, hence such famous literary and critical responses as Oscar Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and Michel Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”. My attempt to understand the crimes committed by the men I was working with gave me the incentive to study sexual violence and to write prison narratives. The overall argument for writing prison narratives is prison reform. Giving a voice to inmates is one means of dispelling the common stereotypes of prisoners as tattooed men on steroids lacking empathy and incapable of feelings, or of worthless people deserving of punishment. In reality, the inmate population
consists of a cross-section of the community. A Criminal Justice System that continues to build more and larger prisons fails not only the growing number of inmates, whom it fails to rehabilitate, but also the broader population on whose taxes it depends and whose well-being it does not serve.

**Sexual Violence**

Because of the dearth of commentary on prison sexual violence, public awareness of the problem remains low. Such media attention as there is tends to normalise the idea of rape, depicting it as an accepted, and acceptable, aspect of punishment in prison. For example, in May 2002 the American firm of Young and Rubicam released a commercial for the soft drink 7UP, called ‘Captive Audience’. The non-profit organisation Stop Prisoner Rape described the advertisement as follows:

A 7UP spokesperson hands out cans of 7UP to prisoners. When he accidentally drops a can, he quips that he won’t pick it up, implying that he would risk being raped if he were to bend down. Later in the ad, a cell door slams, trapping the spokesperson on a bed with another man who refuses to take his arm from around him.

No data for the frequency of rape in prison exists. To date, the Department of Correctional Services does not record rape incidents: those reported are collapsed under the general category of “assault”. In his study of prison sexual abuse in Australia, David Heilpern quotes Dr. Frank McLeod, director of New South Wales prison services, who in a 1990 interview asked rhetorically: “What do you do if a bloke tells you he fell backward on a broom handle...?” (22). McLeod notes
graphically how “one bloke … was being stood over and used as a repository for everyone’s excess semen to the point where his mouth was full of ulcerations and infections. How do you record that? I know it’s there. They know it’s there” (23). The inference to be drawn here is that reality, even when it is widely understood as such, is most safely dealt with as a mythology.

Throughout 1995 and 1996 Heilpern, a magistrate of the Local Court of New South Wales, surveyed 300 male prisoners aged 18 to 25. He estimated that there were around 25,000 incidents of sexual assault each year. He found that the victims were usually young and initially pack-raped. The result of this sexual abuse is shame and a reluctance to talk or write about it. Sociologist Katy Richmond writes about the ubiquity of homosexual talk in prison, arguing that this talk is not a signifier of homosexual behaviour; rather, it is an expression of the anxiety and fears of the inmates. Richmond speaks of these fears not only as a product, but also as a further source of the “precarious sense of masculinity” of men in prison. This is arguably the chief contributing factor in the extreme violence that routinely accompanies sex acts between inmates. The violence is most commonly a component of rape; however, in those cases when inmates show compliance when threatened with rape in order to avoid violence they are often brutalized nonetheless — for wanting it.

**Truth or Fiction**

This exegesis will develop the approaches, outlined within the current cultural field, into my own methodology for this project. The following section deals with questions of memory and its representation in fiction, issues surrounding truth, fiction and authenticity and the ethical dimensions of translating lived experience into fictional forms. Research may be coloured not only by the values of the research worker, but
also by his/her knowledge of criminological theories and literature. Particular care is needed in the ultimate interpretation, classification and evaluation of research findings. To research is to revisit a situation and draw on what is remembered. Who we are at the time influences how we remember and what we write. Writing is alchemy of imagination, memory and knowledge. Research provides an oblique circuit and route to where the researcher is seeking; it involves a lot of reading, and the researcher needs to go forward and to perceive the connection. The true-crime novel (a novel based on the recounting of an actual crime) was part of my research because through the writing process the author does not always distinguish truth from fiction. A good example is Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. Jack De Bellis, in “Visions and Revisions: Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*”, argues that Capote’s novel cannot accurately be described as nonfiction as Capote made nearly five-thousand changes, ranging from crucial matter of fact to punctuation. De Bellis provides the statistical results to prove this statement. He has made analysis of *The New Yorker* and Random House editions, revealing that a great many doubts lingered in Capote’s mind after he committed his six-year work to print.

People are intrigued by the harsh reality of crime. They do not typically, however, want to be intimately linked with or seen to be involved with its deviancy and horror. Veronica, the protagonist in Chloe Hooper’s *A Child’s Book of True Crime* explains the problems attached to writing crime:

The true crime writer’s ethical stance was inherently false – Veronica acted as an intermediary between evil and the reader, positioning herself as beyond reproach. But how could she get inside the criminal mind while bending backwards to then show her horror of the deed? In every chapter she had tried
to cloak her fascination as social responsibility. Her own perversion as research (91).

Later in the book Hooper states, “we read true crime to learn about ourselves” (105). This knowledge comes not in how we discover the truth, but in our awareness of the manner in which narratives shape us individually and subjectively. The confronting subject material of my project contributed to my decision to write short stories in preference to a novel because when the material presented is difficult to accept because of the horrific or cruel content it is easier to digest in small doses. A short story allows the opportunity to read and understand the content and not necessarily to pursue the subject in one sitting.

**The Short Story**

The short story cycle is a collection of short stories that are interwoven with recurring, motifs, characters and themes. The stories may be read separately or in sequence as a whole, thus creating narrative unity and a more powerful reading experience. The experience is intensified because of the variations over time as characters mature and age and relationships grow or become less stable, changing dimensions and events. In this cycle each story contains a beginning, middle and a conclusion. The stories are composed purposely to create a cycle, much in the same vein as in Tim Winton’s *The Turning*. Although the stories are interrelated, they are individually complete. *The Turning* was included in this study for a number of reasons. The first was to determine whether *Living Like Common People* would be more effective written as a number of short interlinked stories rather than as a novel. Winton’s stories are also relevant because they portray elements of social structure and human nature that are exhibited
across the board, in the community and in prison. Although Winton’s writing in The Turning seems far from the genre of prison narrative the subject matter is surprisingly similar. Roger Stitson in his article, “Drowning in Dark States of Mind”, describes Winton’s stories as principally concerned with tortured memory. In The Turning, an allegorical thread links the events in the small fictional Western Australian town of Angelus to broader concerns of death and decay represented as criminality. The stories intersect and eventually the reader comes to recognize the individual characters. The young protagonist, Vic, may easily have turned to criminal ways, as did his older brother.

As described above in “the cycle of the short story”, Winton depicts a series of individual dramas developing through the protagonist’s childhood, into youth and courting, and on to marriage and middle age. He provides variety by changing the narrative from first-person to second and third- person depending on the story and character. He uses the second-person in “Long Clear View”, allowing the narrator to distance himself from the horror and Vic’s own terror and difficulty in coping with police corruption, death, drugs and maiming.

Winton uses “challenging” male characters in his stories to criticise the dominant patriarchal structure of our society. Sarah Zapata explains Winton’s writing thus:

As based on a construction of masculinity that remains dominant in Australian culture, a version that synthesizes the long-established premise that men are not allowed to show their weaknesses and emotions, they should be rough and behave like men (103).
This theory is similar to that (previously quoted) of Ann Ganley who noted that women’s and men’s behaviour stems more from socialisation and institutional sex roles than from biology.

The characters in “Cockleshell” and “Sand” confront domestic violence. Family life involves violence, attempted murder, sexual deviance and psychiatric disability along with loyalty and friendship and human frailty. In “A Long Clear View”, a young Vic is stressed to the limit and sits at a window with his father’s gun. “You cock your weapon” (204), these are the words of his conscious thought as he aims the gun at unsuspecting members of the community. It is a depiction of how an innocent young boy can commit a horrific crime. The unreasonableness of the action is comparable to the meaningless murders committed in The Executioner’s Song and In Cold Blood. It is also the experience of Kevin, the protagonist in Living Like Common People, who has a difficult childhood and eventually spends time in prison where he becomes institutionalised. When he is released, he resorts to crime as a way of financing the drug addiction he has developed in prison. Each story is discrete but Kevin remains a constant character throughout the series. Kevin’s decline into recidivism, the unravelling of his relationships and the increased brutality of his crimes are set within the gloom of the prison walls and the small community he inhabits during the short periods of his release.

This cycle of Winton’s short stories differs from Alice Munro’s Runaway where the stories are an example of “cluster” short stories. They have less continuity but in a similar way to Winton’s The Turning, the Runaway stories move forward and backward in time. They twist and turn; however, they do not overlap. What appear to be ordinary domestic settings in these stories have undertones of rivalry, threat and decay. The scenes are horrific and equal to some of the more gruesome of the prison
stories. Katrin Berndt describes the writing as Gothic, relating “to the darker side of human existence, encompassing insanity, fear, cruelty, violence and sexuality” (2). Alice Munro is hard-hitting and remorseless in her vivid depictions of domestic life. Some of the stories are open-ended, demanding reflection. Her short fiction disproves the adage that short stories tend to be less complex than novels.

The short story is a flexible genre. The idea that a short story focuses on a single plot, setting, and small number of characters and covers a short period of time is discredited in the studies of revered short story writers such as those listed and discussed in the following pages. Many short story writers, including Ernest Hemingway and Tobias Wolff, write open-ended stories with the expectation that readers will contemplate the narrative and reach their own decisions.

Martin Greenup considers that in 1840 Edgar Allen Poe may be the first person to have used the term “short story”. “Poe is not only one of the finest practitioners of the short story, but he is also one of the first, most influential theorists” (254). Greenup defines the format as follows: “a short work of prose fiction characterised by the “development of theme and technique” and by the evocation of a specific locale” (251).

American scholars have different opinions to those of British literary scholars on how and where the short story originated. The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles defines the short story as “a prose work of fiction, differing from the novel by being shorter and less elaborate than a novelette” (1914 vol.V111). In 1933, the Oxford English Dictionary expanded the definition with the supplement, “a story with a fully worked-out motive but of much smaller compass and less elaborate form than a novel” (Vol. 13). Greenup explains, “‘fully worked-out motive’ lends independence to the short story, but still it is chiefly defined against the novel” (251).
The American dictionaries did not include the term ‘short story’ until 1927 when it first appeared in *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language* and is defined as “a relatively brief story characterised by singleness of effort, uniformity of tone, and dramatic intensity, usually having as a plot a single action represented as crisis”. Greenup sees the American definition as having a “strongly-felt presence of Edgar Allan Poe as it echoes Poe’s own prescriptive musings about the form of the short story” (252).

Monique Rooney argues for the short story, “it highlights the importance of the living body, especially the voice, to social relations, communication and to the understandings of cultural difference” (107). If this is the case, the short story is explorative rather than demonstrative in that it examines the situation, as opposed to expressing feelings unreservedly and conclusively.

The stories in *Living Like Common People* are explorative. Some of the stories were directly related to me by inmates. To protect the confidentiality of these people the stories have been fictionalised. There are a number of reasons for writing fiction. Writing that is supposedly non-fiction is examined more closely for libel. In fiction there is no certainty of what is true. Apart from legal issues, there are moral and ethical issues to take into consideration. It is practical to research well and in a way that an identity cannot be recognised in a negative perspective. Prison narrative is more valid if the characters, dialogue and plot convey a sense of authenticity. The representation of language as it is used in prisons is crucial to the perception of realism in prison narrative. The “prison jargon” is part of the story and symbolic of prison lifestyle. Prisoners develop a jargon in their everyday language, which is specific to their culture for a number of reasons, foremost among which is secrecy.

The following colloquialisms are examples of this jargon: the term “kite” indicates an
illegal letter that has been smuggled into the prison; “give us a smother” means “help me hide what I’m doing”; “pan licker” denotes a sycophant; “boob rat” is a reference to any person who has spent time in prison; “frog” is a drug addict, as he is just waiting to croak; and “to slew a blue” is to place responsibility for a misdemeanor elsewhere.

The preceding introduction has provided a personal, experiential context outlining the specific features of prison life and explaining my interest in prison narrative. The stories studied for this exegesis have themes that are relevant to prisoners and prisons and are exemplified by character, settings, the inhumanity of prison conditions and societal expectations. The themes of punishment, retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation and recidivism recur throughout the exegesis and the creative component as do those of the Gothic and sexual violence.
Chapter 1

Genre

The genre of the prison narrative has a long-standing history of exposing social issues significant to the relationship between the individual and the community. In this way, it has functioned as a vehicle of prison reform. It is generally a category of writing practiced by people who are unwillingly imprisoned. It can include memoir, fiction, nonfiction, the novel, short stories, poetry and film. While prisons often feature in fiction, the narratives of their prisoners are rarely published or studied. As a genre, it is defined by the prisoner struggling against powerlessness. Rosalind Smith suggests some reasons for the unpopularity of prison narrative:

With the genre of prison narrative, the texts exploit both a desire for objective distance and control, and its failure: what remains is an intimate contact with lived experiences of violence or transgression that are unresolved, uncertain and exceed all attempts at containment within definitive boundaries (26).

An example of texts failing to provide “objective distance and control” is the non-fiction crime novel *The Executioner’s Song* (1979). Norman Mailer displays the intelligence and insightfulness of the protagonist, Gary Gilmore, but shows little evidence of humanity toward the victims: he shoots dead a young service-station attendant in cold blood. Mailer does, however, according to Philip Bufithis, show the reader that Gary Gilmore “had spiritual valour. Believing the soul can die before the body, he successfully overturned a ten-year national ban on the death penalty and effected the obliteration of his body so his soul could further its ends” (78).
Although prison narrative has been documented, the majority of this work has not been subjected to sociological study of prison effectiveness, which reduces its potential impact in terms of prison management and reform. It remains important, however, because it allows us as a society to learn about ourselves and our criminal justice policies through the words of inmates. Rebecca Bordt states:

Incarcerated people’s experiences in the United States have long been documented in books written by inmates, interviews with scholars, publications of prison activists, anthologies of convict essays and poetry and prison magazines/newspapers. Yet, their work as a whole has not been the subject of sociological analyses of prison life and prison effectiveness. This gap in the scholarly literature is troubling given the emphasis on criminal justice evaluation research in academic circles, the explosion of prisons in every corner of the country over the past 20 years, and the overwhelming public support for locking up criminal offenders (1).

In an attempt to remedy this situation Bordt has analysed prison narrative and described the genre by asking the questions about whether there is change in prison narrative over time: have there been changes in form, substance and number and if so what is the explanation for these changes? What can we learn about ourselves (and our criminal justice policies) from the words of the incarcerated?

The volume of prison narrative has not increased at the same ratio as that of people incarcerated, which makes it difficult for the public to learn more about prisoners and community policy. There are fewer sociological analyses into prison life and prison effectiveness, which is a problem when more and larger prisons are being
built. Most people agree that part of the justification of punishment is that it is deserved. Five new prisons have been opened in New South Wales since 1997 with expansions of Cessnock Correctional Centre and Lithgow Correctional Centre in 2010. It appears that prisons are the popular option for punishment of offenders.

The very nature of prison narrative makes the sociological aspect imperative. Without this lens, prison narrative would lose a major element, that of increasing public awareness of the conditions in which society contains prisoners. Many authors, including those who have been prisoners themselves, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Peter Kocan and Henry Lawson, have written about life in prison and have thus influenced the public’s perception of the prison experience. Most writers of prison narrative espouse the genre from the perspective of prison reform. Beyond this humanitarian aspect, reading prison narrative also gives valuable insight into the complexities of human nature. The reader learns about the strengths, the vulnerabilities, the courage and the weakness of the incarcerated. The inmate is not just a number but also a human being.

A classic example is Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861). Dickens’s dissatisfaction with the penal system is evident in Chapter 32, when the narrator, Pip, visits Newgate Prison and observes that “at that time, jails were much neglected, and the period of exaggerated reaction consequent all…wrong-doing…was still far off and a frowzy, ugly, disorderly depressing scene it was” (246). Dickens uses Pip to express his own view of prisons, which he does not make obvious except through his writing. In the novel, Pip struggles with his position of power. He is an orphan whose development is recorded in the book. He is a country lad who, with the help of his benefactor, goes to London and becomes a gentleman. He assumes his benefactor was Mrs. Havisham and is shocked when he discovers his true benefactor is an escaped
convict, Mr Campbell. Pip’s contact with Estella has a further negative impact on his peace of mind. Pip was written to incorporate both good and bad attributes making him a realistic character. Himmet Umunc writes:

*Great Expectations* not only generates a wide range of interpretation and critical discourse but also becomes, through the story of Pip’s social rise and fall, Dickens’s running commentary on Victorian class mobility, which, in the past, had been motivated by the accumulation of wealth and brought about by industrialization and free trade. Hence, it would not be out of place to regard Dickens as a kind of social historian who formulates his discourse through fabulation rather than mere documentation’ (17).

In 1822, when Dickens was 10, his father was in debt and sentenced to the debtors’ prison, Marshlasea. In this for-profit prison, debtors paid for their stay. Dickens’s parents and siblings stayed at Marshlasea while Dickens spent the time with his aunt. He visited his family there and based the novel *Little Dorrit*, which was published as a series in 1855, on what he saw at the prison. English public policy may have had the aim to punish debtors but it was their children who bore the brunt of the suffering. As Dominic Rainsford explains: “Dickens is a novelist who is intimately related to epistemology, social views, and emotional tone of the novels” (2).

Dickens’s ‘A Visit to Newgate’ links much of his fictional writing, including *Great Expectations, Little Dorrit* and *Oliver Twist*. On his actual visit to the prison, Dickens found the place to be a foreboding institution with appalling conditions. In his writing he acknowledges his concern for the children, beyond reach, in miserable circumstances. His solemn belief in the way that an individual’s life can be damaged
by past experiences, doubtless reinforced by his family’s experiences in prison, comes through strongly in *Little Dorrit*, in which the protagonist is unable to help others because he is incapable of helping himself. This unhappy predicament is endured by Clennam and is evident in his sympathy for Flora in his dream:

> With the sensation of becoming more and more lightheaded every minute, Clennam saw the relict of the late Mrs. F enjoying herself in the most wonderful manner, by putting herself and him in their old places, and going through all the old performances - now, when the stage was dusty, when the scenery was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was empty, when the lights were out. And still, through all this grotesque revival of what he remembered as having once been prettily natural to her, he could not but feel that it revived at sight of him, and that there was a tender memory in it (147).

Rainsford considers this dream ambiguous and questions to whom this ‘tender memory’ refers: “Clennam has been the victim of dreadfully misguided education, but has emerged with a sort of grave uprightness, of a personal and undogmatic type - mirrored in Dickens’s sober cadences has proved to be illusory” (792). Clenman is empathetic towards Amy when she is put in the predicament of paying her father’s debts after his time in prison:

> There was a classical daughter one who ministered to her father in his prison as her mother had ministered to her. Little Dorrit, though of the unheroic modern stock, and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father's
wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine (222).

In the novel, the ideology of the protagonist is similar to that of the narrator whose disillusionment with societal standards drives his work. While it remains a love story, *Little Dorrit* is no exception, in that her ideology is similar to the narrator whose disillusionment with societal standards is of imperative value. The novel, *Little Dorrit*, opens in Marshalsea. Little Dorrit lived there, as did Dickens’s father.

**The Gothic Element**

As explained in the introduction, Gothic themes are evident in a large percentage of prison writing. Katrin Berndt describes Gothic literature as, relating “to the darker side of human existence, encompassing insanity, fear, cruelty, violence and sexuality” (2).

Gothic themes are evident in many of Dickens’s novels where they are used to challenge the Victorian preoccupation with utilitarianism. He exploits themes of mystery, suspense, and domestic abuse in his fiction in order to raise ethical questions about the human potential for violence. His novels, including *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, describe the prison variously as a tomb, a cage or in terms of hell. An example taken from *Little Dorrit* is “Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness of the outside, and would have kept its polluted aspect in contact in one of the spice islands of the Indian Ocean” (3). Valerie Kennedy notes that: “In *Little Dorrit* Dickens reformulates some key Gothic elements, notably the Gothic castle, the Gothic villain, the Gothic hero and heroine in relation to a mid-nineteenth-century version of the Gothic plot of hidden identity,
retribution, and revenge” (36). Elements of Gothic literature include dark themes of the supernatural, a gloomy atmosphere and, as in *Great Expectations*; the juxtaposition of the life of the wealthy is compared to life in prison.

Gill Ballinger argues that Dickens’s deployment of the Gothic is complex and often used to intensify his criticism of the law in his fiction. Concerns over the law’s inability to provide justice haunt Dickens’s work. Indeed, his unconcealed concern for justice and criticism of the law were considered by some legal thinkers to be a direct attack on the state.

Gothic themes are also relevant in Australian literature. Jails are so dominant and intimidating that the actual place becomes a Gothic character in its own right. In Australia, prisons were designed like medieval castles with guarded stone sentry boxes, watchtowers, huge archways and doors of wrought iron lined with wood. They are impressive buildings often built by convicts from quarried stone. In *The Song of a Prison*, a poem giving the image of Darlinghurst Gaol, Henry Lawson describes the Gothic prison in one short verse which recalls sentiments also expressed by Dickens:

Staircase and doors of iron – no sign of plank or brick,

Ceiling and floors of sandstone, and cell walls two feet thick,

Cell like a large coffin, or like a tomb, and white,

And it strikes a chill to the backbone on the warmest night. (October 1909).

Rachael Weaver accounts for the presence of Gothic elements in Australian literature thus:
While in some ways, the conventions of the Gothic, an intensely popular literary form, might be seen to provide a safe or domesticated arena for the exploration of progressive ideas it is equally possible for this drive to contain problematic cultural phenomena which has the opposite effect. For Richard Punter and Elizabeth Bronfen, ‘the uncanny, the disorder, the alien-ness that the Gothic appears to express might be better seen precisely as evidence of what the genre is seeking to control’ (21).

The Gothic genre encompasses fear and dread. The portrayal of the grotesque in a domestic setting is investigative and exposes these fears for what they are.

There are strong elements of the Gothic in Chloe Hooper’s The Tall Man, which deals with the treatment of an Aboriginal man, Cameron Doomadgee, who was arrested for drunkenly swearing at Police Sergeant Chris Hurley and was then taken into custody where he died less than an hour after his arrest. Doomadgee’s death in custody had an explosive effect on the Palm Island community where he lived. Palm Island is a confronting place. It is the wet season and Hooper visualises the heat and rain as oppressive forces, with plants that looked close to drowning and suffocating entwining vines. Hooper has exposed the situation on Palm Island as what it is, racial discrimination in one of its worst forms, including the conditions of gloom that Devarakonda Ramakrishna describes: “The fear evoked in the Australian Gothic is a psychological fear evoked by a haunted conscience and by a morbidity intensified by the environment” (49).

Although the Gothic elements of living in prison are discussed in the exegesis Living Like Common People the work cannot be considered as representative of the Gothic tradition. The creative component is a series of narratives that oscillate around
the central character of Kevin Sullivan. There is no artistic artifice as this would detract from the reality of how the Criminal Justice System affects the lives of prisoners and their families. The focus of this narrative is on the every-day, gritty authenticity. This authenticity does not affect the liberty expressed by the narrative which contributes to the interest of the text.

One of the methods of punishment in our community is removal from society; the most permanent way to achieve this in New South Wales before 1955 was by the imposition of the death penalty. The last execution was in 1939 (John Trevor Kelly). In the short story “Inside”, Kevin describes a cell used to hold prisoners who had received the death sentence:

In 1972, Kevin is transferred to the Central Industrial Prison (Long Bay). He is given special accommodation on the second floor in C4 Wing, the death cell. Unlike the other cells it has a grill door as well as a solid door. The complex was built in 1898 and there are galleries on the second and third floors with rope nets spanning the space in the middle, to catch anyone who might accidentally fall or be pushed off. At Kevin’s end there are tall arched windows which cast a strange yellow light throughout the whole complex. In front of the windows is a big wooden beam (the gallows) with a trap door for the body to fall through at the end of the landing (28).

The original purpose of the cell was to contain men awaiting the death sentence. It is a small, cold, isolated room, permeated by fear. Men have fallen to their death from the galleries and the possibility of murder is real. The surroundings are physically and spiritually Gothic in nature.
Prison Narrative

Prison is a ‘total institution’, a place of residence where the inmates are confined for a certain period, where they are isolated from their community and where they surrender personal control of their lives, submitting to the almost absolute control of officials. Prison conditions and prisoner treatment are frequently reflected in the official position of authorities who have been regarded throughout the centuries as being responsible for the punishment of prisoners. It is for this reason that prison narrative has been neglected by sociological analysts.

Andrew Sobanet seeks a solution by describing prison narrative as a:

literary sub-genre that constitutes an intersection of penology (a branch of sociology that focuses on carceral conditions and power structures) and fiction. A form of documentary and testimonial literature, the prison novel has heretofore received scant critical attention as a unique literary modality. It is a particularly fruitful sub-genre for interdisciplinary study due to its artful negotiation of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction (2).

Sobanet uses the novel Prison by François Bon as a sociological case study documenting prison conditions. His particular focus is on Bon’s use of recycled text. The first-person fictional novel was based on Bon’s experience directing a writing workshop at a youth detention center near Bordeaux in the mid-1990s. Bon includes the inmates’ own spelling mistakes in an effort to document ‘reality’, blur generic boundaries, and create tension between the real and the fictional. According to Sobanet this study of Bon’s work will serve as a springboard for a delineation of the
narrative mechanics, thematic, and ideological impulses of the prison novel as a sub-genre.

Elsewhere, Sobanet notes that *Jail Sentences* (*Jail Sentences* is a study of the French prison novel over the twentieth-century) concentrates on four novels, including Bon’s *Prison*. Here his focus is fiction’s capacity to function as a documentary tool. Many believe, wrongly, that *Prison* is a documentation of Bon’s experiences in prison. While the book is ‘true’ insofar as it represents the reality of prison life, Sobanet emphasises the importance of prison narrative as a sub-genre of penology. He argues that it “should primarily be read as a work of fiction, because the text's referentiality appears to be evoked through narrative strategies modelled after ‘the conventions of referential texts’” (63). Sobanet emphasises the penological importance of prison narrative:

Motivations for writing about the prison experience are many, be it to come to terms with one's social relegation or to reconstruct the self. Often prison writings try to convey to those unfamiliar with life behind bars the inhumane living conditions that for many inmates can only be shouldered by developing bonds of solidarity among prisoners (254).

Like Bon, Neer Korn, in his study of Australian prison narrative, records what inmates say about their life and conditions in prison. His information is gleaned from his study of statistics, interviews with prisoners and through his observations and interpretation of inmate disclosures. Korn observes “in order to adapt to prison life, the inmates had to adopt an assertive and fearless persona, disguise any vulnerability
they felt and use violence as the central means of resolving conflict and imposing superiority” (133). He states further:

> I shared with inmates my assessment that prison is something people hear about in the media, are widely interested in, but in actual fact, know little about and that this was an opportunity for them to let the public know what life in jail is really like (49).

Korn recognises the problems of race within and without the prison walls. As one Indigenous inmate, David, remarks: “Didn’t worry about school, we used to think they’re trying to brainwash us in white man’s ways” (65). Korn reports that the inmates he spoke to described a micro-society in which survival requires them to behave in a manner totally unacceptable in the community. David comments:

> When I talk to people I can see if they’ve got fear in them. And if (we) see that fear, look out, we’ll terrorise you. We used to, like, make them cry, make them stick eggs in their arse in front of us so we can laugh at them…and we used to make a bloke rape ‘em in front of us and laugh at ‘em and that’s because what used to happen to our people (154).

The inmates in Korn’s study are presented as unreliable narrators, at times exaggerating and bragging. Because of the short time-span and sterile environment of the interviews it is difficult to see the inmates as sympathetic characters. Their words describe actions rather than emotions. Like many attributes assigned to criminals, this evasion of truth is not specific to prisoners. It may seem inappropriate to some readers
to introduce the wisdom of the short story writer Tobias Wolff in this instance. The callous subject material of the inmate interviews is far removed from the work of this celebrated writer. And yet, truth and lying are human options that are universally applicable. As Wolff states: “the world is not enough maybe?...To lie is to say the thing that is not, so there’s obviously unhappiness with what is discontent” (Shulevitz 1). This discontent is manifold within the hostile prison environment where inmates are tempted to lie with the intention of representing their surroundings, personalities and actions from a different perspective. Their world is hostile and they do what they can to survive.

**Trauma Theory**

Trauma theory is applicable to prison narrative because throughout history prisoners have suffered trauma including lack of freedom, solitary isolation, sexual violence and beatings. La Capra and Eaglestone look at the ways in which trauma theory emerged from the study of stories of the Holocaust and how this is productive for analysis. La Capra interprets historical trauma and its enduring effects by using and transcending contemporary critical theory to assess the influence of trauma on present-day-contemporary writing. Through the writings of Wendy Brown in ‘Wounded Attachments’ A Political Theory, Eaglestone argues that the experience of trauma has shifted some profound part of western discourse because contemporary identities are increasingly being articulated around experiences and memories called “insistently unredeemable injury” (146). One consequence of this state of affairs is that trauma studies’ principled commitment to injury might result in contributing to “a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it” (406). This process is a recurrent dynamic in prison narrative.
La Capra explores the distinction between history and fiction with regard to actual events. Radical constructionists, including Ernst von Glaserfeld, believe that knowledge is subjective to individual interpretation. They see an “identity or essential similarity between history and fiction at the structural level” (8). The core of La Capra’s argument is that the relativism implicit in this position can have unacceptable implications for the representation of traumatic historical events. When radicals insist that history is vulnerable to the political bias of the historian there is a basis to deny destructive traumatic historical events.

Michel Foucault also studied trauma theory and wrote about the continuing relevance of violence and suffering a signifier of ‘trauma’ in the wider culture in The Order of Things. Traumas happen continuously throughout history, e.g. world wars, conflicts between adjoining countries and atrocities inflicted on prisoners. These traumas are seldom mastered. Trauma theory forms a network of ideas that offers a way of paying attention to forms of texts. It is a narrative therapy that involves respect. Issues of trauma theory are represented by combining ideas of the past, the self, the political and suffering. At the core of Foucault’s The Order of Things there is a change in language that is a response to trauma theory. Foucault writes that in the early modern period there was an “immense recognition of culture” (43), in which the change in language and acts of culture are themselves a response to trauma and ‘trauma therapy’. Foucault’s most pressing claim in The Order of Things is that although all histories have certain truths such as those in scientific studies, these truths have varied over the years from one period’s validity of knowledge to that of the next. Prison narrative is the place where this change has been responded to most clearly and is of importance because of the clever negotiation of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction.
In *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault sections his main ideas into four parts: torture, punishment, discipline and prison. Before the middle of the 1800’s, torture and executions were public entertainment and a means of serving political purposes by demonstrating the consequences of criminal behaviour. Foucault challenges but does not refute the commonly accepted idea that prison became the consistent form of punishment due to humanitarian concerns of the public. He believes that torture was a politically ineffective manner of controlling crime because the effect of torture on the community could not be assessed. It was too haphazard as a means of control. With imprisonment there is more order and predictability. As incarceration became more popular, the infliction of torture was no longer public but probably just as terrible as the public were now unaware of the abuse happening in the prisons. Foucault recognises the role of stories of crime and punishment as functions of social control. The threat of punishment is a form of social control. He concentrates on ideological questions linking narrative structures like authorial narration and first-person narratives to structural attributes of the prison. As a critique of power and institutions in society, Foucault studied this manner of thought. Foucault implies that there are two methods of knowledge; knowledge that has been forced on people by powerful institutions and the knowledge acquired through the study of conflict and struggle which challenges the organisations linked to society, thus allowing alternative discourse. Knowledge acquired independently, not forced by an institution such as a government, is more likely to be conducive to discussion by community members.

David Garland sees *Discipline and Punish* as “a work of history, sociology and penology, legal analysis and cultural criticism” (1). The book (which refers mainly to the time period from 1660 to the end of the 19th Century) has been
authenticated as a serious study of the French penal system (by critics such as Thomas Lemke) since the eighteenth-century. It is an exceptionally complex discourse on power, discipline and communities, which has thrown illumination on my study of prison narrative.

**Penology**

Penology as Prison narrative is a literary sub-genre that constitutes an intersection of penology (a branch of sociology that focuses on carceral conditions and power structures), a brief review of penology will situate the need for prison narrative. Ted Honderick defines punishment as reformative because “Punishment is justified as it provides an opportunity to ‘reform’ offenders and so to reduce offences” (88). The practice of treatment to change behaviour is recommended. By the imposition of programs and the enforcement of imprisonment, this objective incorporates the belief that “crime does not pay”. Objections to this theory typically revolve around the way in which it deems the offender to be in need of treatment, which implies that he is sick. Crime, it can be argued, is a social disease rather than a personal disease; to follow this reasoning, treating the individual is rather like treating the symptoms rather than the cause of the problem.

Ideas of reformation have evolved over the years. Frederick William Neitenstein introduced a new attitude to prisoner conditions when he became Comptroller of Prisons in New South Wales in 1896. He was a reformer who recognised that ‘separate treatment’ or solitary confinement, if used over a prolonged period, was a prime cause of prisoners’ physical and moral deterioration. He introduced advanced methods of rehabilitation. Among the reforms, that he
introduced in 1898, was state assistance, which offered prisoners ‘honest employment’ upon their release. John Ramsland writes:

Neitenstein’s Annual Report for the year 1900 loudly proclaimed a decrease in criminality in the emerging new state of New South Wales, which was breaking free from its narrower, apparently more criminal-ridden past. During the last six months of 1900 the prison population had fallen by 705, despite increases in total population (158).

This drop in inmate numbers is a reflection on the new practices introduced by Neitenstein.

Neitenstein’s reforms were humanitarian and efficient to the extent that, in the early 1950s, Comptroller General Nott echoed his notions of penal reform with a complete revision of prison regulations, which improved living and working conditions for inmates and completed the system of using social workers as parole officers who would assist the prisoner on his release. A Parole Board was established in 1951 but relatively few inmates were released under its jurisdiction (section 5.63 of the Crimes Act). The work of parole officers was adversely affected, however, by a public backlash and bureaucratic policy.

David Brown gives an historical perspective of prison conditions in New South Wales’ prisons in the 1970s. He comments on the manner in which prisoners were inappropriately controlled: “In 1970 all prisoners at Bathurst Correctional Centre were bashed as a reprisal for a peaceful protest” (27). Four years later the prisoners rioted and set fire to the prison.
Prison numbers rose from 1975, peaking at 3954 in 1979. Prison conditions had reverted to a harsh and brutal regime and these poor conditions were exposed by the publicity given to the Nagle Royal Commission Report in 1978. From 1979, Dr. Tony Vinson introduced reform. He advocated for alternatives to prison for first offenders and shorter sentences. Vinson was head of the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services during a period of reform from 1979 to 1981. He was very popular with the prisoners. In the short story, “Home Again” Kevin Sullivan, the protagonist in Living Like Common People comments on Vinson as follows:

Before the commission the screws had enjoyed complete power over us inmates. Even when what they were doing was blatantly illegal they were immune to the laws of the country. We had a champion in one of the Commissioners, Professor Tony Vinson, who organised an inquiry into some of the worst incidents. The public inquiry resulted in the edict that the Law should apply equally to all, including correctional officers. The screws weren’t happy with the result; a loss of power, and industrial action in the form of strikes became common. Four years on, with the screws out on strike we were back to being locked down 24/7 and prison conditions were as bad as ever (39).

Although there was a dramatic drop in the prison population in the 1980s’, there was disruption in the form of the longest strike by prison officers in New South Wales’ history. The officers disapproved of the liberal aspects of prison management
introduced by Vinson. Although there were difficulties, Vinson’s reform methods were to continue.

In 1981, a Special Care Unit was opened at Long Bay Correctional Centre for the care of emotionally disturbed inmates. The 1990s saw the introduction of a number of programs including a Young Offenders Program, an HIV Lifestyle Unit and a Special Management Support Program. The opening of the Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre in 1997 was seen as the marking of a new era and progress in the form of the closure of Maitland Correctional Centre, Parramatta and Cooma and the rebuilding of Long Bay and Goulburn. According to Malcolm Feeley and Jonathon Simon, “the new penology is markedly less concerned with responsibility, fault, moral sensibility, diagnosis or intervention and treatment of the individual. Rather it is concerned with techniques to identify, classify and manage groupings sorted by dangerousness” (452).

The new penology does not refer to inmates as morally corrupt people in need of treatment; rather, it sees the Criminal Justice System as a body responsible for systematic rationality and efficiency through the use of research tools such as indicators, prediction tables and population projection. More dangerous criminals are classified and separated from those considered to be less of a risk. In this manner the new penology has proved effective in joining together some of the external factors encroaching on the criminal justice system and in determining the prevailing responses of the system. There has, however, been a huge increase in the level of incarceration over the past fifteen years, which is not reflected in the rates of reported crime. A 2011 Department of Justice report states that:
Projections indicate that the prison population will continue to grow into the future. Sentencing reform – such as the abolition of home detention and suspended sentences, as well as the proposed mandatory minimum sentencing for certain serious offences – is expected to be the main driver of growth in prison bed demand” (Australian Institute of Criminology).

So, harsher sentencing will be the main driver of prison growth. The new penology may be perceived as contributing to the recent rise in prison populations.
Chapter 2

*Living Like Common People* is fictional prose written with the aim to entertain and alert readers to the reality of the Criminal Justice System and to challenge their belief systems. The series of short stories will provide a description of the sub-groups that make up the prison population. The loss incurred by inmates, relatives and the community are balanced against the profit achieved through community protection, the supposed effectiveness of rehabilitation and deterrence, and the community satisfaction derived through retribution. Retribution is not a positive community response to punishment. The aim of *Living Like Common People* is to explore the nature of character motivation, the essence of violence and common themes in prison narrative. The methodology is based on experiences with prisoners, ex-prisoners, correctional staff, and on analysis of media portrayals of prison including print, television and films. The writers that have informed its writing include Norman Mailer, Truman Capote and Peter Kocan.

The interlinked, fictional short stories in *Living Like Common People* focus on Kevin Sullivan, who is a ruthless and flawed character but human in his effort to survive. Kevin’s first night in prison is Christmas Eve 1969 and he rapidly adapts to the ‘carnival-freak-show’ that is Long Bay Prison. The Criminal Justice System has endeavoured to change Kevin’s behaviour since he was eighteen. The officers use sensory deprivation as punishment. They can lock him up but they cannot control his thought processes. He hates them but he does not fear them. Kevin Sullivan is a damaged person but he possesses strengths and virtues. He has a past, a present and a future. His responses to and thoughts about prison contribute to the person he is.
The manner in which he is contained and treated in prison is inappropriate and results in Kevin being immature for his age when he is released. After serving a lengthy period, he has problems adapting to community expectations. Each time he is released, Kevin struggles to survive and is returned to prison for unlawful behaviour. He forms immature relationships and attempts to fulfil teenage dreams.

By the time Kevin is again released in 1995 he is a hardened criminal. The reader can feel certain that he will continue on his path as a recidivist. When Kevin is returned to prison yet again, he fits into the type of prisoner that Neer Korn in Life Behind Bars chose to interview. Inmates were classified thus: “Violent crime and lengthy sentence” (24). Each inmate, interviewed by Korn, offered a story of a sad childhood in a dysfunctional home where nurturing and expressions of emotions were largely absent, as is the case with Kevin.

Some back-story of Kevin’s life is presented in the first story, ‘Sweetpea’. To achieve credibility, an author needs to portray the story in a manner that resonates with the reader. This story is pivotal to the collection, as it displays the setting of the suburb, the school and the family life of the protagonist. The suburb, Zillmere, on the outskirts of Brisbane, is tough and the children lose their innocence young. The school is under-resourced: migrant children and children with physical, psychiatric and mental disability are left to their own devices, both at school and at home. Kevin is a five-year-old with feelings that are often attributed to adults. He knows how to love, he feels rejection and fear and he experiences remorse. He is an empathetic character who is easy to relate to.
Analysis of Key Texts

What I try to achieve in these stories is the opposite of Norman Mailer’s depiction of his protagonist Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*. In this non-fiction book, the narrative depiction of Gilmore gives an explanation of Gilmore’s daily life and his interactions and the resultant reactions, depicting a potential, raving serial killer. Gilmore shot dead a defenceless service-station attendant and the next day killed an unresisting motel-manager who died slowly because the gun jammed.

An extraordinary amount of detail concerning minor characters and events dominate the story. These characters are not empathetic. Nicole Baker Barrett would normally be a sympathetic character insofar as she comes from a poor family, is a victim of childhood abuse and is young and childlike. Promiscuity and obsessive behaviour dominate her personality, however, and she is perceived as of low intelligence, a poor mother and a somewhat annoying person who colludes with a sadistic murderer. The use of the love letters she exchanged with Gilmore portrays aspects of the reality of their relatively short-lived relationship. The following extract is an example:-

He couldn’t get a hard-on. He looked like he’d been hit with an axe but was trying to smile. He wouldn’t stop and rest. He had half a hard on. Nicole began to do what she could. When her neck was as tired as it was going to be he still wasn’t ready to quit (79).

Nicole had known Gary for only a matter of months before he was locked up for murder. After he was imprisoned, found guilty and sentenced to the death penalty, Nicole became infatuated and Gary’s feelings for her deepened.
The graphic material of the letters adds to the realism of the text but the intimacy makes the reading of the novel an uncomfortable voyeuristic experience, as there is a lack of objectivity. Mailer was not at the scene of the events in the book and he represents Gilmore posthumously. Mailer is the medium, not the third-person narrative voice. The radical constructionists, including Ernst von Glasersfeld, believe (as defined previously in this exegesis) that knowledge is subjective to individual interpretation. The core of this argument is that the relativism implicit in this position can have unacceptable implications for the representation of traumatic events. In a like manner, La Capra regards the objectivity of third-person referential statements as unsuitable for traumatic historical narratives. La Capra’s argument is that these narratives require the writer’s “empathetic unsettlement’ a way of writing that blurs the binary distinction between writer and victim” (xi).

Philip Bufithis’ explanation defends Mailer’s book thus: “To read this book is to feel with unaccustomed intensity desires and fears beneath the tired consistencies of that socially constructed thing we call our conscience. Our chilling fascination with Gary Gilmore is not with the Other, but with ourselves” (79). The characters, scenarios and relationships are not attractive and Bufithis’ explanation for the reader’s initial distaste is as follows:

In the novel Gary’s Uncle Vern, Cousin Brenda, and others are upright, decent characters who add to a wide mix of people we know from life. Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* is a modernist project that puts him in high company. Like Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Beckett and Nabokov he draws from material the reader regards as off-putting, even repugnant—certainly not the province of
literature—then he reveals the import of that material through the power of imagination and altogether changes the reader’s mind (79).

Only a talented writer could achieve this about-turn in the readers thought processes and Christopher Ricks ranks Mailer’s book as a work of genius in its range, depth and restraint. He praised the book as having lucidity when dealing with legal restraints and forbearance, even when bearing witness to brutalities. The negative aspect of prison is well portrayed. Gary was in reform school by 14, in Maximum Security at the State Penitentiary when he was thirty-three and had been incarcerated for 13 years. Gary observes the tedium of prison thus: “Being here is like walking up to the edge and looking over 24 hours a day for more days then you care to recall” (8). Mailer notes:

No wonder Gary Gilmore had gotten into trouble. For twelve years, a prison had told him when to go to bed and when to eat, what to wear and when to get up. He does not have the capacity to function in society because his living conditions are ‘absolutely diametrically opposed to the capitalist environment (468).

Mailer recognises the way institutionalisation in reform schools and prison has contributed to Gilmore’s anti-social behaviour. Mailer is exposing the prison excuse of rehabilitation for what it is.

There is a relationship between Norman Mailer and Russian literature – Mailer’s preoccupation with crime and violence, and his interrogation of the moral and legal systems has an antecedent in Dostoevsky’s work. In “Norman Mailer In The
Light of Russian Literature”, Victor Peppard notes that Mailer’s literary dialogue is highly developed with Dostoevsky:

On the broadest level, Mailer shares a passion with his Russian predecessors for engaged fiction that is morally, philosophically purposeful, and which tackles the large, eternal questions of life, often in striking, disarming, or blasphemous ways (173).

They share a concern for history, which forms the basis of their narrative and thematic structure, but are also strongly concerned with their own eras.

Although Dostoevsky and Mailer have their own distinctive techniques, they both question the nature of good and evil and how people should behave. In Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky focuses on the moral dilemmas of his protagonist Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, who kills an unscrupulous pawnbroker for her money. Raskolnikov struggles with the idea that some people naturally have the right to murder. His argument is that if God does not exist, then all is permitted.

Dostoevsky uses the sense of place with his similar descriptions of “the little room”, “a closet” and “a tomb”. He writes, “An atmosphere of heat and stench equal the atmosphere of crime” (19). Many of the images are of confinement, stuffiness and crowds. Dostoevsky uses yellow as the colour of punishment. The apartment, furnishings, paintings and the jacket of the moneylender are yellow as is the wallpaper on the protagonist’s (Raskolnikov’s) wall. The motif is of prostitution, debasement of man and rapacious exploitation. The atmosphere of St Petersburg, with its crumbling apartment blocks, canals, closets where people live and courtyards, is oppressive. The city is actually a character in the book, not a backdrop.
Raskolnikov sees no clear-cut boundary between vice and innocence. He is at a spiritual impasse. Raskolnikov eventually loses his internal struggle and is consumed by guilt. Later in the novel, Dostoevsky conveys the message that punishment is not effective as a deterrent because criminals accept punishment as deserved. Research has shown that the severity of punishment does not act as a deterrent. As Ted Honderick states: “the contemporary deterrence theorist is left with a significantly large class of offenders whose punishment is of doubtful value” (58). Morally, deterrence is not justified as punishment, “governed by the intention to deter is inhumane and unjust” (58). If the extent of the punishment is greater than the extent of the crime the principal of deterrence is not morally economical. Deterrence is a forward-looking theory. It is designed to prevent crime in the general population through the use of punishment, isolation from the community and corporal punishment being examples. The principle claims that the infliction of punishment on criminals serves to deter the individual being punished and others from future offending. The deterrence theory finds no justification for action in a past offence and depends on consequences of punishment. The argument for deterrence is that people regulate their behaviour by calculating pleasure and pain. The flaw to this theory is that not all offenders are deterred by the prospect of punishment.

The epilogue is of major importance in Crime and Punishment because it is the necessary finale that disentangles the intricacies of the plot. Raskolnikov is ultimately punished. His mother dies and his guilt makes him believe that her death was a result of his criminal actions. His fellow convicts reject him and he experiences the moral suicide of a criminal.

Dostoevsky spent time in a Serbian prison and the epilogue is linked to this time. His experience is evident in the following quote from Epilogue 2:
It was not the horrors of convict life, the hard work or the food or the shaved head which broke him. What did he care about these sufferings and torments!... His pride was deeply wounded and it was from wounded pride that he took sick… If only fate had granted him remorse – searing remorse.

Crime and Punishment is a psychological novel about the difficulties of repentance and how to overcome them (95).

* 

The protagonists in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* would not have been deterred from their actions by the severity of punishment. To avoid recognition, the killers, ex-convicts Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, killed Herbert Clutter and his family because if they were recognized as the perpetrators they would be returned to prison. The crime was particularly brutal. Smith was known for his unstable, violent, personality and had a complex psychological relationship with Perry that may have contributed to the sadistic nature of the crime. Rosalind Smith argues that:

*In Cold Blood* resists the authorial omniscience and closure for which the text strives: the motivations of the main characters for murder are never fully resolved. Here the inherent meaningless of the crime intrudes even as its meaning is explicated, and it is this epistemological tension that haunts the genre (23).

Apart from any sadistic satisfaction achieved by Smith and Perry the crime was meaningless. The pair had intended to rob the Clutter’s but there was no money to steal.
Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is a story with a theme similar to *The Executioner’s Song*, that of senseless murder. It is also true crime where innocent people are murdered and it is beyond comprehension to understand how such a callous crime could be committed. Paul Levine writes:

This is a painstakingly researched account of the grotesque and gratuitous murder of a prosperous Kansas family by two intelligent, personable, and demented ex-convicts who were complete strangers to their victims. With consummate reportorial skill and a novelist's eye for shape and detail, Capote traces the course of events from the day the Clutter family is butchered to the night, some six years later, when the killers are hanged (135-8).

Another similarity to *The Executioner’s Song* is the manner in which an extraordinary amount of detail concerning minor characters and events dominate the book. Ralph Voss notes: “Capote’s exhaustive tracking of the novel’s more minor characters, their lives, and their ongoing perceptions of the novel” (99). With *In Cold Blood* the reader knows from the outset who committed the crime and that they were caught. In both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner’s Song*, the suspense does not rely on these aspects but on the withholding of the horrific details of the crimes. There is contention about the presentation of *In Cold Blood* as nonfiction. Capote’s oeuvre is primarily fiction. According to Levine Capote said:

I wrote what I called a short nonfiction novel, *The Muses Are Heard* about the people going to Russia. And then I got this idea of doing a really serious big work? It would be precisely like a novel, with a single difference: every word
of it would be true from beginning to end. I called this, in my mind, a nonfiction novel (135-8).

Voss believes that “Capote’s style and in particular Capote’s much-heralded ‘invention’ of the nonfiction novel represents a kind of evolution or, more accurately, a kind of reinvention” (99).

Capote wrote about the murder of the Clutter family: Herbert the father, Bonnie the mother, and Nancy and Kenyon the children, who were well liked and respected in their small farming community. The murders attracted headlines throughout the country. Michael Wainwright expresses the view that Capote desired this publicity for his chosen subject:

What separates *In Cold Blood* from newspaper investigations of the case, what emerges from *In Cold Blood* in defiance of Capote’s factual inadequacy, and what makes *In Cold Blood* so prescient both in the specific terms of the Clutters’ murderers in late-1950s America and in the transhistorical and asocial terms of the documentary novel, therefore, is Capote’s implicit realisation of the fundamental framework that places two rational dilemmas at the thematic and aesthetic of his work (36).

Wainwright argues that Capote is not following the basic literary conventions of the nonfiction novelist. Capote’s literary presentation of the gruesome events is averse to the conventions of the American culture in the mid-1950s. It was the era of “mom’s apple pie” and conservative principles. The alleged dilemmas associated with Capote’s account of the murder of the Clutter family were abhorrent to the 1950’s
American public. They were so horrific as to not follow the expectations of what could befall such a well-respected and loved family as the Clutter’s.

There is an obvious plot in this book and Perry, Dick’s co-offender, does evoke some feeling of empathy. The first fifty-five pages are devoted to building the characters of the victims and to a description of their community and way of life. There is a preview to the deviance of the criminals, “but Dick was convinced that Perry was that rarity, a natural killer” (31).

Unlike The Executioner’s Song and In Cold Blood, Peter Kocan’s The Treatment and The Cure has a protagonist, Len Tarbutt, whose life parallels Kocan’s own. Kocan was born Peter Raymond Douglas in 1947. In 1966, he attempted to murder the politician Arthur Calwell. He was found guilty and imprisoned in Long Bay Prison before he was transferred to Morisset Hospital, an institution for the criminally insane. Kocan was released in 1976 and began to write about his experiences. The Treatment and The Cure consists of two novellas following the experiences of Len Tarbutt as he is moved from a secure ward to less restrictive accommodation at the hospital and, in low-key writing, recording his relationships with staff and inmates.

Norma Jean Richey acknowledges Kocan’s recognition of the importance of the individual and the inadequacies of a system that cannot recognize the difference between ‘treatment’ and ‘punishment’:

Kocan affirms the importance of the uniqueness of each individual in a world where the stupidity of institutional order threatens its presence. The idea that a ‘treatment’ for human need can consist of a ‘cure’ that is an obvious expression
of institutional self-aggrandizement is one that Kocan disparages by silence, resists by survival and overcomes by imagination’ (518).

The doctrine of Reformation rejects retribution and deterrence. Punishment is justified as it provides an opportunity to ‘reform’ offenders and thus reduce offences. A practice of treatment to change behaviour is recommended. By the imposition of programs and the enforcement of imprisonment, the objective incorporates the belief that “crime does not pay”. An objection to the justification of this theory is that the offender is deemed in need of treatment, which implies that he is sick. Crime is a social disease rather than a personal disease, so is treating the individual going to reduce criminality?

The characters may be convicted murderers, psychopathic, paedophilic but they are portrayed as individuals with interesting and even amusing qualities. Richey describes Kocan’s poetry as being similar to his writing in The Treatment and the Cure: “it is a unique and beautiful statement of the rejuvenating power of the human spirit in a world that tries to limit its freedom and its very being” (518). In The Treatment and the Cure, Peter Kocan has the ability to bring the reader into the situation and to empathise with the characters through his sustained use of the second-person narrative, which sets up a collaboration of reader and writer where ‘you’ becomes ‘me’. The use of the second-person allows an honesty and lack of hypocrisy that is rare beyond the compound walls. The protagonist Len is deadpan in his response to inappropriate behaviour. When Bob Fleet, an inmate he has been assigned to work with, attempts to converse with him: “Oh, God, I love a tender young bum!” he says as he mixes a wheelbarrow load of mortar. “Ever fucked a nice little boy?” he asks you. “Not lately,” you say’ (48).
The banter between men makes prison narrative unique and interesting. The men are at times tragic and have dark undertones of violence: there is humour, ironic as it may be, some light to contrast with the dark side of life. A conflicting dynamic between the objective and the subjective involves the humanity of the men even though they are in a violent place — ward six for the criminally insane at Morisset Hospital. Kocan’s novel is regarded as prison narrative because although the men are in the insane ward of a hospital, not in a prison, they are legally imprisoned and, as previously stated, prison narrative is defined as narrative written or related by people who are unwillingly imprisoned.

The opening sentence of the narrative reads as follows: “Down a long road all sun and shadowy with trees overhead and a slow look from cows across the fence and you’re there” (1). The reader is immediately at the scene and at one with the narrative voice. Jeremy Fisher refers to Peter Kocan’s use of the second-person narrative:

But second person works well in developing a sense of alienation and being watched and observed: ‘So you work a bit faster, but not too fast, or too slow. You’re concentrating so hard on timing every move to what you think is a proper balance between fast and slow that you feel giddy. You imagine what the screws might think if you fell over’ (42).

The concluding sentence in The Treatment and the Cure – “You sit staring at the tablecloth, thinking you’re going to die of sorrow” (102), demonstrates the strength of the second-person narrative, which achieves a sense of alienation and solitude. Although it is a festive day and Len Tarbutt is sitting at a table with his peers, because of the circumstances (being treated in an inappropriate manner by
custodians and the reactions of vulnerable people), Len experiences an enormous sense of desolation. Fisher observes that, “Used in a consistent manner, second-person narrative can be an effective alternative to first or third person narrative”(10). Fisher reasons that it connects the narrator through the constant use of ‘you’ but also repels him since the reader is compelled to accept confronting narrative aspects as his own experience.

I wrote the final chapter of Living Like Common People “Karma” in the first-person and then as second-person narrative. The protagonist Kevin Sullivan is back at the prison farm where he was granted parole three years ago. The first sentence of the story is: “If you’ve spent thirty years of your life in prison and been described as a recidivist, a career criminal, a bad bastard and a stupid old boob-rat you might as well accept that you are all of the above” (Kama (2) 165). The names and the implication of ‘you’ made me wonder how it would feel to accept this status. At forty-six years of age, Kevin is feeling world-weary. He feels embarrassed when he runs into Natalie, the parole officer who counselled him and wrote his parole reports back in 1993. “You are standing having a smoke while waiting for the muster siren when you see a vaguely familiar woman walking through the compound. She stops abruptly in front of you and before you can nick off she recognises you” (165). The use of the second-person narrative here connects the reader to the discomfort Kevin is experiencing at being confronted by the parole officer who worked with him toward achieving his conditional release.

In this final story Kevin is a changed man. He is no longer interested in even the small victory of ‘one-upping’ a prison officer, which had formally made life bearable in the oppressive prison living conditions. For the first time in his prison history, he actually feels dependent on a prison officer. He is bashed by a former
friend and lying on the shower room floor: “Blood splattered on the tiles and swirling down the plug hole in the steamy shower room. For once in your life you will be grateful to see a screw” (166). The story does not have a happy ending and the use of the second-person narrative accentuates the despondent mood. I felt more implicated in the action and as if I was physically experiencing the emotions of the prisoner.

Kocan’s writing deals with dehumanisation in literature, as does the writing of Primo Levi in If This is a Man. Although the circumstances and settings are different, humanity is the key to both novels. Karl Miller acknowledges this aspect in If This is a Man. Levi claimed:

That he was uninterested in style, but the wisdom and humanity of the prose in which he records the fate of this people should not be relegated, though at times it has been, to some lower circle of literature or to some other category all together. This is prose which has the interest of the poetry we most value (12).

Levi writes: “Sooner or later everyone discovers that perfect happiness is unrealisable, but there are few who pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable” (13). Considering his history as a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, it is interesting that Levi would make this statement. His understanding of the plight of the prisoner is evident in his work. He is a man who has lost all of his possessions and loved ones. He states:

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short of everything he possesses: he will
be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself (26).

Through his experience as a prisoner-of-war Levi is aware of how a person can lose his own beliefs, grace and identity when subjected to inhumane treatment. The atrocities suffered by Levi and the millions of Jewish people who were tortured, murdered and robbed of their families and possessions, led to the writing of stories by writers such as Elie Wiesel (La Nuit) and Anne Frank (The Diary of a Young Girl) and to the philosophical findings of former inmates such as Primo Levi.

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There are similarities between a TV series and a book of interwoven short stories. Each series contains the core elements of dramatic structure: exposition, rising action and crisis. There is generally a climax but not always a resolution, as viewer interest needs to be maintained until the next story. The prison television series studied OZ (a HBO (Home Box Office) prison drama is episodic, thus giving the reader the option to pause and digest the content. The 1997 – 2002 American series consists of 56 episodes. Bill Yousman analyses OZ as a “cultural artifact of the current era of rampant incarceration” (265). Although the violence in OZ at time appears gratuitous, the series gives a powerful depiction of prison life.

Criminal justice officials have been represented in entertainment media and subject to academic study since before 1970, when criminologists became interested in the impact of media on criminal justice agencies. Mike Willis observes:

Fictional representations of probation in Britain over a sixty year period, premises on the idea that a) fiction is not necessarily untruthful or unrealistic
(though it may be) and that b) on some matters it can frame and inform public understanding as much as if not more than factual data, is intended to serve academic, media and probation interests (7).

OZ stands for Oswald State Penitentiary, which changes to Oswald State Correctional Centre in series three. As the narrator, an African-American named Augustus Hill, puts it, “maybe people just weren’t that penitent” (The Routine 1.2). The show is about men, violence and rape. Lara Stemple expresses how, with unflinching persistence, OZ exposes what it means when men rape men:

While the concept of why prisoners rape is not always correct, (in the series, Beecher, a man convicted of an automobile offence repeatedly ‘takes it up the ass’ even when he doesn’t ask for it. He goes on to have consensual sex with other inmates) the important parts are as realistic and have resonance for those with first-hand experience of the penal system. Augustus Hill, the wheel-chair bound inmate whose introductions anchor each episode, sees it this way: ‘It’s about how big, how long, how hard. Life in OZ is all about the size of your dick and anyone who tells you different ain’t got one.’ With that Hill points out the simplistic privilege of masculinity in prison culture, reinforcing it with the ultimate jab – ‘being dickless, or not really being a man at all (167).

The reality, as expressed by Stemple, is unlike the sexual predators in The Shawshank Redemption: there ‘the sisters’, a gang of sadistic rapists, are presented as overtly gay. The Shawshank Redemption is typical of many fictional twentieth-century prison films and narratives that sympathise with a quasi-innocent prisoner-
hero, with little empathy for the ‘deviant’ rest of the prison population. These delimitations are connected with other cultural delineations. Typically the ‘hero’ is white, middle class and heterosexual. His masculinity is threatened by ‘homosexual’ rape and his masculinity is restored by escape from prison, an extension of the phallic power of the white middle class.

The Internet Movie Data Base (I.M.D.B.) list of the best 250 films of all time:- female voters rated *The Shawshank Redemption* (1996) the best, while male viewers voted it the second best film (http: www.imbd.com/chart/female). A large number of people have had their perception of prison influenced in an unrealistic manner by Stephen King, a great fictional writer who has an inaccurate concept of life in prison. As depicted in *OZ*, prison rape is more about power then gender identity. The perpetrators remain heterosexual in their social roles and self-perception. Prison rapists are usually at the top of the hierarchy leaving the victim feeling weak and vulnerable. Through a sense of shame, few victims of rape in prison are willing to discuss the violation. This is the case in *OZ*.

Yousman describes the violence, including the sexual violence, in *OZ* as being truly spectacular. The producers are not content with bashings and stabbings. The inmates electrocute each other, shove each other’s heads into television sets and “as the last brick is slid into place in an entombment scene, a prisoner smiles at the victim and says, ‘You should have taken that blow job when you had the chance’”(277). One possible interpretation for this depiction of violence is, according to Yousman, that it is only logical or ‘realistic’ for a drama set inside a prison to be extremely violent. There is no question that incarceration feeds violence.

The series depicts an authentic picture of some aspects of prison life. The African American prison population dominates and racism is a dominating factor.
People from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disability are represented usually in the main characters in OZ: Cyril has the mentality of a five-year-old and Augustus is in a wheelchair.

The riot scene in the final episode of the first series is very real according to inmates from Long Bay Prison who witnessed riots in Australian prisons (Christmas day riots at the CIP in 1970 and 1971); the one difference being the prison gates. It is a fact that the gates in the old NSW prisons, such as Goulburn, Maitland and Long Bay, all open inwards and inmates stacked furniture against the gates, making it necessary for officers to use a side grinder to cut the metal plate at the bottom of the gates and then a hydraulic ram to shift the furniture. In OZ, the gates slide upwards and officers have direct access to maimed and injured men and men drugged into an unconscious state who are distributed away throughout the units. Mayhem reins. Series Two starts with ‘The Butterfly Effect.’ Although the characters commit the most heinous crimes and plot to torture and kill each other, they mostly retain some humanity and are compelling to observe because of the contradiction of good and evil. Toby Beecher, an accountant who accidently kills a young girl while driving over the limit, is an example of a man who appears mild- mannered when he enters the scene. He is knocked around, raped and tortured and eventually turns into a ruthless murderer. The staff frequently break the rules and consort and collude with prisoners, adding to the violence. OZ is a place of horror and the residents attempt to escape in a number of ways: by using drugs, by digging a tunnel, by seeking salvation in God and by suicide. You become a prisoner in another way however and a belief voiced by the narrator, and held by many an Australian inmate, is that ‘Life on the other side’s not what it’s cracked up to be.’
There is gang warfare. Ryan O’Rilly attempts to explain to his brother Cyril, “we’re in OZ: bad is good.” The use of Augustus Hill as the narrator is an effective device because Augustus presents as an orator without bias – he provides an objective point of view and he provides the links to the episodes. Although the character interacts as a normal inmate throughout most of the series, he appears in each episode in an omniscient context and introduces new prisoners as they enter Emerald City by giving an outline of their crime, prison number and sentence. He also clarifies the plot and provides a moral context.

OZ is relevant to my narrative as it incorporates the reality of prison life. It provides a reason, though not an excuse, for the drug taking, the violence and the hatred many inmates have for Correctional Officers. The series displays how a person from a ‘normal’ background with no previously violent behaviour can become a cold-blooded killer. It is an example of how wrong the concept of prison as rehabilitation can be. It also shows the vulnerability of the disabled and the naïve in the prison system. A large proportion of inmates of Australian prisons come under this category. There are not enough psychiatric facilities to hold the criminally insane or even those people who are unable to function in our competitive communities. The series offers an explanation of how ‘good’ people do ‘bad’ things when they are threatened. It is also an exposition of racial disharmony.

Does society have a predisposition for revenge and violence or are people simply unaware of the cruelty and inefficiency of the system? We are all potential victims of some manner of crime. For a change to a more effective management of offenders, there is a need to expose the inadequacies of the existing prison system and to educate the public of options.
Conclusion

The similarities rather than the differences, between life outside prison and prison social dynamics, are illuminating when studying a variety of prison narratives and contemporary literature. There are degrees in the elements of patriarchy and inequality in relationships, which occur in many areas of life. These elements were addressed in the introduction, where the stories from Winton’s *The Turning* were discussed. Winton used violent male characters in some of his stories to criticise the dominant patriarchal structure of our society. He based these characters on an interpretation of masculinity that remains dominant in Australian culture. Men are stereotyped as too tough to feel emotions. They are encouraged to behave in an aggressive manner. This theory is similar to that (previously quoted) of Ann Ganley who noted that women and men’s behaviour stems more from socialisation and institutional sex roles than from biology. These dynamics exist in the outside community just as they do in prisons, and in similar ways.

The texts reviewed here are relevant not only because of their subject matter but because of similar relationships, inequalities and themes. As cited in the body of this exegesis, the majority of prison narratives display the characteristics of Gothic novels, which relate to the darker side of human existence, encompassing insanity, fear, cruelty, violence and deviance. It is not only prison narrative that has this relationship with the Gothic. Similar attributes are obvious in novels by Winton, Munro, Dickens, Dostoevsky and Hooper. The Gothic theme is popular and the reason could be that discretely most people have Gothic elements in their lives. People are anxious, have addictions, jealousies and insecurities. Gothic fiction speaks to these secret parts of us, these idiosyncrasies we wish we didn’t have but ignore at
our own risk. We are all human. It is this capacity that I have attempted to portray in the protagonist Kevin Sullivan in *Living Like Common People*. It is a characteristic that is evident in the inmates Kocan describes in *The Treatment and the Cure*.

In his introduction to *In the Belly of the Beast*, Mailer writes “it is not only the worst of the young who are sent to prison, but the best – that is the proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising and the most undefeated of the poor” (Abbott, 1981a,p.xii). Prisons are occupied by a cross-section of the community. It is the nature of the institution that is corruptive.

Issues addressed in men’s relations with other men included the role of competition, homophobia and fear of intimacy and, particularly relevant in the prison context, the role that rape plays in maintaining male hierarchies. For the Aboriginal prisoners who have also experienced the oppression inherent in racism, this feeling may be even stronger. Too often, this feeling of oppression is projected as anger.

Inequality of relationships is obvious in a prison setting. There are the correctional officers, the ‘good’ guys, and the inmates, the ‘bad’ guys. The reality is that there are good and bad in both camps. Correctional Officers have power in that they are seen to be on the side of right, they are armed and they have free run of the prison. At times the job attracts sadistic people who find the opportunity to take out their issues of control and anger. On the other hand, Correctional Officers do not have an easy job and it is difficult, if not impossible, for them not to become desensitised to the prison conditions and not to develop a ‘them against us’ mentality. Although they appear to have the power, more than one correctional officer confided to me that he was frightened and dreaded coming to work most days. They were being threatened by inmates. Tendencies to dominate and control may be innate or they may be encouraged by a patriarchal society.
There is a not implausible belief that the prisoners are the ones in charge of the prison. The influential inmates, those who have money, connections and the ability to instil terror, do hold power. If the Governor wants to run a quiet establishment, without the worry of riots, it is prudent to keep this echelon satisfied. This situation is depicted in *OZ*, where the inmates do not reserve their power of control by fear and influence for the establishment but also practice it for their own benefit on other inmates. These are all issues where the public can only be enlightened by prison narrative because this is a part of prison life that is not usually acknowledged by the public or addressed openly by correctional officials. It is not in the best interest of the Governor of a prison to admit that he is not fully in control of his institution. It does need to be public knowledge because the correctional officers and inmates become victims of the system if these problems are not identified.


Ricks, Christopher. “Mailer’s Psychopath” The Mailer Review 2.1 (Fall 2008). Print


