Creative empathy: How writers turn experience not their own into literary non-fiction.

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

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*See Saw Margery Daw*
Abstract

The creative component to this thesis is a form of life writing which straddles both memoir and literary documentary. The writer-researcher interviews the subject for her or his unusual life-experience, and audio-tapes the discussion as resource material for a creative nonfiction documemoir. In a work of this type, the memoir is primarily not that of the writer, but that of the subject. The documentary component can take the form of photographs, and also factual elements which the subject mentions in relation to their experience, and which gives a documentary-type effect to their narrative.

My docu-memoir records the stories of seven subjects, five of whom are Forgotten Australians, of whom I am one. These people are of mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage, and were in care as children in Australia in the mid-part of the twentieth century. Two of the subjects are not Forgotten Australians, but one tells what it is like to be the long-lost sibling of a Forgotten Australian, and the other tells what it was like to have been a child in an orphanage in England so that, in my work, I can show that Australian orphanages were not greatly different to those in England, and the experience of being an incarcerated child was much the same regardless of geographical distance. The inclusion of all these people’s stories is intended to give a concise picture of the experience of being a Forgotten Australian: what it is like to be a “forgotten” and abused child, what it means as an adult to be a care-leaver, how their experiences have affected their lives and those of others around them, and how the experience and the effects of that are much the same no matter whether they were in care as children in England or in Australia. This is a story which has not been previously told from inside the group, in a literary work.

In the exegesis, I study what docu-memoir is, and how to write a creative nonfiction work and tailor it to my topic. As models for my own docu-memoir I chose the works of Tony Parker, and especially Lighthouse, Sheila Stewart’s three docu-memoirs, Country Kate, Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land, and Ramlin Rose: The Boatwoman’s Story, and Helen Garner’s Joe Cinque’s Consolation. From Parker and Stewart I learnt how to structure a docu-memoir of the type in which I am most interested, and various techniques that I could use when recreating the memories of others: such as, how to make the subjects in the work appear as real people, how to dwell on the metaphorical and philosophical in the words of people, and use the transcript material in a way that lets the subjects talk for themselves. From Garner I learnt how one might include oneself in the work as a point of reference for added credibility, and ways in which to enhance my work of nonfiction with creative elements like braiding the narratives with stories suggested by the subject matter, but which take the reader outside the interview situation, and use rhetoric to draw the reader into the literary landscape. From these writers I also learnt ways in which to maintain a code of ethics for a nonfiction writer when crafting a creative work of docu-memoir.
PART I

I

Docu-memoir

Introduction
My research project concerns a process by which writers can take the raw experience of others, as told to the writer by the people who lived the experience, and turn those oral accounts into a literary nonfiction production. The product of this process can be called a docu-memoir. The docu-memoir presented in this thesis centres on the personal experiences of several individuals who belong to a marginalised group of people now known as the Forgotten Australians. These people are of mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage, and like the Stolen Generation children and the so-called Child Migrants they spent part or all their childhood in foster care or Children’s Homes (orphanages) in Australia sometime during the mid-part of the twentieth century. These Homes were little removed from those of the time of Dickens, and many people took foster children as a cheap form of labour. As children in care the Forgotten Australians were subjected to damaging authority, and suffered severe hardships and horrific emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and felt the effect of displacement. Whereas the plight of the Indigenous children of the Stolen Generation was mainly racially motivated, and that of the British and Maltese Child Migrants was mainly politically motivated, the plight of the Forgotten Australians as children was mainly socially motivated. Due to economic and social changes and changes in public thinking and child welfare policy, these types of Homes were phased out in the late twentieth century, and foster care improved greatly. As adults, almost all of these people still carry the pain of their childhood.

Few people know about the Forgotten Australians or what happened to them as children. This is an important slice of Australian history which has, until recently, been swept aside and denied by the various governments and churches and charities of Australia, and kept hidden from the public view. As children, these people were humiliated and condescended to and denied a voice. As adults, until recently they were not believed and in not being believed were once again condescended to and denied a voice. Even today, in many sectors, this is still the case. For various reasons, most Forgotten Australians prefer not to disclose, and those who do disclose reserve their right to tell their own stories in their own way. But they mostly avoid reflexivity, preferring instead to “tell all” and keep their feelings and emotions to themselves. Possibly, with many of these people, this is a coping mechanism. There are thousands of Forgotten Australians, but comparatively few write their stories and those who publish mostly do so privately. Probably all this is because they were subject to the damaging authority of significant others when they were children, and as adults are afraid that disclosure might attract
some form of punishment or public or family censure, or are afraid of speaking out from misplaced feelings of shame or guilt, or for fear of losing control over their stories and so their lives. There are a few others who would like their story to be known, but feel either that they lack the education or emotional strength to write their memoirs to publication, or that in writing their stories themselves, they might not succeed in attracting a publisher’s attention and their stories properly be given a public airing.

For my MPhil degree I wrote a work titled *The Carpet Child*. In that memoir I reveal that I was abandoned into a Children’s Home when I was three years old, and was sent from there when I was eight into less than desirable foster care until I turned eighteen. As a child my soft innocence was like a carpet—it was trampled underfoot and I was damaged. My situation and my pain were ignored, and I was swept under the carpet by my abusers and the authorities and hidden from public view. In 2004 I learnt that I belong to the marginalised group now known as the Forgotten Australians. In writing *The Carpet Child* I reclaimed authority over my childhood by using the reflexive voice to explore my unusual history and discuss the effects my childhood had on my life, and I also used the technique of “double-voicing” to convey my feelings as an abused child and as a more authoritative adult to the reader, and said all that I intended to say about my personal history. While I was writing my memoir I was approached by a very small number of other Forgotten Australians who asked if I might also write their personal stories in a literary work.

I was fortunate in having the same principal supervisor for my PhD as my MPhil. He suggested that for my PhD project I now look outside myself at the stories of other Forgotten Australians. The problem for me as a creative nonfiction writer was how to approach the task ethically, and how to stay true to the facts to honour my contract with the reader, and also with the subjects to tell their stories “true.” My ethical concern was how to manage the task without upsetting the individuals whose personal stories would be made public in a literary work, and how to write a work in which I recreated the raw experience of others in such a way that the subjects told their own story in their own way. The question for me was: how could I manage this without imposing my own views on these people’s stories, and without altering their individual personal “truths”? The challenge was how to use the powerful raw material to take the reader close to my subjects to ask: Who were these children? Why were they there? What does it feel like to be them? How did their experiences affect them, and now that they are adults, what do they think and feel about them?

My supervisor suggested writing the work as a creative nonfiction docu-memoir that would allow the subjects to speak for themselves. The writing of a creative nonfiction docu-memoir about Forgotten Australians would involve me interviewing some of these people about their experiences and audio-taping the discussions as the sole resource for my creative work. Such writing can show a complex picture of the experience, and show the scars that these
people carry. A docu-memoir of this type is essentially a memoir—that of the subject rather than that of the writer—and relies on the writer’s audio-taped interviews with the subjects about their experience. The writer sees the transcripts from the taped discussions as the story. In a literary work of creative nonfiction there are urgent ethical issues in making public distressing episodes from the subjects' lives, and also in relation to readers: in a fictionalised documentary, how does the writer make clear where the boundary lies between fiction and fact, and between verbatim and edited testimony? There are also literary questions: how much the researcher should appear as her- or him- self in the narrative, and how to bring the subjects into vivid, three-dimensional life for readers?

In his 2012 book on the ethics of memoir, G. Thomas Couser points out that even though “memoir shares many narrative techniques and devices with the novel,” the writer of fiction is not bound by the strict ethical code that applies to the life writer (Memoir 10). Couser explains:

The novel, being entirely imagined, cannot lie, and novelists cannot be accused of deception and misrepresentation within their fictions. If they conceal the identities of any real individuals on whom characters are based, they are immune to charges of libel.

Memoir is very different; in memoir, authors necessarily portray characters, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceal their identities. This opens up a Pandora’s Box. The ethical dangers of memoir [by implication, this includes literary docu-memoir] stem from the fact, that unlike fiction, it is rooted in the real world and therefore makes certain kinds of truth claims. (10).

Couser further explains: while “utter fidelity to truth” is neither possible nor desirable in memoir, the memoirist assumes “two distinct kinds of obligations,” one to the biographical and historical record, and one to the people they depict” (10). The implication here for docu-memoir, is that the docu-memoirist has an obligation to the reader, as well as to the subject, to depict the subject as truthfully as possible, and present to the reader the facts of the case and the personal truths of the subject, and to handle the transcript material ethically, and with caution. When crafting a literary docu-memoir it would be neither wise nor respectful to throw everything that a subject has said on tape into the literary arena for public scrutiny. To best convey the essence of the subject’s experience to the reader, and to protect the subject from unwarranted public exposure, the writer must choose which story threads to follow from the wealth of detail granted in audio-taped interviews and discussions intended for use as the resource for a literary work.
In his 2009 book on the ethics of life writing in relation to vulnerable subjects with disabilities, Couser applauds “the significant shift in the demographics and body politics of American life writing” towards self-representational genres and self-written memoirs as a reflection and advancement “in the progress of civil rights, broadly conceived” (Signifying bodies 11). He also discusses the pitfalls and dangers in works where someone other, speaks for a subject who is precluded by a condition (such as disease or mental or physical disability or some other anomaly) from speaking for her- or his- self (3, 6, 12, 19). Couser warns that regardless of “who is doing the telling,” there are certain ethical, political, and rhetorical issues and dangers involved in specific and cultural representations of vulnerable subjects written by others who are not the subjects themselves (12). He points out that all such narratives “involve the risk of the invasion of privacy” and this presents an ethical dilemma: whereas on one hand there can be “great potential benefit in nonautobiographical representation,” on the other hand “portraying people who cannot speak for themselves (and, in some cases, not clearly able to grant meaningful consent) entails the risk of misrepresenting them” (19). Here, in this book, Couser is talking specifically about the disability narrative, but his words are equally pertinent to his discussion on misrepresentation in an earlier work, written in 2004, on the ethics of life writing in relation to vulnerable subjects.

In a review on Couser’s 2004 work, Hilde Lindemann writes that Couser “explores the moral perils [one of which is gross misrepresentation] of speaking for those who either cannot speak for themselves, or can give no meaningful consent to being depicted by others” (1). Lindemann gives a brief overview of the “fascinating” cases of misrepresentation cited by Couser (1-2). One of these cases of misrepresentation is John G. Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks. Lindemann notes that Couser claims Black Elk Speaks to be one of the of the most influential depictions of the Lakota culture but whose author was careful to suppress any mention of Black Elk’s conversion to Christianity or other evidence of assimilation into European ways of life” (1). Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks and Couser’s findings have huge ramification for the writing of a creative nonfiction docu-memoir on the Forgotten Australians because, such a work could provide a very influential depiction of a marginalised group within the Australian society, and about which virtually nothing has been previously known. Like all forms of life writing, the literary docu-memoir calls for sensitivity on the writer’s part. Paul John Eakin warns that, “Ironically, even writers who are ostensibly sensitive to the integrity of their informants may do them harm”: “Couser, for example, suggests the homage that … Neihardt intended to express to Black Elk in writing Black Elk Speaks … eventuated in an act of betrayal; in misrepresenting the truth of the Sioux chief’s vision, Neihardt may have compromised him in his very being, in what he stood for” (175).

Lindemann finds that, in his 2004 book, Couser raises important ethical questions in “the chapters that deal with morally troublesome depictions of vulnerable lives”: “Did the
subject give consent, and was that consent fully informed? Did the author have his or her own axe to grind? Was the subject treated solely as a means to the author’s ends?” (1). Lindemann observes that “important as these questions raised” by Couser are, even more important is his “theory that guides which ones to ask and how to think about answering them, and it is here that Couser breaks down” (1). The Forgotten Australians who asked me to write their stories are not like the vulnerable subjects of which Couser speaks. They are not diseased or mentally or physically disabled or suffer from some other anomalies, and they are not culturally, racially, or ethnically differenced from the society in which they live. They are ordinary people who are undifferentiated in their society, and are marginalised only as a group of persons by a shared experience of having survived a particularly traumatic childhood. This is by no means to say that all Forgotten Australians know, or know of, each other. Many of these people’s past experiences are unknown to their families, let alone a neighbour, a friend, or wider society. Nevertheless, in one sense the Forgotten Australian people are vulnerable by the fact that they had traumatic childhoods and a specific and horrific experience, and most still carry the pain of that childhood within them. Even so, this factor does not prevent them from making informed decisions, or from living normal lives within society, and, in some rare cases, achieving the heights of success in their chosen careers. Many people in society who grew up in “normal” homes, and may never have had the same type of experiences as did the Forgotten Australians, also carry pain from past experiences around inside themselves.

Couser’s theories of ethics of life writing have implications for the literary docu-memoir, and for the writing of my own docu-memoir. In order to try and minimise the risk of ethical dangers inherent in life writing as much as is possible, and understanding that the risk factor in life writing can never be fully resolved, in my own creative nonfiction work I first applied for and obtained ethics approval from my university, and then sent each potential participant a customised Consent Form and a Participant’s Information Statement thanking them for their interest in participating in my research project, and informing them what that project was about, and why the study was being done. All the potential participants in my study were well able to understand the study and what it entailed, and freely gave their informed consent to participate in the project. Moreover, during the interviews and conversations, these people proved to be intelligent, insightful, and reflective, and able to express themselves. In an attempt to further minimise the ethical risks involved in such a work of life writing, I sent each of the participants a typed copy of her or his interview transcript for their perusal and approval before proceeding to craft my work, and, later, after I had drafted the work, I sought each participant’s approval of her or his individual contribution rewritten into a work of creative nonfiction. I decided to write my docu-memoir on the Forgotten Australians as a witness in print. My plan was to use the reflexive voice in braiding the true story of my own travels in life through the equally true story of my travels around eastern Australia to meet and interview the potential
participants for my book, and allow the subjects to tell their own stories within that framework, and without judgement or interference by me as the writer, and without going in competition with the subjects’ stories. I determined to do this by using a further technique of braiding; that of inserting into my own braided story excerpts from the actual audio-taped conversations and verbatim material from the interview transcripts, and allowing the whole thing to flow together as a story that, even though creatively worked other than for the verbatim material (the excerpts taken from the audio-taped conversations and the edited verbatim material from the interview transcripts), was true nevertheless.

In my work of creative nonfiction, I wished to explore these people’s subjectivities so that the reader can gain a sense of what it is like to be a Forgotten Australian. I aimed to convey how they personally see their experience, and also their feelings and emotions in relation to that experience, and what they perceive as its effects on their later lives and the lives of those around them. Literary docu-memoir is a specialised form of life-writing that demands the writer’s use of creative empathy. The writer who uses creative empathy aspires to be non-judgemental of the subjects and their lives, and also of what they have to say in their conversations, and to write with reflection and understanding when recreating the lives of others. Creative empathy is a form of intersubjectivity. This involves the ability of the writer to share with the reader another person’s feelings and emotions as if they were her or his own. In his paper on empathy, Sam Vaknin gives this definition of empathy:

The ability to imagine oneself in another’s place and understand the other’s feelings, desires, ideas, and actions. It is a term coined in the 20th century … and modelled on ‘sympathy.’ The term is used with special (but not exclusive) reference to the aesthetic experience. The most obvious example … is that of the actor or singer who genuinely feels the part he is performing. With other works of art, a spectator may, by a kind of introjection, feel himself involved in what he observes or contemplates. (2)

Vaknin quotes Charles G. Morris:

Closely related to the ability to read other people’s emotions is empathy—the arousal of an emotion in an observer that is a vicarious response to the other person’s situation…. Empathy depends not only on one’s ability to identify someone else’s emotions but also on one’s capacity to put oneself in the other person’s place and to experience an appropriate emotional response. (3)
In his paper Vaknin is concerned with psychology and personality types rather than with writers as such. In his discussion Vaknin maintains that empathy “is predicated upon and must, therefore, incorporate” certain elements (which he lists), and he gives as two of these criteria the “availability of an aesthetic frame of reference,” and the “availability of a moral frame of reference” (2). Vaknin suggests that both these frames of reference, or “conditions,” are “so totally dependent on the specifics of the culture, period and society in which” they exist, that the “availability of an aesthetic frame of reference” is, by itself, rather “meaningless and ambiguous as a yardstick” for empathy, and the “availability of a moral frame of reference” is not met in people with certain personality disorders (2). Also, Vaknin points out that “there is no empathy in the absence of an empathee” (3). In a literary work of creative nonfiction dealing with other people’s lives, this has implications for the writer to treat the subjects and their stories with respect and sensitivity, but to be aware of the ethical dangers of misrepresentation. As Eakin points out, in presenting another’s life a writer may mean well, but can do harm to both the subject and threader and one’s credibility as a writer if one misrepresents the subject or the situation (175).

Steven L. Ablon et al, in their psychology-directed discussions on empathy and virtuality, note that empathy is the term that best describes “affect” which is how we unconsciously and internally “mirror” another’s emotional experiences, how we unconsciously “see” and “feel” those emotions that are those of someone else, and relate to that person through unconscious recognition: “empathy” is, therefore, an abstract concept, and also a word that best describes our unconscious connection to what another person is feeling inside (366). Sigmund Freud writes:

We treat the concept of affect as if it were a concrete, describable entity. But by its nature affect is highly nuanced and contextual. At best, the term “affect” serves as a broad indicator of a certain experience. In its most extreme states it can be conceptually pure, for example, as in describing the experiences we call “rage,” “panic,” “mirth,” or “rapture.” Extreme states, though, are by definition not the most common experience and so are not always the best descriptors of what we mean to explore. Usually we see in-between states [that are extraordinarily nuanced and highly subtle] or complex amalgams…. It comes as no surprise then that in our attempts to feel into another person’s experience of the world, we come up against our inherent limitations of language and meaning. We grope towards the other through the mysterious process we dub “empathy.” (178).
Freud is, of course, specifically referring to psychiatry and the clinician’s dilemma when attempting to find suitable terms to describe the subtleties and nuances presented in the various in-between states of “affect.” But his words could equally be applied to the writer’s dilemma. All any writer has at her or his finger-tips are words—words are the writer’s sole tool, but much depends on how a writer uses that tool, and the perspective and position the writer takes.

In order to craft my docu-memoir, I searched for models that might show me how others have handled the writing of such a work. I found no more than a few. Such works are very rare. Tony Parker’s *Lighthouse* and Sheila Stewart’s *Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land* are primary examples of works that could be classified as creative nonfiction docu-memoir. Discovering these led me to research Parker’s and Stewart’s other docu-memoirs and, in turn, that led to my search for other writers of docu-memoir, and other works that may be related to the docu-memoir form, such as Helen Garner’s work of immersion research, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. A new door opened, and the idea for the practical component of my PhD project, the creative nonfiction docu-memoir *See Saw Margery Daw*, and my research project was born. In this exegesis I look at the docu-memoir form, and discuss literary creative nonfiction works that will serve as models for the writing of my own docu-memoir, with a special interest in the techniques writers use in crafting literary docu-memoirs. I look at and analyse each of the works I chose as models separately in order to discern the methods and approaches and techniques used by the individual authors, to learn things to do, and things not to do, and for ways to make my docu-memoir aesthetically pleasing and interesting to the reader without altering the facts of the various cases, and altering the personal truths of the participants as little as possible.

**Early works**

Arguably, Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) is the main fore-runner of docu-memoir. Mayhew accepted a journalistic assignment in 1849 with the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper as the London correspondent “for a large-scale survey of Britain’s working poor,” but left the job by 1850 and continued to publish articles on the London poor independently, and later collected and published these articles in the four volumes of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) (Brown 1). Mayhew's volumes are works of social investigative-journalism overlaid with Mayhew's own opinions and views and judgements, as shown in his lengthy writings on costermongers for example (Mayhew 1: 4-61). Mayhew paints detailed biographical sketches of his subjects, and includes in the work snatchs of speech that echo the various dialects of the people, of the voices heard on the streets. His description of London street cries is an example: “Then the tumult of the thousand different cries of the eager dealers, all shouting at the top of their voices, at one and the same time, is almost bewildering. ‘So-old again,’ roars one. ‘Chestnuts all’ot, a penny a score,’ bawls another. ‘An ‘aypenny a skin, blacking,’ squeaks a boy” (Mayhew 1:7). The work also includes some verbatim interview material that had been
recorded by hand. One example of this is also in Volume 1: Mayhew writes that an old woman “very poorly, but rather tidily dressed,” gave him the following account which “shows a little of public-house custom”: “—’I’ve seen better days, sir … but now I’m only a poor sheep’s trotter seller…. I serve some public-houses…. Mother’s the best name I’m called in a public-house, and it ain’t a respectable name … ’ ” (172). Nina Brown suggests that Mayhew’s writing recorded his subjects’ utterances “in a form that many have described as the best oral history of that period” (1). Brown maintains that together with the simple black and white maps incorporated into the text, the work addresses the “overall intensity of criminality in each county” and suggests that crime, prostitution and illegitimacy could be found in areas where there is a high rate of variables such as illiteracy (1). Brown further adds: “Mayhew approached his work … ethnographically, venturing into the streets to interview his subjects directly” (1). Helen Groth points out that a number of contemporary reviewers have been quick to differentiate between the apparent “accuracy” of Richard Beard’s daguerreotype portraits included in the work, and the lack of relative authenticity in “Mayhew’s transcriptions of the voices of London’s street habitués” (“Seminar”). These criticisms, argues Groth, strike “at the core” of Mayhew’s claims to have “literally transcribed the patter, slang and speech rhythms of his interviewees” (“Seminar”). Groth notes that Mayhew rarely went out onto the streets to interview the subjects himself, but sent runners to gather the stories or find the subjects and put them in a paid hansom cab, and send them to Mayhew's office where Mayhew interviewed the subjects and recorded their replies by hand in his diaries (“Soundscapes”). In Mayhew’s day, of course, the consumer tape-recorder had not been invented. But his work foreshadows methods used in docu-memoir. Mayhew listened to voices on the street and interviewed his subjects (even though sometimes vicariously) and recorded the subjects’ words in their own “voices” and dialectic speech patterns, and used that as resource material for his work in order to give his readers a sense of what ordinary life was like in the London of his day.

Mass Observation is another fore-runner of docu-memoir. The Movement, a social research investigative organisation in the UK, was founded in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrison, poet and reporter Charles Madge, and documentary film-maker and historian Humphrey Jennings. The anonymous writer in Spender’s Worktown-Mass Observation suggests the founders “felt that there was a gap in real knowledge about the lives of ordinary people…. The media generally portrayed the population as having a broad consensus about the issues of the day. The Mass-Observation was formed to test his depiction of reality …” (1-2). The founders published their findings in 1939 in a book of social reportage titled Britain by Mass Observation, subtitled “The Science of Ourselves.” For example, Madge and Harrison report on ordinary people’s views on science. They reveal that media of the day indicated that the public openly welcomed modern advances in science, and write that “the interviewers asked” the people in the street and in public places “if they were interested in science, what they thought
about it, and if they read about it; then let them talk and kept a verbatim record …” (14-15). Madge and Harrison then give some of “the many recorded examples of indifference”, one of which is: “2. Man of 30. ‘Do you mean them crackbrained blokes who write them books, no I never read them for years since I was a kid, they do things I don’t know, wot should we know abawt anyways, not in my life chum.’” (14-15). Madge and Harrison conclude that “the main reasons for hostility to science were” that advances in the field led to people losing their jobs, that it helped a select few make “big profits,” and that it “was used for weapons of war” (14-15).

Spender’s Worktown assert that the team “decided that the best way to understand what real people did and what they thought about the world was to watch and record them as they went about their daily lives. This was generally without [people’s] knowledge,” though the team also conducted some written surveys (2). Consumer tape-recorders were, again, not yet available. About five hundred volunteers kept personal diaries in which they secretly recorded overheard conversation, and observable behaviour. Once a month, the recorders sent their diaries into Mass Observation. The anonymous writer in Archives Hub points out that, “No special instructions were given to diarists, and consequently the diaries vary in style and content” (2). Like Mayhew, the Movement recorded the “voices” of the people—using the subjects’ own dialects—and used selections of this verbatim material in the work. Unlike Mayhew, the Movement do not give character sketches of the subjects and they do not impose their own views and opinions and judgements on the text. They simply note what was written by the media, offset against the diarists’ recordings, and state their findings. The docu-memoir form had not yet evolved, but Madge and Harrison were aware of a trend. In talking about their sociological research they say, “This book aims to give the other side of the picture” to what has been given out by the authorities and the media, by giving “both ear and voice” to what ordinary people are feeling (9).

Nick Hubble notes that the diaries and anthologies in the Movement’s written report can be directly linked to the “huge growth” in “the academic study of Life Writing” and a “corresponding rise in in the public interest in biographies and autobiographies; especially historical accounts by ‘ordinary’ people’ ” (1-2). Hubble finds that the diaries created by the Movement’s observers show a potential reflexivity of the process for the diarists. Many of the diarists note in their diaries that while writing their diaries “they became aware of themselves as makers of history” and this gave them “the confidence to pronounce on public matters with an authority they would not otherwise have had” (2). Hubble suggests that because these diaries were then “fed back to the Mass Observation and Harrison” and came together in the founders’ written report, the self-reflexivity in the process becomes amplified (2). Hubble writes: “The potentially endless reflexivity of this process captures the logic of Mass Observation that if everyone were a Mass Observer then the observation of another would always be in some way an observation of oneself, and so, therefore, the divisive boundaries between people—between
classes … —would dissolve” (2). Hubble adds: “It is this inherent logic that makes a Mass Observation diary, at least potentially, collectively self-reflexive in a way that exceeds the self-reflexivity of a normal diary” (2-3). Ben Highmore’s essay on Mass Observation ends with the injunction to, “‘Pay heed to the fabric of memory, to the moment of memorial. These documents were not collected primarily, to furnish material for the social and cultural historians of the future. They are explosive documents, or they are meant to be…. ’ ” (qtd. in Hubble 3). Hubble adds: “What is particularly explosive about Mass Observation is the link it highlights between its collective form of self-reflexivity and social agency” (3). Hubble could equally be talking about the creative nonfiction docu-memoir of the type where the living subject speaks for her- or him- self to tell their own story. A docu-memoir of this type also has a potentially “explosive” factor. It goes beyond the narrating subjects’ personal stories to testimony that critiques wider social issues because it involves at least three subjectivities in the text—the researcher-writer who frames the story, living subjects who tell about their experience in their own “voice,” and the reader.

**Defining docu-memoir**

The literary docu-memoir is a mixture of fact, lyricism, and story. It lies in the interstices of oral and social history, and life narrative and creative nonfiction as life-writing, and memoir and literary documentary, and also crosses boundaries into other disciplines such as, for instance, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Depending on the subject’s remembered experience, docu-memoir incorporates elements of autoethnology, survivor narrative, trauma narrative and witnessing. Below, I attempt to tease out the key aspects of the type of docu-memoir in which I am interested, and as I use it in my own work, understanding that other definitions may be proposed. Those key aspects are:

- A docu-memoir is a work of creative nonfiction, and a form of life-writing. A work of this type involves the writer-researcher interviewing the subjects for their story about their experience, and audio-taping the discussions as the resource for a creative work of nonfiction.
- A docu-memoir allows the subjects to speak for themselves. It relies on the writer’s audio-taped interviews with the subjects about their experience. It takes the interview transcript as the story. The writer sees the transcripts from the taped discussions as the story. This is a specialised form of life-writing that demands the writer’s use of creative empathy.
- In a literary docu-memoir the “memoir” is primarily that of the subject. The writer recreates the subject’s memories of their experience without crossing too far into the
fiction writer’s territory, and without altering the subject’s personal “truths” or the facts of the case. This demands the writer’s use of creative empathy, an element which has been discussed earlier in this paper, and ethical concerns for the subject’s integrity and on-going well-being.

- A docu-memoir is a creative nonfiction work that straddles the memoir genre and the documentary genre. In docu-memoir, the memoir genre acts as a vehicle for the documentary genre.
- A docu-memoir can also be a work that employs immersion research.

Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard describe creative nonfiction as “factual prose” which is also literary, and they argue that, “It is fact-based writing that remains compelling” over time and has an enduring “fidelity to accuracy, to truthfulness” (1). Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz maintain that “the world of creative nonfiction is not invented,” that the writer, once handed the facts, must search out what the story is in them “and tell it true, ambiguities and all” (4). But, argue Perl and Schwartz, in creative nonfiction “reality is mediated and narrativized … the particular subjectivities of authors [and the narrating subjects,] are crucial and should be textually embodied” because “language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers that the work is artificed,” because, by its nature, creative nonfiction is “not reserved for a narrow specialist audiences” rather aimed at the general reader (7).

A docu-memoir is not a work of biography which can be described as a detailed historical account of one person’s life by another. Usually, the subject of a biography is a person who is of some interest to the biographer or to others. In some biographies the writer presumes to know why a subject acts in a certain way, and what they are thinking, and even what they say in certain instances. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note differences between autobiographical, or self-referential, writing and biography: “the biographer almost invariably writes in the third person, while the life narrator usually employs the first person” and “matters of time and timing also differentiate biography and life writing. For a biographer the death of the subject is not definitive. A biography can be written either during the life or after the death of the person being written about…. While self life writing … must be written during the writer’s life span—or be published posthumously ‘as is’” (6-7). Many of the points made by Smith and Watson can also be applied to the differences between biography and literary docu-memoir; the memoir component in a creative nonfiction docu-memoir is essentially a subject’s personal memoir, and so, as with any other personal memoir, may contain some elements of autobiography. One difference between docu-memoir and autobiographical writing is that, regardless of tense, the docu-memoirist always employs first person when presenting her or his own, or the subjects’ input.
A creative nonfiction docu-memoir of the type I am interested in is a subject’s life experience as remembered by that subject, and as creatively recreated by the writer. The writer writes in such a way that the living subject tells her or his own story in their own way and, regardless of tense, in first person narrative. A memoir is not an autobiography even though in both forms the subject talks about her or his own life. In his memoir Palimpsest, Gore Vidal writes: “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked. I’ve taken the memoir route on the ground that even an idling memory is apt to get right what matters most …” (5). Perl and Schwartz agree: that memoir “relies heavily on memory, a subjective tool but essential for recapturing what’s important in your past … the emphasis is on perceptions and feelings. How you … experience the world is at the heart of the memoir; it’s your story, not history” (10). They also point out that a memoir “recreates a slice of one’s past for the reader,” and the memoirist’s purpose is to “invite us into their past lives” in the hope that we, as readers, “will connect and identify, even find some of ourselves in the writers’ memories” (Perl and Schwartz 182). The memoirist, advises Judith Barrington, delivers the story in a conversational tone, uses the reflexive voice, and “stands behind her [or his] story saying to the world: this happened, this is true,” and she adds that the memoirist has a tacit contract with the reader, that the reader reads “believing it to be remembered experience, which in turn requires the writer to be an unflinching reliable narrator,” so “your raw experience as a memoirist can only be what you have actually experienced” (25-7).

In a docu-memoir, the more subjective component—the subject’s memories of her or his experience—enfolds or carries and conveys the more objective documentary component. The documentary component can take the form of photographs or illustrations inserted into the text either to give the reader an added factual reference to historical or sociological events, or to support the subject’s story as a factual experience through adding credence and believability to her or his story so that the reader can further envisage and connect to the subject’s experience. The documentary component can also be archival material, newspaper files, or factual information such as historical events and dates, which are recorded, filed, or documented elsewhere, and is cited by the subject in her or his narrative as having importance to their life experience. It can also be material that gives a documentary-type effect to the narrating subject’s story. For instance, as a natural part of their conversation, a subject might refer to “facts” that are not widely acknowledged as historical, but which are nevertheless known “facts” such as dates significant to a family or locality (weddings, births, fairs), folk-lore, local knowledge, or other information known or accepted to be “true” through common usage or collective memory. A documentary-type effect can also be inadvertently produced by the narrating subjects in telling about their lives. For example, the subjects may talk about such items as household utensils, farming equipment and other occupational paraphernalia, family
bibles, and so on, as having some importance in their memories about their experience. In memoir, say Perl and Schwartz, “you bring readers into your world, so they can meet the people, live in the landscape, and understand the historic and cultural context as you remember it” even if you have no photographs or documents “or tape-recordings to support that memory” (10). The “documentary” component is embedded in the “memoir” component, but each component is intrinsic to the other. Ideally, the two genres should be smoothly united and the work should present as a seamless whole. The memoir carries the documentary in order to show history on a personal and affective level. In order to best convey the subject’s meanings and feelings to the reader, the researcher-writer must first have some understanding of the facts, and empathy with the subject. The writer must probe deeply and undertake extensive research, and this also means employing immersion techniques in interviewing and writing and researching.

**The docu-memoir contrasted to the oral history memoir**

The oral history memoir is not to be confused with the creative nonfiction docu-memoir. A literary docu-memoir involves some techniques of fiction and imaginative story-telling of a high order. It is lyrical, it is it literary, it is creative, and the “memoir” element highlights the subjectivity of the subject’s experience as a slice of the subject’s life. It speaks to the subjective truth of the subject’s raw experience and the subject’s feelings and thoughts and emotions in relation to that experience. Moreover, in creatively recreating the subject’s experience the writer of this type of creative nonfiction docu-memoir employs creative empathy. In doc-memoir the writer seeks ways in which to show the reader what it was like for the individual who lived the experience, and give the reader a sense of what it is to be that person.

An oral history memoir is not creative nonfiction writing. The oral history memoir is a systematic attempt to gather and preserve information from the people who experienced historical events and developments at first hand. It is concerned with factual, historical information and how the subject experienced historical events, how those events touched the life of the subject. The oral history memoir looks for meaning in the subject’s memories about her or his experience. It aims to give a plausible account of a particular set of past events that have meaning applicable to today. One of the uses of oral history memoirs is that they can be used to look for the meaning in the past for society today. In this respect, a primary value of oral history testimony is its usefulness in social history, law, education, science, and society. A more particular usefulness of oral history memoir lies in its attempt to recapture a past that would otherwise leave no documentary trace. In this latter respect it can be particularly useful in recovering the personal and emotional ramifications of a life.

An example of oral history memoir is *Tom Rivers: reflections on a life in medicine and science; an oral history memoir*, prepared by Saul Benison. Another is *With all deliberate speed: the life of Philip Elman: an oral history memoir* prepared by Norman Isaac Silber. In the
introduction to *Tom Rivers: reflections on a life in medicine and science; an oral history memoir*, Benison explains, “this oral history memoir is an attempt to chart the evolution of Dr. Rivers’ career” and the importance of that career to the development of advances in medical science (vii). In his memoir, the subject, Rivers, talks about his memories of his professional life and about his observations and what happened in the medical field during his time in service, and how these happenings and events touched his life personally, and states in the beginning he has no intention of talking about his personal or family life, but in the end gives a little information about his parents. In a similar vein is *With all deliberate speed: the life of Philip Elman: an oral history memoir*. Through Elman’s memories of his experiences, Silber charts the evolution of Elman’s life from his modest childhood to his professional career in law, and his contributions in helping to bring about important changes in American social history and the American legal system.

Both these oral history memoirs are non-political non-polemic journalism. Both are unadorned chronological narratives—lively, competently written and pleasant to read, but in no way lyrical or reflexive. In both books, the subjects’ accounts are delivered in the first person, and written in rational common-sense terms, not exploring emotional or psychological states. In their memoirs the subjects simply present the concrete details of their subjective experiences without emotion, and even though the writer in both cases is non-judgmental, the writer does not employ the use of creative empathy. Each of the books is written differently in that, with Elman’s memoir, Silber prepares the work as a monologue, and with Rivers’ memoir Benison prepares the work as a somewhat verbatim (if presumably edited) transcript of questions and answers. These two examples of oral history memoir are but one small corner of a very diverse field. One example of diversity in the field of oral history memoir is *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt. In his 1932 Preface to *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt alleges that Black Elk “has been a participating witness to various stirring events, both in the spiritual and physical world, and he tells of these with a thoroughly unselfconscious simplicity that makes for easy reading” (xviii). Black Elk tells his story to Neihardt through an interpreter—his son, Ben—and in telling his story also tells the story of the Indian tribe to which he belonged. Black Elk is quite poetical, even biblical, but he is no way self-reflective and he does not enter into discussion about his thoughts and feelings. Smith and Watson cite *Black Elk Speaks* as an example of the “as-told-to” narrative, one of the three processes of collaborative life narrative, and which can be expanded on by the interpreter, the interviewer, or/and the editor (p. 191).

An anonymous writer in an online *Oral History Primer* notes:
Oral history is spoken history, subject to all the biases and vagaries inherent in human recall; yet it is not substantially different from other historical sources (diaries, correspondence, official documents, newspapers, photographs, etc.) which are distorted, partial, and viewed through the screen of contemporary experience.

In my view, it is the author’s positioning in the writing of the literary docu-memoir that is crucial in defining this “sub-genre” of creative nonfiction. The creative literary approach to the crafting of the oral narratives—the subject’s stories—while maintaining their integrity, singles out the docu-memoir from oral history and other forms.

**The docu-memoir approach**

The term docu-memoir is not easy to pin down. Docu-memoir is a hybrid that shares borders with other similar works, and so can stray into other definitions and genres. The approach, and the type of docu-memoir, and the way in which each of its components is understood, depends greatly on the writer’s purposes and perspective. The term “docu-memoir” means different things to different people. “Docu-memoir” is a creative nonfiction approach that can be used variously in film and in literary works. One definition of docu-memoir is implicit in an online article by the film-maker Loni Ding in which she discusses the making of her *Ancestors in the America* series which explore the personal experiences of Asians in America. Ding writes: “Our visual method … —documemoir—tells stories from the viewpoint of the … subjects themselves; it is a way of combining research history with fictive story telling” (1). By taking a docu-memoir approach, explains Ding, “Fundamentally, we are finding ways to create a first-person voice using historical and cultural materials in which the personal accounts and experiences of the subjects “are conspicuously absent” (1). In other words, by taking a docu-memoir approach the film-maker sought a way in which to put “flesh on the bones” of objectively-written historical records. In making the film, asserts Ding, the aim was not to take an outsider’s point of view of the subjects and what happened, but to give an insight into what the subjects “thought or tried to do for themselves in response to the opportunities and obstacles they encountered” in their life in America (1). Ding further explains that in order to recreate these stories, the film-makers “searched for archaeological sites; graves; rocks; pots, pans and dishes; Asian folklore; customs and sayings; as well as more conventional primary documents such as census records, legislative reports, and period newspaper clippings” (1). In the film, says Ding, “we frame these materials, remains of a once robust presence, with the critical analyses of on-camera specialists and scholars, knowledgeable and eloquent” (1).

A literary parallel to Ding’s film would be Dianne Wilson’s work *The Spirit Car: journey to a Dakota past*, (2006). Wilson’s publishers describe the book as an example of
“documentary-memoir” and an “exquisite counterpoint of memoir and carefully researched fiction” that “vividly illuminates the difficult history of the Dakota people and the indomitable spirit that has allowed them to survive” (n.p.). In her author’s note Wilson writes: “This book contains a variety of material: stories, facts, speculation, and insights. The stories in Book One are based on real people whose lives have been reimagined on a bedrock of facts. I wanted to bring the facts alive, to see and feel history transformed into a living, breathing reality … ” (xi). Book Two in Spirit Car is a mixture of Wilson’s memoir, her families’ stories and memories—recreated by Wilson from the audio-taped interviews—and pure invention. Wilson argues that “in a sense, these are ghost stories” (xi). Even so, says Wilson, readers “can trust the information in these stories as having come from solid, dependable sources: scholarship, historical research, interviews, and first-hand experience” (xi). She adds: “The small details—eating fry bread after school, drinking goat’s milk—came from interviews or research. The letters I quoted are real, all of the people existed, and I visited each place that I wrote about” (xi). In the text, Wilson alleges that she arranged a family gathering so she could audio-record her mother’s and aunts’ family stories and their first-hand accounts of their past experiences as Dakota Indians with mixed heritage—Swedish, Anglo-Celtic American, and French Canadian. Wilson admits in her author’s note, “I imagined conversations and feelings based on plausible assumptions and the intuitive understanding I gained of these people after burrowing inside their lives. Book Two continues the narrative with stories from my life…. My intent was to write a memoir in which I serve as a guide through a larger story” (xii).

The approach taken by Ding and Wilson departs from what I mean by docu-memoir. As I define docu-memoir, the writer interviews the subjects for their true stories as they remember them, and uses the creatively reworked transcripts of those audio-taped discussions as the story. What Ding and Wilson both do is employ the fiction writer’s techniques of authorial omniscience to imaginatively explore the experiences of ethnic groups from the reimagined viewpoint of the individuals in those groups. Ding situates the subjects’ personal experiences in relation to the socio-political climate of an eighteenth and nineteenth century America in which the European population held political power. Wilson does likewise but the time period of her work extends from the 1800s into the present day.

The Seamstress: a memoir of survival (1999) is a narrative of Holocaust survival written by the subject, Sara Tuvel Bernstein, with her daughter-in-law Louise Loots Thornton, and her daughter Marlene Bernstein Samuels. In his introduction to the work Edgar M. Bronfman names it as an autobiography (xxv). On the covers of the book it is described by the reviewers as a “memoir.” Seamstress is also a creative nonfiction docu-memoir. It differs from my slant on docu-memoir in that it is written by these authors as if each were the subject, Sara Tuvel Bernstein herself. Neither Thornton nor Samuels knew of each other’s input until the work was in the hands of the publisher. In her preface to the book Thornton writes that when she first
heard Sara’s audio-taped monologue of her experiences she did not know who the speaker was, but learned later that it was Sara (x). Later again, explains Thornton, Sara showed her a journal in which she had recorded her experiences. Thornton notes that “the lack of emotion” in these written and audio-taped accounts puzzled her, and she asked herself, “What happened to her feelings… Did she have to suppress them in order to survive?” (xi). Thornton adds, “I decided to see if I could write the book the way Sara envisioned. Taking a small paragraph from the transcription of the tape, I expanded it … writing in the first person, as if I were Sara, as if I were in the camp” (xii). Thornton reveals that Sara read the work and wrote back, “It’s very good! … It’s just like it happened.’ ” (xii). Thornton then interviewed Sara for her story, audio-taping the discussions, and using the same technique as she had previously when expanding the small paragraph from the transcription, began writing from the interview transcripts (xii). Creative empathy aside, by “writing in the first person” as if she were Sara, as if she herself “were in the camp,” Thornton inadvertently allows the conclusion that she helped in shaping Sara’s personal truths—at least, as they are shown to be in the book. In my view of docu-memoir the writer avoids altering or influencing the subject’s personal truths, rather creatively incorporating the transcript interview material into the text, as the story, in such a way that the subject tells their story for themself and in so doing reveals their personal truths to the reader independently of the writer’s personal subjectivity. In the preface to Seamstress Thornton tells the reader that when crafting, the work she could not make the work “line up” with the time frame she had constructed, and she reveals that Sara later admitted to failing to disclose certain facts important to her story (xiii-xiv). Thornton’s manuscript was not published. After Sara’s death Samuels found Thornton’s “dishevelled” manuscript, and believing that her mother had written a book she placed it with a publisher, then carried out some extensive research, edited the work, and filled in the missing gaps partly from her researched material, and partly from her own memory (xxii-xxiv). Seamstress diverts from my sense of docu-memoir in that Thornton and Samuels use artistic licence to add what Sara did not divulge, to make her experience into what Bronfman asserts is a “brilliantly told story” (xxv).

**Related works**

True docu-memoirs of the kind I have been describing are rare, but there are a number of works that are related to the form, such as, for instance, literary journalism. The journalist Truman Capote is accredited with kick-starting the movement with his work *In Cold Blood* (1966). In 1959, Capote travelled to Holcomb, Kansas, with his partner, Nelle Harper Lee, to investigate the story of the brutal and senseless murder of four members of the Clutter family for an article. Capote spent the next six years working on the book which Conrad Knickerbocker claims is a masterpiece, “agonizing, terrible, possessed, proof” that evil exists even though the affluent solidity and innocence of the Clutter’s lives, like the lives of the country-people around them,
“denied the possibility of evil” (2). *In Cold Blood* is at once a work of literary journalism and a biography. It is not a critical biography, but one which shows the history of a terrible real-life incident in near-documentary detail by using more of the fictional techniques of imagination and storytelling than would be usual in literary journalism or biography. Cheney quotes Leon Edel to point out that in the “new biography” the “biographer may be as imaginative as he pleases—the more imaginative the better—in the way he brings together his materials, but he must not imagine the materials … he must tell the truth” (238). These restrictions also apply to literary journalism. Matthew Ricketson observes that “literary journalists aim to go beyond journalism’s facts but stop short of fiction’s creations,” and he gives a concise definition of literary journalism, and then adds, “Literary journalists … can use novelistic techniques where a bedrock of research makes it legitimately possible,” and they can create whole scenes, quote passages of dialogue, describe the social milieu in detail and write interior monologues for subjects as long as those things are “based on interviews with the subject” (235-6). In his investigation, Capote researched police records and newspaper archives and interviewed people who had known the murdered family and investigators who had been assigned to the case, and he also interviewed the killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock after they were arrested for the crime. Marc Weingarten notes that Capote did not use a tape-recorder “but after each interview was complete” he would type “everything from memory and Lee’s notes, then file and cross-reference” (30). Weingarten quotes Capote: “‘If you write down or tape what people say, it makes them feel inhibited or self-conscious. It makes them say what they think you expect them to say,’” (30). In the acknowledgments in his book Capote writes, “All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken directly from the official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned” (n. pag.) Weingarten quotes a passage from *In Cold Blood* as an example of Capote’s innovative creativity: the real-life crime investigator, Alvin Dewey, looks out of an upstairs window in the Clutter home at a scarecrow in a wheat field. The scarecrow is wearing a “weather–faded flowered calico dress” and Dewey thinks to himself, “(Surely an old dress of Bonnie Clutters?):

Wind frolicked the skirt and made the scarecrow sway—made it seem a creature forlornly dancing in the cold…. And Dewey was somehow reminded of Marie’s dream. One morning recently she had served him a bungled breakfast … then blamed it all on ‘a silly dream’—but a dream the power of daylight had not dispersed. ‘It was so real, Alvin,’ she said. ‘As real as this kitchen. That’s where I was. Here in the kitchen. I was cooking supper, and suddenly Bonnie walked in the door….’ (Weingarten 32, Capote 149)
How, asks Weingarten, could Capote or anyone else possibly know what Dewey was thinking? (32). By means of his research and interviews and his own educated observations, and by employing fictional techniques of imagination, Capote pieced together a story that, as Weingarten points out, “had only two living witnesses … the murderers themselves” (29). Indeed, says Weingarten, “Capote was venturing into unknown territory … writing about events he didn’t witness, dialogue he had received secondhand, interior monologues that could only be stitched together from his interviews and a fair amount of license on his part” (31). Ricketson asserts that the purpose of this type of work, of this style, “is to go beyond the constraints of daily journalism and find the underlying meaning in issues and events. This implies greater intellectual rigour in mounting an argument about the subject, even if that argument is embedded in an artfully constructed narrative” (236).

Capote’s book allows the reader a glimpse into the minds of the killers. Weingarten writes, “Using his dispassionate and gentle probing approach, Capote achieved a rapport with the killers that eluded everyone on the case,” and that resulted in the killers confiding in him about themselves and their roles in the crime, and even telling him the “brutally clinical details of the murders (30). Weingarten quotes Capote as saying, “It wasn’t a question of my liking Dick and Perry…. That’s like saying ‘do you like yourself.’ What mattered was that I knew them, as well as I know myself” (30-1). The killers were hung for their crime, and it was then that Capote found the underlying meaning for his book. In Cold Blood Capote employs creative empathy to explore the complex psychological relationship between the two killers, the lives of their murder victims, and the human waste and fall-out from the tragedy. Weingarten suggests that in writing the ending which had been provided for him, “what Capote had in mind was a narrative that burrowed deep into the lives of everyone that was touched by the murder …. Using John Hersey’s ‘Hiroshima’ as a model, Capote would recreate the events using the omniscient voice of the novel,” or what Capote called a “nonfiction novel” (31).

In Cold Blood and the creative nonfiction docu-memoir are both factual in content but use some techniques of fiction to get at deeper “truths.” Both demonstrate immersion in the story, and both forms require the writer to undertake extensive research. As well, both contain a documentary component. Where the creative nonfiction docu-memoir (as I understand the form) and Capote’s book of literary journalism differ is that In Cold Blood is a biography and uses third person narrative and the fictional techniques of omniscience and imagination to the point where the author can “show” the characters’ actions, thoughts and words even though these are based on the writer’s educated observations and immersion research. The type of literary docu-memoir that draws my interest is more immediate. It is, in effect, a personal memoir, and as such uses first person narrative and a subjective voice. The writer is limited in her or his use of fictional techniques and denied omniscience, and is more limited by the facts of the experience as well as by the personal “truths” of the subject and the subject’s expressed feelings and
thoughts and emotions in relation to that experience. Capote shunned the docu-memoirist’s tools of trade—the notebook and the tape-recorder. When researching for a work of creative nonfiction as docu-memoir, the writer interviews the subjects for their story about their experience, and audio-tapes the discussions as the resource for a creative work of nonfiction. The docu-memoir takes the interview transcript as the story.

Forché and Gerard name literary journalism, biography, the creative documentary, and personal memoir (so by association and implication the creative nonfiction docu-memoir), as related forms of creative nonfiction which they define as “fact-based writing” that has “at heart an interest in enduring human values,” and is “expansive enough to connect the self to the larger world of experience, shaping its form to tell the truth of a particular moment” (1-2). Barrington is specifically referring memoir when she advises that the form seeks a “theme or themes that will bind the work together” (19-25). The same could be said of literary journalism, biography, and the creative documentary. In fact all these forms are related in actuality. Forché and Gerard write: “though it feels young and vibrant, creative nonfiction [and by implication this would also include creative nonfiction docu-memoir] has a long history and an honourable provenance. Its roots lie in the literary works” of Montaigne and many other “greats,” and the “documentary ‘immersion’ journalism of Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens,” George Orwell, and countless other authors’ works (2). Forché and Gerard point out that this also applies to all other creative nonfiction genres including New Journalism (2).

Amanda Lohrey observes that New Journalism is “One of the most influential genres of writing to emerge in the second half of the 20th century,” and she notes that the movement was “kickstarted” in 1965 by Capote’s “crime classic” In Cold Blood and Hunter S Thompson’s Hell’s Angels (1966) (51). Lohrey argues that New Journalism “seemed a necessary invention if the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was to be adequately chronicled, New Journalism captured the character of those decades, their crazed mood and volatile trajectories” (51). About the New Journalists Lohrey writes:

Philip Roth would later famously declare that fiction couldn’t keep up with the new reality while orthodox journalism came under attack as the medium of the phony objectivity that mostly served the ruling elites…. New Journalism responded to the upheaval of their times by borrowing from the techniques of the novel—characterisation, scene-setting, dialogue—to dramatize a truth that factored in the writer’s own prejudices. In the process they created a more vivid and seductive form of nonfiction. At the extreme end of its libertarian spectrum the writer might even become part of the action, which is what the term “Gonzo journalism” came to signify. (51)
Weingarten feels that the term New Journalism is a slippery phrase because it is new growth sprung from literary journalism, and the style has a long tradition (9-17). Tom Wolfe names Gay Talese as the founder of the movement which he, Wolfe, came to call New Journalism. Talese’s style of New Journalism differs from other New Journalism, and from Capote’s literary journalism. Unlike Capote who pieces together a factual story about murder from research and his own educated observations and imagination to get at the deeper “truths” behind issues and events, Talese is more concerned with a living subject and in revealing the man behind the façade. As well, Talese relies more on immersion research and interview notes and scene building to create his storyline, and less on fictional techniques and building vivid pictures than does Capote. Weingarten suggests that there is “no fixed definition for New Journalism,” but it is a literary reporting style that demands the writer’s use of “storytelling skills” to create feature stories (7). Robert S. Boynton maintains that where the “aim of most New Journalism is to write so vividly and report in such intense bursts that a scene leaps from the page, Talese goes in the other direction. He slowly drills down through the mundane subterranean reality of human existence to its ‘fictional’ core,” and he quotes Talese as saying, “I believe that if you go deep enough into characters they become so real that their stories feel like … fiction. I want to evoke the fictional current that flows beneath the stream of reality” (1). The best New Journalism, advises Ricketson, is successful descriptive writing that reads like short stories. They “show, don’t tell,” because “getting the picture is the aim of description in features” (Ricketson 195). Ricketson notes that Talese wrote “profiles that read like short stories,” and animates “the inanimate: leaves lie in wagon ruts, Coke bottle are thrown out of windows” (197-8). New Journalism, observes Weingarten, “is journalism that reads like fiction and rings with the truth of reported fact. It is … the art of fact” (7).

Weingarten says that Talese was interested in gathering “unusual facts” about the ordinary people, and the ordinary things in life, “the little things that helped bring the big things to life” (59, 83). Weingarten suggests that Talese’s method was to hang about waiting for a story, and he quotes Talese as saying, “I am a reporter who is forever in search of an opening scene…. I never start writing until I have that scene, and then I become a man in search of a final scene” (58-9). In discussing Talese’s piece on the film-director Joshua Logan, Weingarten implicitly reveals Talese’s methods of working: Talese “spent days with Lohan and the cast, [hand] recording all their conversations…. Then he blocked out all the scenes” of his book on a “corkboard in his apartment” and “these scenes alone would dictate the direction of his story; …” (59). Talese’s book titled Honor Thy Father, first published in 1971, is the inside story of a Mafia family told through that of Bill Bonanno, the son of Mafia boss Joe Bonanno. In his author’s notes at the back of the book Talese writes, “The research for this book was begun nearly seven years ago on January 7, 1965, the day I first met Bill Bonanno … in a dimly-lit corridor of the federal court building in Manhattan talking to one of his attorneys …” (512). In
these same notes Talese also writes, “I wondered … what it must be like to be a young man in the Mafia…. Most of what I had read about organized crime was obtained” from police, the media, books, and “sources in the federal government” and this data “focused on gangland slayings and grotesque portraits of men with Runyonesque names” (512). “This,” says Talese, “did not satisfy my curiosity about life within the secret society. I was more interested in the men,” how they spent their days, and “about the roles of their wives, about their relationship with their children” (512). Boynton suggests that gathering material for the book put Talese’s “fly on the wall approach” to “the test by the fact that during the six years Talese followed” Bill Bonanno, he [Bill] was “the target of Mafia hitmen” (1). In his author’s notes Talese reveals that he struck up a “friendship” with Bill Bonanno, and Bonanno began to confide in him, and he says that during the time he was gathering information for the book that he hoped one day to write on Bill Bonanno, he talked with Bill’s sister Catherine and through her gained valuable insights into the family, and “not only into Bill’s character but also into their father’s” (514). What Talese shows is that behind the façade of a life in Mafia, Bill Bonanno’s life was that of any other young man—eating, sleeping, watching television, being a father to his children and a husband to his wife, and having all those ordinary worries in life that all young men do, and that, no doubt, Talese himself did.

New Journalism is related to the type of docu-memoir in which I am interested. All are works of creative nonfiction, all involve immersion research, all have a shared ancestry and are evolved from a long tradition, all show rather than tell, and all three forms use some techniques of fiction—literary journalism most of all, New Journalism (even though it uses some novelistic techniques such as characterisation, scene-setting, dialogue) to a lesser extent, and the creative nonfiction docu-memoir very carefully so. All these forms are fact-based genres committed to “truthfulness” and have at the core “an interest in enduring human values.” All three forms involve the writer’s use of creative empathy and carry a documentary component. Like New Journalism and its forerunner literary journalism, the creative nonfiction docu-memoir is interested in plumbing the depths. In creative nonfiction docu-memoir writing the emphasis is on perceptions and feelings. The writer of creative nonfiction docu-memoir seeks to do these things by seeing the interview transcripts of the audio-recorded conversations with the subject as the story, and allowing the subjects to speak for themselves and tell their own stories about their experiences. The writer of this type of docu-memoir seeks to reveal to the reader the previously “unknown” through creatively incorporating the subject’s edited and verbatim interview material into the text without crossing too far into the fiction writer’s territory, and without altering or influencing the subject’s personal truths or the facts of the case.

The chosen books
For detailed discussion in this exegesis I chose several significant literary creative nonfiction works which all use extensive verbatim material and take a creative nonfiction approach, and come closer than any of the works already discussed to the docu-memoir I had planned to write. They are *Lighthouse*, a creative nonfiction docu-memoir by Tony Parker; *Country Kate*, *Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land*, and *Ramlin Rose: The Boatwoman’s Story*, creative nonfiction works of docu-memoir by Sheila Stewart; and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, a work of immersion research by Helen Garner.

In *Lighthouse*, Parker explores the psychology of marginalised communities and focuses on the essence of those communities, and the experiences of the individuals who live within them, to give the reader a sense of how that individual is affected by the community. Parker tries to strip away the mystery in order to take the reader as close as possible to questions of identity and experience. Parker’s purpose in writing seems to be to allow the subject to speak for her- or his- self, and in so doing dispel misconception and broaden people’s understanding.

In her works of docu-memoir Stewart shows change and threatened loss. Stewart attempts to capture for the reader the richness of the dialectic speech of a few ordinary country people who experienced life in the agrarian and traditional canal communities of old Oxfordshire in rural England. Her aim in writing is to reclaim for the reader a sense of past worlds that are now lost in actuality and all but forgotten other than in the memories of a few aged persons. In *Lifting the Latch* and in *Ramlin Rose* Stewart seeks to expand her readers’ knowledge of life that once was, in order to keep such history and the English heritage alive for her readers.

In her work of immersion research as true life crime-writing, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Helen Garner weaves together several stories and braids these stories through with themes of loss and grief on a number of levels. Garner is concerned with showing the potential darkness in human nature to the reader.

These writers reveal their subjects to the reader as ordinary men or women, without alienating or destroying the subject. They all allow, in one way or another, for the subjects to speak for themselves and talk about their experience in their own voices. They all convey the essence of the subjects’ personal “truths” without altering the facts of the case. As well, they are all creative nonfiction, a mixture of fact, lyricism, and story. They all search beneath the surface of their subjects’ realities for a deeper truth—through their subjects’ stories they show history on a personal and affective level—and through that, highlight deeper social issues. All three writers interviewed their subjects for the sole purpose of producing a book that would convey to the reader the essence of the particular situation, and a sense of what it was like for the subjects to be involved in that situation. Each of these works uses the raw experience of ordinary people as the focal point in the writing.
These works differ one from the other in genre and writing technique. Even so, each of the authors creates a vividly realised literary landscape which the reader can enter, and they all keep the reader focused on the marginalised or isolated person. With Parker it is a revelation of hidden worlds, with Stewart it is reclamation of past worlds that have been all but forgotten and lost, and with Garner it is a questioning of our society and human life and the unknowable in us all as human beings. Each of these works demonstrate that it is the duty of the author who writes a narrative about human experience and human nature to give to the reader a literary experience which is honest to the experience but enjoyable and moving because vividly realised and convincing. What Parker, Stewart, and Garner all do is create a vivid picture of the extraordinary in the ordinary, a picture of loss of some kind, in combination with the subjects’ thoughts and feelings and personal experiences, and in so doing give a rounded picture of the unusual, or of marginalisation or isolation, within a social context.
PART 1

II

The docu-memoirs of Tony Parker

Introduction

Tony Parker is possibly the first writer of literary nonfiction to craft his books entirely from extended interview material from which he edited out most of his interview questions. All Parker’s twenty-two works, written in the mid part of the twentieth century, deal with persons and communities who are marginalised—most famously, with prisoners. There have been any numbers of reviews of Parker’s work written from the various viewpoints of sociologists, criminologists, those involved in law, and oral historians. As far as I am aware, there has been very little if any critical analysis of Parker’s works from a purely literary perspective to date.

Parker was born in 1923 into a middle-class family and educated at a public school in England. In an interview with Paul Thompson, Parker revealed that he was an atheist, a devoted socialist and a pacifist, and that he never wanted to be a writer (64-73). At the outbreak of World War II he registered as a Conscientious Objector and was granted “Conditional Exemption” and sent to work in the coal mines. Parker said, “I’d never understood what the problems of poor people were, or the working-class people, but living with and working with the miners gave me that kind of strong socialist belief”—“the feeling of social injustice”—that was not politically motivated (Thompson 64). Parker’s insights into the lives of the poorer classes and the hardships they had to endure would appear to be the underlying motivation for his work in docu-memoir.

That Parker did become a writer was probably due to his keen sense of social responsibility, and circumstance. In his interview Parker told Thompson that he was appalled when a handicapped man with a mental age of eleven was hung for a felony in which he was involved, but did not commit. Wanting to do something to help fight against what he saw as social injustice, Parker went to the Howard League and became a prison visitor (Thompson 65). At an annual conference for prison visitors Parker had a chance meeting with a BBC radio producer, and that led to a broadcast of his tape-recorded interview with a serial offender. Shortly afterwards, he was contacted by a publisher who asked if he would write a book about the prisoner. In his interview, Parker stated, “and that was my very first book … The Courage of his Convictions … an extension, really, of the radio interview” (Thompson 65). Parker told Thompson he wrote the book and every book thereafter, using the method taught to him by the radio producer: “Take the questions out, and try to make it into a consecutive piece” (65).

It is well documented by those who interviewed him (Smith 248, Thompson 64-71, Graef 38, for example) that as an interviewer Parker was non-judgemental of his informants and
was always considerate and keenly interested, and sat quietly listening to what they had to say. Parker’s wife Margery explained: “Tony had this extraordinary ability to tune in very quickly to somebody” and “he convinced them that they could trust him absolutely” with any confidence whatsoever, but his main concern was “not to take advantage of them” (qtd. in Smith 245, 248). He saw his writing as a way to give people and communities on the margins of society a voice. Lyn Smith asserts that these were people who “were never heard, social pariahs often who seldom had the chance to express what they felt inside” (247). Parker made no secret of the fact that upon completion of a project he destroyed the interview tapes and the transcripts in order to honour his promises to his informants to protect their privacy. As well, in his books on communities, Parker frequently masked his informants’ identities and other identifying factors in various ways. This potentially fictionalising factors throw the basis of those works into question, however, as I will argue below.

When Parker sat down to write a book he did not begin with a theme in mind, rather he transcribed the interviews and waited to see what would emerge. Parker claimed that he never began an interview with a list of prepared questions, and he explained, “I always try to approach a subject without any pre-conceived ideas at all…. I always regarded myself as a blackboard for people to write on. And see what they write on it…. And see if a theme came out of it” (Thompson 67). Thompson asked Parker if when dealing with a community rather than a single subject he saw the problem of editing to be different, and Parker replied, “Yes. Because [with a work on a community] you’ve always got to think, ‘What gives this unity?’ … you decide whether to make the unity the individual, or the place…. I get all the tapes together … listen to them, think about them, wonder how I’m going to make sense out of them” (67). Parker added: “Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t” and he named Lighthouse (1975) as an example of a successful work about a closed community (67). For Parker, his method was a learning process. Smith asserts that Parker “had no role model; his style was entirely his own invention” (250).

Ultimately, all Parker’s works are experiments with his invention of a new way of life writing that arose from his strong socialist belief and his perception of himself as a pacifist. His purpose in writing was always to allow the subject to speak for her- or him-self, and in so doing dispel misconception and broaden people’s understanding. In his need to find a way in which to do this, Parker invented the literary docu-memoir. Parker’s seemingly straightforward, honest works present the reader with a dilemma in that they are written to open closed communities to public view, by a writer who is determined to protect his informants’ privacy. All Parker’s works are built on this dichotomy which, within his books, creates a paradox—an uneasy unity which is inseparable from, and intrinsic to, each of his works.

What Parker inadvertently succeeds in doing is raising important ethical questions in relation to turning the raw experience of others into literary nonfiction productions. His works
serve to alert one that literary docu-memoir is a creative form that is full of pitfalls. For instance, there are urgent ethical issues for the writer in relation to readers: in a fictionalised documentary, how does the writer make clear where the boundary lies between fiction and fact, and verbatim and edited testimony? Nevertheless, for the writer who wishes to craft a literary nonfiction work in which the subjects speak for themselves and so gain a voice, Parker’s works can be used as a model in that Parker demonstrates creative empathy, and sets precedents for a new and exciting way of life writing. As models, Parker’s works offer the aspiring writer insights into ways to approach the task, and a treasure trove of interviewing and writing techniques and methods to sort through and adapt to their own use. Yet to fully adopt Parker’s approach and methods could result in a work that is questionable.

**Structure in Lighthouse**

After he had written ten books on prisoners Parker’s publisher suggested it might be time for a change. In the Thompson interview Parker said, “[so] I suggested … that I’d like to try and do a book about lighthouses and lighthouse keepers” (72). For this exegesis, I chose to analyse *Lighthouse* in detail rather than any other of Parker’s works because, in this book, Parker deals both with individuals and a closed community. Bella Bathurst feels that keepers interested Parker as a subject because “like prisoners they belonged to a marginal society,” and she points out that like prisons, lighthouses, too, “had become part of an institution which bore its own peculiar restrictions” (290).

*Lighthouse* is crafted as a series of interviews that mostly begin with brief descriptions of the individual informants. These short introductory passages do not employ an “I” and so place the emphasis fully on the informants’ thoughts and feelings about their experiences of living and working in the lighthouse service. These introductions also place the individual interviewees in their homes or places of work, lighthouses, and so provide an ordinary and “normal” setting for each interview. In this way Parker keeps the focus on the lighthouse community. In this work the interviewer’s questions are never directly asked, rather implied in the informants’ conversations. For example, a young Cornishman drinking in a bar, announces, “That’s right my handsome that’s what I am, a lighthouse keeper, yes” (13). For much of the book, and especially at the beginning, the interviewer does not refer to a self—as in “I” or “me” or “we,” for instance. Yet from the very first pages on, it is possible to infer that there is a narrator, and that this person is the interlocutor and a male, and a writer. Partly this is because this is a book that begins with a letter from Trinity House addressed “Dear Sir” (9). As well, it is partly because the old retired keeper who more or less opens the book, exclaims, “A very good day to you too young sir! … A book, you’ve put that out of your mind have you? No, I didn’t think you would, somehow. You’ve brought your infernal tape-recording machine with you I see” (18).
Even though this visiting writer-interviewer is present throughout the book, at first, and for much of the book, his is mostly an “unseen” presence. As the book progresses this presence can be sometimes more clearly “seen” as the writer-interviewer-narrator in that at various times he uses the terms “I” and “we,” and one thickly accented lighthouse keeper calls him “Tawney,” i.e. “Tony” (161, 181). Occasionally—as with the account of Eric G. in the chapter “Different people, different things,” for example—this narratorial presence is conspicuously absent from the pages but is nevertheless implicit in that the informants are talking to someone, some presence, other than themselves. Probably because of the way the book is structured, and partly because this is a book by “Tony Parker,” it is possible to infer that Parker is the writer-narrator in the book and also the invited interviewer of the lighthouse keepers and their wives.

By making himself relatively “unseen” as a narrator and by having his informants use the term “you” to address an “unseen” narratorial presence, Parker brings the reader face to face with the informants in the book. For instance, in talking about his tower lighthouse which is built “on a rock sticking up out of the sea,” the Cornishman drinking in bar tells the silent and “unseen” interlocutor, “It’s a different world…. You couldn’t imagine it for yourself and I couldn’t explain…. The only way you could really find out what it was like would be to come off there for a few weeks to live with us, have a proper chance for each one of us to talk to you, wouldn’t it?” (13). Here is a prime example of how Parker uses the art of suggestion to influence his reader in a subtle way. He allows his informant to tell the implied narrator, and through his use of second person address by implication the reader, what they need to do if they wish to find out what lighthouse life is like, and, in the same breath, he brings his informant to issue him with an invitation which can double for an invitation to the reader to penetrate the secrets of the lighthouse community. Despite its seeming courtesy, this invitation is an assertive and manipulative move. The reader’s privileged access to secret knowledge in reading seems to be contingent on the writer’s manoeuvres to penetrate the hidden world he is researching. In this way, Parker provides a setting and a reason in the book for conducting the interviews, and this in turn acts as a framing device for the various informants’ stories, and the stories as a whole. This unifying frame is Parker’s way of containing all the individual informants’ oral accounts, and this enables him to expose the information in those accounts piecemeal to the reader’s view. In turn, this allows the reader time to consider the story from all angles and take in the stories implicitly embedded within the informants’ narratives in order to absorb the story as a whole work. Inasmuch that these stories are only ever about the lighthouse community, Parker’s implied interviewer-writer-researcher acts as a framework within which these many stories can be told to provide the reader with a rounded picture of life in a lighthouse community. In *Lighthouse*, Parker’s structural framing device is the glue that holds the interviews in place and allows them to happen and go forward, and the adhesive that binds the work together as a whole. Lee Gutkind advises that, “The best answer to finding a frame and
where in the process to start is to isolate a point in the story at which a major action or conflict or idea or resolution is about to take place… Starting a frame or story as close to the heart of the action as possible is the best way to involve the readers and compel them onward” (The Art 55). In Lighthouse, from page one of the Introduction on, in the guise of the visitor who joins the community in order to gather research material for a book, Parker’s implied writer-interviewer-narrator is forever situated at the centre of the action and propels the story forward.

It is not until the end of the book that Parker discloses that he is the narrator and the interviewer both in the book and in fact. The appendix to the book is a letter from George Thomson, the then Public Relations Officer for The Corporation of Trinity House, London, which begins, “Dear Tony” (285-86). In this letter George Thomson outlines the then recent improvements to the conditions for lighthouse keepers, and expresses the hope that Parker might make some reference to these in his book, Lighthouse. In the late twentieth century, years after Parker wrote Lighthouse, due to progress in technology and changes in policy governing lighthouse, manned lighthouses in Britain were phased out in favour of automated lighthouses (Hughes). In his acknowledgements to Lighthouse, Parker thanks this George Thomson for his “unstinted co-operation and unlimited assistance” during the time that Parker was researching for his book. In his acknowledgements also, Parker tells the reader that he did indeed write the book about the lighthouse community from a series of interviews with keepers and their wives (287-88).

**Transferring responsibility to the reader**

In his Thompson interview, Parker told Thompson he identified with Christopher Isherwood who once said of himself, “I am a camera” (67). Approximately a third of the way into Lighthouse is a vividly created harbour scene. It is possible to assume that Parker (who, by this stage, one understands by implication to be the narrator and also the invited interviewer) is waiting at the quay for the relief-boat to ferry him out to an offshore lighthouse where he will live with and interview the lighthouse keepers for his book. But the narrator is “unseen”: he does not place himself within the scene, or relate himself to the scene by actually referring to his person or his actions. Not only is there is no narratorial figure in the scene, there is no relief-boat in sight, and there is no-one visible at all. Instead, Parker builds the scene from a series of vivid images that seem to rise up from the page. There is the small harbour, deserted under “thin grey-slatted curtains of rain” drifting in from the sea, clusters of “squawking” gulls, a graceful boat, a “line of dirty brown seaweed” left on the sand by the “departed tide,” and “no other activity or sound, apart from the low soughing of the wind” (141). Suddenly, this lonely peacefulness is shattered with these words: “Heh you there, you silly sod! Never mind arsing about having a morning stroll on the quay looking at the scenery. Come down here and lend a hand with these bloody boxes” (142). This passage is a prime example of how, in Lighthouse,
Parker draws the reader into the story by suddenly switching to instances of second person address in what is basically a first person dialogue. Here, at this point in the passage under discussion, when the comment is made there is no-one in sight and the words seem to come straight from Parker. It almost seems that Parker is directing the comment at the reader in that his use of “you” implies an “I” (possibly Parker, the “unseen” narrator) addressing the “you.” Immediately following this loud “voice-over” this illusion is broken, the relief-boat captain suddenly comes into view “between two sand-dunes at the top of the beach” (142). It is only at this point that one learns that the “voice” is, in fact, that of the relief-boat captain, and that he is addressing the presence who was surveying the harbour scene. At this stage in the narrative this presence remains “unseen” to the reader, but by implication this presence is presumably Parker as the writer-researcher-interviewer in the book. The relief-boat captain declares, “Well at least someone’s turned-up on time for the relief” (142).

Smith argues that Parker’s “aim was to introduce readers to his people … and let [the readers] make their own judgements” (251). In a central chapter of Lighthouse, “Notes during a week,” the writer-narrator talks directly to the reader by adopting a diary form. In this chapter, as in a diary, Parker meticulously dates the various days at the beginning of each section—“(1st day Thursday, 11 p.m.)”, “(2nd day Friday, 9 p.m.)” and so on—but misses day five, and in the following day’s entry he writes, “Didn’t make any notes yesterday, due to being up until four in the morning with Alf” (181). As is sometimes done in a diary entry, Parker makes use of elliptical sentences—“Wind very strong” (178)—and also truncates some sentences: “Finally to have arrived, actually to be here at last; strangely it doesn’t feel strange” (158). In Lighthouse, Parker’s change in style to diary form, even though sudden, is somehow a gentle transition from the style adopted in the previous chapters in the work. Possibly, the sudden change in style does not create a sense of urgency or disruption in the work because Parker’s book relies on his steady observations and his informants’ reflections and stories which are bound together by the subject matter of an isolated and marginalised community. In Lighthouse, the writer of the diary—who by implication is Parker himself since one of the keepers refers to him by name (161, 181)—makes personal observations of the workings of the lighthouse and also the men he is living with on the offshore lighthouse. Parker’s diarised observations are written in such a way that he seems to be confiding in the reader. An example of this is where Parker writes in his “diary” that Alf had been sea-sick and “was in great discomfort in the boat” coming across to the lighthouse, but “accepted his lack of dignity with dignity” (159). In this way, Parker attempts to expand on his readers’ knowledge of the workings of a lighthouse and allow insights into the keepers themselves.

Bathurst notes that Parker “devoted his time and energy to the art of being a witness in print” (289). One example of this in Lighthouse is an entry in Parker’s “diary”: “Dinner at half past twelve: pork chops, mountains of carrots, tinned peas, tinned tomatoes and mashed potato
and gravy. Afterwards tinned treacle pudding…. Alf ate nothing; he sat continuously drinking tea. He turned his chair away so he didn’t have to look at the food … he said he felt rotten and was going to bed” (163). The implication here is that out in the middle of the ocean on a sea or rock tower fresh food is at a premium. The sharp imagery in this brief passage plays against the emotion in Alf’s quietness and stoic resignation, and provides a tension that pulls the narrative together. In this passage, Parker’s use of indirect discourse to report Alf’s words in his “diary” allows the diary entry to fit into the work as a part of the narration. It is as if Parker is giving the reader tacit permission to read his “personal diary” as he writes. In a work that seems to be factual, Parker places himself in a God-like position as would a writer of fiction. Smith asserts that the critic John Banville “was spot on” when he said Parker “is a very cunning writer”, and she quotes Banville: “By means of arrangements and pattern, rhythm and tone … [Parker] achieves an extraordinary narrative tension. He knows exactly how to place things, so the reader is carried along from one sly revelation to the next … he is as little present in this book as is possible to be, but that does not mean to say he is off paring his fingernails” (252).

At the close of his diary chapter in *Lighthouse* Parker drops his use of personal pronouns in reference to himself, and swings the reader’s attention away from himself and his overt observations back to the informants and their conversations. Towards the end of the book Parker once again appears briefly, but his appearance is implied rather than stated. Principal Keeper Steve Collins remarks to the now “unseen” narratorial presence (and equally, by his uses of the word “you,” the reader), “Christ, I’m only the bleeding PK. I thought you were supposed to be the fucking writer, not me” (242). In one way, Parker’s use of this technique seems to thrust the reader into the story. In the penultimate chapter in *Lighthouse*, when talking about his impressions of his journey out to the lighthouse, Parker quite often refers to himself. For example, he writes, “I remember it as up and down, up and down, over waves like mountains” (259). Strangely, the rhythm in the line echoes the rocking, rolling, swaying motion of the sea. When relating his impressions of the rather terrifying experience of being transferred to the lighthouse from the boat, Parker suddenly switches from first-person dialogue to second-person address: “Going up the rope, regarding yourself as a parcel. Amos and his assistants fix the harness, others help winch you up, and one minute you’re in the boat and the next you’re up in the air. For a while you dangle and spin in space” (260). Here, it is as if Parker is on one hand describing the reader’s own experience (which is really that of Parker) to them, and by implication covertly suggesting to the reader how they should feel, and on the other hand inviting them to imagine what the experience is like, and in so doing make it their own. This last passage is an example of Parker’s use of the indefinite “you,” an informal substitute for “one,” as in “this is the way you feel [or “one” feels] under these circumstances.”

*Marginalisation, perception and misconception*
Lighthouse starts from the premise that lighthouse keepers’ lives are a mystery to most other people. By their existence, lighthouses indicate the edge of something. They are a country’s outermost outpost. By implication, they are situated on the edge of society. In Parker’s book Connie Preston, a Principal Keeper’s wife, remarks, “We’re such a long way off the beaten track, aren’t we?” (29). Through Connie Preston, Parker implies that the reader is about to be enlightened about the community. Connie states, “You won’t have been able to see much what the place looks like arriving in the dark. Have a wander around tomorrow in the daylight, you’ll soon find your way about” (30). All the characters who live in the lighthouse community talk to and about each other. Other than to the narratorial presence who is also the visitor to the lighthouse community, not one of the subjects who live in the lighthouse community actually talks to anyone outside that community. In the book, the keepers themselves say that the lighthouse keeping service is the “silent service” compared to which the navy, which calls itself the “senior silent service,” is like a bunch of “chattering monkeys” (15). The point that Parker implicitly makes is that the service is very quiet about itself—it protects its secrets. In her conversations Connie reveals that the lighthouse community is rejected by mainstream society. She remarks that if you’re not fortunate enough to live on a land light or a light that has a house supplied, “you might find yourself … in a middle of a council estate among strangers who don’t think you’ve any right to be there” (36). The situation is not all one-sided. Trinity House maintenance worker Ray Flint moans about the keepers: “They’re an unsociable sort…. They’re all right with each other; but they don’t like outsiders and they keep it up when they’re ashore” (115). In this way, Parker allows the reader to experience the lighthouse community as one which is very tight knit and closed to the outside world.

By showing his reader the world inside the lighthouse community, Parker allows the reader access into the mysterious unknown. But by structuring Lighthouse as conversations in which he has removed all of his actual interview questions, and by creating himself as a narratorial presence that is relatively “unseen” by the reader, Parker creates a sense of mystery and a certain romance about a community he is attempting to demystify. In fact it could be said that in a work about a closed community, Parker sets himself up as the demystifying agent but ultimately, in the process, he mystifies himself as creator. In the book, through the words of one Keeper’s wife, Jean E., Parker implicitly tries to balance this situation and show the reader that he himself is no different from any other ordinary person. Jean E. does some very straight talking. She could equally be addressing the reader when she tells the implied narratorial presence, “I wish it could be got over to people that it wasn’t something freakish, that being a lighthouse keeper is not all that much different from any other kind of job…. You wouldn’t take it as a subject for a book if you didn’t think of it in the same way, an occupation that was slightly odd and a matter for curiosity” (233). By implication, Parker allows Jean E. to give him a slap on the hand and in so doing aligns himself with the reader. The further implication here is
that, as the writer of the book, Parker alone can get it “over to people”—the readers—that lighthouse keeping is not something that is “freakish.”

Bathurst argues that “one of the book’s many charms is that it helped destroy a couple of myths” (290). In Lighthouse Parker uses the informants’ conversations to do this. For instance, in talking about the different types of lighthouses he has worked on, Assistant Keeper Tom Collins states, “I can’t say I liked my time on the rock; but I liked the tower even less” (72) Tom explains that he did not like the loneliness and the isolation, and that he does not like being separated from his wife and children, but “it was part of the job and it had to be done” (72). And he says, “I could never wait to get ashore quick enough when my turn off [offshore on the light] was finished…. I used to hate it when I was at home as it got towards the date for me going back” (72-3). Tom then adds, “I’m not romantic about the sea either, like some people. I never had any liking for it whatsoever: … it’s as treacherous as a vicious dog, it’s not safe to turn your back on it for a minute” (73). Tom reveals that when he was working offshore on the sea tower he had had a “nasty experience” once (73). One fine calm day he and another keeper were “down on the set-off” (the narrow concrete platform that runs around the outside of the lighthouse tower below the entrance door) fetching supplies from the supply boat that had just come in, when a rogue wave came from nowhere and swamped them (73). If they had not been hooked on to the safety harness they would have been swept into the sea: Tom remarks, “that’d have been the end for us” (73). Tom says he has seen young men working on that set-off, and most of these men “will take one look at the sea on a fine day and not bother to hook themselves on the harness like you’re supposed to”: Tom pauses briefly, then continues, “I’ve even seen men sitting on the set-off fishing. If you say anything to them they laugh at you; they don’t believe a wave could come up like that. But once you’ve had it happen to you, it puts a different complexion on it after” (73). Tom adds, “I didn’t ever get used to that tower at all. It was a dark and dismal place inside of it, small windows, no daylight hardly…” (73-4). Principal Keeper Steve Collins works on that sea tower and understands what it is like: “When I first came here this was what surprised me, I think it does everyone else too. When you see it from the outside, the tower’s white granite so you take it for granted that it’s going to be light and airy inside” (245). Assistant Keeper Stanley Vincent also works on that tower, and he feels that, “That’s something should be got over to outsiders, there’s nothing exciting about it. I don’t think they want to believe it, they’d sooner hear romantic things” (199). In a few well-chosen words worked into the conversations of the keepers, Parker reminds the reader that no reader in their right mind would actually wish to live with the danger of rogue waves or live in the isolation of a gloomy lighthouse (no matter however romantic it sounds) with great seas crashing into it and shaking it to its very foundations.

Parker’s point in writing, suggests Bathurst, was to “always to let other people talk, to grant [the reader] insight into the hidden corners of human existence” (289). In the human
condition there is such a thing as loneliness in company. In *Lighthouse*, about being out on a sea tower, Assistant keeper Tom Whittaker says that he never got used to the loneliness of it, and that on “middle watch” in the night he would “switch on the radio transmitter” and listen to foreign ships talking to one another: “I couldn’t understand a word they were saying; but at least it made me feel … the world hadn’t come to an end, which is a feeling you can easily get when you’re stuck out there” (74). Bathurst writes: “the problem for the keepers wasn’t loneliness, it was proximity. Their difficulty was how to negotiate living in a small space with a stranger; it was their wives who were often the lonely ones” (290). In *Lighthouse*, Connie Preston speaks of the first land-light her husband was assigned to: “I didn’t enjoy living there…. It was one of the very isolated ones…. The lighthouse itself and its cottages were all enclosed behind a great wall … it was exactly as though you were living in prison…. It was lonely …” (34).

Smith suggests that Parker “was out to demolish stereotypes” (247). In *Lighthouse*, some keepers love the sea, and contrary to what one might expect, others do not. One keeper on a rock lighthouse says to “Tawney” (Parker), “Nice, the view from up here … makes you feel like you’re on top of the world” (156). Another keeper on a different lighthouse tells the now “unseen” narrator, “Every time I go ashore now, I’m more and more tempted not to come back” (203). The wives, too, defy stereotyping. For instance, one wife states: “If you try to explain that you didn’t mind your husband away a lot, I suppose some people jump to the conclusion you don’t get on well. We do and we always have done; but we don’t think we’re odd … because that’s how we are” (67). Not everyone is the same. Mary B. is divorced. She could not tolerate the life (209). In a chapter, “Different people, different things,” the village pastor, The Reverend Rowland W., tells the “unseen” narrator, and so by implication the reader, that he had once been an Honorary Chaplain to Trinity House, and before that an Army Chaplain. He discloses that he had found most of the servicemen’s wives to be phlegmatic about the separations from their husbands, and had mistakenly expected that the lighthouse keepers’ wives would be much the same: “women who were accustomed to separation from their husbands and accepted it as an unavoidable part of the job” (216). He reveals that in the main they were the opposite of what he expected, and he wondered why lighthouse keepers married highly strung women unsuited to lighthouse keepers and the job. He admits he eventually realised his expectations “were based on a mistaken premise,” and discovered “It had nothing to do with such a generalization as a type of person: it was much more that the job itself was the cause of the situation” (217). The servicemen’s wives long separations from their husbands allowed them time to rearrange their lives to fit. With a lighthouse keeper’s wife, says the Reverend, “it was a constant changing backwards and forwards of her domestic situation that gave her little chance to make satisfactory adjustment” (217). Earlier in the book, Principal Keeper’s wife Margaret Vincent explains, “The wives are leading an unnatural sort of life … so it’s natural they get a bit upset
Principal Keeper Steve Collins has the final word in *Lighthouse*. He tells the “unseen” visitor-writer-narrator, presumably Parker, “Your job as a PK’s to see the light’s shown when it should be, not let it dazzle you so you can’t see anything. These are men here, give them the freedom to be as they are. Christ knows it’s an odd way of life they’ve chosen; ...” (282-83). Steve then adds, “This thing is about human beings getting on with each other…. I hope it’s an experience of that. When you go yourself [leave the lighthouse for the land] ... try and take back some sort of impression of ordinary human beings rubbing along” (282-83). Steve Collins is, of course, only talking to the writer-interviewer about working in the lighthouse service. Yet on a different level the keeper’s words could equally be those of Parker addressing the reader. Parker’s wife, Margery, once said: “Tony saw himself as the man in the street, presenting another man in the street, to the man in the street…. His dream was that he would open up perception, that if people listened ... it would somehow help a more liberal and understanding attitude develop” towards others (qtd. in Smith 253).

**Parker’s use of metaphor and reflections on the human condition**

Theodore A. Rees Cheney argues that the way that the creative nonfiction writer seeks to expose human behaviour to the reader, is through the accounts of the various people involved in a story, the reason being that the creative nonfiction writer knows that each of the people involved can only give parts of the story, because each of them sees it from a different point of view (135-36). Parker is a persuasive writer. In *Lighthouse*, he uses the conversations of the lighthouse keepers and their wives as a pretext for his own comments on human behaviour. From the beginning of the book the people who belong to the lighthouse community make the reader aware that the job and their personal relationships are inextricably intertwined (87). Connie Preston feels that “if your husband’s job’s his life as it has to be in the lighthouse service, you’ve got to have a certain frame of mind if you’re going to fit in with it” (34). The job affects the family as a whole. Connie Preston speaks about the difficulties her son faced at school because his father was a lighthouse keeper: “the other boys … knew his father wasn’t at home much, and they kept asking him where he was…. When he told them his dad was a lighthouse keeper they didn’t believe him; they said he was in prison” (36). Here, it would seem that Parker is making the point that when people are uninformed, when they don’t know the facts, their imaginations fill the gaps.

Like ordinary people in actual life, the informants in *Lighthouse* use metaphor of their own making when trying to make sense of their experience for themselves and the person they are talking to. Assistant Keeper Alf Black is a too heavy drinker, a senseless and uncaring drunkard when he is on shore leave. Out on the lighthouse, where drink is forbidden and
unavailable, he is sober and sensible and caring. He is also a self-educated man. He listens to opera, enjoys crosswords, and reads Shakespeare. Alf also talks about some religious writer he cannot name but who has brought him to ponder the bigger questions in life. In talking about these things to the implied presence of the interviewer-writer, Alf employs metaphor to put his concepts into words in order to contemplate deeper issues. Alf describes man’s spiritual being as various forms of “light” gained from some outer source. He compares the unreliable light given off by a match to the more steady light of a candle, and he likens the light of a candle to that of a lighthouse: “The lighthouse is a sort of fixed point isn’t it, that helps with navigation? And what I’m doing is to keep the light going for people to make their way. But it’s the fixed point in my life too…. Out here’s the sort of light and ashore it’s the sort of dark. So long as I keep coming the candle’s still glowing for me …” (198). Alf adds: “Crikey, Tawney, I haven’t half got myself in deep water you know, who’d have thought? … I like thinking about things like that though; it’ll go on in my head a bit now, will that” (198). In all this, the informants are only talking in a straightforward and apparently honest manner about their life in the service and how it affects them personally. Parker layers the conversations of his unsuspecting informants with his own philosophical comments on life through using the informants’ own metaphors to create metaphors of his own.

In Lighthouse, Parker weights the informants’ words with multiple layers of meaning for the reader and, in part, he can do this because he highlights his implied meanings by backing up the various issues raised in the conversation of one informant, with the conversations of other informants. Two conversations will serve as an example. Keeper’s wife Stella Whittaker states that when there is a sudden move that will upset the family or when bad weather prevents the keepers from coming home to their families, then “there’s nothing else for it…. We’ve got to put a brave face on it when we tell the children … it won’t be of any help to them if they see we’re taking it as though it was the end of the world” (82). In the broader scheme of things, Stella’s words could equally apply to life in general in that when things go wrong there is little one can do other than “put a brave face on it” and get on with living. A little later in the book, Assistant Keeper Paul Bailey comments that when the weather turns bad and the sea becomes rough “there’s nothing to be done about it…. So you may as well sit back and put your feet up with us…. It’s part of everyday life to us, waiting for the weather to change so you can get off out there and start your tour of duty, or if you’re already out there come ashore for your leave” (91). Here are the two sides of the same coin. Both Stella Whittaker and Paul Bailey understand that there is little humans can do about what is inevitable. Whereas Stella Whittaker accepts the inevitable but finds it a drain on her emotional resources, Paul Bailey accepts the inevitable with calmness and resignation.

Engaging the reader’s interest
In *Lighthouse*, through the informants’ conversations, Parker releases information to the reader little by little, and that information is sometimes given openly, and sometimes by implication. In this way Parker keeps his reader wondering about the deeper emotions and feelings of lighthouse keepers. For instance, when talking about the effects of the job on her husband and about how he copes as Principal Keeper, Connie Preston whets the reader’s appetite by saying, “There is just one little thing…. No, I better not say anything more, I’ll leave it to him. He might want to talk about it or he may not; you’ll have to see” (36). Later in the book George Preston reveals that he was on an offshore lighthouse when a young keeper by the name of “Ginger” was lost overboard (47). It seems possible that Ginger committed suicide. Parker does not spell any of this out, he makes the reader work.

Through listening to George, it is possible to somehow infer that Ginger was a sensitive soul, and even possibly to the point where he was not strong enough emotionally to withstand the teasing of the other keepers. The new fishing rod Ginger brought with him to the lighthouse and proudly showed off to the others, says George, was “not the sort that’d be any good for fishing in the deep sea,” and he admits, “We were pulling his leg and laughing at him” (45). George explains that one of the men, Danny, “a good-natured chap,” offered Ginger the use of his own deep-sea fishing rod, and he says, “Ginger asked me if I thought it’d be all right for him to try his luck later from the doorway. I said I was fairly sure it would … so long as he didn’t do anything daft like going out on the ladder” (45-6). Ginger disappeared, but in the book, nothing is directly said about suicide, and all anyone says is that Ginger went missing (46-7). George Preston simply states, “the body was never found” (48). At the beginning of the conversation George tells the implied narratorial presence, and so the reader, that no matter what happens when you are out on a light, when you are the PK “you accept you’re responsible in the end,” and he says about Ginger’s disappearance, “it’s a thing, a kind of something for me I’m not ever likely to forget…. I said I’d go back on a tower if I had to; but in the middle watch your thoughts wander. I think about this; I don’t talk about it much but I think of it, I suppose I always shall” (44). Here, George’s words imply that he is hag-ridden with guilt, with thoughts that he may have been personally responsible for Ginger’s “disappearance” in some way, and that he did not take steps to prevent it from happening. The further implication is that George’s reluctance to open up about the matter of possible suicide allows the inference that, with George, the incident somehow echoes his own secret fears.

The implication of Parker’s ethics for his art

Smith describes Parker as a “very skilled pen-portraitist” who was “determined to be faithful to the person and setting” and equally determined to adhere strictly “to his principle of confidentiality,” and she notes that in keeping with his promises to his informants to protect their privacy (promises which he made to the informants on tape at the start of every interview),
in *Lighthouse* Parker altered each of his informants’ physical appearance and even endowed one character with various physical attributes gleaned from others (251). Bathurst argues that Parker’s point in writing was always “to offer up the lives and characters of ordinary people” to the reader in a literary landscape they would enjoy (289-92). It could be suggested that Parker, in *Lighthouse*, tries to serve two masters, confidentiality and vividness, to fulfil his personal promises to his informants and his stated aims in interviewing concomitant with his expressed wish to foster understanding by broadening his readers’ perceptions of a marginalised world.

Perl and Schwartz say the technique of creating composite characters from the real in order “to protect the privacy of friends and family” is acceptable and ethical if the nonfiction writer informs the reader upfront that the characters are composites of the real, and if this is done then the writer preserves their credibility and maintains their integrity (171-73). Parker writes *Lighthouse* in such a way that, from the first pages on, the implication is that the characters the reader is meeting face-to-face are the actual real-life people in conversation when, in fact, these characters are not the real-life informants rather composites of the real. Parker does not alert the reader to this element in his work beforehand but leaves it until the acknowledgements at the end of his book. Even then he is not altogether open with the reader because, partly he informs the reader by implication and leaves it up to the reader to make the inference that the informants in *Lighthouse* are composite characters. In his acknowledgements Parker tells the reader that to honour his promises to his informants, the “lighthouses” are not “descriptions of the actual lighthouses” he visited while researching for the book, rather composite pictures of those lighthouses, and he explains that he altered all his informants’ “personal details, and obscured the localities and changed the locations in which they talked” for the same reason (287-88). Nowhere does Parker actually mention changing the physical appearances of his informants. But, since he changed all else to protect his informants’ identities, it seems logical to assume that, like the lighthouses in the book, Parker’s characters are composite pictures of the various informants, and his supposedly nonfiction work is a construction of composites based on factual material.

In a book section titled “Ethical implications of composites and fabrications in pursuit of the larger truth,” Cheney writes:

A fiction writer very often creates a character by combining facial features from someone the writer knows, a limp from another [and so on] … totally out of his or her own imagination. Creating composite characters is not only acceptable and ethical behaviour for the fiction writer, it’s expected. However, when the … creative nonfiction writer creates a composite character and puts that character forth as real, the writer violates the rules of ethical conduct for nonfiction writers. When a writer creates a composite scene made up of bits and
pieces of actual scenes or settings, he or she also violates the ethics of the profession. Again, the fiction writer does this all the time to create more interesting, more dramatic scene or setting and it’s expected. Creative nonfiction writers sometimes do it with the same motivation—but in their case it’s unethical. (227)

In Lighthouse, Parker does not altogether put his composites forth as real. In his acknowledgements he states that he uses composites of the real in order to honour his promises to his informants that “they would not be identified,” and he promotes his work as “true” to the “facts” of a lighthouse community, and to what had actually been said by his informants (287). In a sense, Parker’s characters are a product of his imagination. This is not to suggest that Parker’s characters are altogether conjured up by his imagination, rather that they are compositions informed by his imagination but based on his real life informants. Even though his composites are based on the real, through practising his methods of composing and techniques of masking Parker creates a new kind of people. In a way, Parker’s composite characters seem not unlike those created in the children’s game of “Composites” where figures are cut from photographs and sectioned up, and re-arranged so that the head of one person and the legs of another are assigned to the torso of a third person, and a new person is created. Even though Lighthouse is in fact a literary docu-memoir, because of Parker’s crafting methods it is a creative nonfiction work that is suspect in that it relies on unity and structure and an emerging pattern that stems from the composite conversations of composite characters that live and work in composite settings. Perl and Schwartz say, “Creative nonfiction writers, intent on being creative and truthful, walk a thin line that other writers do not” (163). Lighthouse is a fluid and even deceptive blending of real people into fictional constructs.

In another of his conversations, “Fictional bits within nonfiction,” Cheney discusses the ethics of inserting small pieces of pure fiction into regular nonfiction articles and narratives. He advises that “there are times when a nonfiction writer may want to … lapse into fiction to protect someone’s privacy … [or] to make the same point better, more colourfully, more entertaining, more emotionally, and thus more memorably; or to get at the “whole truth,” the “larger truth,” by introducing some fiction (232). He then adds: “We can use pure fiction in the midst of nonfiction provided we flag it. We must alert the reader that we’ve crossed, or are about to cross, over that fuzzy border into fiction territory” because “we have a contract with the reader” to be truthful at all times (232, 233). He writes:

Writers have found several flags to alert the reader, some more subtle than others. The more subtle, the more artistic, the more artistic, the more dangerous. A balance must be struck between not wanting to be too obvious, too intrusive
about it, and wanting to be sure that the code of ethics is not violated by being so subtle that the reader fails to see where the nonfiction leaves off and the fiction begins. (232-33)

Cheney suggests that these things also apply to “creative nonfiction articles and books. The same contract stands—you must be honest with the reader” (232, 233). As a writer, declares Cheney, “You have an unspoken, unwritten, implicit contract with your reader, a contract to tell the truth—whether you’re writing fiction or nonfiction. In fiction, you must stay true to the story, which is different from nonfiction, where you must stay true to the facts as you know them” (232). Cheney continues:

It is easy to violate unintentionally our implicit contract in creative nonfiction writing, which in some critics’ minds is always on the edge, if not over the edge, of fiction. Obviously, it’s impractical to flag every place where we’re being “creative” and not “factual” (because we’re always true to the facts while presenting them in a creative way). But we’ve got to honor our contact and tell the reader what we’re up to. (Cheney 233)

With a book-length work, argues Cheney, some writers add a foreword that explains “just how much fiction is involved” and this enables the reader “to carry that understanding with them as they work through the words,” and other writers make a statement or Author’s Note at the back of the back of the book to explain their methods and use of fictive elements (235-36). Cheney points out that it does not really matter where the statement is placed in the book as long as it is made somewhere and it is “honest and clear,” and leaves the reader in no doubt about what has been done and why (236). Cheney does not at any time refer to Parker. Nevertheless, Parker is crafty—his writing is clever, subtle, and artistic. He does not make it clear either upfront or at the back of the work or in the text just how much fiction is involved in Lighthouse. With Lighthouse, it is too difficult for the reader to ascertain where the creative elements end and the factual begins because the line between the two components is too blurred to distinguish one from the other: in Lighthouse Parker’s composites are intrinsic and essential to the text.

Cheney states what he considers to be the ethical standards demanded of creative nonfiction writers: “our professional ethics demand that we be honest” with the readers and with “the characters involved” and with ourselves as writers, for “without that honesty there may be creativity … but not honourable and esteemed creative nonfiction” (236). Again, Cheney does not mention Parker. Nevertheless, what Cheney says here has implications for Parker as the writer of Lighthouse. From all accounts Parker was at all times honest and upfront with his
informants and ethical in his dealings with them. In *Lighthouse* Parker adhered to his personal principles and stayed rigidly within the boundaries of his self-imposed ethics to protect his informants’ privacy and keep his promises to his informants of confidentiality. Parker kept his promise to his informants to protect their privacy and he did this by recreating them and their world and their conversations in the book as composites so they could not be identified in any way whatsoever. By creating *Lighthouse* as a construction of composites and in failing to clearly inform his reader about his methods, and in explicitly promoting his work in his acknowledgements (placed at the back of the book) as “true” to the “facts” of a lighthouse community and what had actually been said by his informants, Parker’s *Lighthouse* is, in one sense, unethical. He frames the work as authentic and faithful to the truth when it is in fact a construction based on composites. In this sense Parker breaks the contract between the writer and reader. Parker honours the contract with his subject, but not with his reader.

In his paper on interview technique Parker advises oral historians to remember that, when interviewing, the informants are “doing you a favour,” and that getting access to people’s innermost secrets and thoughts and feelings in oral accounts on audio tape is a privilege and a great honour (*Criminal Conversations* 239). What Parker does not say is that it is also an intrusion into their privacy. If the dual nature of the interview process is taken into consideration, it could be suggested that whether an interviewer intends it or not, an interviewer exerts power over his or her interviewees. Smith implies that Parker knowingly wielded power over his informants: “Parker was not an indulgent interviewer who let people ramble on. He had a very good idea what he was looking for and, without very obviously directing the interview, he was usually able to get it…. His style was so relaxed that people often thanked him for ‘an interesting conversation’ ” (247). Bathurst is stating a well-known fact when she points out that, at the beginning of interviewing, in accordance with his self-imposed ethics, Parker gave his subjects guarantees on tape that on completion of the book the tapes would be erased (291). Smith is somewhat critical of Parker’s methods, and implies that in destroying the tapes Parker left himself open to possible accusations of acting from motives of power and greed and personal gain. Smith quotes Margaret Brooks of the Imperial War Museum: “Historians who erase their oral history recordings are equivalent to those who might find some unique written documentary sources only to destroy them after taking notes exclusively for themselves” (252). No doubt Parker acted from the best of intentions in destroying the tapes, yet his actions raise the question of damage to the integrity, and so the reliability of the book. The implication is that by honouring his personal ethics, Parker brought the authenticity of *Lighthouse* and similar of his works into question. Parker’s act of destroying all hard-copy data leaves nothing to check his work against for authenticity.

Smith reveals that Peter Hart expresses this concern: “where no checks could be made
on the original tapes, material could be construed as works of fiction” (253). Parker’s reply to this, writes Smith, was to “vigorously defend his stance,” and she says, he “would not hear of an alternative such as placing the tapes under restriction, in a safe archive” because he had given his guarantee to his informants to protect their confidentiality, and he “strongly felt” that without that guarantee “people would not be so open of revealing themselves” (253). Smith notes Parker as saying: “This is what I do and what I want to do, and if it doesn’t fit with any neat methodology—no problem for me” (253). This last is interesting from an ethical point of view in that it indicates certain impatience with considering the full range of ramifications of his practice. Ultimately, Parker’s motives are only secondary in a discussion of Parker’s methods. What is important is the effect of Parker’s practice on his subjects and readers. It could be asked if, in *Lighthouse*, Parker interfered with reality in the way that he does in order to create a “reality effect” to help create unity and theme in the work, and make the book enjoyable and instructive for the reader.

**Parker’s integrity of “voice”**

In his acknowledgments to *Lighthouse* Parker tells the reader that in order to protect his informants’ privacy and to keep confidentiality, he also removed all traces of their identifiable accents, and that the informants’ conversations in the book are “composites of conversations with different people, transcribed from tape-recordings” (287-99). Parker explains his position: “Innumerable lighthouse keepers, keepers’ wives, and others connected in other ways with the service all talked willingly and without reservation; and in return had the assurance they would not be identified” (287). It would seem from all this that Parker was a man of principle, and an interviewer and a writer of the highest integrity.

According to Smith, Parker’s aims in interviewing were “always directed at producing books forged from the interview material” (244). Whenever Parker wrote a work on a community, he began by transcribing the interview tapes and watched to see what “voices” would develop. Smith asserts that, for Parker, “getting the voice right was crucial,” and being very aware of “the distortion which can occur when the spoken word is constrained in forms of written prose,” he would transcribe the interviews word for word and include every expression of hesitation, italicise words to “indicate unexpected emphasis”, and use punctuation marks to indicate every stop and pause (249). When crafting, says Smith, Parker searched for structure and unity, and frequently discarded “voices” that didn’t fit the emerging pattern (249). Smith clarifies this statement by saying, “It has to be remembered that throughout the whole process of interviewing, it was the *written* result which was his goal,” and she adds: “one of Parker’s most cherished skills was that of editing: of selecting and shaping his oral material into something readable,” (Smith reveals that he called this process “composing”), but he never overshaped or invented “things that had not been said for the sake of flow” (249-50).
The seventh point Parker makes in his paper “Principles of Tape-Recorded Interviewing” is that before beginning the interviews, he takes care to explain to the informants “that though I may not use all they have said (perhaps for example because others have said or will say something identical), I will not put words into their mouths or have them saying things they didn’t say” (Criminal Conversations 242). In what seems to be a direct contradiction, in his acknowledgements in Lighthouse Parker states that in order to protect his informants’ privacy, “Additionally the interviews themselves are composites of conversations with different people, transcribed from tape-recordings. But this was what was said; …” (288). According to Cheney, in creative nonfiction “snatches of conversation” (and this would also extend to conversations composed of selections) can offer the reader valuable insights into human nature, and “make interesting and possibly revelatory reading” (136-37). Cheney warns, “These pieces should be used only if the writer believes them typical for the character,” because, as readers, we learn about a person through what they say (137). It would seem that composite conversations in a work of creative nonfiction such as Parker’s Lighthouse are valuable if those conversations convey some sense of the actual informants. But Parker’s “shaping” techniques and “composing” involved combining similar statements by different people and re-ordering them, and then weaving the end result into the conversation of someone whose identity is so masked, and whose person has been so altered in the book from the real-life character, that they are no longer a true picture of that real-life character. Parker’s methods of crafting create problems for the integrity of the voice because what was said could have been equally “said” by other people. So if, as Smith suggests, it was “the written result” which was Parker’s goal, and if, as she also states, Parker “was well aware of the distortion which can occur when the spoken word is constrained in forms of written prose,” then it could be argued that by his editing and crafting techniques Parker did compromise “the original integrity of the voice” for the sake of his art.

Smith claims that when transcribing interview material, Parker carefully noted the idiosyncrasies of every individual’s speech, and he was careful to retain those characteristics when re-ordering his selected material while crafting his books. In his interview with Thompson, when talking about his methods, Parker explained: “It might not be a very important phrase in the sense of what they’re saying…. One man, for example, has a habit of saying things like, ‘My mother was very difficult … she was very difficult … my mother’. This is a characteristic …” (68). Cheney argues that in literary nonfiction, in order for the reader to better “see” and “understand” a character, the writer should “capture” the real character’s accent and speech idiosyncrasies on paper, and assign that to the original speaker (137). When writing a book on a community Parker’s principles did not permit him to do this. In Lighthouse, a book that relies on composites to protect the actual informants, Parker occasionally uses repetition of a phrase as a characteristic to indicate a character’s individuality. For example, when talking about his job as Principal Keeper, Steve Collins has a habit of repeating the phrase, “I like it …
I like it: I like it: just said like that, nice and level, no more no less” (280). Here, it could be suggested that Parker looked for, and employed, a “characteristic” that would make his somewhat altered character seem individual and believable. So, since Parker’s stated aim in interviewing was to produce a book from the material, and since (as Smith points out) his most “cherished skill” was his method of “composing,” it could be suggested that Parker was only “faithful to the language of the informant” to enhance his work for his readers.

What Parker was actually doing, asserts Smith, “was looking for the essence of each person and to give them the opportunity to express this essence” (247). Since each of Parker’s characters in Lighthouse is a composite of a number of actual informants, the implication allowed is that the essence of each of the characters in Lighthouse is a composite essence. Therefore, it would be virtually impossible to locate the true “essence of each person.” In his acknowledgements in Lighthouse, Parker states, “I hope [this work] conveys some impression of the world of those in the lighthouse service” (288). In her research paper on narrative approaches in qualitative research Margarete Sandelowski allows herself the same freedoms: “When you talk to me about my research … ask me what I invented … from and out of my data. But I am not asking you to ask me this, I am not confessing to telling any lies about the people or events … I am telling the truth. The proof is in the things I have made … whether you believe them, and whether they appeal to your heart” (qtd. in Goodley et al 68-9).

**Parker’s works**

In a review of Parker’s works, Mike Nellis writes: “In his lifetime, Parker’s books were almost always reviewed in the reputable national press, often by prestigious figures in the literary and criminal justice worlds, and treated with far more seriousness than the average work of ‘true crime’—or, for that matter … of academic criminology” (543). Probably because his first ten books were about criminals, Parker would naturally excite academic interest of this type. Nellis points out that, “Even in the books that were not ostensibly about offenders he invariably included interviews with them…. This was always Parker’s point: no society’s picture of itself is ever honest if it leaves out the voices of its criminals” (542). In Lighthouse, through his informants’ conversations Parker shows that in any society there are all kinds of people with all sorts of secrets. For example, Assistant Keeper Bob Archer tells the “unseen” interviewer and so by implication the reader, “I was … in a children’s home when I was twelve: remand homes, approved school, borstal, prison, I’ve done the lot” (183). To this, Bob Archer adds: “Sometimes it’s crossed my mind perhaps Trinity know a bit more than they’ve let on” (186). Bob Archer feels that being out on the tower light in the middle of the ocean is freedom compared to being in a prison. He reveals that when others say it must be like being in prison it is all he can do to keep his “mouth shut,” and he says, “I want to say, ‘it’s nothing like being in
prison at all; it’s more the exact opposite as it happens, and I know what I’m talking about’’ (188).

Given the nature of his works, such as *Lighthouse*, one would expect Parker’s works to be popular with the reading public. Extensive research shows that only thirty-two Australian libraries out of sixty consulted hold any of Parker’s work, and most of these libraries are closed libraries such as court, police, and service libraries. The reasons given by librarians are that Parker’s works are considered to be too academic, and, therefore, too specialised for public libraries—that there is simply no interest from the general population.¹ Parker never intended his work for academic analysis. Smith quotes Margery Parker who recalls her husband saying: “‘I’m not writing a scientific paper …. I’m not appealing to scientists and academics. I’m trying to get through to your ordinary everyday reader who doesn’t know anything about statistics and doesn’t want to know.’” (253). It would seem that for all that Parker himself sought to explode popular misconception, a huge misconception about Parker’s works remains.

¹ I spoke to approximately sixty purchasing librarians in Australia on 18.10.2010, and on the 19-10.2010, on this topic.
PART 1

III

The works of Sheila Stewart

Introduction

Sheila Stewart was born in England in 1928. Stewart wrote five books in total. In her first work, her memoir, *A Home from Home*, she confides to the reader that she was born out of wedlock and abandoned into an orphanage at three years of age, raised by the Waifs and Strays Society and spent her entire childhood and youth in care. Her second work, *Country Kate*, records the memories of her daily help, old Kate. The third work, *Country Courtship*, deals with old Oxfordshire customs but is presented as a novel. In Stewart’s fourth work, *Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land*, Old Mont recalls his life in a past era. In Stewart’s fifth and final work, *Ramlin Rose: The Boatwoman’s Story*, Rose Ramlin tells her story of life as a traditional boatwoman on the Oxfordshire canals.

In her preface to *Lifting the Latch* Stewart clarifies her purpose in writing: “Some years ago I wrote a little book, *Country Kate*…. I wanted to record the richness of the spoken word of ordinary country people before the ‘media world’ had faded out their own lively observations and perceptions of the real world about us. Such characters are now very rare” (xiii). Stewart allows something similar in her preface to *Ramlin Rose* (vii). Stewart evidently writes to preserve some record of the lived experience of the traditional agrarian societies of Kate and Old Mont, and the traditional canal community of Rose Ramlin’s. Stewart’s works fall into the category of local history. By tradition, local history books belong to a huge range of books which are not canonical, and are not mass-market either. Nowhere, is there any information to indicate that Stewart was anything other than self-taught. Yet it is possible that she may have been influenced in some way by an English tradition in local history1 of romantic portraits of a “lost” era in autobiography, biography, and memoir which includes George Sturt, George Ewart Evans and Flora Thompson. It is worth considering these three writers briefly as a context for Stewart’s work in local history.

Sturt is perceptive and sensitive. His works are socio-historical reports on his observations of the social, economic, and industrial changes he saw taking place in the traditional rural English village where he lived in Surrey. He includes himself in his works to describe and comment on the rural society, and give his opinions on the loss of tradition and heritage. Sturt mourns the passing of old customs and craftsmanship, and the change in spoken

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1 That this is a tradition common to local history groups in the UK is implicitly evidenced by online sites such as Sounding Board productions (http://www.soundingboardproductions.co.uk/suffolkvoices.shtml , accessed 17 June 2013.)
language. He analyses the effect of these changes on the rural society by comparing the contemporary situation to that of the past or the “old.” Sturt takes a sympathetic but unsentimental and objective approach in his work. Michael Bell points out that in Change in the village, and The wheelwright’s shop, Sturt “chronicled the period of his own lifetime” and described the changes “in a concrete way and not as an exercise in nostalgia” (115).

Evans writes about the rural community in Suffolk where he lived. Evans includes himself in his works of oral history testimony to describe and explain old customs and farming ways, and traditional rural village life. Like Sturt, Evans does not concern himself with his informants’ feelings and emotions in relation to their experience. In his accounts Evans includes anecdotes gathered from his informants. In his introduction to Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay, Evans admits that not all “the material contained in this book has been collected orally: much has been taken from books and manuscripts; but in nearly every section the oral material has given the initial impetus to search, check and exemplify wherever it has been possible to do so” (13). Evans focuses more on his aged subjects’ memories than Sturt does on his, and in his “recordings” the dialectic speech of his subjects is more pronounced. In his editorial preface to Evans’ book The Crooked Scythe (1993), David Gentleman writes: “Certainly one can enjoy [Evans’] books in a spirit of nostalgia, and take pleasure from the charm of the rural subject matter. But George was too clear-headed and too objective for nostalgia,” and the reader speedily discovers “that the lives and times he recorded were far too hard for anyone with any humanity to wish them back, rather, he used the past as a way to understand the present” (24). In his introduction to Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay, Evans admits the material in the book has been creatively worked, and he writes: “It is only fair to warn the reader … that there is a slight didactic purpose lurking in this book, related in a way to the village of the future…. A move into the past gets the best start from the sure ground of known and felt facts about one’s own immediate environment” (16). Evans also reveals “that the book, as originally conceived, had no purpose at all” and was simply a response to the abundant materials that he found when he arrived in the village (16-17). Michael Evans, George Ewart Evans’ son, calls Evans a “pioneer of oral history,” and discloses that after his oral history recordings had been put to air Evans “realised that transcriptions of the recordings could be used in book form” (3).

Thompson’s semi-autobiographical Lark Rise to Candleford is a partly-lyrical partly-documentary work of social history and agricultural portraiture. In the trilogy, written years after the events, Thompson details her recollections of the daily lives and the domestic interiors of the homes of the living people in rural Oxfordshire where she once lived, and shows the individuals as an integral part of rural society. In her chronicles, through her assumed character, “Laura,” Thompson records her observations of human character, and the social and economic changes happening around her on a deeper level than either Sturt or Evans. Laura “is the recorder of hamlet, village, and the country town who was of them but detached from them, and
whose observation of their inmates by intimacy by no means clouded precision of insight and an objective capacity to grasp ... the essentials of character” (Massingham 8). Thompson uses the fictional techniques of authorial omniscience and third person narrative, and is a sympathetic but unsentimental, realistic writer. For example, through “Laura’s” story Thompson reveals that within the tight knit community, the villagers’ attitudes towards each other are contradictory; the villagers are sympathetic towards young village girls who give birth to an illegitimate child, as long as that girl is not their own daughter to bring them shame: “‘I allus tells my gals,’ one woman would say confidentially to another, ‘that if they goes getting themselves into trouble they’ll have to go to the work ’us, for I won’t have ’em at home.’…” (Lark Rise 138-40).

H. J. Massingham points out that Thompson’s Lark Rise may seem to be a “placid English water-colour,” but what Thompson depicts is “the utter ruin” of the three layers within a closely knit rural society—country, village and small market town—with “a richly interwoven and traditional culture that had defied every change, every aggression, except the one that established the modern world” (10). Thompson does not explicitly describe transformation, rather does so through “Laura’s” story and allegorically through the changing of the seasons in the rural community where “Laura” lives. Through “Laura’s” story also, Thompson implicitly shows that underneath all the organic change life goes on, and during transition from the old pre-industrial England to the new contemporary society, traces of the customs and language of old England still exist in some rural village households, and in isolated pockets the “age-old discipline” is not altogether lost but has adapted to the modern times.

Stewart is different to Sturt and Evans and Thompson. Stewart’s books are not autobiographical or biographical, and not socio-historical reportage or accounts of her observations. Rather, each of her works is a subject’s personal memoir delivered in her or his own dialect and local idiom. Stewart’s works are more creative, more literary, and more lyrical than those of either Sturt or Evans, and she does not employ Thompson’s novelistic techniques. Unlike Evans, Stewart purposefully set out to gather stories, and she did so without any plan other than to audio-record the oral account of some aged person who had experienced life in the rural England of the past for a book. Her sole avowed aim in interviewing was to use the interview transcripts to create a readable story that would appeal to her readers and add to their knowledge, and she never interviewed for any other reason. Like Parker, Stewart focused on her subjects’ feelings in relation to their experiences of life in a marginalised community.

Unlike Thompson, Stewart takes a sympathetic and subjective approach in her writing and does not closely examine human character. Each of Stewart’s works is essentially the story of a living subject as told by that subject in first person narrative, and each of her narrating characters is in sympathy with the community in which they once lived, and any creative empathy in her works is written into her work as the empathy that her narrating subjects had with other persons in their one time communities. Stewart’s portraits are gentle, and her books
are charming paintings. Yet, in a way, similarly to Thompson, Stewart implicitly shows this process of transition in *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* through her narrating subjects’ stories and in the work as a whole, and in so doing makes a social point about vanishing worlds, and the need for preservation of culture and heritage. For one example, the appendix to *Ramlin Rose* is an essay written in 1959 by Jenny Littlemore—the living daughter of a traditional boatwoman—when she was fourteen years of age (219-21). Jenny notes the renewed interest in the waterways of England, and she refers to “those” modern-day people involved in the restoration and retention of England’s canal system (221). Jenny makes no mention of the writers who also play a part in ensuring that England’s heritage is not lost. But in writing *Ramlin Rose* Stewart assists by keeping such history alive. In 2005 the Roundham Lock Theatre staged a play titled “A Boat’s Yer Whole World” adapted from *Ramlin Rose*, and their 2006 review they maintain that traditional canal life is now almost “consigned to the history books” but not quite; there are still working boats and some traditions of community have passed down into modern times (1).

Like Parker, Stewart writes with the general reader in mind. After each session she took selections from the interview transcripts and moved them around to create a readable story. In her preface to *Ramlin Rose* Stewart writes, “Reading expands our knowledge of life far beyond the bounds of our own experience” (ix). Stewart’s books, *Country Kate*, *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* are not solely works of local or social history. They are also works of creative nonfiction that straddle the memoir genre and the literary documentary. In fact, Stewart’s works meet the criteria for creative nonfiction docu-memoir as I define it earlier in this exegesis.

In the preface to *Lifting the Latch* Stewart reveals that some years after Kate died, she went to the local butcher’s shop and the butcher and his wife said: “‘You’re the lady who wrote *Country Kate….* Somebody ought to be doing the same job on Old Mont.’ It was obvious they meant *me*” (xiii). Stewart admits she could not resist the challenge, and she adds, “I learnt his name and address and wrote … to ask if I might come and see him with a view to writing his life story…. Thus began my friendship with and weekly visits to Old Mont” (xiii). The same sort of simple circumstance that led Stewart to write *Lifting the Latch* also led to her writing *Ramlin Rose*. In her preface to *Ramlin Rose* Stewart reveals that she first learnt of the canal-boat people from Old Mont, and she writes: “Mont was in his eighties; those boatwomen he used to see at work on the Oxford Canal must now be in their eighties and nineties. If nobody had captured a boatwoman’s life-story it would soon be too late. I resolved to find a woman born and bred on a horse-drawn boat on the Oxford Canal and write her life-story” (vii). In the same preface Stewart tells the reader that Rose Ramlin is a composite of the actual traditional boatwomen and explains her reasons for creating this composite character (viii). In all her works Stewart assigns what has actually been said by a particular subject to that subject her- or himself, and even though Rose Ramlin is a composite character, her conversations are supposedly
those of the actual boat women Stewart interviewed for her story (x). By being open with her readers seeking her subjects’ approval to what she has written about them, Stewart avoids accusations of being unethical. Moreover, Stewart is very quiet on the subject of the existence or nonexistence of her tapes, and in this way also she neatly side-steps questions about ethics.

In 2001-03 several Oxfordshire papers and magazines published brief reviews fondly praising some of Stewart’s works (Fenton “Re: Emailing” 12 Nov. 2010). But as far as can be determined there has been no critical analysis done on Stewart’s books at all. My interest is in the type of docu-memoir Stewart writes, and in how she writes it. Stewart’s works serve as a model for things to do, and things not to do, when attempting a literary docu-memoir. Ultimately, the docu-memos of Stewart are charming pictures painted by an author who takes a sympathetically subjective stance towards her subjects, all of whom she made into close friends. Stewart’s works serve as a reminder that because the memoir component in this type of docu-memoir is the subject’s own personal memoir, just as with any life writing, this form is fraught with pitfalls. Nevertheless, for the writer who aspires to create a seamlessly blended work of docu-memoir that sits easily with the reader and grabs their heart, Stewart’s *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* can be used as models. These two books at once quietly demonstrate how to build a romantic picture rich in social history, and the skilful unifying and blending techniques necessary to a docu-memoir, and distancing techniques necessary to the writer’s purpose. They also model different memoir and story-telling techniques. As well, from Stewart’s methods, the writer who proposes to pen a docu-memoir can learn ways in which to avoid accusations of being unethical. But to slavishly follow Stewart’s methods and take her sentimentally subjective perspective could result in a work that does not challenge the reader’s intellect in the same way, or to the same extent, as do Parker’s works. Here, I will discuss all three of Stewart’s docu-memos but my primary focus will be on *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose*.

**Stewart’s narrators and use of dialect**

Each of Stewart’s three docu-memos has a single narrator—Sheila Stewart’s old daily help, Kate, in *Country Kate*, eighty-year-old Mont Abbott in *Lifting the Latch*, and Rose Ramlin, who was born 1901, in *Ramlin Rose*. The difference between the three books is that in both *Country Kate* and *Lifting the Latch* the narrators are actual people, and in *Ramlin Rose* the narrator is a composite character created from a number of real life women. In her books Stewart does not enter the narration in her own person—does not question or give an opinion—but simply allows the subject to get on with the story.

In all three of her docu-memos Stewart’s narrating characters speak in their native dialect and use the colloquial language of the areas and times in which they grew up. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call say that when a writer records a person’s dialect and speech patterns it
lets that person’s “voice” come through to the reader, but to use too much would make that person sound ignorant (108). According to Cheney, the technique of using dialect in a creative nonfiction work can detail “the flavour of the person you are portraying,” and convey the essence of the narrating character to the reader (88, 137).

About a character’s use of colourful language, Cheney argues that “the writer should not report every swear word, but should use some to convey the flavor of the conversations. It would be a distortion to clean up every sentence to make it acceptable to every reader” (137). In her preface to Lifting the Latch, Stewart refers to Old Mont’s swearing: “I censored his original ‘bloody’s’ from the first chapters, but without them the dialogue seemed anaemic. I let them stand in the next chapter. Mont was shocked. ‘En’t we a-sweerin’ a bit much, mam?’ I trust we en’t, Mont. I just wanted to paint your wonderful character” (xiv). In her personal memoir A Home from Home, Stewart reveals that one aspect of her upbringing by the Church of England’s Waifs and Strays Society was an emphasis on religion and the ways of the church. Despite knowing herself to be an abandoned illegitimate, in the Church Homes Stewart led a very sheltered life, and was reared to be lady-like in her manner and speech. It is not surprising, then, that Stewart struggled at first with Old Mont’s language when crafting Lifting the Latch.

Even though it seems highly unlikely that the traditional Canal-boat people almost totally avoided the use of bad language, there are almost no profanities in the text of Ramlin Rose. In Rose Ramlin’s conversation, the closest she or any other character gets to swearing is a rare “booger.” For example, Rose announces that, “WIND was yer worst booger on the Cut. You never knew how yer craft would be’ave from one gust to the next” (131). Given that Stewart attempted to edit out every one of old Mont’s “bloody’s” from the text of Lifting the Latch, and then discovered that the character of Old Mont would not stand in the text without at least some language, it is more than probable that Stewart included a little profanity in Rose Ramlin’s conversations in Ramlin Rose for the same reasons.

Stewart’s methods and techniques

In her preface to Lifting the Latch Stewart tells what happened on her weekly visits to Old Mont while she was writing the book: “I’d take my tape-recorder, place it on the old kitchen table … and he’d converse at random for about two hours” (xiv). From this, it would appear that Stewart did not ask interview questions of her subjects. Apart from the snippets Stewart offers in her prefaces to Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose, there is no available information about Stewart’s writing methods or techniques. I wrote to Stewart’s present publisher of Lifting the Latch, Edward Fenton of Day Books in Oxfordshire. Fenton replied that he has never asked Stewart about her techniques, but “suspects” she “did not copy out what Mont Abbott told her verbatim”, and he said, “I imagine that she would sometimes ask a question, and if he said, ‘Yes’, she would then phrase it in such a way as to incorporate her original question … but this
is pure speculation on my part…. I imagine that Sheila Stewart found her own way of working, and may not have analysed it a great deal” (“Re: Emailing” 6 Nov. 2010). One thing seems certain though: like Parker, Stewart made selections from the audio-taped interviews, and reorganised those selections to make a readable story that would appeal to her readers. Stewart does not admit to this other than by implication in the preface to *Lifting the Latch*: “It took me almost two years to write the book, sifting through the wealth of material on fifty tapes, collating random threads and weaving them into a narrative. I left each finished chapter with him for approval” (xiv).

Fenton suggested I write through him to Stewart, and he said, “I would like to help if I can, but am aware that Sheila Stewart may not be very forthcoming…. I fear that you may not get any more detail than that she would visit Mont Abbott once a week, tape-record what he said, and then write up each chapter” (“Re: emailing” 9 Nov. 2010). Fenton wrote to say Stewart was sending a personal letter by regular mail, and he also said, “Sheila … wanted me to email you directly to pass on to you her five points/rules…. I’ll relay them to you in her own words” (“Sheila Stewart’s”). Since this information is not available anywhere else, and since the insights it offers into Stewart’s methodology are valuable to any aspiring writer of documen-memoir, I will include this communication here exactly as I received it.

Sheila Stewart’s five “points/rules”:

1. Important to look upon your subject as a person not as material for your research.
2. Your relationship must be built on conversation and not on interviews.
   When you conduct an interview the subject is usually well known and you can feed in the leading questions to carry the interview along; the whole thing has momentum.
3. You often know very little about the person you are hoping to establish a relationship with in your book. Your material must be gathered from hours of recorded conversation. This takes ages, especially at first, when you are learning about each other. Usually your subject is older than you are. Mont was an old man of 80, with the slow recall and slow delivery of an old man of 80. There were many reflective sighs and silences, and he often repeated himself.
   To listen to these tapes is excruciating, boring, boring, boring to the listener unless, like us, the writer is listening for that gem of a word or expression that makes it all worthwhile. With Mont I was very fortunate that for his generation the main means of entertainment was conversation.
4. (As you probably know) write in the first person.
5. Open with an original, arresting quote from your subject.
Stewart is very protective of her privacy. What Fenton wrote in another of his emails to me might provide a clue as to why Stewart does not give away a great deal about her techniques, and why she allowed me an insight into her methods: “There … is a lot of the schoolteacher about her. She has little patience with sloppiness” or with writers who send her their work asking for comments, but she admires “those who work hard, and who have had hard lives” (“Re: Sheila Stewart”). As Fenton points out about Stewart’s five rules for interviewing and writing, “it was really good to have them encapsulated like this. They wouldn’t apply to everyone, and some people might disagree on some or all of the points—but that may make it all the more interesting” (“Sheila Stewart’s”).

A composite character, ethics, and authenticity in Stewart’s works
In her preface to Ramlin Rose Stewart tells how she gathered material for the book: “I put a letter in the Banbury Guardian stating my aim…. Jenny Glynn (née Littlemore) was the first to reply” (vii-viii). Jenny came from a long line of traditional boatwomen, she was delighted the story was being told, and led Stewart to her mother, “Ada Littlemore (née Mellor)” (viii). Stewart found that there were very few traditional boatwomen left, and, she writes, “Some were willing to talk but did not want to be identified, fearing that the stigma of their illiteracy and impoverished beginnings might still reflect upon their educated and more accomplished children” (viii). Stewart points out that the traditional boatwoman led an isolated and busy life, that she did not have “opportunities to communicate” or the time to converse with others, and as a result spoke in short phrases and could hardly “complete a sentence” (ix). Stewart also argues that the boatwoman “had very few points of reference outside her own narrow existence on which to pin memories. She only had what L. T. C. Rolt called ‘the slender threads of folk memory’ which were often cut at a tender age when she was sent away from Mum to work on another boat” (ix-x). Stewart writes: “I could not find a single one who could furnish me with “enough memories to compose her biography, though each … remembered who was related to whom amongst the canal community, and never forgot a kindness” (ix). Stewart maintains that, for these reasons she gave up her original aim “to find a woman born and bred on a horse-drawn boat … and write her life-story,” and decided instead to “take writer’s licence and weave the memories of several women into a complete story” (vii-ix). Stewart captures a picture of the actual boatwomen for the reader, and highlights the social importance of their lack of education due to occupational circumstances, by writing Jenny Littlemore’s prize-winning actual Essay which forms the appendix into the text. In the book, Rose Ramlin says, “When Jinny was fourteen she winned the Essy prize,” and she tells how Jinny corrected her: “Not “Essy”, Mum, Essay” (216). Rose tells her, “‘No need to talk posh. Wot is it anyway?” (216).

In her preface to the work Stewart admits that “Rose Ramlin did not exist” but “is a composite of several boatwomen … [who] worked on horse-drawn narrow-boats during the first
half of the twentieth century” (vii-ix). In *Ramlin Rose*, in attempting to “textualise” lived experience, Stewart ends up with a very atypical boatwoman in Rose Ramlin. Rose is the “ideal” of a traditional boatwoman created from Stewart’s subjectivity. Rose is eloquent and articulate. She can string words and phrases together. She talks non-stop in dialect and colloquial language for full 218 pages to tell about the traditional way of life on the canals and give a more than satisfactory story about her life and experiences as a traditional boatwoman. As Stewart demonstrates through *Ramlin Rose*, once the living boatwomen’s actual but disjointed conversations were taped and put together collectively as the conversation of a composite boatwomen, the living boatwomen had a great deal to say.

In her preface to the work Stewart writes: “Where I have used real boatwomen I have kept as closely as possible to the original recordings I was privileged to make with them, sometimes putting their words into Rose’s mouth, and sometimes letting them speak for themselves” (x). Perl and Schwartz say, “The most controversial storytelling technique for creative nonfiction writers involves the creation of composite characters,” because even though your friends may welcome your act of respecting their privacy and some readers may not mind, others will feel betrayed and be “outraged at the deception” (171). Perl and Schwartz further say that by using composite characters a creative nonfiction writer puts their “credibility at stake,” and one solution to the problem that most creative nonfiction writers agree on is for the writer to let their readers know what they are doing and why (171-72). By telling her readers upfront in her preface that she created Rose Ramlin as a composite of living traditional boatwomen, and by explaining why she took this action, Stewart avoids being unethical and maintains her credibility. In the acknowledgements following the preface Stewart adds a disclaimer: she thanks the boatwomen who featured in Rose’s conversations—“all those ‘on the bank’ who have kindly allowed me to use them as true characters in my story; and the following boatwomen, all of whom are now off the boats,”—and she adds, “Ada Littlemore (née Mellor) was my chief mentor, but the responsibility for what I have written is mine and mine alone” (n.pag.). Perl and Schwartz say that the technique of using a disclaimer is one which creative nonfiction writers use when they wish to avoid being misunderstood by their reader, and they say, “most readers … don’t mind some invention as long as they are not being duped” (172-73).

In *Ramlin Rose* Stewart adheres closely to the family names of the community, and to the popular Christian names common to the canal-boat people. In her broad Canal dialect Rose Ramlin (née Mellor) pronounces her maiden name as “Mella.” Rose talks about how changing times eventually forced boat families into villages on the bank: “In them days Branston was choc-a-bloc with boat peoples’ cottages where all those Council estates are now. Ramlins, Littlemores, Mellas, Carters, Dawsons, Kents, James and many more of the old well-known boatin names” (117). Rose Ramlin also talks about Granny Stratham, a well-known and greatly respected boatwoman: “At Granny Statham’s funeral I gathered the rigmaroles of me relations,
Roses, Roses, all the way” (25). In her acknowledgements Stewart implies that “Rose” is a favoured Christian name traditional to the canal community (n.pag.). In the book, inserted between pages 104 and 105, are a number of photographs of actual boatwomen and their children. The Christian name “Rose” and the family names of Littlemore and Mellor feature strongly in the identifying captions. In Ramlin Rose, these photographs are a form of documentary evidence. Photographs are also inserted into the pages of Lifting the Latch, but possibly for a different reason to those in Ramlin Rose. In Lifting the Latch, it is evident that the photographs come from Old Mont’s family album. Some of these photographs were in the original publication, the Oxford edition, and since the work was written while Old Mont was alive, and since he approved each chapter as it was written, it seems likely that the photographs are intended to enhance the work as Old Mont’s true story. I asked Fenton about the photographs. He replied that when Oxford University Press let the book go out of print he contacted Sheila Stewart to ask if he could publish a new edition. Fenton said: “The Day Books edition, I believe, is better than OUP’s original one. I commissioned a number of engravings from a local artist; … I commissioned a local historian to add the ‘People and places’ section; and I added some more photographs” (“Re: Emailing” 6 Nov. 2010). In Ramlin Rose, along with Stewart’s use of names traditional to the Canal-boat community, the incorporating of photographs into the text of Ramlin Rose adds credence and reliability to Rose Ramlin’s conversations about her life and experiences as a boatwoman, and so to the “documentary-type” effect in the work. But this technique gains an added dimension when the illustrations in the text are also included. The mix of genuine articles and factual data and pure creation (illustrations and composites, for instance) highlights the double nature of the work as at once a fiction and creative nonfiction.

Earlier in this exegesis I quoted Cheney: “Creating composite characters is not only acceptable and ethical behaviour for the fiction writer, it’s expected,” but when “the creative nonfiction writer creates a composite character and puts that character forth as real, the writer violates the ethical code for nonfiction writers” (227). In Ramlin Rose Stewart does not violate the creative nonfiction writer’s code of ethics. Unlike the readers of Parker’s Lighthouse, Stewart’s readers know from the outset exactly what they are reading because Stewart fully flags her work for the reader in the preface and acknowledgements in the front of the work. She explains her methods, and simply and openly announces that Ramlin Rose is written in the novel genre, but that that it is a mixture of the real, the actual and pure creation (ix-x). Stewart also draws a clear line to show the reader what parts of Ramlin Rose are fiction and what parts are not (vii-x). Even before commencing, the reader of Ramlin Rose understands fully that what they are reading is in effect a docu-memoir in the form of creative nonfiction presented as a novel, and that Rose Ramlin is a composite narrator that embodies the conversations and the essence of actual boatwomen. In her preface to Ramlin Rose Stewart writes:
After all those scholarly and meticulously researched factual books I had read about the canals I felt a complete failure in ‘opting out’ to fiction until I read Mark Baldwin’s reassuring words in his Canal Books: ‘Some of the more solemn collectors of canal books reject canal fiction, regarding it as unworthy of serious attention. This is narrow-minded; a novel may not contain facts upon which one would rely, but its very publication is a historical fact, and its portrayal of the waterway scene is an encapsulation of the feelings of the author towards his subject.’ (x)

In the interests of research, I wanted to verify the authenticity of Stewart’s works and I wanted to see how closely the words of the subjects in the texts echo what the subjects actually say in their taped discussions. But I was unable to discover the whereabouts of the interview tapes or transcripts from any of Stewart’s projects. I wrote to Fenton to ask if he knew anything about the interview tapes from Lifting the Latch. I asked if they still existed. In the return email Fenton said: “A year or so ago, a sound engineer contacted me, wanting to know about the original tapes and offering to digitise them. I wasn’t surprised not to hear anything more. What we may regard as ‘data’ was, for her, an extended conversation with a beloved friend” (“Re: Emailing” 6 Nov. 2010). Further than this, on the matter of the tapes and interview transcripts, Fenton could not say. In this same email Fenton also said: “But since Mont Abbott himself approved each chapter, it can definitely be said that he endorsed the words and the manner in which his story was told.” The preface to Ramlin Rose, and acknowledgements following, allow the inference that Stewart also made the boatwomen into her personal friends (vii-x). The letter that Jenny Glynn (née Littlemore) wrote in answer to Stewart’s advertisement, along with Jenny’s actual essay that forms the appendix to the work, and the assistance that Jenny’s mother Ada Littlemore and other traditional boatwomen gave to Stewart in writing her book, are indications that Jenny and the boatwomen gave their approval to the text in Ramlin Rose. In the absence of the tapes and the interview transcripts this in part confirms the authenticity of the book as a work of creative nonfiction even though Stewart presents it as a novel.

There is no information available to say whether Kate, Stewart’s old daily help who is the narrator in Country Kate, gave her formal approval or not. But one assumes this to be the case since Stewart wrote the book while country Kate was living. At the back of Lifting the Latch is a glossary titled “People and Places” by Graham Binns who writes: “The following notes are designed to give additional information about the people and places … that feature in Lifting the Latch” (221). One entry reads: “WALKER, JACK. Long Compton horse doctor, who had no formal qualifications but considerable practical skill, and was therefore allowed to continue in practice under the supplementary veterinary register” (231). In Country Kate, Kate
reveals that her father, W. J. ‘Doc’ Walker of Long Compton, had no formal qualifications but was particularly clever with horses, and could “casterate them” while they were “standing up, no ropes, no halters, nothing,” and she proudly announces, “My Dad finished up accepted as a veterinary of the first rank” (2, 11-14, 91). In *Lifting the Latch* Old Mont declares, “Jack Walker, the horse doctor from Long Compton, ‘ud usually come to castrate the colts. Amazing fellow! Never needed no help … castrate ‘em standing up…. No ether, no halter…. How they colts trusted him, I shall never know, but they did” (79). Here is evidence that country Kate’s father, whom she talks about in *Country Kate*, was the Long Compton “horse doctor” in actuality and the Long Compton “horse doctor” Old Mont talks about in *Lifting the Latch*. More importantly, this cross-referencing in *Country Kate* and *Lifting the Latch* in part enhances the sense of authenticity of Stewart’s work.

**Structures and themes in *Country Kate***

*Country Kate* is a simple account of life in a sleepy English village, by old Kate. By implication, Kate’s opening words inform the reader that the book is to be viewed as a straightforward memoir that is linear in structure and runs along a chronological time-line. Kate makes this claim: “I always starts at the beginnings, then we knows where we stands. I was born a Walker; Kate Walker I was born” (1). In the next line Stewart flags the reader that the memoir does not follow a strict chronological order, but moves backwards and forwards through time. Kate muses, “I don’t know how far back go the Walkers. All I knows is when I were married the Reverend Manton looked us up in the Parish Register and found we went back for three hundred years” (1). Stewart expands on this to allow the reader a little more information. Kate briefly states where and when she was born, and then continues, “Captain Nettleship ’buried’ our Mother’s father and ‘married’ our Mother to our Dad, so when the time the time came our Mother said Captain Nettleship should christen me” (1). Now, Kate returns to the present to recall looking at the past: “I saw an old-fashioned photograph the other day and there, smiling among the old fashioned folk, stood Captain Nettleship … just like he used to be. It were lovely, seeing Captain Nettleship a-standing there again” (1). Having said this Kate suddenly hares off at a tangent: “My father was a ‘veterinary’” (2). Kate then discloses that her father’s home-made remedies were famously used by the village folk for themselves and their animals alike: “Even today, if I has a bad chest, I goes to brother John for some of Father’s embrocation…. Powerful good stuff…. Just rub a little over your throat … but don’t get it in your eyes. If you’ve trouble with your eyes you needs——” (2). Kate stops suddenly, and admonishes herself: “There now! I’m rambling. We must stick to the beginnings then we knows where we stands” (2-3). Even though old Kate makes a few attempts to get back to the “beginnings” she continues to ramble. In his discussion on memoir structure, Cheney writes: “Not to be confused with diaries, which I’ve placed under chronological structure, memoirs do not necessarily follow a strict, linear
chronology, the way a diary typically does. They generally proceed from youth to old age, but a lot of jumping around through time may happen in a memoir. Tradition allows a memoirist to follow his or her own eccentric route …” (173). In *Country Kate* old Kate jumps around more than a narrator in a literary memoir normally would, and this aspect is disruptive to the reading of the work.

Stewart tries to pull the work together by arranging it into chapters under thematic headings such as “The Sabbath” and “Neighbours.” In any one chapter there are a number of seemingly unrelated stories clumped together, and in each of the chapters any one of Kate’s memories of her childhood can spark any number of other memories, and Kate’s fond memories of her father pop up here and there and form a weak thread in the work. For example, in a chapter titled “Wayfarers,” old Kate talks about the constant stream of “salesmen, touters, vagrants” that passed through their village (74). In this chapter Kate mentions her father no more than three times. On the first instance, Kate says about these people, “Nobody ever see’d them feed, they nor their cats. But my Dad did once” (77). On the second instance Kate talks about a woman vagrant; “I used to peek in at her whenever I delivered bills for my Dad” (78). At the end of the chapter Kate mentions her father once more: “In all the villages all wandering folk were accepted as a natural part of life….‘You treat ‘em with respect, my gal!’ my Dad would say. ‘You never know what you’ll come to in this life …” (80). It would seem that, for old Kate, her “Dad” is her guru, so to speak. Whatever else, this is also an example of Stewart writing Kate’s “Dad” into the narrative in order to try and create some sort of continuity to give the work a semblance of structure.

There are no photographs in *Country Kate* to support or enhance old Kate’s story. Perl and Schwartz say, “In memoir, you bring readers into your world, so they can … live in the landscape, and understand the historical and cultural context as you remember it—even if you have no photos, film, or tape recordings to support that memory” (10). Barrington argues that the writer draws the reader into their literary landscape by using the reflexive voice and by building scenes through using suggestive description to “show,” rather than using informative description to “tell,” the reader about their past world (22, 29-30). Cheney points out that creative nonfiction writing mostly uses suggestive description rather than informative description (23). Whereas informative description “presents just the facts” because it seeks completeness and instant comprehension of what is being said, and, therefore, does not permit the reader to bring their imagination to bear on the narrative, suggestive description favours the use of metaphor because it floats on tiny snippets of imagery that are never complete, never fully developed as such, and this invites the reader’s experience and imagination to expand upon the description (Cheney 23). Stewart uses very little suggestive description in *Country Kate*. She structures the book in such a way that old Kate’s account of her past life is top-heavy with informative description. Old Kate is more inclined to tell the reader about the past world in
which she once lived, and her love of it, than show what it was like to have lived in that world. Sentimental old Kate is not reflective; she lovingly rambles on at length throughout the work about items in her childhood home. Since this is the manner of writing of the entire book, this mixture affects both the “memoir” and the “documentary” components of the work. For one example, in a chapter titled “Families”, Kate informs the reader, “Me and my Mother never really got on. I was all for my Dad” (21). It would seem that there was a note of family unrest in Kate’s history. But Stewart does not flesh the theme out. Instead, she leaves the matter hanging, and in the next chapter, “The Daily Round,” Kate immediately smooths over this revealing aspect by chatting on about her wonderful memories of her father and daily family life. The one tiny allowance Stewart makes to suggestive description in this new chapter is when Kate states, “I grudged helping my Mother…. I always hankered after being with my Dad … and she knew it. Before I could slink off to the surgery to help my Dad she would make me clean the knives and my father’s boots every day” (23). Here, in this line, is a fleeting picture of a little girl resentfully polishing the cutlery and her father’s footwear. But then, in a line of pure informative description, old Kate’s sentimentality immediately kills the moment: “Of course, to me it were an honour to clean my father’s boots … but I hated cleaning the knives … because it took me so long and hindered me from helping my father” (23). In *Country Kate* Stewart might afford the historian a very brief look at items used in a past era—such as old photographs of “Captain Nettleship” and old-fashioned kitchen utensils once used in the village home—but possibly because of her manner of crafting, she is unable to successfully embed the “documentary” genre in the “memoir” and create a balanced literary work because she does not develop the memoir with suggestive description.

Old Kate is a self-indulgent narrator. She “loves” everything about the past world in which she once lived. In this, both *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* differ to *Country Kate*. Neither Old Mont nor Rose Ramlin is filled with sighing nostalgia for the past. Certainly, they have fond memories of their past worlds and miss certain aspects of that, but unlike Kate they do not idealise the past. In *Country Kate*, Kate’s sentimentality finds its quintessence in her memories of flowers. Throughout the book Kate refers to her love of gardens and recalls that flowers played a large part in her life as a child, and in a chapter titled “Rosies’ and Remedies,” Kate murmurs : “I’ve always loved flowers…. My Mother loved flowers too…. My Father was fond of them too” (35-45). Stewart weaves a variety of flowers throughout the book. Old Kate claims that her Dad “always looked smart … with a flower in his buttonhole” which, she proclaims, “I always picked … from my garden. Even in winter I’d search for something … even if ’t’were but a sprig of holly” (29). Stewart literally sprinkles the pages in the book with simple, even childishly executed, black and white illustrations of flowers. The fact that these illustrations are not coloured could imply that the “flowers” belong to past that is long dead
other than in old country Kate’s memories. It would seem that Stewart intends her flower motifs as a structural support for the work.

Stewart’s use of flower motifs in Country Kate is heavy-handed and awkward, and her “flower” symbolism does not marry happily with either the memoir or the documentary component of the work. In fact, Stewart’s flower imagery battles the historical detail for supremacy and the work splits into three—a documentary of sorts, an under-developed memoir, and a recurrent botanical discussion. In this aspect, compared to Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose, which are both beautifully melded docu-memoirs in that the documentary component is seamlessly tucked into and carried by the memoir component, Country Kate could be said to be a naive work.

**Structures in Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose**

Like Country Kate, Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose both use a memoir structure organised into chapters under thematic headings. But in these two later docu-memoirs Stewart’s techniques are more sophisticated than those in Country Kate. In both Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose the various side-stories in each chapter directly relate back to, and tie into, the chapter theme. The documentary component in each of the works is seamlessly carried within and by the memoir component to create a balanced work. The “memoir” and “documentary” genres are smoothly fused because the imagery and the suggestive description take precedence over the informative description or telling. In Lifting the Latch and in Ramlin Rose, the memoir structure is also more ordered, and each of the works follows a more structured time-line than Country Kate.

**Lifting the Latch** proceeds from youth to old age, but the apparent linearity of the storyline is deceptive in that the book loops back on itself— it begins and ends with Old Mont’s silver turnip pocket-watch. The book opens with Old Mont saying, “The day ‘Lordy’ presented me with this silver pocket-watch I knewed I were a man. It were 1915, and I were all of thirteen years of age” (1). From here, Old Mont takes the reader on a back and forth movement down through the years, and back up again through an ever-changing landscape to the present day. In the first chapter of the book Old Mont moves from 1915 only to say that ever since he was seven years of age he had been “helping out in the harvest holidays on Mr. Lenox’s farm at Fulwell” in order to help with the family finances (2). This brief mention is then tied back to the “turnup watch” that marked the end of his schooling and the commencement of his adult working days (3). In chapter two Mont moves back down to 1902 to when he was born—“Mam and Dad … married later in life than most and had gotten ten children…. Montague-Archibald comed seventh in this long hierarchy …” (3). From this point, Old Mont’s story proceeds more or less chronologically until a chapter two-thirds of the way through the book.
In this chapter, “Nine Hundred and Ninety-Nine Ewes—And a Black’un,” there is a more noticeable backwards and forwards movement, and that movement is in keeping with the uncertainty in Old Mont’s situation at the time. Old Mont roams up and down the years, telling many little side-stories that in some way connect to, or relate back to, the main story in the chapter which is about his friend and boss Taffy whom he had known since boyhood. The chapter opens with Old Mont declaring, “TAFFY HUGHES WERE THE OCKERDEST, inconsiderate, fly-off-the-handle gaffer I ever come across, yet I shepherded for him for thirty years…. It were bloody hard work” (167). While Old Mont was shepherding for Taffy, the war began: “We knowed in ’37 the war were coming; they started speeding up the building of aerodromes” in the Enstone district (168). Old Mont then goes on to tell little side stories about working for Taffy and about his family, and which are nevertheless related to the theme of the chapter, and in this way brings his conversation around to 1940: “Thomas Hawtin made Dad’s coffin …in 1940…. Our Mam went to pieces after Dad had gone …” and had to be taken to the workhouse for her own safety (171-72). Old Mont returns to the main story by saying: “In 1940 we’d [he and his brother Jim] moved to Twiggs, a tied cottage on one of Taffy’s farms” (172). Old Mont continues telling side stories, and comes up through the years back to Taffy: “I thought I’d got his measure, but in the bad winter of ’47 he sank below zero in my little black book” (179). Old Mont talks about the terrible winter of 1947, and about how, when a farm gate fell on him, his old appendix scar ruptured and the doctor booked him in for an operation (180). On the point of his leaving for the hospital Taffy took delivery of a new load of sheep in lamb, and he alleges that he told Taffy, “’thee’d best get somebody daft to come out in all this mud and lamb ‘em…. I’m to turn up for me operation on Monday” (181). On the Sunday as Old Mont was packing for hospital Taffy came to his cottage, and announced, “I’ve been to the Radcliffe. They’ve put it off for a month. With a bit of luck you’ll have lambed all those ewes by then” (181). Old Mont claims that he held his tongue; “I never spake a word. I couldn’t think of one black enough for a black’un like him. There was nothing a labourer like me could do about it in they days. I had no posh motor to drive myself to the Radcliffe. I had no phone—never used a phone in my life—and anyway who in a big infirmary … ‘ud speak to the likes of me?” (181-82). The only form of transport Old Mont had, was his old wheelbarrow.

Old Mont worked around the clock in the rain and cold to finish the new lambing: “It were Black Friday … I were in pain…. ‘Tell Taffy I’m quit,’ I says to old Twiss when he brought my wages. ‘Theer’s one yaw left to lamb …’ “ (182). Old Mont then adds, “I were going up with my wheelbarrow to collect my tack … when Taffy came slithering to meet me, all flustered, ‘That ewe’s started. She’s in difficulty.’ ‘Thee’d best get down in the mud and help her,’ I says, …” (182). Old Mont watched Taffy as he ran; “he [Taffy] were charging straight for Severn Bore. I were about to warn him. ‘Naw,’ I says to myself. ‘Why should I? He can taste a bit of his own medicine.’ He had mouthfuls of it, …” (182-83). Old Mont alleges that
Taffy begged him to stay on: “Thee can talk till thee’s blue in the face,’ I says, loading my crook and folding-bar on top of my barrow, ‘I don’t want yer bloody job. I’ve been workin’ me guts out for thee for seven years … a little appreciation, a bit of consideration, ‘udn’t come amiss. Instead thee piles on the lambin’ and buggers up me operation!’ ” (183). Old Mont now moves back down the years to talk about his old barrow: “He were a token of appreciation from Ted Barrett.… Seventeen years I’d had that barrow. I’d treated him to a pneumatic tyre in ’33 … and as I wheeled him on his last lap home along the muddy lane to Twiggs in the spring of ’47, carrying all my shepherding tackle, he were still going strong” (183-84). When Old Mont got home to Twiggs cottage he “looked around the homely kitchen” and “suddenly realised” that he was unemployed, and could not tolerate the thought of swapping the land for a modern-day job (184-85). Old Mont recalls times past and he muses on the transition from the old agrarian ways to the new: “There was a tremendous leap forward, during and after the War, in animal medicine and farm mechanization,” and he adds, “Now, in 1947, reaping, ricking, thatching, threshing were disappearing fast into the maw of the new combined harvesters that had landed like locusts … crawling across the country-side” (185-87). Standing there in his kitchen Old Mont thought about how he would have to leave his home and move far away to find land that had not yet succumbed to the modern age: “I turned round. Taff were standing in the doorway, his face still tear-stained with mud. ‘Stop on, Mont,’ he pleaded.… I were won over … ‘I’ll think about it,’ I says, distant-like, ‘after me operation.’ ” (184-88). Old Mont then adds, “Taff were true to his word. I had no more lambing; and there was the old horse and cart waiting for me when I got back.… Years later, Taff got around to buying me a little second-hand tractor …” (189). Old Mont continues with his story, going back down through the years and back up, through the 1950s and 1960s and 70s, and on the final page of the chapter he comes back to the main story in hand: “I retired when Taffy retired. I were sixty-eight. I’d laboured on the land, seven days a week, for fifty-five years” (202). In telling his story in this way, Old Mont inadvertently tells a story of organic change, and shows the struggles in the process of transition between the old agrarian community of the past, and the rural society of the modern age.

The ending of Old Mont’s story is foreshadowed at the start of Old Mont’s story. Old Mont reveals that when he first received his watch, he saw that his name was inscribed inside the back of the silver case: “Right handsome ‘Montague Abbott’ stood out on that day in 1915. Bright and unblemished it remains, three-score-year’n’ten later, even though the works be spent, young ‘Montague’ be now ‘Old Mont’, and my blunted hands be that ockerd and weather-beat I be apt to blunder when I tries to open it” (2). By employing this technique Stewart encapsulates Old Mont’s past life, and traps it in a bubble, as it were. In this way, Stewart cleverly conveys a sense of Old Mont’s past life to the reader, with some sort of understanding of a past world that is now lost in actuality and all but forgotten other than in Old Mont’s memories. In Lifting the
Latch, through Old Mont and his turnip pocket-watch, Stewart invokes the ticking away of time, and the inevitable cycle of the seasons and the progress of the years, and by implication matches or marries the progress in natural time to Old Mont’s progression from youth to old age and the contemplated end of a life cycle. In Old Mont’s story there is no promise of renewal of life other than that implied in the seasons and the flocks. There is no possible continuation of Old Mont’s lineage because an accident rendered him incapable of having children and, therefore, it is truly the end of an era (150-54). When Old Mont dies, the era will die with him other than in Stewart’s book. In the final lines of the book Old Mont becomes reflective: “I en’t been so well lately…. They asks me if I’ve made a will. I got nothing to will, ’cept this old pocket-watch, my shepherd’s crook, my folding-bar, my wheelbarrow. They’m like me now … ought to be in a museum” (212-13).

Ramlin Rose has a similar memoir structure to that of Lifting the Latch, but follows an even more strictly monitored chronological time-line, and the circularity of the structure is even more subtle. In a way, this structuring echoes the constant turn of the days, of the twenty-four hour clock, of the never-ending grind of the boatwomen’s seven-day week, of the weeks and years of hard graft that flowed one into the other. As well, it is symbolic of the strict time-table the traditional boat-women had to follow in order to get to their destinations on time, deliver their cargo, and meet their obligations so they could live. In the book Rose Ramlin reveals that during the war the traditional boatwomen worked even tighter schedules: “We was working all the daylight God sent for the war, coal, inkits, stone, sand, timber, grain. Then they brings in ‘the clocks’ … ‘daylight savin’ they called it, daylight slavin more like! another hour of strovin on the boatworkers’ day” (41).

In Ramlin Rose, Rose Ramlin looks back down the years and remembers her life on “the Cut” (i.e. the canal). Rose’s story is told from the present, and she begins her tale with the child Rose’s first awakening to consciousness. In the first line in the book Rose Ramlin announces, “The day the mule fell in the cut I knew I was born” (1). This was the day that her school-teacher said, “‘Rose Mella’ … ‘today is your birthday. Eight summers ago, on July 4th, nineteen hundred, you were born’” (10). Rose states, “It was the first I’d heard of it. I never knew I was borned” (1). From here, Rose’s story proceeds fairly chronologically up through the years back to the present day. From the first page on, Rose interweaves her tale with stories of canal life and culture, and stories about the hardships and joys of living as a traditional boatwoman. At the end of the book Rose’s parting line in her narrative is “me and Moy-chap quoytley ‘slipped our moorings’ … and sailed orf … into the moonlight” (218). On a literal level, what Rose is actually talking about is slipping away from the Town Hall undetected by their fourteen-year-old daughter Jinny who forbade them to attend the ceremony. By implication, this line is at once a sinister and covert reference to the end of life, and a symbol for the end of an era and the traditional boatpeople and their way of life. But it is also a symbol of
transition and ongoing life. For, unknown to Jinny and against Jinny’s wishes, Rose and her husband went to the Town Hall to hear her read her Prize-winning Essay in which, amongst other things, she mentions the renewed interest of the nation in preserving England’s canal system (217-18). Here, in this passage, the elegiac tone of slipping moorings and sailing off into the moonlight is contradicted by the new generation which itself is actually taking an interest in the canal-boat life and preserving a memory of it, though more as an academic exercise than an unselfconscious lived experience.

By implication “Jinny’s” essay in the text is one and the same with the actual Prize-winning Essay Jenny Littlemore wrote when she was fourteen years of age, and which forms the appendix to the work (219-21). The inference here is that the “Jinny” in the text is the same Jenny Littlemore who wrote the actual Essay, and the now-grown Jenny Glynn (née Littlemore) whom Stewart speaks of in the preface (vii). These factors in Ramlin Rose allow the further inference that, through “Rose” and “Syer’s” teenage daughter, “Jinny,”—and who is Jenny Glynn (née Littlemore) in actuality and who possibly has children—there is a promise of the renewal of life, and continuation of the family line and the spirit of community that was common to the traditional boatpeople. In Ramlin Rose, with the onset of modernity Rose’s old world slowly changes and dies out and is lost, but through Jinny and her essay there is an implied birth of a new world which grows from the old world and carries something of the old world within its soul. On this level, the circular movement of Ramlin Rose symbolises the life cycle and foreshadows the implied renewal of life—birth, death, rebirth. The circular movement of Rose’s “memoir” allows an implied promise of continuance and hope in a changing world. In Rose’s story the beginning is the antithesis of the end, but it is this which is also the indestructible link between the old and the new in the process of organic change.

In Ramlin Rose, through Rose Ramlin’s story, Stewart paints an even more overt picture of organic change. In Rose’s story, though life sometimes brought hardship and heartache, and more modern times and two World Wars and advancing technology threatened their livelihood and their traditional ways, the Canal boat-people tried to preserve their way of life. For one example, Rose tells about the time one of the Ramlin family’s horses died suddenly, leaving them with only “old Charley” (113). Rose Ramlin recalls that her little daughter asked her father, “Owever will old Charley manage? Shall us ‘ave to ‘ave a moty-boat, Dad?’”, and Rose’s husband replied, “He’ll manage … we en’t ‘avin no moty-boat!”” (113). A little later in her conversation Rose muses, “He liked his little ’abits, did Syer, wasn’t ’appy with change” (129). But Rose reveals that change was inevitable, and as time went on and things progressed motor-lorries took over their trade: “Most of us ‘Roses’ had to brave the controls of a moty-boat in the end but in main we was glad to leave the runnin of the hinjin to our chap” (213). Rose Ramlin and her husband accept the inevitable, but the implication is that underneath the organic change the customs and language of the traditional boat community still
exist and the “age-old discipline” is not altogether lost in transition but has adapted to the modern times.

The circular structures in *Ramlin Rose* and *Lifting the Latch* encapsulate Rose Ramlin’s and old Mont Abbot’s stories about the worlds that no longer exist in actuality. This allows Stewart to present these worlds to the reader as recaptured time, as it were. But at the same time this encapsulating structure is a distancing technique. Stewart shows the reader that even though one cannot actually know a world which one has never experienced and which is long past, one can see what that world was like through her narrators’ conversations.

**Stewart’s picture**

In her preface to *Lifting the Latch*, Stewart reveals that during the time she was writing Old Mont’s story, she would make weekly visits to his home where “he lived alone in the tiny hamlet of Fulwell where, apart from a seldom-heard passing tractor, it was so quiet, Mont seemed to be the only person left alive” (viii). In one of his emails, Fenton told me that sometime after Old Mont had died, he had gone to have a look Old Mont’s cottage in Fulwell, and he said: “Fulwell remains apparently cut off from modern life. The road into it leads nowhere, so there is no traffic. It is like stepping back into the past—the real past, and not some tacky idealised reconstruction of it” (“Re: Card”). Here is an indication that in some isolated pockets of England traces of the old order still survive. In *Lifting the Latch*, through Old Mont’s conversations, Stewart paints for the reader a picture of gently-paced life and communal solidarity in an old-world English country village of a past era, and she portrays Old Mont as a delightful old man. Old Mont is a naturally funny person with a keen sense of humour (11, 50). Old Mont is gentle and caring, and unassuming, humble, and easy to please (199, 202). Old Mont is pious, patient, honest, kind and tolerant, gracious and grateful, and has a keen sense of responsibility (156, 211). As well, he is empathetic, sympathetic, kind, and selfless. For example, he reveals that one time he was informed by “Tom” that his “mate” Taffy was going blind, and he tells the reader, “My world stood still…. I were blessed with wonderful eyesight,” and he then tells the reader that he said, “Mine be two good ’uns, Tom. Tell him he can have one of mine” (202). We all know delightful characters similar to Old Mont—if we do not get to know them too well. In *A Home from Home*, Stewart implies that in spite of the obvious hardships she endured growing up in Children’s Homes in the mid-twentieth century in England, she led a rather blessed and privileged life. Even so, Stewart’s memoir is testimony to the fact that all she ever wanted was to live with loving parents of her own and have a “Dad,” a loving, sweet, gentle father (17, 130, 182, 185). It could be suggested that Stewart’s gentle portrait of Old Mont is, in part, the result of her deep unresolved longing. Even so, Old Mont is very likeable. He is warm and friendly, and family and community hold a special place in his heart. At the same time, he reveals himself to be a man of deep feelings.
In chapter ten *In Lifting the Latch*, “Here’s to the Lass that Queened on the Green!” Old Mont talks about when he first met his Katy, and his excitement about their forthcoming wedding (107-24). The following chapter, “Jack Frost,” is only three pages long, and is the shortest in the book. In this chapter Old Mont tells about the terrible snowstorm that suddenly blew up and prevented him from meeting his Katy to buy her wedding ring (125). Old Mont recalls that when the storm lightened a week or so later, he was “looking out for a fresh letter from Kate, fixing another date to get the ring,” when he received a package in the post with a letter telling him of her death, and he opened the package: “It were Kate’s Sunday School Bible. ‘Presented to Kate Carey, 1913. Never absent, never late.’ I opened it at her marker. She had marked our favourite … Psalm, the one we’d specially chosen for our wedding” (127-28). A few paragraphs later, Old Mont says: “I opened her marker. It were one of the earliest notes I sent her last summer, still enfolding the tiny wild blue heartsease flower I found” (128-29). In the final line of this short chapter Old Mont repeats the words his Katy had written in her marker, and tells of his terrible grief: “‘Sweetheart—’ The message ran with my tears. ‘Dost find heartsease in Paradise?’” (129). One knows Old Mont is repeating Katy’s written message word for word, as if reading it aloud, especially since he breaks into the message with a brief remark that is like a sob. This remark is at once informative description because it is telling of how he feels, and suggestive description full of snippets of imagery, and metaphorical language of his own making. But because Old Mont’s expression of heartache is set into Katy’s message which takes the form of direct discourse that is tagged (offset within quotation marks) but not cued by a pointer such as “Katy said” for instance, one “hears” Katy talking. Right up until the quotation marks enclosing Katy’s written words Old Mont is narrating the story of his terrible loss, but within the quotation marks, and even though Old Mont is repeating the words written in the message, the words seem to be coming directly from Katy herself. This mixture of (the now dead) Katy’s “voice” and Old Mont’s “voice” is a symbolic unity of Old Mont and Katy. By using literary devices like these Stewart provides variation in the narrative. Stewart’s handling of the imagery and metaphor in this passage in *Lifting the Latch* is exquisite: the informative description is in the minority and nicely tucked into the suggestive description.

In this chapter, Stewart does not go deeply into Old Mont’s grief. Instead, she underwrites the work by writing simply and keeping the chapter very brief and focused on the one subject—Old Mont’s terrible grief over his loss of his Katy. First, Old Mont sets the scene by telling about the terrible storm that kept him from his Katy. Next, Old Mont speaks of receiving a packet in the post from Katy’s parents, and he then reads excerpts from the enclosed letter telling of her death. Then, in short sentences delivered in his unhurried speech Old Mont tells the bare facts of his loss and his terrible heartache. At this point Stewart heightens the poignancy in the passage by using repetition at the start of three consecutive sentences: Old Mont announces sadly: “Never no more ’ud my lovely Kate lift her laughing blue eyes to the
hills. Never no more ’ud her eyes answer mine with overwhelming love and understanding. Never no more ’ud I hear her beloved voice, smell her sweet hair, hold her soft body close” (128). Here, in this nicely controlled passage, Stewart takes the reader up very close to Old Mont’s innermost feelings, but then she quickly shifts the reader a short distance away from this closeness, and decreases the intensity slightly, only to build the emotion in the passage once more: Old Mont says, “I looked for the date of the letter. Already my Kate, my dear warm, ever-loving Kate, had lain a week in the frozen ground of that little church in the Vale of Evesham. And I never knewed. My arms ached to cradle her close, to comfort her. I couldn’t even write to her” (129). In this way, Stewart slowly builds the poignancy in the short chapter but confines the most emotive part of Old Mont’s story to the last page, and then heightens the pathos by inserting a brief but powerful expression of his heartache into the now dead Katy’s written message and using that as the final line in the chapter. By keeping this chapter very brief and by not elaborating on the matter further, Stewart creates Old Mont’s sadness as powerful and moving indeed. The shortness of this chapter signifies that Old Mont is too emotional to talk at any length about this sad part of his life. This is an indication that he has much pain locked away inside him. In this chapter Old Mont shows himself not to be a paragon, but an ordinary old man.

Throughout the book Old Mont reveals himself to be not consciously reflective, and not concerned with philosophical or psychological issues as such, but nevertheless stoic. With the exception of the chapter that has just been under discussion here, throughout the book, whenever Old Mont relates a particularly gruelling or disturbing or frustrating experience he declares, “Us’ll get over it,” or “Us got over it,” or “Us’ll have to get over it” (54, 138, 209). It can be assumed that, basically, Stewart is not interested in portraying Old Mont psychologically but, rather, as living history, as an old man who epitomises a past world. In his book *Courage of His Convictions*, Parker takes an objective perspective and a realist’s slant on his informant. Together with his informant “Bob” Allerton, Parker questions the deeper meanings of life and probes Allerton’s motives, views, thoughts, and opinions. For example, Parker asks Allerton, “What really made you a criminal? Do you know?” (105). Allerton answers, “There’s so many facets, you see, aren’t there, to what makes anyone what they are?” (106). He states, “I’d have been a criminal whatever … what makes anyone what they are? … But, you know, you’re asking me a question that far better people than me can’t even answer. Some of them get paid for sitting in Chairs at universities and trying to work out answers to this one, don’t they?” (106-7). Parker asks Allerton that if he could change just one thing about himself, what would it be, and Allerton replies, “I don’t mind being a criminal … but the viciousness that goes with it, that does worry me…. Like you, I want to know ‘Why’… what it is in me that makes me like this…. Why am I—I? God knows I ask myself often … and the answer is … I still don’t know” (114). Parker’s treatment of Allerton suggests that he is showing the surface of Allerton’s psychology
in order to convey a sense of Allerton’s essence, but Stewart does not afford the reader of *Lifting the Latch* the same opportunity with Old Mont. Old Mont does not question life or his existence, he does not give opinions, he does not reveal his thoughts to the reader, he gives some views, but he does not discuss deep issues. As well, other than in one instance, the Taffy affair, he does not give his motives (180-83). Moreover, he does not intend the reader to discern the deeper motives behind his dealings with Taffy. Instead, he places the onus on Taffy by saying, “I even missed old Taff in hospital. I knowed he’d never change, it ’ud always be … no appreciation; but better the Black ’un thee knows than the devil thee don’t” (189). Even though it is possible to read Old Mont to a certain extent, one is prevented from seeing too deeply into Old Mont’s thoughts and feelings. Old Mont is loveable and does not lack individuality, but compared to Parker’s informant, Old Mont is a rather “flat” character, and somewhat distant from the reader. When Stewart’s *Lifting the Latch* is set alongside Parker’s *The Courage of His Convictions*, Stewart’s work has shallowness and seems to lack fire and depth. *Lifting the Latch*, like Old Mont himself, is a gentle portrait of a lost era.

Stewart’s methods raise questions about whether or not her close personal friendships with her subjects affected her writing adversely. In his book section “The challenges of research,” Cheney asks if whether, in the interests of producing work that has a “creative edge,” it is best for a creative nonfiction writer to affect neutrality and remain objective, and he writes:

[as a creative writer] you will have to willingly … dig into that which smells bad as well as that which smells wonderful, and listen to that which repels as well as that with which you agree. All of this sensory acquisition will provide the concrete and sensory details you’ll need to create the objective reality of the situation for your reader. You’ll need, too, to dig deep into the emotional side of those interviewed, uncovering their innermost thoughts and feelings, if you are to give your readers that subjective reality which, when combined artfully with the objective reality, will paint for them a an honest and accurate picture of the world as it’s possible for you, a fallible human, to paint…. One difficulty associated with staying close to a subject is that you may get too emotionally involved…. You may feel guilty about your necessary voyeurism. You’ll have to ask penetrating questions that probe where the person is extra sensitive. That may be just what needs probing, but your sense of propriety may prevent your probing deeply enough.” (217-18)

It could be suggested that Stewart’s subjective sentimentality prevented her from taking a sympathetically objective perspective to her writing and which may possibly have benefited
her writing and so resulted in an even better work. Nevertheless, what Stewart does in *Lifting the Latch* and in *Ramlin Rose* is demonstrate her quest to preserve the experience of ordinary people by giving her readers a sense of a way of life that has now gone for good.
PART 1

IV

The immersion work of Helen Garner

Introduction

Helen Garner, freelance journalist and writer of fiction and nonfiction, was born in Australia in 1942 (Middlemiss). The second of Garner’s nonfiction books, *First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* could be classified as literary journalism. Garner’s fifth nonfiction work, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation: A True Story of Death and Grief and the Law*, could be classified as immersion journalism. In this paper I will refer to *The First Stone*, but focus mainly on *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is not a docu-memoir, but a related work of creative nonfiction. It has been included in this exegesis because it serves as a model to the aspiring writer of docu-memoir. It is creative nonfiction writing that inadvertently demonstrates how the writer of docu-memoir could combine documented facts with story and elements of memoir, and the writer’s use of imagination and rhetoric to engage and involve the reader. It is a work that models creative empathy. It also demonstrates how the writer can include her or his self in a creative nonfiction work to provide the reader with a point of reference, and give the work added credibility.

*Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is a highly emotive and disturbing work about tragedy and loss and unresolved suffering. The work is a search for understanding and a striving for some form of consolation. The title suggests that the book is intended to memorialise the murdered Joe Cinque. In an interview with Kerry O’Brien, Garner said, “one of the things I hope that the book can do, is restore some dignity to Joe Cinque” (1). In actuality, though, the book is an in-depth work in which Garner brings together many issues suggested by the subject matter of Joe Cinque’s death. Garner uses her journalistic skills, her imagination and her inquiring mind to contemplate the tangled complexities of the case. Her book questions the psychology and values of the writer and of her reader as ordinary men and women. The book is also an outlet for, and an outpouring of, grief—her own and others’. *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* has its basis in reality and explores philosophical issues, and uses a subjective voice, literary prose, and some techniques of the novelist. It is also a literary work in which the author’s creative empathy is evident. On the front cover of the book the editors say that *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is “a book which functions at one level as a psychological mystery, but at deeper levels as an exploration of the adequacy of the law to dispense justice, and the responsibility that humans have to each other.” (n.pag.). Morag Fraser maintains that, “It would be a sorry waste if *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* were to be treated as sociology and not story, if the sensational details of the case,
or arguments over balance or entitlement—whose story was it to tell etc.—were to obscure the fine discriminations of the writing” (2).

Joe Cinque’s Consolation is three stories in one. On an explicit level it is a story about the tragedy of Joe Cinque’s murder and the consequences of that for everyone involved in the drama, and the on-going suffering of his family. That narrative frame or more objective story is a vehicle for the more subjective story of Garner’s personal struggles to write the story. The third story and deepest level in Joe Cinque’s Consolation is organic in that it is the unfinished story of Garner’s personal grief over the break-up of her marriage. Implicit in the work is Garner’s deep uncertainty about herself as a woman, and her position in the world as woman, and of herself as a writer who just happens to also be a woman. It is these levels—and so the subjectiveness in the work—that are enfolded within the more obvious story in Joe Cinque’s Consolation, and the validation of Garner herself as a woman and of suffering womanhood through her writing as well as her creative nonfiction techniques, that I am concerned with in this essay. Then there is the further question of “consolation.” In considering all this, I will look at Garner’s use of creative empathy, and how, as a writer, she takes raw experience—her own and others—and turns it into a literary production of creative nonfiction, and which holds a mirror up to the reader, as it were. In order to discuss these various factors, it is necessary to attempt to unravel each of these strands one from the other. But because the three diverse stories in the book are inextricably interwoven into a unified whole as Joe Cinque’s Consolation, in a literary criticism such as this it is difficult to avoid some crossing over.

Garner’s informed subjectivity

In his book chapter “Saturate and Immerse,” Cheney asserts, “The highly involved research effort,” sometimes called “saturation reporting” or “immersion research,” involves the writer going out into the real world, following their subject and digging deep into their lives (196). Cheney reveals by implication that immersion journalism grew from New Journalism. He notes that all the significant New Journalism writers (Talese, Didion, Dunne, Lapham, and Plimpton) spoke at Yale University on a panel (“New Journalism—Two Decades in Perspective”) moderated by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and that Talese argued, “In creative nonfiction, the rules of accuracy must not be violated. All that we write should be verifiable” (197). All the New Journalist on this panel “stressed this requirement of accuracy” (Cheney 197). Cheney suggests that, in this, the panel may have been reacting to “to allegations made against the New Journalists that they ignored accuracy in pursuit of drama” and the “joys of self-expression” (197). In Joe Cinque’s Consolation, Garner’s work is verifiable; she writes about a well-documented and reported case. Garner involves herself closely in the drama and in the lives of her subjects and follows her subject doggedly, gathering information about her subject for a book that she hopes one day to write. This takes the entire book to happen, and in the end she
finds she has no choice other than to wait for the whole larger picture to present to view before she feels able to write her story (269-70, 326-28). Garner does not use biographical distancing and objectivity in telling her story. Rather she obtains objectivity by including herself in the work and observing the action as the ever-present writer-researcher. Garner’s immersion journalism allows her, as the writer, to include herself in the narrative in order to detail the experiences of some of the individuals involved in the drama from what is a deeply personal perspective. Everything that happens, or is said or heard or seen, is filtered through the lens of Garner’s subjectivity and her own pain as a deserted wife. In this way, Garner provides her reader with a reference point, and, as a writer, a researcher, and an observer, adds credibility to her story. Cheney writes: “Traditional journalists have only to report the variations or versions of ‘truth’ given them by” their various sources, and do not have to “figure it all out and come to some synthesis of what the truth is” because they are “constrained by journalist tradition “not to introduce their feelings or interpretations at all” (197). Unlike traditional journalists, creative nonfiction writers “may well bring themselves into a story, either overtly or subtly, believing it only fair to let the reader gauge the writer’s credibility and thus the accuracy of the facts presented. For creative nonfiction writers, concealing themselves, in a sincere attempt at objectivity, gives the reader no reference point,” and then “the innocent reader has no choice but to believe the facts, or reject them totally” (Cheney 197). In Joe Cinque’s Consolation Garner does not add either a foreword or an author’s note to her book to explain anything. Instead, she writes everything, including her findings, her observations, her opinions, and her doubts and conjecturing into the story as a part of her story about the story of her struggles to write a book about the death of Joe Cinque. In Joe Cinque’s Consolation Garner’s immersion research informs her use of subjectivity, and her informed subjectivity together with her saturation reporting allows her as the writer to describe the internal experience of external events.

**Joe Cinque’s Consolation and The First Stone**

The blogger Jetsetting Joyce writes about Garner’s interview with Jennifer Byrne at the Wheeler Centre. Jetsetting Joyce asserts that in Joe Cinque’s Consolation Garner shows “her ability to delve into the dark areas of people’s psyche and her spare yet vivid and powerful writing style” (1). Jetsetting Joyce also reveals that in her interview with Jennifer Byrne, “Helen [Garner] said that every one of her books is a continuation of the last book, so that all her works are just one great big long book which describe what she makes of the world and her life as she’s lived it” (1). David Leser points out that “it is no secret that Garner has always been an autobiographical writer” (“Helen Garner: March” 112). According to Leser, Garner admitted to being an “old guard” feminist who fought for women’s rights—equal pay and employment opportunities, legalised abortion, and the pill on demand, for instance (“Helen Garner: March” 109-13). Leser writes: “Garner’s enthusiasm manifested itself as a kind of counter-cultural snub to the status
quo, rather than as the sophisticated, intellectual paradigm of today which has found its way into
the universities” (“Helen Garner: March” 113). In First Stone Garner questions the excesses of
radical feminism, and states, “It … makes me ashamed to call myself a feminist” (210). The
First Stone is about the charges of assault two women law students brought against the master
of Ormond College, a student residence at the University of Melbourne (Hewitson 1). One of
the women claimed he had made unwelcome sexual advances towards her, and the other alleged
he had touched her breast at a party. Garner was appalled that the women went to the police.

Leser writes: “She regarded, as did many of her feminist friends born in the 1940s, uninvited
sexual advances (presuming he was guilty) as simply part of the landscape. They were coded
into human nature. Why go to the police,” because if every woman did that every time it
happened to them, “the judiciary system would be clogged” (“Helen Garner: March” 109). In
the book Garner claims she wrote two letters to the master—the first to express her sympathy,
and the second with a view to writing a book about his case and “asking him for an interview,”
and she adds, “His accusers I would have to approach more obliquely” (37). After believing at
first that all parties involved in the incident would be agreeable to an interview, Garner later
discovered that both these young women declined to speak with her (83-84, 211). Despite their
refusal Garner wrote on. Leser writes that the release of The First Stone threw Garner into the
public eye, and she was “cast as the traitor, a feminist who’d sided with the patriarchy and all its
blunt instruments of power,” and that as a result she was “vilified, blackballed and snubbed.
People turned on her with a ferocity that had rarely been witnessed in Australian literary circles”
(“Helen Garner and the Agony” 121-22). Leser notes Garner as saying, “I can’t imagine ever
writing a book like this again. I am frightened that people might approach me and want me to
tell their story’ ” ("Helen Garner and the Agony” 111-12). Maryanne Dever observes that
despite Garner’s declaration that she “just couldn’t do it again,” “that is precisely what” she
does in writing Joe Cinque’s Consolation (1).

Fraser points out that it is important to remember that Joe Cinque’s Consolation is not
The First Stone (2). Admittedly, both books deal with the kinds of destructive power attractive
young women can hold over men. But there is a marked difference in the types of power the
young women wield in The First Stone to that in Joe Cinque’s Consolation. The First Stone
suggests that the young radical feminists who are central to the drama flaunted their sexuality to
entrapp an unsuspecting male and damage his reputation in order to make an example. What
happened was criminal if the charge against the master was fabricated or planned—entrappment
is a criminal charge. Never once is it suggested that they would resort to murder to achieve their
aims. In Joe Cinque’s Consolation Anu Singh, the woman most central to the drama, exerts a
force of personality to enlist the assistance of her subservient friend to destroy the life of an
unsuspecting and innocent young man whom she supposedly loved. In Joe Cinque’s
Consolation Anu Singh’s reasons for murdering her fiancé are wondered about by others but
known only to her. Feminism is never once put forward as a consideration in her case, or in any way implied as a motive for her act of murder. Whether Anu Singh is a feminist or not is beside the point because, unlike *The First Stone*, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is not a discourse on feminism as such.

Early in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Garner tells the reader that she first heard of Joe Cinque when a journalist friend rang and said he had heard about a murder case, and suggested she write the story. Garner reveals that at the time her “third marriage had just collapsed in a welter of desperation,” and she tells the reader: “I had no job, and lacked the heart to look for one. I knew I had to get out of my own head, to find some work to do. The journalist, whatever his motives, was offering me a story” (13). Garner adds, “He didn’t spell it out—you’re interested in women at the end of their tether—but I saw at once why I was the writer he had called. Four years before I had published a book of reportage called *The First Stone*…. The parallels between that story and this one were like a bad joke” (13). The parallels were that each of the stories involved two young women who had committed a heinous wrong against a male who was known to them. In an interview with Clare Foster, Garner admits that “right back at the start” she approached the Cinques and the Singhs and introduced herself as a writer who might want to write a book on the case. Both parties were interested. Garner tells Foster she thought, “‘Wacko! This isn’t going to be like *The First Stone*, I’m going to have access to both sides of the story, and I’ve made personal contact with both sides, and I haven’t taken a side, and I’ll be able to write a balanced story’” (2). Some way into *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner writes that while attempting to research the book she discovered that, just as in *The First Stone*, the two young women central to the drama refused to speak with her. Garner writes: “Here I was, back at the same old road block. My fantasy of journalistic even-handedness … gave way…. I was too scared to go on, to step around the barrier of the women’s silence and face another public roasting” (269). Nevertheless, Garner did eventually write on despite the young women’s refusal to speak with her after they had at first appeared to agree. Lohrey observes that Garner describes the New Journalism writer Janet Malcolm “as the writer who influenced her more than any other” (53). In her interview with Foster, Garner reveals that in regard to subjects, she interprets Malcolm as saying: “once somebody has … broken [their spoken contract] … someone who thought they wanted you to write their story but then changed their mind … ‘You are in fact free’ (I think she meant morally free) ‘from that moment on’ ” (Foster 4-5).

The fact that these women refused to talk with Garner is one of the pivotal aspects of *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. It is this factor which determines Garner’s subjective approach in the book. This approach at once permits and is supported by Garner’s immersion techniques, and the two together allow and encourage her use of extended metaphor which, in turn, gives rise to heightened images that double as symbols that also act as linking devices.
Garner’s “truth” and her use of imagination

Docu-memoir as I define it takes the interview as the story. The writer crafts the creative work from verbatim and edited transcript material, and uses first person dialogue so that the subject appears to be telling their own story her- or him-self. The works of Parker and Stewart are examples of this type of writing. Unlike the works of Parker and Stewart, Joe Cinque’s Consolation is not a creative recreation of the audio-recorded oral accounts of others about their personal experiences as told to the writer. Rather it is a work of saturation reporting and immersion research. Walt Harrington advises that “immersion journalists avoid the idea that the story is the interview” (xxxiv).

In Joe Cinque’s Consolation Garner does conduct some interviews as resource material for her work, but does not include verbatim or edited transcript material within the text; rather she implies the use of transcript material. For example, at one place in the work Garner mentions the first day she talked at length with Maria Cinque for her story; “Maria Cinque and I spent seven hours in the kitchen, with the tape-recorder clicking on and off between us…. To call the encounter an interview would be to gild the lily” (84-5). A few pages later Garner writes: “It took me three days to transcribe the cassettes, hauling the tape back and forth, stabbing away at the buttons” (87). Garner also implicitly uses some of her note-book material from the court proceedings and her conversations with some of the people who lived the experience as a resource for the book. As well, in many various places throughout the book (too numerous to list here) Garner gleans information from her less formal meetings and discussions with Joe Cinque’s parents and friends—and some others such as journalists and Anu Singh’s father—and from researching police files, pre-published documentary material, newspaper columns, and court transcripts. Garner admits that her data gathering, and so her personal knowledge, and so her resolution, is incomplete because she is prevented from talking with Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao, the two women accused of murdering Joe Cinque. In her interview Foster asks Garner to “tell us” what she would have liked to ask Anu Singh if she had the chance, and to “read that part of the book” to the audience because “it’s a seminal part of the book” (2). In answer, Garner declares that she would have liked to ask Anu Singh “about her soul” but had no way of knowing if Anu Singh was repentant: “The trouble was that her soul, like everyone’s, is invisible” (289-90). Hewitson argues that Anu Singh “remains a murderous riddle never solved” (1). About Madhavi Rao, Garner states in her book: “She was closed and quiet. I could not read her” (203). Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao remain a mystery to Garner, like the psychology of those who commit murder, and the definition of wickedness and the nature of evil (80, 152).

In the book, after finding that she could not talk with either Anu Singh or Madhavi Rao, Garner attends every session of the murder hearing to observe the two women at first hand. As well, she talks with others about them, and listens to what the lawyers and witnesses say about
them in court. Garner fills in the gaps left in her knowledge with information gathered from her own and others’ observations, and from her “gut” feelings and reflections, and intellectual ponderings. Suzanne Eggins quotes Garner as saying she learned from Malcolm “to draw symbolic meaning from interviewees’ everyday behaviours” (and by implication this would also include observation of everyday behaviour where interviews are not possible) “and to look for psychoanalytic ‘readings’ of what people say and do” (“Interview” 4). In her interview with Ramona Koval, Garner acknowledges Malcolm’s influence:

Her work is deeply imbued with what she called the psychoanalytic view of reality and its basic doctrine that life is lived on two levels of thought and act; one in our awareness and the other only inferable from dreams, slips of the tongue and inexplicable behaviour… What really was tremendously useful for me was seeing the way that Malcolm observes and permits herself to interpret the behaviour and body language of people she's interviewing…

There's a link there between that freedom and learning to free-associate, as you do when you're in psychoanalytic therapy. It's very exhilarating to learn to trust and follow the leaps of association that are always there in your mind leading towards deeper meaning. But it took me many years to have the nerve to do that, to trust flashes of insight and flashes of association. Of course that's what metaphor is, it's the leaps of mind that link thoughts together. (1)

This does not in any way solve the various mysteries. For that, Garner has to rely on her imagination. In his journalistic nonfiction work *In Cold Blood* Capote wrote: “Imagination, of course, can open any door—turn the key and let terror walk right in” (84). This is not to say that in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner prevaricates, or fabricates a lie. It is only to say that Garner constructs in that she uses her imagination to combine what is known with what is observed and with what she believes may be “true” of the various characters involved in the case. Garner uses her imagination to fill in the gaps in the story about those things which she does not, indeed cannot, know. Even so, Garner does not descend into fiction. Garner adheres strictly to the facts of the case, and the “truths” of those affected by the senseless murder of young Joe Cinque. About a creative nonfiction writer’s use of imagination Gutkind advises that the writer can use imagination, speculation, “to fill a gap in a story that can’t be closed by memory or research” and this can be enriching in a creative nonfiction work provided that there is “truth” in the speculation, and “the reader is no way misled” (*Keep it ...* 150-52). Gutkind writes: “We all do this: fill in the parts of a story that intrigue us but that we can never really know. Nonfiction writers can do this a well, as long as they label it honestly” (152).
Anthea Taylor deplores Garner’s treatment of the young women in both *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, and she maintains that “at the narrative core of both these works of ‘non-fiction’ are women, constructed as manipulative and destructive” (1). I argue that Garner’s portrayals of these women are not always mere “constructions.” For one example, in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Maria Cinque sums up Anu Singh: “She was very controlling, very bossy…. She manipulate” (88, 90). These are almost the same words as Maria Cinque uses in her interview with Phillip Adams (3-11). This would seem to indicate that these traits in Anu Singh are, in fact, observable behaviours, and not devised by Garner for the sake of an effect on the reader.

*Joe Cinque’s Consolation* raises questions about whether some “truths” are more those of the writer-narrator than those of the actual individuals who feature in the work. Garner acknowledges this when she asks, “How much of this was I projecting, with the knowledge I had of [Joe’s] horrible fate? It was magical thinking, sentimental. I tried to pull myself into line” (328). Early in the book, a young woman, “now a journalist,” phones Garner to tell her that she had “been a student at ANU” and that Madhavi Rao was well-liked, and Garner replies: “People seem to feel warmly towards her” (229-30). At a different place in the book Garner implies that Madhavi Rao was in Anu Singh’s power; “Rao was the blur behind her” (203). The implication here is that Madhavi Rao is a victim of Anu Singh just as is Joe Cinque. At one time during Madhavi Rao’s murder trial Garner looked across the courtroom at the young woman and imagined a silent communication between them. The glance brings Garner to remember her own youthful actions, and causes her to feel “a curiously protective urge” towards the young woman, and she writes: “Of course, I knew there was no ‘significance’, that I was projecting it. But it unnerved me…. I was just like everyone else who had come into contact with these two women: one made my hackles go up, while the other aroused a curious, muted compassion” (231). In relation to Madhavi Rao, Garner findings seem to be based on the views of only a very few others. Nevertheless Garner presents these impressions to the reader as trustworthy.

Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard say that regardless of the particular genre, creative nonfiction writing has an obligation to shape its “form to tell the truth of a particular moment” whether that moment is long, or short, in duration (1). These truths can be defined as the articulations of the factors in the situation which writers can reasonably hope to persuade readers are fundamental and incontrovertible. Despite Garner’s frustrations, and regardless of her projections, and the personal truths peculiar to the various individuals, there is truth, or facticity, in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. In actuality, Joe Cinque’s fiancé murdered him for what ever reason, and her girl friend was involved in some way. Garner, as a writer of immersion research, has a tacit contract with the reader to give as truthful a picture of the situation as she possibly can, in the same way that a writer of docu-memoir does. The bottom line in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is that Joe Cinque is dead and the fact of his murder has brought a great
deal of on-going suffering to his family. The challenge for Garner in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is her struggle to write a highly subjective literary work of immersion journalism about a tragedy that had occurred “nearly two years” before, to people she did not know about at the time. In line with this factor, Garner does not allow herself to immediately enter the story. Some pages and a good way into her story she introduces herself by saying, “The first I heard about this tale was in March 1999. I received a phone call at home … ” (12).

Dever argues that Garner “carries the privileges of fiction across to the genre of non-fiction (true crime stories) to produce not truth, but a series of well-honed truth effects” (2). In her book, by implication, Garner answers for others when they themselves do not answer, and presents those answers to the reader as words that have actually been uttered. For example, in one scene, a young journalist notes that Anu Singh could be released from prison before she is thirty years of age and remarks, “I’m nearly thirty. My whole life’s in front of me,” and Garner replies, “Still … she’ll have to live with what she did” (128). The journalist does not answer this, but Garner states that the young journalist “was not convinced. Neither was I” (128). Eggins suggests that Garner’s work shows “how tricky it is to blend the objectivity, balance, ‘facticity’, and source-based reportage of journalistic genres with the subjective, self-reflective, imaginatively-sourced narrative drive of literary forms” (“Real stories” 124).

**Garner’s creative empathy**

In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner reveals that as a schoolgirl Anu Singh had started using “cannabis and alcohol,” and then “at university moved on to acid, cocaine and speed” and also used “ecstasy and crystal meth, which caused hallucinations” (113). During this time, states Garner, Anu Singh “had entered a cycle of bingeing and purging” and had “started taking the ipecac” for which she blamed Joe Cinque (113). Garner writes that whenever Anu Singh visited either her own or Joe Cinque’s parents “she ceased to use drugs; withdrawing had brought on depression—and perhaps, I wondered, also the behaviour that her father had found disturbing on her visits home: the pacing, the crying, the skin-pulling, the sleeplessness” (94-6, 113). This passage refers the reader back to an earlier passage where Garner listens as Anu Singh’s father tells the court that when Anu came home for the September break in 1995, she had sat around “crying for no apparent reason” (27). Garner states: “Any woman who has left home for university can fill in the gaps here…. Drugs. Booze. Stupid, risky sex. ‘Love’ affairs. Casual wounding. Pregnancy. Abortion. What do parents know? What can a girl tell them about her stampede towards danger and self-damage?” (27). A few pages later in the book there is a short, seven sentence passage which sits approximately centred, alone on an entire page, and begins with Garner saying, “When court rose for the day I carried my backpack along Northbourne Avenue and took a room in the first hotel I could stand the sight of’ (33). Garner then continues, “I lay on the bed thinking about Anu Singh and her distracted visits home from university” (33).
Garner’s thoughts immediately jump back to her own youthful situation and she writes, “I wondered if my parents guessed what the matter was with me, in 1964, when I took the train home from Geelong after I had had an abortion” (33). In her short story “Civilisation and Its Discontents” in Post Cards from Surfers, Garner fictionalises her youthful affair with her tutor and her subsequent abortion (93-101). Kate Legge reveals that “Writer and academic Elizabeth Webby once told Garner: ‘I am amazed at how much you can walk around naked in public.’ Webby declares that [Garner] is ‘prepared to reveal intimate, rather shameful things’… most of us wouldn’t cough up with a gun to our head” (5). In the passage in Joe Cinque’s Consolation, Garner’s reference to her own youthful exploit is quickly replaced by a thought about her present situation, and she wonders how she can finance her intended book “without having to commit” herself “to a publisher” (33). This brief passage then ends with Garner walking away from the hotel intent on the business of buying “two new notebooks and a bunch of pens” (33).

In this short passage, Garner’s artistic representation of her thought pattern and leaps of association mimic the pattern of human thought. She begins by pondering one thing, and then drifts or jumps to thinking about something quite different and quite distant from the first line of thought but which is nevertheless associated in some way. In turn, that thought then leads on to something else again which is also quite different but somehow associated. In this way, Garner captures a picture of the destructive actions of unthinking youth in a few, plainly expressed sequential sentences, or “thoughts,” that tumble one upon the other in a single session of contemplation. Moreover, by showing herself as walking into the hotel to rest on her bed, and then walking out of the hotel after thinking about Anu Singh and her own situation, Garner encapsulates these “thoughts” and in so doing makes them at once subjective and private, and, so, distanced from the reader. In this short passage also, Garner creates heightened images that double as symbols. These images build one upon the other to create the effect of creative empathy which appears at first to be meant for Anu Singh. But in this passage Garner’s creative empathy is contained by her own experience, and so does not really extend to Anu Singh whose murderous act has isolated her from society. Since Garner’s “thought sentences” are not actually related in that they could each stand alone and are only associated and connected by dint of being clumped together in the one small, self-contained paragraph, they could be read as reflecting in their form Anu Singh’s isolation from others and from society in general. This also reflects Anu Singh’s dissociation from reality, and—if there is such a word—her unreachability. It could also be read as reflecting Garner’s own association—which, in a strange way, is simultaneously dissociation—with Anu Singh on both a physical and metaphorical level. The point here is that Garner uses this particular passage in Joe Cinque’s Consolation to try and comprehend Anu Singh’s situation and feel her pain, but only within the parameters of her own experience.
On a different level, the “thought” passage under discussion is about the loss of youth—Garner’s own. Garner uses her fine writing skills to write her own story through that of Anu Singh. This idea is given credence by a different passage later in the book; at her flat in Sydney, in the “week between the trial and the judgement” of Anu Singh, Garner finds she is restless: “I paced, I ate lollies, I scrubbed…. I got up at four in the morning…. I was agitated by the prospect of a solemn judgement on a woman’s life” (66). Back at the courthouse in Canberra, a young reporter tells Garner that Anu Singh could get a twenty year sentence. Garner is “stunned,” and thinks, “She’ll be my age by the time she gets out” (71). This last is yet another moment in the text when Anu Singh is paralleled by Garner. The implication is that by the time she is Garner’s age Anu Singh will discover that her youth has gone, lost forever, the doors of hope and promise and youthful romance closing in her face just as they had for Garner herself when her third marriage crumbled. Implicit in Garner’s words there is almost an element of spite or vengeful glee. Garner deplores Anu Singh’s act of wasting a young man’s life. But Garner’s frequent and oblique references to her own wasted youth imply that Garner is a woman in conflict. Outside the courtroom Garner comes to the sudden realisation that she got “the sum wrong,” and she tells the reader, “I was filled with an obscure shame, I slunk around behind the jostling mob … pretending to be only a passer-by” (71). The Cinques are taken out the back door of the courthouse and whisked away. Garner cries, “There was no one to wait for now…. I turned away … crouched against the cold concrete rim of a planter box and howled into my hankie. I didn’t even know who I was crying for” (71). The implication here is that Garner cries for the loss of her marriage, for the loss of youth, for the loss of the hope and promise of personal happiness, and for the futility of waiting for something that has passed her by. Garner writes: “On, on rushes time, without hesitation, without mercy” (72).

**Garner’s persuasive techniques and the nature of empathy**

In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Garner keeps the reader involved by posing dilemmas and offering more questions than answers. In her book, Garner wonders about the nature of empathy, and questions her values as a woman and a writer. Garner also asks rhetorically whether a killer has the right to the protection of privacy, and whether one can really empathise with someone who lacks empathy with and sympathy for others. For example, a friend of the Rao family asks Garner how she would feel if her own daughter had committed a heinous crime and someone wrote a book about it. Garner writes: “I was affected by it. What further hurt might I inflict? What right did I have?” (136). Garner ponders the question, formulates her opinion, adopts a tone of reasoning, and then puts the question to the reader: “Yet surely if you kill someone … you forfeit your right to a polite turning away. You have blazed your way into the collective awareness. The rest of us have to think about you. We need to know what you mean, what should be done about you” (136). Here, by using the inclusive first person plural
“us” and “we” rather than the singular personal “I” to pose the problem, Garner implicitly invites the reader to contemplate the issue.

Garner indulges in a series of statements and questions which are by nature unanswerable, and she makes comparisons between values which she holds dear and the perceived values or non-values of those involved in the drama. Garner’s questions and the manner in which they are asked have the double, shifting effect of wooing one into deep thinking about one’s own values. On the blog site Sleepercatchertimes, one anonymous Canberra Times writer comments: “Mrs. Cinque makes you ashamed of the vapidity of modern society—its flaky moral relativism,” and about the student body involved in the drama, “Their indifference and disengagement are breathtaking. It all reminds one of Claire’s dark lines in Edward Albee’s A Delicate Balance: ‘We’re not a communal nation, dear; giving, but not sharing, outgoing, but not friendly’ ” (7).

Some way into the book, at Anu Singh’s preliminary sentencing Judge Crispin looks straight at Anu Singh and tells her, “‘In the next few years … you will have to come to terms with the fact that you killed the man you loved. You have caused immense pain…. If you find the moral courage … you may be able to rebuild from this wreckage, to repay the trust people have put in you’” (126). Garner then asks the reader this rhetorical question: “Trust? Who had put trust in her?” (126). Since it is not altogether clear from Garner’s writing whether she implies some empathy with Anu Singh or not, it seems likely that she intends the reader to share her ambivalence. In his interview, O’Brien asks Garner, “Did you feel any empathy for Anu Singh?” (2). Garner answers, “Yes, at the beginning I did, which was very disturbing. It’s disturbing at my age to look at a young woman’s destructive behaviour, and hear the echoes of it, of one’s own destructiveness in youth” (2). Garner was never in the same situation as Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao. The closest she can come to understanding their particular situation is by means of her imagination. In her interview with O’Brien, Garner announces, “I think empathy can only take you to a certain point” (2).

In Joe Cinque’s Consolation, Garner observes Anu Singh and listens to the evidence put forward, and re-evaluates her views. Garner ponders the issue: “Now, though, I wondered if one ought to be wary of allowing oneself to ‘understand’ so readily—to skate all the way to forgiveness. Doesn’t a killer have to carry any responsibility for her actions?” (52). By using the singular personal pronoun “I” in this passage, Garner indicates to the reader that these are her opinions. The reader should not trust Garner too readily. She begins with a reference to herself—“I wondered”—and closely follows this with “one ought.” Here, Garner’s use of “one” is ambiguous. Garner brings readers close and makes them privy to her thoughts, and then she suddenly distances readers from her personal self to point a finger at them as if they had been stupidly naïve in being, perhaps, only too willing to “understand so readily”—even if they were not. Garner invites one to think about a deep issue that one may have not wished to dwell upon
in the first place, and question and re-assess one’s own beliefs and values. Garner points out to the reader that there is a limit to one’s empathy, “Because when all is said and done, one brutal fact remains. Joe Cinque is dead” (52). This four word phrase is Garner’s litany. Cheney advises that the use of “litany” in a work of creative nonfiction is a “special technique” which “because of its vague resemblance to church litany, simply lists single words or short phrases that accumulate in the reader’s mind to create and leave an impression of a person, place, or thing” (175). Garner’s constant refrain makes it obvious that her empathy does not, in actuality, extend to self-centred women who wilfully inflict harm on others.

Garner, Maria Cinque, and finding a “place”

When Garner first goes to Canberra to research Joe Cinque’s murder her life is in turmoil and she lacks a sense of purpose, and she tells herself, “there’s nothing here for me” (21). On the way home she reads a newspaper article which “galvanises” her, and she returns to Canberra to attend the committal hearings because, she says, “the break-up of my marriage had left me humiliated and angry. I wanted to look at women who were accused of murder…. I needed to find out if they were any different to me” (25). In her review of Garner’s novel The Spare Room (which has its basis in autobiography) Moya Costello talks about Garner’s unique writing style and names Garner as one of Australia's great stylists: “Anger, regret, sorrow, sadness and incomprehension stalk the pages of The Spare Room. Death is not new to Garner as subject matter…. See, for example, 'Woman in a Green Mantle' and 'Tower Diary' in The Feel of Steel, where the anguish and inconsolable sadness displayed on the pages over the break-up of a marriage are akin to that of a death” (1-4). Legge suggests that when Garner wrote Joe Cinque’s Consolation she had a “melancholic sense of failure” at what she calls her “three crashes” in marriage, and she adds: “The boundaries of art and life blur in all Garner’s work…. Garner dominates the pages, driving narratives with her impatience, her anger, her thirst and her angst” (4). For most of Joe Cinque’s Consolation, Garner does not know who or what she is as a woman or a writer, and where her place is in the world.

Fairly early in the book, during a break in the committal hearing, Garner accidentally meets Maria Cinque for the first time and asks if Maria if would be prepared to speak with her if she wanted to write a book about her son. Garner writes, “She turned, examined me with dry attention, up and down. ‘Yes’ ” (39). It is at this point in the story that Garner gains a sense of having found a direction for her immediate future. Later in the book, Garner is invited to stay to dinner at the Cinques, and heads for the chair she had sat in all day while interviewing Maria, and Maria whispers, “ ‘Helen—sorry…. That’s where Joe always sit. Nino don’t like it if anyone sit there’ ” (86). Garner is aghast: “I looked at her in horror. For seven hours I had been sitting in Joe’s chair, ignorantly making his father suffer; and they had been too polite to tell me” (86).
Throughout *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Garner refers to her own suffering and acknowledges that it is not of the same magnitude as that of Maria Cinque, and she declares, “I didn’t want to lug my paralysis into their private lives” (285). Nevertheless, Garner empathises and aligns herself with Maria Cinque as suffering womanhood. In their paper on survivor discourse, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray alert both the speaker who has survived trauma and the writer who writes of such experiences, to the dangers of appearing to be less than reliable by using overly emotional speech when telling their true stories (285). In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner writes in a plain style, and she admires Maria’s ability to act with decorum and speak in a reasonably calm manner despite her terrible suffering, and she claims, “I longed to know her, but I was afraid I would not be strong enough” (195). In this, Garner implies that she herself becomes overly emotional about her personal suffering. In the context of Maria as bereaved, suffering motherhood, and in the wider context of denied and betrayed womanhood, the images of a poor murdered innocent young man and the suffering inflicted upon his equally innocent family, along with Garner’s suffering for the Cinques and for herself, are more likely to evoke the reader’s ethical, emotional and sympathetic responses and trust than if Garner had just pushed her own personal suffering forward for the reader’s consideration. By highlighting Maria Cinque as an idealised and deeply sorrowing figure, Garner takes the spotlight off her own emotional state by camouflaging it to a certain extent. By showing herself as a writer and a suffering woman who also suffers for the Cinques, Garner strengthens the picture of herself as a woman suffering for the senseless loss of promise, and for a woman’s betrayal at the hands of a self-centred other. Even though Garner’s creative empathy lies with Maria Cinque as a mother who suffers of the loss of her innocent son to murder, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* offers Helen Garner a means by which to air her personal grievances publically and achieve some form of atonement for herself.

Maria Cinque is a much loved wife and mother. She knows her place in the world as woman, and is in secure in that knowledge. Maria is everything Garner wishes she was, and feels she is not. Garner writes, “I was awe-struck by Maria Cinque’s composure” (131). In all their terrible loss and great suffering, Nino maintains his place “alongside the huge, elemental drama of his wife’s persona; but such power dwelt in her others shrivelled in her presence …” (131). Maria, writes Garner, “never grandstanded or behaved falsely; yet as their suffering and outrage intensified, there rose from the depths of her a tremendous, unassailable archetype: the mother. We recognised it. It answered to a need in us as well. Her outburst after the sentence was not a rupture of protocol” (131). Maria’s cry as a bereaved mother answers Garner’s need to cry out against her own suffering as a wronged and deserted wife. In our Western society it is socially acceptable for a bereaved parent to publicly cry out against the suffering of losing an innocent child to murder. It is somehow not socially acceptable for someone whose marriage has irretrievably broken down to make a public outcry against their suffering of the loss of
personal happiness. Nor would it be deemed as socially acceptable for Anu Singh to cry out against her trial and sentencing since by her act of cold-blooded murder she has shamed herself and her sex and forfeited her rights to be accepted by society. About Anu Singh, Garner writes, “She seemed to lack a language deep enough for the trouble she was in, a language fit for despair. With dread I recognised her. She was the figure of what a woman most fears in herself—the damaged infant, vain, frantic, destructive, out of control” (18). In this, Garner intimates to the reader that she herself is a woman who is hurting and as a result of her particular kind of hurt finds herself in conflict. On one hand she seems to believe that she has let herself down and brought shame upon herself by the failure of her third marriage, but does not have a language to express her despair. On the other hand it would seem that she is fearful of the vengeful force inside her and is afraid to voice her feelings of revenge. Garner and Anu Singh must each suffer in silence—always assuming that Anu Singh does suffer. This would seem to align Garner more closely with Anu Singh than Maria. But Garner does have her book as an outcry. Unlike Anu Singh, Garner has not offended against society, and can do her suffering in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* through witnessing the suffering of Joe Cinque’s mother. In this way, Garner finds a niche for herself in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* by placing herself into the story as at once an ever-present observer and the writer, and, so, as an essential part of the story. The inference that one could draw here is that Garner longs to be like Maria Cinque, fears she is more like Anu Singh, but has the identity of being a writer as consolation.

**Garner’s braiding techniques, framing, and mosaic structure**

Previously I have said that *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is three stories in one, and that they are braided through with discussions and queries about many issues. One could also say that the work is a narrative that consists of three sections which fall into two framing parts, which together inform the narrative as a whole. On one hand there is the ostensible framing narrative that is the central and unfolding story of the confusing events leading to Joe Cinque’s death and the subsequent unravelling of the trial of his murderers. Attached to that, there is the human fallout from the tragedy. On the other hand, underpinning all this, there is the covert narrative frame—Helen Garner’s own story, and her involvement in the book and the story as a whole—which is also carried by the more overt framing structure. In her discussion on the lyric essay Brenda Miller advises that the “braiding” technique in a lyric work of creative nonfiction brings together various different stories in the narrative (16). Miller points out that those forms which are “inherently lyric”—those that do “not necessarily follow a linear, narrative line” in every element or perspective—have been defined variously by many writers and thinkers as collage, montage, mosaic, and “been called disjunctive, paratactic, segmented, sectioned” (16). Miller adds that all these various defining terms are correct, and all recognise in a lyric work the “tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is
unknown rather than the already articulated known” (16). These comments could be applied to Garner’s immersion-research book.

At first, the reader of Joe Cinque’s Consolation does not altogether understand where Garner is heading, that she is searching for Joe Cinque in order to find a niche for herself and, so, create a sense of where she fits into the world and validate herself as a woman and a writer, and in this way combat the confusion and the devastation in the aftermath of The First Stone and the recent collapse of her third marriage. This story only unfolds and makes sense to the reader as Garner layers in the fragments tile by mosaic tile. That Joe Cinque’s Consolation favours a mosaic structure is further verified by the fragmented backwards and forwards movement of the narrative, and the jumping around of the murder trials. In the Department of Public Prosecutions in Canberra, Garner looks at police files and court transcripts: “I must have had a childish fantasy of the transcripts as a text of wonderful clarity and simplicity…. I thought it would answer the questions I was still too confused to formulate; and I hoped that somewhere in its pages I would find Joe Cinque. But it was a mess, full of fast forwards and flashbacks” (141). A few pages later, Garner writes: “The transcripts may not have offered me the simple chronology of events that I craved, but as I shifted back and forth between the aborted double trial and Singh’s solo trial, I found the differing versions were rich in extraordinary passages of dialogue that witnesses had recreated under the pressure of counsel’s questioning” (149). Each “witness” presents a different view of events. In Joe Cinque’s Consolation these types of fragmentation allow for moments of uncertainty or not knowing, a theme which runs throughout the work. In her discussion titled “Forging a Structure,” Laura Wexler, in speaking about the various types of structure used in creative nonfiction, argues that in a creative nonfiction work that combines a number of different stories or many levels that are braided together, one structural model “that could allow for multiplicity and conflict” and also “reflect the multiplicity and conflict that is at the heart of the content” is “informed subjectivity” (31). It could be suggested that in Joe Cinque’s Consolation, enhanced subjectivity is the only structural model that allows Garner to “reflect the multiplicity and uncertainty that is at the heart of the content” of Joe Cinque’s story. Garner’s use of a mosaic structure and novelistic techniques allows her to interweave and meld together these various layers and stories into a unified whole. In Garner’s book this contextualizing force enhances the ostensible story-line in the book.

Forché and Gerard maintain that when a writer “takes on the practical problems of research, along with the profound issue of which truth the writer can tell—there may always be a hole in the center of the story, the great unknowable fact—and the writer must make choices informed not only by aesthetics but by ethics in order to present the story in its integrity” (2). It could be said that in Garner’s book, the “great unknowable fact” which is the “hole in the centre” of the story is that which she wonders about, but to which she has no answers. It remains as it must—a mystery. Garner suggests that it is this unknowable factor in human
nature which is potentially capable of unleashing terrible and destructive forces upon others. Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao are examples of the terrible forces within this unknowable factor which is the innermost core of the work, the central tile in Garner’s mosaic structure, and the hidden message that supports the entire work.

**Garner’s “reality”**

In many of Garner’s works—*Monkey Grip, Postcards from Surfers, The Last days of Chez Nous*, for example—the overt story-line is one of loss or death in one form or another, presented to the reader as ordinary life. In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, the type of death and loss that Garner presents is extraordinary, and yet it is still presented in the wider picture of ordinary life. One example of this is where Garner visits the Cinques to interview them about their murdered son. Maria Cinque welcomes Garner, leads her into “a living room whose brick walls were hung with family photos and trophies,” settles her “on a velvet-covered sofa,” and then disappears into the kitchen to make them both a cup of espresso coffee (81-2). Garner writes that at noon Maria Cinque “wiped her eyes, got to feet” and, “with a smile asked me if I would like something to eat. At five o’clock, Mr. Cinque led me down the long orderly back yard and we stood without speaking before his rows of shivering lettuces” (85). This is a prime example of how Garner uses heightened imagery and extended metaphor to heighten the drama and the tension in her story. Partly because of the subject matter in the book, and partly because the “shivering lettuces” belong to Nino Cinque, the phrase “shivering lettuces” becomes a transferred epithet that creates an atmosphere of impending and imminent doom, and colours everything in the book that has gone before, and everything in the book that comes after with a sense of dread and horror. In this one sentence, Garner combines images of Nino’s very human suffering with images of the natural world by imbuing Nino’s lettuces with an element of anthropomorphism—they “shiver” in face of Nino’s great grief. Murder is against nature. As Nino Cinque points out, murder is the type of thing you only think you might read about in newspapers, and he tells Garner, “Every family suffer a little bit. Every family laugh … every family do things—but—never, never, never was I think anybody kill my son” (104). So, says Garner implicitly, we exist in a fog of complacency if we think that tragic death and enormous emotional loss is something that only happens to others, when, in reality, it is something that could happen to any of us in the course of our everyday lives. Garner crafts a story which fascinates on a macabre level, and thrusts it forward into the reader’s present, and thereby attempts to bring the reader to confront their own mortality.

**Garner’s writing**

In his discussion on how to write features stories for magazines and articles, Ricketson refers one or two journalists whose techniques are outstanding, and states that Garner has a particular
gift for noticing small details in the macabre to give her stories an extra twist (196-97). With Garner, meaning emerges from accumulated detail and imagery and extended metaphor. In a review of Garner’s writing style Costello writes that Garner’s novel *The Spare Room* “sustains a metaphor of death, whether it be a shattering wall mirror, dark gardens and drooping roses, the looming presence of a deadline (the requirement ‘to find something new’ and, presumably, fill a blank page), a dried-out pumpkin …” (2). This is also a writing technique that Garner uses in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. Garner uses the little things, the small details of everyday life, to highlight the bigger things—the things that matter, and the depths of human nature. For one example, in the part of the book where she sits in the offices of the Director of Public Prosecutions sifting through police files on the Cinque case, Garner tells the reader that on the third day she “came upon the crime scene photos” (140-2). The reader “looks” over Garner’s shoulder at the photos, and “sees” “a merry young man” full of life “standing in front of the Trevi fountain; he is grinning, gesturing dramatically with one hand: Look! It’s me! I’m in Rome!” (143). Another set of police photos shows the kitchen, left just as it was while Joe Cinque was slowly being murdered in an upstairs bedroom. This photo shows that there is nothing unusual or out of the ordinary here, it is merely an ordinary, lived in kitchen where there is a plate of food and a wine glass on the table, and a bowl of fresh, green Granny Smith apples on the kitchen bench, and Garner thinks: “it was jarring to see their intense, gleaming green, the fresh green of childhood—as if these people, with their poisoned ‘dinner parties’, their horrid dramas, could never have performed an act of cutting and peeling an apple” (143). These police photos were taken in an ordinary flat in an ordinary suburb of Canberra where two bright and seemingly ordinary law students throw a series of ordinary dinner parties for ordinary guests for the sole purpose of setting up an opportunity to murder poor, innocent Joe Cinque for no apparent reason at all. In its own way Garner’s book answers Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” which she describes in the title of her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—in the midst of ordinary life seemingly ordinary people do bad things to unsuspecting others and innocent people.

In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Garner continues to “show” the reader police photos of the crime scene. Through her clever use of explicit terms Garner builds a picture which allows the reader to “see” a young man “stretched out on his back … relaxed as a sunbaker. His body is healthy, smooth and strong. His uncircumcised penis lolls to one side. His arm lies loose against the carpet” next to “a mug half full of pale milky liquid” (143). In these passages, in a strange and macabre way, Garner’s description is at odds with the subject of the police photo in that her tone is almost caressing. In this way, and through her use of extended metaphor, Garner builds image upon image to create an increasingly chill atmosphere that permeates the book. Garner suddenly chops into this atmosphere by changing pace and style. Garner writes, “A bare left arm on the metal surface of a mortuary table its elbow crook showing the discoloured, swollen entry
mark of a needle. A bare right arm similarly punctured” (143-44). Here, it is almost as if she has suddenly stepped back from the body to coolly survey the scene with the objectivity of one about to conduct an autopsy. In his discussion on what sets some journalist apart, Ricketson finds that Garner’s writing, her descriptions, are brutal and make “you wince, but the point of such brutally unromantic description is to highlight the brutally unromantic nature” of the situation (196). Here, Ricketson is not in any way referring to Joe Cinque’s Consolation; rather he is talking about journalistic feature stories. Nevertheless, it could be said that in Joe Cinque’s Consolation the police photo scenes are “brutally unromantic descriptions” that serve to “highlight the brutally unromantic nature” of the situation. In the book, Garner “shows” the last police photo she is holding. This is a “close-up” which has been “taken directly from above, as if the photographer were straddled directly above” Joe Cinque—the young man’s face is youthful, and its expression reveals the “tenderness” of his nature, but there is “a thin trickle of black muck running from one corner of the gently closed mouth and disappearing under his left earlobe into the dark” (144). Garner tells the reader, “Yes, it is the young traveller from the Trevi fountain,” and she states, “This is Joe Cinque. Joe Cinque is dead” (144). These are like the images in Garner’s feature stories which Ricketson suggests, “resonate in the reader’s mind long after they have finished the piece” (197).

What Garner actually does in these passages, as she does throughout Joe Cinque’s Consolation, is create a series of sequences which vary in content and length but all slowly rise to emotive peaks. This method allows Garner to present the reader with the various issues and questions which arise from the drama surrounding Joe Cinque’s murder and the suffering and grief portrayed in the work. Garner further raises the tension and the horror in the narrative by panning quickly back and forth between the tragedy and the drama and ordinary life. When the tension and the horror in the narrative reaches a greatly elevated height, Garner suddenly faces the reader with a question that more often than not is rhetorical even though Garner masks it by embedding it in her own ponderings, or disguises it by implicitly claiming not to understand. Garner sometimes varies or reverses the order of this structuring by first claiming not to understand, then building the emotion and tension in the narrative, before finishing with a philosophical statement to provoke the reader into contemplation of the issue. Quite frequently, after she has asked a thought-provoking question Garner immediately returns to her narrative and places the human element in the story into the seemingly ordinary world, and seeming comparative peace. For example, Garner describes herself sitting at a desk in the Department of Public Prosecution looking at the court transcripts (140-1). As she scans these transcripts, she moves swiftly along through the “muddled” confusion of “fast forwards and flashbacks” and the interrupted speech of “panicky” witnesses, and then she pauses briefly to ask: “And what was a ‘voir dire’? A ‘Basha inquiry’? How the hell did one read this stuff?” (141). At this point in the narrative Garner suddenly adopts a fly-on-the-wall-technique and the transcripts come alive.
Garner recreates the transcripts as scenes which she presents as action being played out before her eyes: “the prosecutors strode in and out of their offices, calling to each other cheerfully, making efficient phone calls, donning and doffing robes and wigs” (141). Along with Garner, the reader watches the action in the courtroom and listens in to the conversations (141-42). Garner abruptly brings the reader back to her presence in the Department’s office by saying she kept “nodding off over the folders,” and she then abandons her perusal of the transcripts by saying: “I went outside for a sandwich and a walk in the cold air” (142). Garner finishes the passage on a philosophical note which thrusts the responsibility onto the reader to ponder the questions she has raised and the issues that she has proposed. She writes that as she walked past a shop window on her way to buy a sandwich “an insignia on the glass door caught” her “eye”; it was “a fighting cock armed with spurs, and underneath it, elegantly lettered in a curve, the legend, Every knot was once a straight rope” (142). In a peculiar way, even though this passage immediately follows the passage where Garner looks at the police photos of poor, murdered Joe Cinque, it foreshadows the earlier passage to begin a new run of sequences and heightened images which then swiftly rise to yet another emotive peak.

**Garner’s canvas and her symbols**

In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner offsets the psychological and the drama in the human state against the life and “noise” in nature, and so places the tragedies in everyday life in context within the natural world and man-made world in which we all live. Garner uses symbols as recurring motifs that act as linking devices which tie the themes in the narrative together. For instance, the force of words in “Joe Cinque is dead” bursts upon the page as a terminating phrase. Garner’s mantra doubles as a recurring motif of the long-lasting effects of human tragedy such as murder. In contrast to the knell of Garner’s mantra, Garner’s clouds are less frequently used recurring motifs that double as subtle symbols. Rather than natural phenomena that float quietly above the world, clouds are symbols for disquiet and growing horror. At various places throughout the narrative Garner points the reader’s attention to the sky above Canberra. At one time Garner turns the reader’s attention to “the west” to contemplate “a pure sky with one tiny orange cloud floating in it” and, then she suddenly hits the reader with this question: “Does a person get any sleep at all, on the night before her acts are to be judged?” (67).

Earlier in the narrative Garner uses her cloud motif to instil a sense of foreboding into the narrative. Returning to Canberra for further sessions in Anu Singh’s murder trial, Garner steps out of the plane into the dusk and immediately notices that “several big, grey-blue arrowheads of cloud lay parallel with the low hills” (42). Garner writes: “Later, remembering the beauty of those clouds, I would pick up the significance of ‘arrowheads’. But as I took the few steps between building and plane … I suddenly understood that Anu Singh would be
incarcerated. Her life was ruined” (42). In a different scene, after Madhavi Rao is acquitted, Garner thinks, “Her life goes on. Who was I to begrudge her this?” (251). Garner then walks outside the courthouse to sit “on a bench under the elm tree,” and she tells the reader that “The sky was seeded, as far as the horizon and beyond, with tiny, high, white puffs of cloud” (251). At first it seems that, because Garner paints the sky light with fluffy little puffs of white cloud, Garner is a little swayed towards Madhavi Rao. This illusion is quickly dispelled when Garner adds: “I felt sick, miserable, morally at sea. I wished I could stay out there forever, and heal myself by breathing in the summer air. But I was in this story now, and I would have to stay in it till the end” (251). Garner’s cloud imagery is not a symbol of hope or lightening of the spirit.

Garner also uses magpies as recurring motifs that double as symbols. Unlike her cloud symbols, they serve a dual purpose. On one hand they are symbols of hope and promise and symbolise the serenity in nature, and on the other hand they are symbols of deep disquiet. Garner’s narrative magpies are patently oblivious to the human drama that plays out in the world. Approximately half-way through her story, Garner writes, “The July nights in Canberra gasped with blue cold; mornings were stiff with frost. Before dawn each day, right outside my window where I was staying … a magpie let loose a bubbling burst of song” (152). In Garner’s book the hope and the promise of a new a day and new life in a magpie’s song is short-lived. Garner writes that after a particularly gruelling day in court she “walked back along Ainslie Avenue to her tiny hotel room, crept under the doona, and went to sleep,” and she adds: “When I woke, night had fallen. I opened the window. The air outside was cold. The magpies had stopped singing” (182). Serenity and hope, in Garner’s story, exist in the promise of nature and the “magpie’s song” which, like human life, when viewed in the scheme of things, exists only briefly. Garner shows the reader a picture of the futility and brevity of human life as played out against the timelessness of nature. This theme is that of John Keats in his “Ode to a Nightingale”:

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Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.
While thou art pouring forth they soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. (VI: 51-9)
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In her book Garner brings all the paraphernalia that goes with the business of human living into perspective by placing it in the wider canvas. Life goes on above and beyond the human drama and the tension of courtrooms. For example, in one scene, the court breaks for lunch and Garner confides to the reader, “to clear my head, I went for a walk in the autumn sunshine across Garema Place…. Men and women who work in government departments stride across this square with identity tags swinging…. Junkies slouch whining in phone booths. Magpies perch, warbling their absent-minded melodies, on the chair-backs of outdoor cafes” (48). Garner then writes: “As I walked I brooded crankily on the business of the defence psychiatrists” (49). This passage presents a delicate balance of informative and suggestive description, where the suggestive takes precedence over the informative. In this way Garner paints a picture of the peculiar balance that exists in everyday life even in episodes where the situation one finds oneself in is by its very nature traumatic and stressful. Garner suddenly breaks into this picture to bowl a set of rhetorical questions at the reader in fast succession, and she slides her doubts about her understanding—or lack thereof—in between the questions as if in natural conversation: “How can an expert witness hired by the family of the accused be considered disinterested? This couldn’t be right. I must have misunderstood. Or was this a dumb question?” (49). In this way, Garner brings her readers into the scene only to spring them with sharp questions. Having asked her questions, Garner immediately slips back to her story to once again create a fresh sense of grief and suffering and embed it in her picture of the natural world. Garner writes: “As I returned across the thick, dark-green grass … I saw Mr. and Mrs. Cinque seated quietly together … under a leafy tree. They seemed composed and civilised, sitting outdoors to take the air and to eat slowly a picnic lunch they had brought with them, while everyone else rushed” around finding something to eat (49). Garner’s descriptions of Canberra are controlled, nicely paced, and understated. This technique heightens the tension and emotional import in the passages; when the many different images of the courtroom scenes and the Cinque’s presence are played back against the various images of nature and the natural world all these images resonate against each other. In this way, Garner engages the reader on different levels.

Consolation
Garner writes that some time after the trial she visited Judge Crispin who had presided at the murder trials. Her intent was to interview him for her book, and ask why he did not punish Madhavi Rao, and why he gave Anu Singh a comparatively light sentence for her act of murder. Judge Crispin explains the constraints of legislation to Garner, and Garner closes her interview in the book by saying to the reader: “Sitting there at the coffee table with this tired, serious, decent man, I felt the self-righteous anger seeping out of me. There was nowhere for me to go with it. All that remained was sorrow, and loss” (317). Garner’s words bring one to
acknowledge that sometimes terrible things happen in life for which there is no real answer and so no real solution.

Throughout the book Garner feels distressed that because she did not know Joe Cinque she cannot “find” him, cannot capture a picture of him and, so, feels unable to write a book about him (275). It is not until the final pages of the book, when she is watching a video of Joe Cinque with Maria that Garner feels she has “found” him at last (326). Garner only “finds” Joe Cinque with the aid of a “video camera,” and Joe can only be “seen” while the video is playing. In the final line of the book, Garner sits on Joe’s parents’ couch together with Maria and re-watches the video, and Garner tells the reader, “we gazed in silence on her undefended son” (328). In the book, Garner never does heal her damaged womanhood. The only form of consolation Garner can find for herself is through sitting on the Cinque’s couch alongside Maria and finding a sense of Joe by watching the video of him. It is these factors together with her use of imagination that enable her to at long last write her book about how she wrote a book on Joe Cinque’s passing and, by implication, overcome her fear of the effects of the publication of The First Stone. In this way Garner finds a niche for herself in writing, and a form of validation for herself as a woman and a writer, and the assurance and consolation that she does indeed exist in the world. The only justice that exists for Joe Cinque is that which Garner creates by means of her imagination, and through her use of creative empathy in Joe Cinque’s Consolation. Justice for Joe Cinque exists as reader empathy parallel to Garner’s creative empathy. The only consolation in Joe Cinque’s Consolation is in the writer’s skills and the reader’s consciousness. In her interview with O’Brien, Garner said “there are some wounds that can never be healed” (4). What Garner does through Joe Cinque’s Consolation is open to the reader’s contemplation those intangible “truths” of human nature, and which, even though they somehow form a part of our instinctive knowledge, are too intense and too disturbing to contemplate other than briefly.
PART 1

V

Conclusion

The docu-memoir as a form of life-writing inevitably brings a number of problems for the aspiring writer. One of those problems is how to recreate someone else’s raw experience in such a way that the subject speaks for her or himself in telling their story and expressing their feelings to the reader, whilst yet maintaining the vision of a mature author on the part of the writer. The underlying problem is that because the work is nonfiction, the writer has an ethical duty to reveal the subjects to the reader as ordinary men or women, warts and all, so to speak, without altering the individual subject’s personal truths, insofar as they can be ascertained, and without alienating the subject, and without crossing into fiction. Of course, the creative non-fiction writer can employ some techniques of fiction, but to do so ethically the writer must first warn the reader in some way that they are about to cross, or have crossed, into fictional territory. Having said this, because creative nonfiction writing and creative empathy involve the use of the writer’s power of imagination, the crafting of a docu-memoir demands some degree of fictionalisation. In a creative nonfiction work it would not be viable or aesthetically pleasing to include everything that has been said in interviews and discussions that have been tape-recorded over many hours and days. The creation of a work that best conveys the subject’s and the writer’s message to the reader, in a way that permits the reader to draw on their own experience of life and learn something new or broaden their understanding, involves the writer making selections from the transcript material, and either editing or moving that material around into a readable narrative of creative nonfiction. The basic problem for the intending writer is how to stay within the ethical boundaries for nonfiction writers when attempting to recreate the raw experience of others who have led unusual lives, as told directly by the informants to the writer-researcher in audio-taped interviews and discussions intended by the writer solely as resource material for a literary nonfiction production. There are urgent ethical issues in making public distressing or unusual episodes from the subjects' lives, and also in relation to readers: in a fictionalised documentary, how does the writer make clear where the boundary lies between fiction and fact, and between verbatim and edited testimony? There are also literary questions: how much the researcher should appear as her- or him-self in the narrative, and how to bring the subjects into vivid, three-dimensional life for readers. Parker’s Lighthouse, Stewart’s Lifting the Latch and Ramlin Rose, and Garner’s Joe Cinque’s Consolation, are each, in their different ways, revealing about these difficult fault-lines in the docu-memoir.

All Parker’s books are docu-memoirs that deal with persons and communities who are marginalised and disadvantaged in some way. Lighthouse is one example of how Parker seeks
to expose the psychology of such communities to the reader. He uses his art to show what life is like for the people who live in that isolated community, and he tries to strip away the mystery in order to take the reader as close as possible, to examine philosophical issues and questions such as: who are these people, why are these people here, how does this work affect their lives, and are they really any different to ourselves? In his writing, Parker takes a sympathetically objective approach. Parker crafts *Lighthouse* entirely on extended interview material from which he has edited out most of his interview questions. The interview questions that remain are implied in the subjects’ conversations rather than overtly stated by Parker who, for most of the work, does not appear “physically” on the page other than as an obliquely implied “visiting” presence, or as a narratorial framing presence that is inferred by the reader.

Parker was a man of strong principles. In accordance with his personal ethics, at the beginning of every project he made a personal promise to his informants, on tape, that he would protect their confidentiality and their privacy, and openly admits to destroying the tapes and the transcripts of his interviews on completion of a project in order to honour those promises. Parker’s acts of destruction leaves nothing to check his works against for authenticity and credibility. *Lighthouse*, a seemingly straightforward, honest work, presents the reader with a dilemma in that it is written on the basis of the personal ethics of an author who at once attempts to open a closed community to public view, and protect his informants’ privacy. All Parker’s works are built on this dichotomy which, within his books, creates a paradox and an uneasy unity which is intrinsic to each of his works. Throughout the work, because *Lighthouse* is a book written by Parker, and because the reader is encouraged by the text to believe that Parker is in actuality the implied narrator-researcher-writer in the work, and the invited visitor-interviewer-researcher-writer to the lighthouse community, the reader is led to believe that what they are reading is, in fact, accurate in every detail. At the end of the work in the acknowledgements, after the narrative is finished, Parker tells the reader that, because of his promises to his informants to protect their privacy, the lighthouses in *Lighthouse* are composites of the actual. By implication, Parker also tells the reader that the conversations of the informants, and by inference the informants themselves, are composites of the real. These sudden revelations highlight the elemental flaws within the narrative.

Parker uses composites in such a way that they somewhat fictionalise a work that is supposedly nonfiction. His methods create fuzzy shifts between what is real and what is not real. He crosses in and out of fiction and nonfiction and he does not indicate to the reader when he is crossing between. By being adamant that he adhere strictly to his own principles and ethics, Parker fictionalises his work of nonfiction to the point where he possibly strays beyond the bounds of ethics for nonfiction writers. In his acknowledgements he writes that he intends the reader to gain a sense of what it is like to live as a member of the marginalised and isolated lighthouse community, and justifies this by saying he hopes to convey to the reader the essence
of the real. Parker’s art exists in creating composite characters that appear to speak to the reader from their hearts, and in creating composite lighthouses and communities that are based on the real and indistinguishable from the real to create a literary landscape that lives on in the reader’s imagination. What Parker inadvertently succeeds in doing is raising important ethical questions in relation to turning the raw experience of others into literary nonfiction productions, but at the same time he succeeds in giving the reader a sense of the problems inherent in isolated and marginalised communities, and a sense of the problems the individuals in that community face daily as a direct result of belonging to that community. For the aspiring writer of docu-memoir, to fully adopt Parker’s approach and methods, for all their attractions, could result in a work that is questionable ethically. Nevertheless, his works also demonstrate a new way of writing a life.

Other than to discuss her work in her prefaces and acknowledgements and forewords at the beginning of her books, Stewart is not obviously or implicitly present in her works. Nor do any of her works contain her interview questions. Each of her works is structured as the memoir of a single narrator. Stewart and her narrators are not at all concerned with the philosophical or the psychological as such. Stewart’s aim in writing is to reclaim for the reader lost worlds that are past and all but forgotten other than in the memories of a few aged persons. Stewart regards all her subjects as close personal friends. In her work Stewart takes a sympathetically subjective approach and gives the reader a somewhat romanticised view of life in her narrators’ past worlds. She paints empathetic pictures of her aged subjects, and gentle portraits of the now lost eras and settings in which her aged subjects once lived and were at one with, and which they knew intimately. Because she made her subjects into close life-long friends both during and after the interview process, Stewart’s sentimental subjectivity may have prevented her from fully seeing and so portraying her aged subjects as ordinary men and women. In *Lifting the Latch* Old Mont is not a rounded and full picture of the old man; he is a romanticised notion of rural labour. Likewise, even though the reader of *Ramlin Rose* is aware that what they are reading is a creative work of nonfiction presented as a novel, because Rose Ramlin is a composite boatwoman based on the real, Rose Ramlin is sacrificed as a believable character for Stewart’s romantic sentimentality. This raises questions about whether or not Stewart’s close personal friendships with her subjects affected her writing adversely and prevented her from taking a sympathetically objective perspective to her writing, and which could possibly have benefited her writing in some way. One wonders if displaced feelings of loyalty to her subjects prevented Stewart from probing them deeply for their innermost thoughts and feelings. Probing her subjects deeply for information of this kind may have provided Stewart with the means to create for her readers a more accurate picture of her characters and their worlds though some would argue that fictionalisation begins the moment a writer prepares to “see” below the surface of her or his subjects.
Even though Stewart is relatively limited as a writer of docu-memoir, she stays within the ethical boundaries of creative nonfiction. Even before beginning the story the reader is fully aware of what they are about to read because Stewart notifies her readers about her practices in the prefaces, acknowledgements, and forewords to her works by telling them exactly what she is doing in writing the work and why. The question of ethics therefore does not generally arise with the works of Stewart. Nevertheless, compared to Parker’s works, Stewart’s work lacks fire and depth. Stewart’s docu-memoirs may not challenge the reader’s intellect in the same way as do Parker’s works, but what she does in *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* is present to the reader two beautifully balanced and melded works of docu-memoir. The apparent linearity of the story-line in each of these two docu-memos is deceptive. In both these works there is antithesis between the beginning and the end, but the end of the story turns back and meets up with the beginning and forms a circular movement that symbolises the life cycle and organic change. The circular structures of the memoir component in *Ramlin Rose* and *Lifting the Latch* also encapsulates Rose Ramlin’s and old Mont Abbot’s stories about the worlds in which they once lived but which no longer exist in actuality. By employing this technique Stewart is able to present these past worlds to the reader as recaptured time, as it were. In Stewart’s works this circular structure is also a distancing technique. Stewart shows the reader that even though one cannot actually know a world which one has never experienced and which is long past, one can see what that world was like through her narrators’ conversations. She instils her reader with an understanding of Old Mont’s and Ramlin Rose’s old worlds, and she distances those worlds from the present and from the reader by placing those worlds in the past through her subjects’ memories. Stewart’s techniques show that as an author she is in control of the situation. In *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose* Stewart preserves something of the experience of ordinary people by giving her readers a sense of a way of life that has been lost. Stewart’s works, *Lifting the Latch* and *Ramlin Rose*, model a treasure trove of techniques and methods that could be added to the aspiring docu-memoirist’s toolbox, and they also demonstrate to the aspiring writer how to create a beautifully balanced work of docu-memoir.

Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is a creative nonfiction work that takes a true-life crime as its ostensible storyline. It is a highly emotive and disturbing work about tragedy and loss and unresolved suffering. It is also an outlet for and an outpouring of grief, and a search for understanding and a striving for some form of consolation. Garner brings together many issues suggested by the subject matter of Joe Cinque’s death by murder at the hands of his fiancée Anu Singh. It is also a book about Garner’s difficulties in trying to write a book about Joe Cinque. The book explores philosophical issues but uses a subjective voice, literary prose, and some techniques of the novelist. *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is not a docu-memoir but a related work. It is not a creative recreation of the audio-recorded oral accounts of others about their personal experiences as told to the writer, rather a work of saturation reporting and immersion research.
With Garner’s book the question of the existence or non-existence of the interview tapes for reasons of checking the creative work for authenticity does not arise. Partly this is because the crime of Joe Cinque’s murder was well documented in court reports and newspapers and police files at the time of the murder trials, and partly it is because Garner uses an immersion research technique, and partly it is because she does not include verbatim or edited transcript material within the text. She implicitly uses some material from her audio-taped conversations with some of the people who lived the experience, and obliquely refers to the use of those tapes and her transcripts by weaving it into her story about trying to find Joe Cinque in order to write a book about him. As well, Garner reveals in the text that for material for her book, she gleans information from her less formal meetings and discussions with Joe Cinque’s parents and friends and some others, and from researching police files, pre-published documentary material, newspaper columns, court transcripts and archival and other researched data. Garner admits that her data gathering, her personal knowledge, and so her resolution, is incomplete because she is prevented from talking with the two women accused of murdering Joe Cinque. It is this factor which determines Garner’s subjective approach and her use of an immersion research technique and a mosaic structure in the book. Garner neatly sidesteps accusations of being unethical. Everything that happens or is said is seen and heard though the screen of Garner’s own experiences, and through the aperture of her own perspective. The question of whether *Joe Cinque Consolation* is a balanced work does not arise since the work is interwoven or braided through with many other levels, at the base of which Garner can be seen as an autobiographical writer. Within the work, as she puts each mosaic tile in place and the story unfolds, and as a natural part of her narrative, Garner reveals to the reader that she uses her own and others’ observations, and her own imagination, to fill in that which she does not know, and she uses rhetorical statements and questions to draw the reader in and align herself with the reader and make the reader a part of her story. She uses techniques of fiction in creating a work of nonfiction as immersion journalism and she flags the reader about what is fiction and what is not every step of the way in the text.

Through her immersion techniques and rhetorical questions and ponderings, Garner makes it clear in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* that the darkness that exists in the nature of Joe’s murderers potentially exists in her and all of us as human beings, and that potentially her own personal story and the Cinques’ story of loss is also essentially the story of us all as people. By writing her own sense of loss and sadness and self-doubts into the Cinques’ story, and by viewing and showing the reader the whole through the lens of her own subjectivity, Garner reveals how the human tragedy of loss affected her personally, and shows that she understands the situation as part of the human condition. Garner uses motifs and transferred epithets to create atmospheres of impending doom in line with the stories and the subjects in her book. Garner’s techniques force the reader to focus on the tragedy of the loss of life and youth and the
long-lasting effects that has on those left behind whilst simultaneously bringing the reader face to face with the darkness of human nature. In *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner brings the reader to cogitate those intangible “truths” of human nature which, even though they somehow form a part of our instinctive knowledge, are too intense and too disturbing to contemplate other than briefly. *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* serves as a model to the aspiring writer of docu-memoir in that it is creative nonfiction writing that demonstrates how the writer can combine documented facts with elements of memoir and the writer’s use of imagination and rhetorical questioning to engage and involve the reader, and model creative empathy.

Parker, Stewart, and Garner each take the raw experience of others who have had unusual lives as the focal point in the writing. They each invite their reader’s empathetic involvement and sympathetic response by building upon the pathos and the emotional, ethical, and mimetic content in their narratives. They each bring their informants and their stories to life on the page for the reader, and they each connect to one’s own actuality in some way. As well, they each bring their subjects and their stories to some form of resolution or conclusion or understanding, and at the same time give their subjects a resonating literary voice that conveys the informant’s and the writer’s message to the reader. As models for writing, these works create awareness in the aspiring writer that it is the duty of the writer of creative nonfiction as docu-memoir to bring to the reader a true picture of the subject, and a literary experience which is honest to the experience and understanding of the subject, but which is also enjoyable and moving because it is vividly realised and convincing. This is a dilemma. In creative nonfiction writing truthfulness is essential, but also impossible. Human nature is such that each and every person is an individual mixture of immeasurable depths. In a work of docu-memoir it would not be wise or admirable or aesthetically pleasing to include everything one perceives in a subject. Nor is it possible, or feasible, to include everything a subject has said during the auto-taped interview sessions. To do any of these things could detract from the work as nonfiction and, possibly, upset or even harm the subject who, after all, has trusted the writer with their story. There is also a chance that too much truthfulness may bore or offend the reader in some way. This would seem to imply that there is something artificial about writing—even creative nonfiction. The message here is that it is the duty of the writer to be honest with the reader and true to the subject and their experience and their individual “truths,” but mindful that they are dealing with living people (the subjects) who, in telling their stories, are laying themselves open to public view, and to use creative empathy and sensitivity when writing about the raw experience of others in literary nonfiction productions.

So what is the importance of docu-memoir? The docu-memoir gives the subject a safe medium through which to speak for themselves and connect to the reader in some way. By seeing their stories in text, in a language of their own making, the subjects can see their experience outside themselves and possibly gain understanding. As well, they share their
personal story with the reader, and are no longer alone. In one way, they become writers and
readers of their own life stories and gain a literary “voice” in the public arena. Literary narrative
gives distance between the subjects’ personal selves and the reader, and this allows the reader
insights into the experience. In this way, the subjects’ stories go beyond the purely personal to
testimony that highlights social issues. The ultimate role of the docu-memoir is to bring the
experience of ordinary people into the sphere of literature, making the everyday memorable and
remarkable so that readers can gain insights into the experience of others, and in this way learn
something that is new to them, or broaden their knowledge of that which is already known,
whilst at the same time gaining enjoyment from a new and different type of literary landscape
which they can enter. Clearly, the writing of a docu-memoir is a daunting task, and one which
brings with it huge responsibilities for the aspiring writer.
PART II

I

The first-time docu-memoir

Introduction

As part of my research project I am writing a docu-memoir. My focus is the group of marginalised people now known as Forgotten Australians. In undertaking this project, through a literary work aimed at the general reader, I wish to expose a slice of Australian history that was either little known or not known about previously, and show how the social attitudes and traditions and the cultural and historical influences of mid-twentieth century Australia affected these people as disadvantaged and unwanted children. My primary aim in writing is similar to that of Parker. I want to show the reader lives about which little is known, to help dispel the mystery or confusion that may have surrounded this group of people in the reader’s mind. My hope is that this will allow the reader new insights into the Forgotten Australians’ experience as children and as care leavers, and, that this will in turn help promote new or increased understanding of others. My aim is also to create a work that may help those who are Forgotten Australians achieve some deeper understanding of their experiences and the effects those experiences may have had on their lives by seeing their experience in print, and so gain distance that might assist them to achieve a sense of perspective of their past experience.

Smith and Watson Smith describe the fifty-two genres of life-writing as adopted by the International Auto/Biography Association, and link four of these genres, memoir, survivor narrative, trauma narrative, and witnessing to narratives of damaging childhoods (198). Smith and Watson describe memoir as narrative in which the writer records personal memories that “historically situates the subject in a social environment” (198). They describe trauma narrative as writing in which the narrator attempts to make sense of personal traumatic experiences, and witnessing as life-writing which gives testimony as “an act addressed to another … getting beyond the repetition of trauma to a more humane ethically informed future” (206-207). Smith and Watson also say that life-writing and testimonials can illuminate history at personal and affective levels and that in survivor narratives the victims are remade by “telling their stories in ways that move beyond a concentration of personal feelings to testimony that critiques larger cultural forces” (207). This happens because, as Rosamund Dalziell rightly points out, “when the process of confronting shame and loss and of reviewing a life is represented in a text intended for the gaze of a benign reader, the autobiographer’s narrating self is no longer isolated, having aligned him/herself with the other in regarding the shame and abandoned narrating self” (261).
My goal is to create a literary landscape which the general reader can enter, and a literary work that is enjoyable and informative to that reader. I wish to expose the psychology of the institutionalised and out-of-home child care community in mid-twentieth century Australia to show how this type of marginalisation affected the lives of the children who lived in that community. My goal is to create a work through which the Forgotten Australians can speak for themselves and voice their thoughts and feelings, and tell the reader about their childhood experience and how they see that experience may have affected their adult lives and the lives of others around them. My goal is to show that this experience has had a profound effect on our society today. The 2004 Senate Inquiry Report into the maltreatment of children in care in Australia advises: “It is not just the impact that tragic childhood experiences have had for the care leavers. Their children and families have also felt the impact, which can then flow through to future generations” (xv).

I want to take the reader close to my subjects to ask: Who were these children? Why were they there? What does it feel like to be them? What effects have their childhood experiences had on their later lives, and on the lives of others around them? What does it mean to be a Forgotten Australian?

**Modelling See Saw Margery Daw**

As models for my first-time docu-memoir and to see things to do and not to do when crafting my work, and for ways in which to make my docu-memoir more appealing to the reader, I used Parker’s docu-memoirs, mainly *Lighthouse*, as well as Stewart’s three docu-memoirs, *Lifting the Latch*, *Ramlin Rose*, and *Country Kate*, and Garner’s immersion work of creative nonfiction, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. I took what I wanted from these three writers, and decided to evolve the form and write my docu-memoir in my own way. The following points are things I learnt from studying these three authors, and this is what I took away for my own use when crafting:

- Inform the readers upfront in the Preface by letting them know exactly what they are reading, and by outlining one’s methods, and purposes and aims in writing.
- Stay within the boundaries of ethics for nonfiction writers, and maintain an ethical position by ensuring safe storage of the audio-taped interviews.
- Indicate where the boundaries lie between fact and more creative writing, and between verbatim and edited testimony, but be subtle.
- Make the subjects in the work appear and walk and talk and act as real people, and place them in their own surroundings.
- Dwell on the metaphorical and philosophical in the words of people, and use the transcript material in such a way that lets the subjects talk for themselves to show the various subjects’ thoughts and feelings.
• Use rhetoric and various techniques and literary devices to play on the reader’s emotional and sympathetic and ethical responses and draw the reader into the literary landscape.

• Maintain a sympathetic but objective and non-judgemental stance in the interview situation and also in the writing of the work even if including oneself in the work, or writing from a subjective viewpoint as does Garner for instance. By writing herself into her book in the way that she does, Garner shows you that when you are writing you can be yourself. That is, in a work of creative nonfiction, and so in docu-memoir, the writer-narrator can appear as her- or him-self.

• Treat the subjects and their stories with sensitivity but be aware of the ethical dangers inherent in misrepresentation. In writing and presenting another’s life, one can mean well, but can do harm to both the subject and the reader and one’s credibility as a writer if one misrepresents the subject or the situation.

The process, the approach, and the difficulties in getting started

Before I could begin my PhD project I needed two different sets of approval. Firstly, because it is a nonfiction work about living people, my project required ethics approval by the University of Newcastle Ethics Committee. Secondly, the project required the approval, and written consent, of the potential participants whose stories would be told to me by themselves in a series of tape-recorded discussions intended solely as resource material for my literary nonfiction production. As part of the ethics application, I was required to state the number of potential participants, the type of information I would require from them for my work, and my purposes in carrying out the research—how I intended to use the material, and if that was ethical. Apart from writing the work as a part of my PhD project, my intention was always to create a stand-alone work for commercial publication.

When considering potential participants for my project, I made a careful selection from the nine Forgotten Australians who had previously asked that I write their stories. I chose the five people who wished to tell their stories to inform the general public in the interests of social history and social justice and civil rights. However, of the five chosen, one left the country before signing the consent form, and moved overseas to live, and did not leave a forwarding address. Four of the potential participants were not pursued for various reasons relating to an inability to give informed consent in one case, and to expressing agendas unrelated to the research project in others. Two subjects I did include in my work were not Forgotten Australians. One of these subjects, Bev Osborne, is the recently discovered sister of Geoff Steele who is a Forgotten Australian; neither knew of the other’s existence until late in middle life. Bev has been included in the work to show what it is like to be the sibling of a Forgotten Australian. Mick Riley is the other subject in the work who is not a Forgotten Australian. Mick
is included in the work because he is a care-leaver—as a child, he was incarcerated in an orphanage in England—and to show that, despite the geographical distance between Australia and England, Children’s Homes in England were virtually no different to those in Australia, and the children’s experiences were much the same in both countries.

My aim in writing was to recreate these people’s stories in such a way that would allow the participants to speak for themselves and so gain a literary voice that would help dispel misconception and bring about understanding for themselves and others. When making my selection I eliminated any person who indicated they wanted to tell their story out of revenge and sought to harm others either personally or politically, or who wanted to dictate how I should write, or expected payment in return for their stories. In this last, I took a lesson from Parker. Smith maintains that Parker “needed to convince the informant … that he was coming to meet them on absolutely equal terms, in a spirit of openness with no preconceived ideas, and not judging him or her in any way. The moment that … money became involved that was undermined” (245).

After I finished selecting I was left with only seven people in total, and that total included myself, and, in order to give as rounded a picture as possible, I decided that five of these potential participants would be asked to tell their personal stories as care leavers, and that five also included Me), and two would be asked to tell their stories as the co-founders of Australia’s only national advocacy group and support network for care leavers. The Ethics Committee required that I write Participant Information Statements and Consent Forms tailored to my potential participants. I wrote one lot of forms for the participants who would tell their stories as care leavers, and a different lot of papers for those care leavers who would speak as the co-founders of the national support network. The Ethics process was difficult and protracted. It seems that I had presented them with a problem they had never before encountered. It was asked how it would be possible for me as a Forgotten Australian to write the stories of other Forgotten Australians. Being a Forgotten Australian myself, would I be too emotionally involved? Would this process cause the subjects ongoing emotional upsets and flashbacks, and result in a new type of trauma that was permanently damaging? Would I become traumatised by the process? Eventually, I was granted Ethics Approval for my project. During the interview process, each of the participants freely said on tape that they were only speaking with me because I was a PhD candidate at the university and also a Forgotten Australian who had been through similar experiences to their own. They said they felt that I would understand them and their position, and could be entrusted with their stories. They also said that had I not been one of them they would not have considered talking to me, or on the level they did. Given that I had been through similar experiences as a child, and given that there is ample anecdotal and some other archival and hard-copy evidence provided by the Forgotten Australians, and also ample documented evidence provided by Joanna Penglase in her book and in the Senate Inquiry’s
findings into out of home and institutionalised child care in twentieth century Australia, I had no difficulties in believing what my subjects had to say about their experiences and how they see it may have affected their lives. Even so, when interviewing my subjects I probed them deeply, and later when I was crafting the creative work I carried out extensive research and checked (as far as possible) historical information given by my subjects in their conversations. In his work on the research interview, Bill Gillham expatiates on “the richness of interview material and the insight that it can provide into human lives,” and he ends his discussion with a cautionary note on the limits of interview data: “The relationship between beliefs, opinions, knowledge and actual behaviour is not a straightforward one. What people say in an interview is not the whole picture: adequate research and, in particular, adequate theorizing needs to take account of that” (91, 94). Nevertheless, other than the owner of the story, who better to tell the story of one Forgotten Australian than another Forgotten Australian who understands, and who has received professional training as a writer-researcher-interviewer? Even so, I am aware that being a writer who is also a Forgotten Australian and who is entrusted by other Forgotten Australians with their personal stories places an added responsibility on a writer-researcher-narrator such as myself in every which way, ethically and personally and socially.

After receiving signed consent forms from six of the potential participants and learning that the seventh had gone to live overseas and had left no forwarding address or contact details I decided to include in the work my own personal essay. I did this to give perspective to the work by adding the device of an outside frame, and to enhance my use of subjectivity in the work and give the work added credibility. I had always intended to include myself in the work in order to provide the reader with a point of reference. When interviewing, I followed the advice of Parker and of Stewart. To make the potential participants feel more at ease I made arrangements to conduct the interviews in the participants’ own homes or offices as they so wished, and started the interviews by saying something conversational that might establish an immediate rapport and empathy, and show the participants that despite my university card and tape-recording paraphernalia I was just an ordinary person. The participants all chose to forego the right to have a support person present during the interviews, and in each of the sessions there was only the individual participant and myself, and my tape-recorder in the room.

As a first-time interviewer I did not know what to expect when interviewing, but without exception all the participants were warm and welcoming and trusting, and happy to be involved in the project. During the interview sessions, in our conversations, we spoke as equals and with mutual respect, but I encouraged the participants to take the lead. That is, I played the role of the sympathetic and empathetic but objective listener but asked interview questions from a prepared open list (which I kept hidden) when I felt it necessary, and in this way surreptitiously guided the interview in order to keep the participant on track so that I might gain the information I needed for my work. At the conclusion of their interviews I thanked each of
the participants, on tape, for their participation in the project, and told each participant I would forward her or his completed interview transcript, and the draft of the chapter on her or his self, for approval. I did this, and found that some participants wished to correct certain minor details in their transcripts, and I made these corrections before beginning to craft my work.

Interviewing
I felt very honoured that the participants invited me—a virtual stranger—into their homes and willingly allowed me a glimpse into their private business. But in a way I felt like an intruder and was rather amazed and shocked at my audacity. Strangely, during and after the interview process, each of the participants expressed pleasure and gratitude at having had the opportunity to speak with me, and said they felt humbled that I was making the time and effort to bring their stories to the public arena, and thanked me for listening to their stories and understanding. I had the distinct impression that they were placing me on a pedestal, and I found this discomforting. This served to remind me that in the interview situation the interviewer is in a position of power, and must be careful to avoid the dangers that such a position could hold. All this created within me mixed feelings. On one hand I prided myself on maintaining a professional stance and being sympathetically objective while at the same time remaining non-judgemental, empathetic, and accessible, and I felt that I was doing a good job. On the other hand I felt like a fraud, and suspected that I was practising chicanery. I worried that with my probing and my university card and my Ethics Approval number, H-2010-1184, I might somehow represent authority in these people’s minds, and so be seen as suspect. Most Forgotten Australians mistrust and fear figures of authority, and are extremely angry about how they were treated as children. I also felt like a thief, sneaking into their innermost sanctum and taking their thoughts and feelings for my own use as a writer. Throughout the interviews I asked myself time and again that despite my university card and Ethics Approval number what right did I have, really, did I have any? I was afraid that I would somehow be caught out and exposed as an imposter—an ordinary person and a little-known writer who did not know much, playing at being something that I was not. My thoughts were: what if I let these people down in some way? What if what I write does not meet their expectations? What if no publisher wants to look at my work? What if because of the way that I write these stories never get an airing?

Throughout each of the interviews I stayed as silent as possible but maintained good eye-contact. At one point in each of the participant’s interview sessions something odd, something very strange happened. Suddenly, as she or he was speaking, the participant’s eyes seemed to go so clear that I felt that I was looking deep down into her or his very soul. Each time it happened I instinctively knew that what I was getting from the participant was absolute honesty and trust, and what I was hearing was the fullness of their thoughts and feelings. Each time this happened I felt that the participant and I were cocooned in some inner space, and for
me this eerie experience was both spiritual and awe-inspiring. But nothing was said about this occurrence, it was a very private moment indeed. But from that point on the participant seemed to forget the tape-recorder and held nothing back, and this made me doubly aware of possible power-positions and ethical boundaries. As well, I knew then for certain that I could not possibly disclose to the reader everything that had been said in the interviews, even though said on tape, and that when crafting the work I had to be vigilant that I include nothing that could betray any participant’s trust in me, and also that I had to decipher the meanings in their words as truly as is possible. I knew it was my duty to be responsible as a writer and do the best that I could by these people whose stories I had taken on.

The most difficult of the interviews to conduct were those with Mick Riley. “Riley” is a pseudonym because this is what Mick wanted. Perhaps I found these interviews to be a little difficult because, unlike with the other participants, I knew Mick personally. I have known him for years. But until recently I did not know that he had spent part of his childhood in a Children’s Home. Perhaps because friendship is a type of emotional involvement, the too personal closeness made it difficult at first for me to step back and take an objective slant as an interviewer. Equally, it appeared to be difficult for Mick to get into the stride of being interviewed. But as Mick explained to me on tape, it was the raising of his memories of his earlier life and facing his feelings and emotions for the first time more than the fact of being interviewed by me (Riley “Interview”). But during our tape-recorded conversations we somehow overcame these difficulties and began to converse as we always had, as old friends who talk frankly together about anything and everything. For some months after the interviews Mick rang me on a regular basis and continued to discuss his past and his feelings about that past. In a way, he placed me in the position of confidant and mentor. There was no real problem in this. The problem came several months later. Mick still rang but seemed awkward, and pointedly avoided mentioning his past life. I worried that because of the disclosures he had made he was regretting his participation and if the process had somehow damaged our friendship. In a way, I felt rather sorry I had chosen Mick as one of the participants, and asked him if he wanted to withdraw his story from my work. Mick answered that he did not, and would feel let down by me if I did (Riley “Telephone”). Happily, the awkward stage or whatever it was passed, and we again speak easily and frankly as we always did, but Mick has made it plain that he does not wish to read his own story, ever. All this was a lesson to me, and places an added responsibility on me as the writer to be very careful that I do the right and ethical thing in recreating Mick’s story.

Crafting the first-time docu-memoir
Transcribing the tapes of the interviews was a time-consuming and challenging task. On a tape-recording, given the absence of the speaker’s body language and facial expressions, the
subject’s meaning is not always clear. At times, I found I had to try to decipher exactly what the participant was saying so as to capture their true meaning and not alter her or his personal truth. As Sheila Stewart had warned me personally, to listen to these tapes is “excruciating” and very, very boring unless the writer, the docu-memoirist, “is listening for some gem of a word or expression that makes it all worthwhile” (“Letter”). Even so, as Parker writes in his paper “Some Very Basic Principles of Interviewing”, listening to the tapes and transcribing is sheer “murder” (Criminal Conversations 237-38). Garner talks about the difficulties of transcribing tape-recorded interviews in Joe Cinque’s Consolation, and she admits, “It took me three days to transcribe the cassettes, hauling the tapes back and forth … I was appalled to hear my own contributions, the puny interventions I made, my impertinent attempts to inject hope, to modify savagery, to relieve tension. I sounded ignorant and shallow, a twerp with no experience of life” (87). I take great comfort that a seasoned immersion journalist-writer should feel much the same as me, a first-time interviewer-writer. After I had I transcribed the interviews word for word, I sent the transcripts to the individual subjects, as promised, and then waited for their approval before commencing the more creative work. Later, I repeated the exercise the draft chapters, each participant approved the draft chapter pertinent to her- or his- self.

When crafting, I wanted to create a work that was tailor-made to my topic, and that would remain true to the Forgotten Australians and their stories, and also to my purposes and aims in writing. But I took note of Garner’s story-telling and immersion techniques, and her use of symbols and mosaic structures. Each of the stories in my docu-memoir can stand alone and also act as a mosaic tile in the work as a whole piece. In writing my docu-memoir I noted Stewart’s circular memoir structures and dialectic speech patterns. I also took note of Parker’s clever use of metaphor and second person address in first person dialogue techniques, and the psychological depths in his work. As well, I noted Parker’s use of a dash rather than a quotation mark to indicate when a subject is speaking in Lighthouse, and use something of this particular technique in my own work. To bring the reader closer to the conversations, rather than enclosing my own or the various speakers’ direct speech in quotation marks and regardless of whether that speech is tagged or untagged (i.e., “I say,” “He, or she, says,”) I use an en dash for articulation of dialogue, and to indicate when someone is speaking. But in something of Stewart’s fashion in Lifting the Latch, and even though Stewart uses a single narrator, I do use quotation marks for articulating or when conveying my own unspoken thoughts to the reader and when reporting the direct speech of others in my conversations. I also use quotation marks whenever the subjects verbalise their previously unspoken thoughts or report the direct speech of others in their conversations. Similarly to Parker and Stewart, in crafting I chose selections from the interview transcripts that would balance the work, and I moved these selections around for ease of reading and to make a readable story, and to bring the subjects’ stories forward and to make a more inviting work for the reader. Some critics might argue that this is in itself a
fictionalising process. But in moving the selections around I did not alter what the subjects had said in their interviews and transcripts. I sandwiched this edited and verbatim transcript material in between the more creative work (in which I took a little from Garner’s use of creative elements) and which also included snippets from the actual audio-taped conversations, and I offset the verbatim transcript material from the more creative element by allowing a space either side of all verbatim material. Like Parker in his book The Courage of His Convictions, I also use italics to indicate my actual interview questions. In my work of docu-memoir, all questions written in italics are my actual questions as lifted from the verbatim transcript material. My own story (Jo Parnell’s Story,) is the only personal essay story in Part I of the work. My story does not include interview material. It is written as a personal essay, a different style to the mixture of memoir and narrative styles I use for the personal stories that make up Part II and Part III of the work. I use my own story as a central point of reference to the work as a whole, and as a lead into my creative nonfiction docu-memoir about Forgotten Australians.

As is expected in an academic work from the Humanities, the exegesis to this thesis concludes with a Works Cited list. The creative writing work to the thesis, the docu-memoir titled See Saw Margery Daw, is intended for commercial publication. Creative writing does not generally use a Works Cited list, and I do not use one here. The creative nonfiction docu-memoir as I define it is an unusual sub-genre of life-writing and a relatively new literary form. The way in which I have chosen to write my docu-memoir is also a creative nonfiction sub-genre that is a trans-genre: it lies in the interstices of oral history and creative nonfiction as life-writing, and memoir, survivor narrative, trauma narrative and witnessing, and literary documentary. For these reasons I use end-notes in the creative work See Saw Margery Daw that forms Part II of this thesis. In See Saw Margery Daw I have included a Notes section to explain to international readers, and others, what the various terms used by the subjects mean, and to give added information about other works and bodies the subjects mention in the course of their conversations. The Notes section in the creative work See Saw Margery Daw sits at the back of the work, before the Appendix.

The use of these various creative writing techniques allowed me to create many levels in the stories, as well as braid smaller stories into and through the main story and better reveal the psychology of the subject and the situation. This also allowed me to highlight certain points in the stories, and which I see as rather important. For instance, in telling his story Geoff Steele inadvertently shows how some care leavers just get trapped—locked inside their childhood horror. Just as the spokes of a wheel radiate outwards from an axle, Geoff relates everything that happens, everything that goes wrong in his life, back to his traumatic rape experience when he was about nine years of age, and ties this to his adoptive parents’ inability to provide him as a child with a stable home, security, and an even upbringing. Geoff’s sister, Bev Osborne, tells how Geoff unexpectedly came into her life when she was in her mid-sixties. Bev’s story also
has something of a circular structure. It begins and ends with Bev’s family which she presents as a loving and united group. In between the beginning and the end of Bev’s story, her story opens out like the pages in a book and her romantic views break down. Bev unintentionally alerts one to the many possible dangers inherent in the act when a previously unknown and unheard of relative suddenly enters a siblings’ adult life. Evident in the story of Barbara Walters-Smith is the loss of hope, the failure to find closure, and the inability to value oneself as a human being. Barbara’s story demonstrates that poetic justice does not exist as an actuality. Mick takes a philosophical slant and shows that sometimes in life bad things just happen, and how reflection can bring self-understanding and a form of resolution. My story is a literary attempt to discover and recover a sense of self from the architecture of my past, and the realisation that there are certain things in life that are not known and can never be known. Acceptance of those mysteries, and the ability to put the past in place, in the past, is necessary in order to move forward in life. Leonie’s and Joanna’s stories show how knowledge can bring understanding, and how good practice based on sound research can bring about change. The work as a whole raises unanswerable questions. For instance, how is it that even though all Forgotten Australians were handed a card that dealt them a double minus in social capital on which to base their futures, a small handful of these people nevertheless managed to come out of the experience with a plus in social capital on which to build their adult lives? This is not to say that those who were more fortunate in coming out with a plus in a social capital card do not have problems and issues to overcome.

In writing I have tried to create a work that is rich in social history and which exposes a range of human nature and emotions to the reader in the hope that it may in some way help to broaden people’s understanding of others. As mentioned previously, in such a work it is not possible or aesthetically pleasing to include everything that has been said in conversations that have been audio-recorded over many hours and days. But I do not alter what the subjects have said and, like Stewart, I assign what has been said to the original speaker her- or him-self, so that in the text, the subjects only ever say what they have actually said in real life. The type of literary docu-memoir I am writing “arises from the necessity to find a form of prose” that permits me to “say the unsayable”,1 and record authentically and undeniably the facts and poetics of the care leaver’s traumatic childhood experience” (May “Message to Hugh Craig”).

See Saw Margery Daw

I have titled my docu-memoir *See Saw Margery Daw* after a popular English language nursery rhyme, with its sinister and pessimistic undertones. According to one UK website, *Rhymes*, the rhyme “Seesaw Margery Daw” first appeared in the 1700s. The information given on this website also infers that the rhyme was not merely an innocent:

> The last three lines of "Seesaw Margery Daw" appear to reflect the use of child labour in work houses where those with nowhere else to live would be forced to work for a pittance (a penny a day) on piece work (because he can't work any faster). The words of "Seesaw Margery Daw" might be used by a spiteful child to taunt another implying his family were destined for the workhouse. (1)

Many Forgotten Australians relate the way they felt as children in care to riding on playground or funfair equipment—see-saws, swings, round-a-bouts, roller coasters, for instance. For one example, in his interviews Geoff maintains that his life was “an emotional rollercoaster,” that one minute he would be encouraged to feel that he was the king of children and his emotions would be swooping up in the air, and the next minute he would be made to understand he was a nobody child and his life would come sliding rapidly down to feelings of hopelessness, and so on (Steele “Interview”). As do many other Forgotten Australians, I liken my life as a child to being on a see-saw. In the Home, whenever I was locked in the play enclosure behind the six-foot high wire fence, I would sit on the see-saw and my hopes that my people would come and take me away from my hell would soar as I sawed upwards on my precarious wooden perch, and the next minute my dreams would come crashing as I sawed down with the splintering realisation that I had no hope, that I had been abandoned by those I loved.

As children, most Forgotten Australians were dehumanised and stripped of their identity. Often their names were changed by those in charge. Rarely do these people have photos from their childhood, and most of these people’s childhood records were either lost, or destroyed by the authorities. All they have to show that they existed as children are their memories. Virtually, they are ghosts. Like Stewart, to add credence to my work and give the subjects’ stories validity I place photos of the subjects, taken by me at the time of interviewing with their permission to use in my work, into my docu-memoir. To bring the subjects into vivid, three-dimensional life for the reader I describe my subjects in the text and have them, and others in the smaller stories, move and speak as ordinary people both within, and outside of, the interview situation. Like Parker and Stewart and Garner, I situate my subjects in the ordinary world, in their actual homes and neighbourhoods and towns, as they go about living their daily lives. Writing of this type allows readers to identify with the informants, and also allows the subjects a place in which to claim the sense of identity that they were missing in childhood.
because it provides an illusion of continuity over space and time. In this aspect, and in that the subjects use metaphorical language and reveal their deeper feelings and underlying emotions, I borrow from Parker. In that I use rhetoric and step outside the interview situation in my framing story and view the world through the lens of my own subjectivity, I borrow from Garner. In that the subjects speak for themselves in their own voices and manner of speaking and dialect as in the case of Mick, I borrow from Stewart.

When regarding experiences of trauma, ordinary people use a language of their own making to grasp psychologically difficult concepts and come to terms with their experience. The form of docu-memoir I have chosen to write in depends on this aspect of language. It brings out a deeper level of meaning in the speech and the reflections of ordinary people as elicited by the docu-memoirist. When speaking to the interviewer-writer who gives a context or setting that they otherwise never had in their ordinary everyday life, the subjects sometimes use language in a way that opens up a whole new understanding for themselves and, incidentally, for their readers who are, in one way, a disembodied audience.

The subjects in my work speak for themselves in a language of their own making that they and others can easily understand. Mick Riley is an example. Mick is a Forgotten Australian by proxy. Now a naturalised Australian—“mate, I’m a true blue Aussie” (Riley “Interview”)—Mick was born in England, and migrated to Australia with his family when he was fifteen. In his taped conversations Mick inadvertently shows how in ordinary conversation people use metaphors when they are working to understand their deeper experiences and make sense of those experiences for themselves, and for the person they are talking to. Mick rewrites his experience in a way that not only brings self-understanding but also allows the reader to gain a sense of what the experience is like for Mick, and this in turn allows the listener-reader to vicariously share in the experience and empathise. In his taped conversations and in his interview transcripts and so in my docu-memoir, Mick describes himself as an ordinary person. But because these conversations are intended solely as resource material for a docu-memoir, Mick has been given a specific context or setting in which to discuss his experience. As a result, to convey his story to the listener-writer, Mick freely expresses himself in a way that he most likely would not otherwise do in the course of ordinary everyday conversation. As a child Mick was incarcerated in an orphanage. The experience of being abandoned as a child, and the treatment he received at the hands of his carers, has had long-lasting effects on Mick’s later life. In his conversations Mick’s use of language enables him to reach an understanding of his childhood experience as the source of his bouts of depression. Mick uses metaphor as a way in which to connect to his experience so he can come to terms with his demons. In his interview, and so in my docu-memoir, Mick states, “So my reality is all I’ve got and it’s made me what I am and I figure I could be a lot worse, but with people like us … you have to accept you’ll
always have that monkey on your back. You can’t throw it off because it’ll just jump straight back on … so you’ve got to learn to try and carry it with dignity” (Riley “Interview”).

As children, the Forgotten Australians were locked away from society, and did not learn the social language common to other children who grew up in families, rather a language caused by feelings of displacement. When released from care they faced the necessity and additional difficulty of learning a new and different kind of language in order to cope with life in the outside world. As adults, they had to learn yet another different kind of language in order to readjust to society and function in an adult world. This process of learning, unlearning, and relearning made them at once displaced, and placed. Many Forgotten Australians find it difficult to gain a sense of closure because they find themselves caught between two worlds—the displaced inner “child” with its memories of the experiences lived and the concomitant feelings of low self-esteem, deep distress, guilt, shame, self-disgust—self-loathing, even—and the adult life in which they now live. Either consciously or subconsciously, many Forgotten Australians try to disassociate themselves from their childhood experiences. Some even go as far as severing all connections with their siblings, if they have any, out of fear that association will somehow push them back into their experience.

Through viewing and “hearing” a creative reconstruction of their own language, as voiced in the interview process, the subjects can “see” a combination of their memories, experiences and feelings expressed as a unifying metaphor outside of themselves, and quickly learn a new form of language through which they can reach a new level of understanding. After being abandoned by his natural mother at birth, Geoff “kicked around” Babies’ Homes for over two years before finally being adopted. The adoptive parents’ families did not accept Geoff because they did not hold with adopting a child who had not been born into the family. He was loved and spoilt by his adoptive parents, but their marriage broke down and Geoff was placed in an orphanage. There, he was raped by one of his “carers.” In the interview process Geoff talked about this rape and the devastating effects it had on his life. I included this lengthy narrative in my docu-memoir because the discussion provides Geoff with an outside view of himself and his inner feelings, and because it allows the reader to “see” and “hear” a discussion about things that, even today, are somehow considered to be taboo subjects in polite society, and never normally disclosed. Gaining entry into a private person’s inner world is indeed a privilege and one that allows insights into things that we all wonder about but never ask and never discuss because they are considered to be too delicate, too private, and taboo. But Geoff welcomed the chance to provide insight, and, as he spoke, he gained insights for himself. During our interview sessions I noticed that Geoff frequently referred to himself as a child as “Geoffrey” and himself as an adult as “Geoff,” but when speaking about his life generally he always referred to himself as “we.” When I pointed this out to him he was surprised, and even though he searched for an answer, he could not explain. A couple of days later, during a different audio-taping session, I
asked him if he felt sorry for himself (Steele “Interview”). I am not a psychiatrist. But his answer caused me to believe that by objectifying himself as “Geoffrey” and “Geoff,” whilst yet referring to himself generally as the subjective “we” rather than the more subjective “I,” he had subconsciously found a way of at once disassociating himself from the child that was and the damaging childhood experience, and maintaining any shreds of identity that he had managed to preserve. By his answer to my question, Geoff showed that he had obviously made these connections, even though somewhat subconsciously, at some time prior to the interview process. Late in 2011, after reading the transcript of his interviews, Geoff rang to say he was delighted to find some answers at last (Steele “Telephone”). It seems that the interview process and the transcript together, brought Geoff to reflect and make these connections in his conscious mind.

Geoff and Mick show how, when ordinary people use a language which they create specifically to convey their experience to others, they create themselves as creative nonfiction writers of their own life stories. By seeing their stories in text, in a work of docu-memoir, the subjects see their experience outside themselves and watch their own healing. Through their use of language, they become writers and readers of their own life stories, rather than just sufferers from abuse—at least, this happens on a literary level if not actually on a literal level. Literary narrative allows a little bit of distance between the subject’s personal self, and the reader. Retold in docu-memoir, the subjects’ stories in one way go beyond the purely personal to testimony that critiques deeper social issues, and it is this factor that can move the subjects towards a sense of healing—again, on a literary level if not on an actual level. So because docu-memoir employs metaphors coined by the subjects themselves it allows these people a safe medium through which to speak out, and can give these subjects a resonating literary voice.

As in other life-writing, in a docu-memoir of this type the reader needs information they can use as points of reference. So within the framework of the interview process, I frequently interrupt the subjects’ narrations with “smaller” stories that relate to life in general and tie back to the deeper meanings in what the subject is saying. These stories at once displace and frame and support the subjects’ stories. But all these stories are written in such a way that they take second place to what the subject is saying, and as soon as the subjects’ conversations are reinstated their stories displace and reframe these smaller stories. This technique allows me to make and highlight certain points, and also create in the work a sense of place, displacement, place and displacement that is in keeping with the trauma of the subjects’ childhood experiences. But because each of the subject’s stories has difference and similarity one to the other, and because each of the subjects is an individual “voice,” I also use this process of interruption and continuation right throughout my docu-memoir to give the overall work an organised integrity of intertwined interwoven continuity. Some of these smaller stories are about my own experiences, present and past. In listening to and writing the real-life stories of others
such as the subjects in my docu-memoir, similarly to Garner in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, I become part of my subjects’ stories and they become part of mine. So I include myself in the work in order to provide a central point of reference and give the story added credibility, but I am careful not to over-balance and go into competition with the subject. All literary nonfiction allows distance between the subjects’ personal selves and the reader, and this allows the reader insights into the experience. To provide contrast and the necessary distance, throughout the work I place the subjects’ stories about their past experiences as being narrated in the present, and use present tense. But the subjects use past tense when speaking about their past experiences. Within the text, this process allows a shifting space and a means by which to manipulate time. In a way, this creates my docu-memoir as fictionalised documentary. But these structural unifying techniques allow me to make it clear to the reader where the boundary lies between fiction and fact, and between verbatim and edited testimony.

I begin my docu-memoir with my story of my own traumatic childhood to provide a reference and a setting, and I begin the subjects’ stories with my own true experience of battling floods to gather the subjects’ stories, and end with an equally true story—on the hot March day I finished collecting the data for my docu-memoir, as I made my way home a welcome storm broke the sweltering heat, and the after-storm light bathed the landscape with a surrealistic golden glow. This outer shell foreshadows the drama of the tragedies and trauma within their stories. It also highlights the temporal and the historical in the stories and at once centres them in the subjects’ subjectivities, and situates them as a whole in a given time frame to create a sense of orderliness and continuity of place and time—something the subjects did not have as children. As well, it locates and anchors them on the page, in a text, intended for public view. Once the stories of horror and trauma are no longer confined to the subject’s unspoken memories but out on the page they are out in the open, and because they are no longer private they belong to us all. Together, the subject and the reader, and I—as the interviewer and writer—can view and contemplate the care leavers’ childhood trauma and the effects that had on the care leavers’ lives.

Because I deal with the various stories of a number of living Forgotten Australians in my docu-memoir, as a writer I am always aware of the subjects as readers and of other readers as well. I am forever aware that there are multiple implied audiences in a docu-memoir of this type. What I hope readers will get from my docu-memoir is some measure of understanding of the subjects as Forgotten Australians, and also as ordinary people who have led extra-ordinary lives. I hope the subjects gain further understanding of themselves and the situation into which they were thrust as children and of the effects this may have had on their later lives. I also hope that I have revealed to the reader a slice of neglected Australian social history.
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See-Saw

Margery Daw

Jo Parnell
Dedication and Acknowledgements

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Illustrations by Jo Parnell
Introduction

This work is a collection of seven stories about the experiences of care leavers, and, in particular, the care leavers now known as Forgotten Australians. These people are of mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage, and like the Indigenous Australian children of the Stolen Generations and the British Child Migrants (English and Maltese Boat-children) they spent part or all of their childhood in foster care or Children’s Homes or orphanages in Australia sometime during the mid-part of the twentieth century. These various groups of children were incarcerated in the same Homes, or the same types of Homes, and all these children received much the same sort of care. This care was provided by the State, or the churches, or other religious groups, or charitable bodies, or by private persons under licence, as the case may be.

Conditions in these Children’s Homes and orphanages were little removed from the time of Charles Dickens and his *Oliver Twist*, and many people took foster children as a cheap form of labour. As children in care, nearly all the Stolen Generations, the British Child Migrants, and the Forgotten Australians, suffered severe hardship and were subjected to horrific psychological, physical and sexual abuse, and felt the effects of displacement. With the Forgotten Australians, displacement was mainly socially motivated. In this latter aspect they differed from the Indigenous children of the Stolen Generations who suffered the effects of displacement that was mainly racially motivated. Both these groups differed from the so-called British Child Migrants in that this group suffered the effects of displacement that was mainly politically motivated. Nevertheless, in regard to displacement, for each of these groups there was some crossing over of social, racial, and political motivation. Due to changes in child welfare policy and an improved social security system that supports families and children, Children’s Homes and orphanages were phased out in Australia in the late 1900s, and foster care has changed for the better. But almost all these people who were in care as children in the 1900s still carry the pain of their childhood, and have feelings of shame and humiliation.

In this work I have not included stories of the Australian children of the Stolen Generations as I feel that would merit a work of its own. For the same reason, I do not include stories of the English and Maltese Boat-children. But in this work I do include Mick Riley’s story. Born and raised in England where he spent part of his childhood in an orphanage, Mick migrated to Australia with his family when he was fifteen, and became a naturalised Australian. I have included Mick’s story because it serves to show that the Children’s Homes in twentieth century Australia were much the same as those in England, and the long-lasting effects
on the lives of the children who were incarcerated in those places were similar despite the geographical
distances between the two countries. Of course, these people’s stories also may have similarity with those of
other people’s in various parts of the world. The type of childhood that the Forgotten Australians suffered
may very well be, in one way, a universal story of abused childhood. In some parts of the world Children’s
Homes and orphanages still exist, and all over the world the abuse and usage of children still takes place on
an everyday basis.

For various reasons, a great many Forgotten Australians prefer not to disclose, and do not tell their
stories in any way at all. Some do not wish their past experiences to become known to anyone, not even
their partners and children. Some try to re-invent their lives, and some try to create for their selves a new
identity out of the shambles of their past. Possibly, with many of these people, this is a coping mechanism.
Some others do tell their stories, but most do not disclose until late in life, and often they only disclose
within the group as an act of sharing. A few others do want to disclose more openly, and, as is their right,
most want to tell their stories for themselves in a way of their own choosing. There are thousands of
Forgotten Australians, but comparatively few write their stories and those who do, mostly do so privately
either for themselves or for their families. A very few others make their stories publically available, but
most of these people self-publish. In writing their stories these people mostly avoid reflexivity, preferring
instead to “tell all” and keep their feelings and emotions to themselves. Probably all this is because they were
subject to the damaging authority of significant others when they were children, and as adults are afraid that
disclosure might attract some form of punishment or public or family censure, or are afraid of speaking out
from misplaced feelings of shame or guilt, or for fear of losing control over their stories and so their lives.
There are a few, and only a few, others who would like their story to be made known through commercially
published literature but feel they lack either the education or emotional strength to write it themselves.

I am myself a Forgotten Australian. When writing my personal memoir I was approached by a very
small number of people who asked if I might, sometime, also write their stories and “tell them true”; they did
not wish their stories or their thoughts and feelings about their experiences, or the facts of the case, to be
altered, and they also wanted to tell their stories for themselves. These are the people who appear in this
work. After receiving ethics approval to carry out my PhD research work, and, following that, after receiving
signed consent forms from the participants, I talked with these people and audio-recorded their oral accounts
of their experiences and their feelings and thoughts as resource material for this docu-memoir. Later, I
transcribed these interviews word for word, and sent the transcripts to the subjects for their approval. In crafting my more creative work I chose selections from the transcripts. After reorganising the material within those selections to bring each individual’s particular experience into greater focus, I moved these recomposed selections around to enhance them as part of a literary work, and to help create ease of reading. I sandwich this edited and verbatim transcript material in between the more creative work, and I offset the verbatim transcript material from the more creative element by allowing a space either side of all verbatim material to indicate what is verbatim transcript material and what is not. For this reason also, I also use italics to indicate my actual interview questions. In the individual stories that make up Part II and Part III of my docu-memoir (here, I am not including Part I, “Jo Parnell’s Story,” because this is my own story and it is written as a personal essay, which is a different style to the mixture of memoir and narrative styles I use for the personal stories of others), all questions written in italics are my actual questions as lifted from the verbatim transcript material. In such a work it is not possible or aesthetically pleasing to include everything that has been said in conversations that have been audio-recorded over many hours and days. But in this work I do not alter what the subjects have said and I assign what has been said to the original speaker her- or himself, so that in the text, the subjects only ever say what they have actually said in real life.

Amongst the Forgotten Australians, it is tacitly understood that one Forgotten Australian shall respect another Forgotten Australian’s rights and their rights to privacy at all times; and that no Forgotten Australian shall tell another’s story for them, but allow the individual to speak out and tell their story themselves. I have written this work as a creative nonfiction work of docu-memoir in first person so that the subjects can speak for themselves in a language of their own making, and in their own colloquial speech and dialect. In this docu-memoir, I have tried to stay as close to the “truths” of the interviews as possible and when the subjects are speaking I utilise spelling and terms that capture or reflect the subjects’ speech. For one instance, when speaking Barbara Walters-Smith says “git” for “get,” and “me” for “my,” at times, and uses the two of each variations interchangeably. In her interview, and so in this work, Barbara says she is uneducated. In everyday conversation people use metaphors and language of their own making to make sense of their experience for themselves and the person they are talking to. For this reason, the narratives in this work include both verbatim and edited transcript material (somewhat reordered and reorganised to make it more readable as a story). For the reason that each of the stories in this work essentially centres on an individual care leaver, and because these individuals are in the main all Forgotten Australians, and because
the Forgotten Australians identify each other’s stories simply by that person’s name followed by the word “Story” (for example, “Jo Parnell’s Story”), each of the stories here is titled in the same way in order to follow the tradition already established.

Even though two of the stories involve a brother and sister who were adopted out as babies, the focus of this work is on Forgotten Australians and not adoptees. The term Forgotten Australian does not apply to adoptees because, generally speaking, adoptees are not people who were “forgotten” as children. Nor are they care leavers as such other than in exceptional circumstances when that child may have been placed in a Children’s Home or orphanage sometime after adoption.

The two final stories in this work, and which together form PART III, are told by the co-founders of Australia’s only national support network and advocacy group for Forgotten Australians, and that is run by Forgotten Australians. Both co-founders are themselves Forgotten Australians. The first of these stories is that of Leonie Sheedy who gives a potted history of the struggles and the politics involved in trying to help her fellow Forgotten Australians. The second of these stories is that of Joanna Penglase. Joanna holds a PhD in Sociology from Macquarie University in Sydney. In her story, Joanna tells how the support network arose as the result of her struggles to understand her own experience, and she gives insights into the Forgotten Australian experience from a sociological viewpoint.

The inclusion in this work of all these people’s stories is intended to give a comprehensive picture of the experience of being a Forgotten Australian: what it is like to be a “forgotten” and abused child, what it means as an adult to be a care leaver, how their experiences have affected their lives and those of others around them, and how the experience and the effects of that are much the same no matter whether they were in care as children in England or in Australia. This is a story which has not been previously told from inside the group, in a literary work of creative nonfiction.

I am grateful to those people who agreed to participate, and humbled that they allowed me to interview them and record their accounts of their experiences as resource material for this work of literary nonfiction. I have included a Notes section in this work to explain to international readers, and others, what the various terms used by the subjects mean, and to give added information about other works and bodies and places the subjects mention in the course of their conversations. The Notes section sits at the back of the work, before the Appendix. The Appendix to this work includes the Apologies made by the various governments and other bodies to the people who had spent either a part or all of their childhood in
orphanages, Children’s Homes, institutions, and other out-of-home care in twentieth century Australia. Most of these Apologies were given after the Senate Inquiry into children in institutionalised and out-of-home care in twentieth century Australia, and on the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry reports, and before the Federal Government issued their National Apology. As well, in the Appendix, I have included a reference to the National Apology made by the Federal Opposition leader, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP, to the Forgotten Australians and the former British and Maltese Child Migrants. Malcolm Turnbull gave his National Apology on behalf of the Federal Opposition Government. This was done on the same day that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued his National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and the former British and Maltese Child Migrants on behalf of the Federal Government. The final inclusion in the Appendix is of various images of monuments and memorials dedicated to the memory of care leavers. These monuments and memorials were erected on the recommendations made to the governments by the Senate Inquiry into children in institutionalised and out-of-home care in Australia in the twentieth century. In this section of the Appendix I also explain the various monuments and memorials.

My aim in this work is to highlight the human content, the feelings and the thoughts of the participants, in the stories in the hope that this will allow readers new insights into the care leaver experience and, so, gain new or increased understanding of others. My aim is also to reveal a slice of Australian history that has been largely hidden from public view and which has previously been little known or unknown. I wish to expose the psychology of the institutionalised and out-of-home child care community in mid-twentieth century Australia to show how this type of marginalisation affected the lives of the children who lived in that community. My goal is to show how this experience has had a profound effect on their later lives, and how this affects our society today. I want to ask: Who were these children? Why were they there? What does it feel like to be them? What effects have their childhood experiences had on their later lives, and on the lives of others around them? What does it mean to be a Forgotten Australian?

I have titled my docu-memoir See Saw Margery Daw because it is also the title of a popular English nursery rhyme with sinister and pessimistic undertones. According to one UK website, Rhymes, the rhyme first appeared in the 1700s. This website also says:
The last three lines of "Seesaw Margery Daw" appear to reflect the use of child labour in work houses where those with nowhere else to live would be forced to work for a pittance (a penny a day) on piece work (because he can't work any faster). The words of "Seesaw Margery Daw" might be used by a spiteful child to taunt another implying his family were destined for the workhouse.

Many Forgotten Australians relate the way they felt as children in care to riding playground or funfair equipment—see-saws, swings, round-a-bouts, roller coasters, for instance. For one example, in his interviews, and so in his story in this docu-memoir, one participant Geoff Steele says that his life was “an emotional roller-coaster” in that one minute he would be encouraged to feel that he was the king of children and his emotions would be swooping up in the air, and the next minute he would be made to understand he was a nobody child and his life would come sliding rapidly down to feelings that he had no hope, and so on. As do many other Forgotten Australians, I liken my life as a child to being on a see-saw. In the Home, whenever I was locked in the play enclosure behind the six-foot high wire fence, I would sit on the see-saw and my hopes that my people would come and take me away from my hell would soar as I sawed upwards on my precarious wooden perch, and the next minute my dreams would come crashing as I sawed down with the splintering realisation that I had no hope, that I had been abandoned by those I loved.

I hope that all readers, whether Forgotten Australians or not, can get something for themselves from this docu-memoir.
PART I
Today, the Government of Australia will move the following motion of apology in the Parliament of Australia.

We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation’s history.

And we come together today to offer our nation’s apology.

To say to you, the Forgotten Australians, and those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent, that we are sorry.

Sorry – that as children you were taken from your families and placed in institutions where so often you were abused.

Sorry – for the physical suffering, the emotional starvation and the cold absence of love, of tenderness, of care.

Sorry – for the tragedy of childhoods lost – childhoods spent instead in austere and authoritarian places, where names were replaced by numbers, spontaneous play by regimented routine, the joy of learning by the repetitive drudgery of menial work.

Sorry – for all these injustices to you as children, who were placed in our care.

As a nation, we must now reflect on those who did not receive proper care.

We look back with shame that many of you were left cold, hungry and alone and with nowhere to hide and nobody to whom to turn.

We look back with shame that many of these little ones who were entrusted to institutions and foster homes – instead, were abused physically, humiliated cruelly and violated sexually.

We look back with shame at how those with power were allowed to abuse those who had none.

And how, then, as if this was not injury enough, you were left ill-prepared for life outside – left to fend for yourselves; often unable to read or write; to struggle alone with no friends and no family.

For these failures to offer proper care to the powerless, the voiceless and the most vulnerable, we say sorry.

We reflect too today on the families who were ripped apart, simply because they had fallen on hard times.

Hard times brought about by illness, by death and by poverty.

Some simply left destitute when fathers, damaged by war, could no longer cope.

Again we say sorry for the extended families you never knew.

We acknowledge the particular pain of children shipped to Australia as child migrants – robbed of your families, robbed of your homeland, regarded not as innocent children but regarded instead as a source of child labour.

To those of you who were told you were orphans, brought here without your parents’ knowledge or consent, we acknowledge the lies you were told, the lies told to your mothers and fathers, and the pain these lies have caused for a lifetime.

To those of you separated on the docksides from your brothers and sisters, taken alone and unprotected to the most remote parts of a foreign land – we acknowledge today the laws of our nation failed you.

And for this we are deeply sorry.

We think also today of all the families of these Forgotten Australians and former child migrants who are still grieving, families who were never reunited, families who were never reconciled, families who were lost to one another forever.

We reflect too on the burden that is still carried by your own children, your grandchildren, your husbands, your wives, your partners and your friends and we thank them for the faith, the love and the depth of commitment that has helped you through the valley of tears that was not of your making.

And we reflect with you as well, in sad remembrance, on those who simply could not cope and who took their own lives in absolute despair.

We recognize the pain you have suffered.

Pain so personal.

Pain so profoundly disabling.

So, let us therefore, together, as a nation, allow this apology to begin healing this pain.

Healing the pain felt by so many of the half a million of our fellow Australians and those who as children were in our care.

And let us also resolve this day, that this national apology becomes a turning point in our nation’s story.

A turning point for shattered lives.

A turning point for Governments at all levels and of every political colour and hue, to do all in our power to never let this happen again.

For the protection of children is the sacred duty of us all.

This is the motion that later this day this Government will commend to the House.

The Hon Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister
Dear

As you are aware, on 16 November 2009 the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, delivered an emotional and long overdue apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants. This apology, for the first time, provided national and international acknowledgement of a period in our nation’s history where the most vulnerable of our children did not receive the care they deserved.

The apology acknowledged that what happened in the past was both real and wrong. It has helped to ensure that a largely invisible part of our history is put firmly on the record and served as a reminder of what happened to many of these children - the loss of family, the loss of identity and, in the case of child migrants, the loss of their country. The words spoken by the Prime Minister conveyed a sincere hope that the national acknowledgement of the trauma experienced by these people would help to begin the healing process.

Around 900 people who spent time in out-of-home care travelled from across Australia to attend the event at Parliament House, as well as state and territory ministers, senators, members of Parliament and the general public. The event was an emotional coming-together and an opportunity to build new friendships and networks.

It is with pleasure I provide you with a copy of the apology motion and DVD as a reminder of the day. I sincerely hope, in line with the words of the Prime Minister, that this national apology to our Forgotten Australians and our Child Migrants is seen as a turning point for the future.

Yours sincerely

JENNY MACKLIN MP
Jo Parnell

When I was three years of age I was abandoned into a Children’s Home. On the eve of my eighth birthday the Home placed me in foster care. At eighteen I escaped the foster house by running away and going into nursing. Later, I trained as an artist, and then retrained as a school teacher. Now retired, I am fulfilling my life-long ambition to write.

The fact that I am a Forgotten Australian gives me authority over the experience. Knowing and understanding the experience of being a “forgotten” child at first hand, and how those experiences have had long-lasting effects on my own life, I feel it is my duty to speak out about what it means for these now adult people to be Forgotten Australians in terms of effects on their lives, and what it means to each of them personally to have been “forgotten” as a child.

Jo Parnell’s Story

Jo Parnell: photo author’s own collection.
One golden day in a late winter, I picked up my aunt in the car, bought two red “Poppa Mia” roses, and drove south to see my father. I wrapped my arms around the potted roses, and looked at his newly erected head-stone. Engraved in gold on the dark green slab of polished granite, in Times New Roman, were my two siblings’ names. Mine stood out in its absence. The roses slipped from my hands. My aunt, my father’s sister, put her arms around me. *You’re my niece ... but, there was something—about your mother.* She searched her memory. *I’ve forgotten a lot.* I drove her home to the Central Coast and drank tea while she looked in the family fruit box and wrote on perfumed note-paper. She handed me the folded paper. *Here you go. Names and places from your father’s side. That’s all I’ve got.*

During holidays, I travelled from Bathurst to Wellington, to Guyra, Geurie, Milparinka, Tibooburra, Dubbo, Broken Hill, and back to Coogee in search of my paternal ancestors. I found nothing but ruins, and learnt nothing except that people are soon forgotten. I swallowed my disappointment and searched for my paper trail. There wasn’t one. It left me feeling confused and angry. I rang my brother and said, *Al, I’ve got a birth certificate, but I think I’ve dropped from the sky.* Later, we compared certificates. Same surname, but the mothers’ Christian names differ; on his certificate, Mary Catherine, on mine, Kathlyne Mary. My father called my mother *Kate*. So was there only one Kate, or were there two?

My aunt died four years after my father. She left me the family fruit box. I rifled through it, looking for hard-copy memories. I had recently read an essay called *The Photographs: A Story* by the Sydney poet Adam Aitken; and as I searched through the fruit box the feeling grew inside me that I knew exactly what Aitken meant when he said his parents’ old photographs were his “lucky talismans, a connective tissue to the past.”² My aunt’s fruit box yielded one photo of my brother as a beautiful wide-eyed baby. There were no other photos of any of us three children in our early years. The first was taken in black and white when I was seven. I don’t bear any family resemblance. I look like I’m the cuckoo in the nest. There were no photos of our mother, and none of the houses in which we lived.

I think we all return to every place we’ve ever lived. If we don’t make the return journey in person we do it through memory or in spirit. As Frank Vanclay writes our sense of “place remains fundamentally important to our sense of identity, our sense of community, and our humanity”, and without that sense we’d be lost.³
My mother’s father, my English grandfather, said, *You can’t marry him, lass. He’s nobody ... a bohemian.*

After the hasty registry office wedding my father bought a milk-run at Randwick, and a smart Australian-style Californian ranch house with rustic Victorian gables. Georgian posts supported the bull-nosed veranda. Those memories aren’t mine, they belonged to my aunt. Yet I can pick up a pencil and draw the house because it is physically imprinted on my senses … no, not the whole house. I can only really remember its face.

The thought crosses my mind that drawing, like writing, is one of life’s mysteries. Sketching is a solitary occupation, and a private act. I’m in charge of the pencil, and I’m making the lines on the page. I complete my drawing of my memory-house, and here it is. So now that it’s on this page it’s on display and it’s become a public exercise. Criticise my drawing, however you will, but you won’t see it as I do. Like reading, studying a drawing is an intensely private act—we all see things differently.

Whenever I think about the Randwick house, snippets and images slide across my mind. My brother arrived yesterday for one of his regular three-day visits. He leans against my kitchen bench, one long leg crossed over the other, waiting for the kettle to boil. He looks up and says he remembers nothing about anything, and then he says, *Long, the house was long. It ran backwards up a hill.* He pours hot water into his cup. He puts the kettle down, and says, *Our artist father had a studio in the backyard.*
I remember. Or did I only dream the swirls of colour?

My first real memory is of the time my mother opened the front door. She stood talking to my father and someone else. I crawled down the wide hall, across the black and white veranda tiles, and tumbled down the stairs. My parents rushed to pick me up. I saw the palms outside the arched façade of the Royal Alexandria Children’s Hospital. It seems I had a tiny fracture of the skull. Later in my childhood, much to my distress, this skull fracture came back to haunt me. I began walking in my sleep and my step-mother informed me that I was cracked. She meant insane. My anguish lay in believing her.

My second memory also started at the front of the Randwick house. My father carried me down the steps and out the gate in his arms. Al closed the picket gate, as if to keep the house safe, and walked along beside us in his little boys’ coat. There was a long tree-lined street, maybe two, and then we were in a line of men, slowly edging towards a row of trestle tables, uniformed soldiers, and papery stacks. My father once told me that the army had rejected him on medical grounds. When he was fifteen he’d been the victim of a hit-and-run.

My brother carries his coffee over, and sits down opposite me in the family room. He tells me we left the Randwick house and moved to the bush some months before he turned four. So that would’ve made me not yet eighteen months old. I say, I remember. We moved to the bush because Dad thought a bomb might fall on Sydney, on our house.

Al looks over the top of his reading glasses at me. No. That wasn’t it. We moved because Dad hated being called the Randwick milk-man who didn’t get into the army. Besides, the house started to weep. There was water. It ran down the walls in our bedrooms.

The address of the Randwick house is entered on my birth-certificate. Sixty-odd years after I left Randwick, I stand in front of the house I’d lived in as a baby. Not because I want to relive or recapture the feeling of security I think I’d experienced as a baby—I’m years too late for that—but because, if ever I’m to find out who I am and where I belong, I need to discover where I came from. There’s the black-and-white tiled veranda of my memory-house. But nothing else is quite as I remember. This house has a second storey. A tall woman comes out the front door and crosses the street. She points to my camera. No photos, she says. The house is now a refuge, owned and run by the Anglican Church, for abused women and their children.
Back home, I look at my finished sketch and shiver. This house, this safe house, once sent me and Al away to a life of hardship and abuse.

Why has this house taken the veil? Is it trying to make amends for not keeping us safe, all those years ago? Or didn’t it have a choice back then? Did the fates decide that Al and I had to journey through hell to become the people we are now? Perhaps the house knew, all those years ago, what we were in for. Perhaps that’s why it wept.

Al’s been down to Sydney to look at the Randwick house. He calls in on his way home to Yamba. He looks at my sketches and says I’ve caught its essence. I compare the two and I’m filled with self-doubt and sadness and a sense of time gone past, of time that can never be regained. Al doesn’t see what I see. He’s standing on a different plane to me, and views things from a different eye-level. In a sketch, altering the relationship of figures to the horizon alters perspective, and changes the dynamic of a drawing.

I look deeply into my creations and suspect that, behind the front door, just through the threshold of my drawing, lay another world—a distant past, no longer mine, but sacred just the same.

§

My sketches remind me that when my father sold the Randwick house, we didn’t move to the country as he said he would have liked. His new job, as a Chief Sign-writer and Pictorial Artist to the NSW Government Railways, and my mother’s tuberculosis dictated that we live closer to Sydney. Our rambling old
“Queenslander” house, an oddly beautiful Colonial-European mix of weather-board, Victorian-filigree iron lace and lattice-work, set in the tiny hamlet of East Bankstown, was surrounded by thick ti-tree bush.

I mightn’t have a photo, but the house is so clear in my mind that my pencils fly across the paper. Here’s the weather-board exterior my proud father painted in white and blue-greys. Here are my mother’s crisp white curtains at the open windows. Here are the climbing roses that dropped their petals onto our shady front veranda . . . there were no climbing roses. A lead-light window set into the weather wall threw red and green reflections onto the wide veranda where only we children played.

I take a fresh sheet of paper. My brother hasn’t gone home to Yamba yet. He glances down at my sketch. The bathroom was next to the kitchen, and on the other side of the kitchen was a big room— that’s where we both slept.

I stop drawing and say, You’re wrong. There was a big room, sure. But that’s not where we slept at all, that’s where our mother sewed on her treadle machine. It had acorns carved on its lid.

In fact, when I was very small, I used to sit in that room on my mother’s sewing table, squinting at the acorns and howling loudly while she brushed my tangled curls. At such times she was all brisk movements and sharp words. At other times though, she was a mother with a soft lap and lilting Irish lullabies. In those days, she was a mother who taught me to read and scrubbed the house until it sparkled. Back then, she cooked exquisite cakes from which I picked tiny silver cachous, and sneaked little pieces of
spun sugar and delicate icing. Sometimes, she was someone I didn’t know. At those times, she was an
elegant lady who brushed her hair into a smooth chignon and wore high-heeled peep-toed shoes.

My brother’s in a huff over the big room in our old childhood house. He sighs, pushes his chair back,
and says, *Look ... you have your memories and I have mine, right?*

Most middle-aged people have ghosts in their past. A past without at least some would be rather empty. There are ghosts living in my memory-house. While I’m sketching, they come to meet me. But it is I alone
who conjure them up by drawing the house in which they live. I suspect my drawing allows me to think
about the house more than if I was reading a photo which, had it existed, would’ve been taken by someone
other than myself.

It’s a long time ago, now. But when I think about it, my life in this house seems to be divided into
two sections. In my mind, the first section is filled with the crowing of roosters, the scents of the bush, long
summer evenings, and my father laughing and lifting me high onto his shoulder—all the better to read the
stars in the night sky. In those war days, whenever he wasn’t at work or on air-raid duty, my father fascinated
me with tiny ships in bottles and bubble pipes fashioned from bamboo canes. Sometimes he’d stand before
me on the Persian carpet in the lounge-room, regal in his purple cravat, dark suit and brown sandals, a
cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, reading Shakespeare aloud, and hamming it up for anyone
who happened to come by—a neighbour perhaps, or the lady from the corner shop, or even the leather-
aproned man who delivered the great blocks of ice to put in the chest that kept our fresh food from going
rotten. Not bad for someone who claimed he was shy. I wonder if our house would have stayed happy if our
butcher, my father’s mate, hadn’t brought his lady cousin to visit. But I suppose that even if the butcher’s
cousin hadn’t come on the scene, our lives were bound to change sooner or later. My mother was very ill,
and my father was an energetic lad.

The butcher’s cousin came often. She hung around our back door. The house began to sigh and tremble. Al
and I saw our mother sitting over the open fire in the lounge-room, crying silent tears into her knitting. At
that time, we two children tried to keep out of our father’s way. He was unpredictable and cranky. We felt
glad, but sad, when he didn’t come home some nights. Weeds took over our father’s vegetable garden. My
brother crawled under the house with the hose to make mud and dig holes, practising for the day when he’d
be tall enough to go away to fight the enemy and dig trenches in the war. He invented a game that took us to Africa. Big game-hunters armed with gum-stick guns, we sailed through a sea of waist-high grass, crept into the orchard on shaking legs, tried to dodge the fruit hornets, and went on the hunt for snakes.

The butcher’s cousin’s loud voice called through our back door. The knife and fork tossed carelessly into the mashed potatoes and beans, the scraping of a chair, the banging of the back door, all were signs that my father had gone out into the dark with the butcher’s cousin. The house shook itself. My big brother took me by the hand. *C’mon, it’s bed-time. I’ll tuck you up. Mummy’s sick, and Daddy’s gone to watch for bombs.* I realise now that my brother tried to shoulder adult responsibilities. Is this what it means to be the eldest child in a family?

Our English grandfather came to sit straight-backed on one of our mahogany chairs. He murmured with my mother about sailing timetables and private schools. That night the house echoed with my father’s roar. *You’re out of your flaming mind if you think I’d let him take them to England. There’s a war on!*

Al’s over his short-lived huff. He sprawls on my lounge and dreams about what our life would’ve been like if we’d gone to live in England with our English grandfather. I stand at the sink, scraping carrots for the stew we’re having tonight, and tell him, *That’s all hypothetical.* I look over at my sketch, and think back. After our English grandfather left, our house filled itself with rows. My mother cried and my brother pointed his cap-gun at my father and pulled the trigger. Bang! *You’re dead.*

As the row-filled days went on my brother became quieter. I carried a feeling of dread around in my stomach. No-one seemed to notice how we felt. Back in those days, children were expected to remain oblivious to the adult world around them. We knew it was our job to play happily, speak only when spoken to, and eat everything on our plate.

The sun-room in the old weather-board house was the hub of the old weatherboard house, and it epitomises my childhood. I think of it as being sacred—like a wedding ring. A wedding ring is a circle. Yet seen from any oblique angle it forms an ellipse. For an artist, the trick is to recognise the different angles and add toning and highlights to fool the viewer’s eye into believing that the ring in the sketch is a circular object. In this aspect, drawing is not unlike writing. But unlike writing, a drawing is a two dimensional object. The viewer is always conscious that behind the visible illusion is the undeniable reality that a wedding band is a
circle. This is how I see the sun-room. As a child I saw it from different angles, but behind the illusion was
the reality of which I was partially conscious.

Al won’t talk about it, he never would, but in my drawing there are two pictures of the sun-room. The first is about white lace curtains, newspaper sailor hats, water-colour paints, my mother’s apple blossom perfume, and soft boiled eggs with smug, ink faces drawn by my father. The second is about confusion, a
sense of unreality, and a white fruit bowl. When I think of this bowl I see my mother’s pregnant belly rounded and full under her silky night-dress, her long black hair swirling wildly around her face as she picks up oranges, apples and pears and aims them at my father’s stiff back.

Somewhere inside my drawing is my mother’s ghostly scream. You bastard ... she’s not going to have my babies—do you hear me?

In my drawing I see my brother grab a green apple. He throws it with all his force at my father’s head. This picture leads to a memory of a spring day in 1943.

Our mother sat Al and me in the back of her friend’s car. She put herself and our new baby sister in the front. The car rattled down the road. Al looked back over his shoulder. The house’s disappearing. Abracadabra. The friend shot my mother’s tight face a sideways look. Don’t worry your mother. Be good. You’re going to get a surprise ... a special holiday.

The surprise was Dalwood Children’s Home.

In Sydney, after I discover my memory house in Randwick has changed itself into a refuge, I turn to my husband and say, We’re here now, might as well go on. We park the car in Rookwood Cemetery, and tramp along the public path amongst the crowded Catholic ‘R’s. We trudge up the hill to the office, and ask for directions to the magnificent shrine my father had once said he’d erected to my mother’s memory. But there’s no shrine. She’s under the public footpath. A pauper’s burial. My father, caught out. Does guilt sometimes cause people to lie? How else to explain my father’s words? Guilt implies a conscience. I suppose he had to live with himself. Nevertheless, the red jelly at the emotional centre of my secret self tilts, and comes dangerously close to a state of melt down. I bite down on my bitterness and say I’d like to visit the house I lived in before I was put in Dalwood. Perhaps, back there, I might find my father as he used to be in the early days.
On the way we pass the old corner shop which is now the local hardware. After sixty-odd years the shop looks the same on the outside, but the inside of yesterday has gone. My mind-picture, taken when I was a child, is caught in the net of time long past. We travel away from the shop and wait for the traffic lights to change. I look around at the present. The eucalypts and honeyed wattles, the horses and carts, and the crowing of roosters that can’t tell the time are now nothing but dim, silent ghosts flattened under the reality of rumbling traffic, exhaust fumes, and houses as far as the eye can see. It seems to me that time, when passing, loses as much as it gains. Progress is inevitable, and technology is wonderful—would you really want to be without it? Nowadays we have computers, televisions, mobile phones, and supermarkets—things that didn’t exist back when I was a child. But where have the nightly board games and story-telling, the home-grown vegetables to be shared with some friendly neighbour, and the wonder of life lived at the slower pace of yesterday gone? As we go on our forward journey, why couldn’t we have kept the valuables of the past?

I shrug off my mood of nostalgia and feel a sense of excited anticipation as the car whispers down the street. I shut my eyes and turn my head away. I want to feel the full impact of the happy years of my childhood when I turn around. Savouring the moment, I turn towards the house, open my eyes, and drop from a great height—no parachute—and slam into another dimension. My old house that holds my childhood safe in its bosom, the house that has lived for years in my memory, untouched by time, is gone. Spread across what used to be our house paddock and our orchard, stands the Church of Christ complex. My husband nods over at the church and says quietly, There’s the shrine to your mother.

I look across at the church and feel as if there’s a yawning hole in my world; and I realise that the home of my childhood is nothing more than a dream—a product of my imagination and unconscious yearning. Was it ever anything other than that? I reach for my camera and take a photo, and wonder if I do this simply because I can. But I know in my heart that a photo of my mother’s strange shrine is as close as I can physically get to her; I could never make a drawing of anything as intangible as an eerie sense of sacredness—no artist could, it’s beyond the scope of human ability. In my photo everything leans in opposite directions. I think my picture is out of focus. But I’m glad the spirit of my house—the house that once lived where a house of God now stands, where Pastor James Hogan looks to his congregation, and well-cared-for little children play in their church pre-school—is alive and well, and happy. But inside, I cry for my mother, for having missed her, for my memory house, for the destruction of my dream, for the unreality
of the thing. I cry even though I know it’s a waste of time crying for what isn’t, what never was, what wasn’t to be.

§

I’m looking at Dalwood Children’s Home, now. It’s taken me sixty-odd years to find the courage. The trouble with suppressed memories is that they often surface in other ways. Denied daylight, Dalwood came to me in tall, dark, twisted nightmare houses. I dreamt of rooms I hadn’t known existed, and where my dream-mind warned me not to go. Sometimes in my sleeping head I’d be compelled to climb a narrow wooden staircase to an attic with a sloping ceiling and bare floorboards. Sometimes an aged lady in black, her hair pulled tightly into a bun, sat silently in a chair to bring me suddenly awake, screaming, and soaked in icy perspiration. A few years ago I told myself, Enough. I hunted through the fruit box. No Dalwood photos. Weeks later I picked up one of Aunt’s books. Three photos fell from the leaves. Staring up at me, when I least expected, was Dalwood.

Dalwood, a great stone edifice originally called Clavering, is distinctly not Australian but something imported into Australia from Europe. Built on high land at Seaforth on Sydney’s Northern Beaches in the 1890s by Professor Theodore Thomas Gurney of Sydney University, a man of letters and a professor of science who failed to publish, Dalwood was sold on to real estate magnet and philanthropist Albert Edwin Dalwood in 1918. Albert bought it for his wife, Julia, who said, No. I won’t live there. It’s too spooky, too Gothic. It gives me the creeps. Albert gave it to the Food for Babies Fund. The mansion was extended. It gained added wings and a new façade, and Dalwood Children’s Home was born. Back when I was a child it reminded me of terrifying picture-book castles, and, somehow, of Transylvania and vampires.

I’m rather glad I found these photos. Back then I could not have picked up my pencil and drawn a picture of Dalwood. I still can’t do it now. It’s not the angles and planes that frighten me—it’s the mediums. When you’re making a drawing you invest your soul in the act of creation. After you’ve completed it, you look at your drawing and see yourself inside the representation; you see your style, you own the drawing—it’s your interpretation of what you see that’s on the page in front of you. A photo is not an act of creation as such, it’s a recording—you capture an image. When you’re reading a photo, especially one taken by someone else a long time ago, you can only ever remain outside looking in; it’s not your personal creation so you can’t own it—you can only look and wonder, or marvel, or smile, or shudder. When I look at the photo
of Dalwood I remember back, but my pencil refuses anything my heart rejects. The Home used its camera face to hide its evil heart from the world. But here’s a photo that reveals Dalwood’s chilling nature. Some clever photographer crept around the back and caught it unawares. The photo below is dated 1920, but this section looked exactly the same in the 1940s.

In this photo there are two types of windows—closed, and open. The panes in the closed windows reflect the sun away. The windows that stand open are deep, uninviting black holes where shadowy ghosts lurk. I can only bring these ghosts into the light by writing about the photo. Once I have placed them into words on the page in front of me, the ghosts are out on public view. A wise woman I knew once told me that spectral shadows can’t live in sunlight. But do they disappear completely? I suspect that they slink back into their

*Dalwood Children’s Home: rear view, c. 1920.*

*Photo: courtesy of the Manly Library.*

eerie space, back into the deep gloom, and play a waiting game. When it’s late and it’s time to turn off my computer and switch off the light, there they are once again, lurking just beyond the sills of the open windows in the photo.
When I look at this photo of Dalwood I think that this picture is one that will never bring anyone pleasure, except maybe an historian because it ended up being kept. So here’s a part of Dalwood frozen in time. For me, it’s a reminder that Al wasn’t with me during those years. Nobody was, except a host of other shocked little girls—each wrapped in her own misery, each a number instead of a name. ‘23’ is tattooed into my mind for all time.

This photo reminds me that Dalwood shone on our pain. We dusted, scoured, and got down on our hands and knees to scrub and polish. Back then, our gaolers’ canes swished down across our knuckles and criss-crossed the backs of our legs with raised welts, reminders that we had “something” to cry for.

Our gaoler-carers said, *Your people sent you here to us because they don’t love you.* I blocked my ears and turned my mind away.

Every Sunday afternoon, locked behind the six-foot wire fence of the play enclosure I waited for my mother to come and take me home. I sat on the swings, and swung high then low then high then low, and sang: *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.*

My mother didn’t come.

Every Sunday afternoon, locked behind the six-foot wire fence of the play enclosure, I waited for my beloved grandfather to come and take me home with him. I sat on the wooden seat of the see-saw. I sawed up and sawed down, and sang: *See saw Margery Daw, I shall have a new master.*

My grandfather didn’t come.

I cried for my mother. I cried for my grandfather. I cried for myself. In my mind I sat on a see-saw, I went up, I went down. I went nowhere.

This photo reminds me that we were hungry, always hungry. Some Saturday afternoons the big girls took me with them to Dalwood’s front fence to watch the soldiers march by. The soldiers threw pennies for the big girls, and tossed their cigarette butts on the ground. The big girls gathered the pennies and pushed them up the legs of their Bombay bloomers. I pushed my skinny arms through the iron railings, and groped around on the ground for cigarette butts. I unravelled the paper and pushed the tobacco into my mouth. It kept my hunger away. I called it my “chewing gum.”

Every night, in babies’ cots too small for our child bodies, we curled into foetal positions and went to sleep with the tears still wet on our cheeks.
In the night, every night, I climbed the high, barred sides of my cot and crept to the bathroom to suck toothpaste from the tube. I called it my “ice-cream.”

In the dark, I crept back to my cot. The night-duty sister’s long arm shot from the shadows. Her rubber truncheon, the sole of a plimsoll shoe, descended. The black marks on my back, on my skinny chest, on my arms, faded to green, faded to yellow. Kept from school until the yellow had disappeared, I learnt how to scrub pots, and the red tiles of the kitchen floor.

In the night, I dreamt of the toothpaste tube.

Every morning a bell dragged us from our cold cots to wash in ice-cold water, to dry our cold hands and faces on a sopping wet corner of the grey communal towel, to brush our hair with the communal hairbrush, and to brush our teeth with the communal tooth-brush.

Some mornings the night-duty Sister deserted her rum bottles and sailed into our dormitory in her starched muslin veil. Smiling, she’d stand between our cots and throw her hands wide like a picture of Jesus and bless us, the dear little children. Today I’m going to take you all to Manly, to the seaside; we’ll play in the waves and build sand-castles.

The sea beckoned. The sea waited. The sea took our sand-castles. Our dreams floated away. By mid-afternoon the night-duty Sister’s hands came together. Her alcohol-fuelled blows rained down on our small bodies in beltings for this, for that, for everything, for nothing. We learnt our lesson; adults’ promises weren’t worth the words that were spoken.

Those closed balcony doors in the photo remind me that there were nights when we messed the bed. Our noses were rubbed in the mess. The dirty sheets were draped over our head. No breakfast. Go wash your dirty sheets.

Afterwards, up the stairs to the Infirmary to be held down and given a hot soapy enema; and that night to sleep naked on the bare, rubber Macintosh.

Back then we all knew: Don’t see, it might happen to you. We all knew the cardinal rule: Don’t say ... I feel bad if you know what happened. Once, a child was gripped tightly and held face down in her mess. She stopped struggling, stopped breathing, and in the morning her cot was empty. There was only the red rubber Macintosh.

The photo speaks to me of the mournful sounds of childish weeping, of screams that seeped into the cold stones of which Dalwood is built. On windy nights the ghostly voices of children who’d suddenly
disappeared moaned and screeched around the high chimneys, and their wraiths played a sad game of hide-and-go-seek with the clouded moon. Death played peek-a-boo with my mind and havoc with my feelings. My parents, my siblings—in my child mind all were dead. I took my terrible sadness out to the hydrangeas where I believed the fairies lived. Al’s voice whispered from amongst the leaves. *I came up here from the Boys’ Home to see if you’re still alive.* Home Sister called me into the hall. *Come. Your baby sister’s very ill, she’s dying.* I hadn’t known my siblings were in Dalwood, in other sections. I went back to the flower fairies. In my child mind my siblings went back to the grave, only to come to life again when we stood together in Randwick Auxiliary Hospital beside our dying mother’s bed. A skeleton lay propped against her pillows and offered a bag of lollies. My brother reached forward, Matron smacked his hand down. Black and white striped humbug sweeties clattered onto the hospital floor and rolled under my skeleton mother’s bed.

On an early autumn day in 1947 my siblings arose from the dead for a third time. The photo below was taken on that day, the only day we had visitors. In this photo I have blurred the subjects’ faces because they are ghosts from my past. Here, in this one photo are the three small, child prisoners and their two large adult Beefeater Guards, and Dalwood—the Tower of London.

In this photo, my sister’s on the right. Her thin little body seems hardly able to support her head. My brother’s in the middle. Bow-legged, hands behind his back, his head down, he looks like a boy who’s been
crushed for all time. I’m standing on the left, in the straddle-legged pose of an abused child, my body and face bloated with Kwasikor’s Syndrome and malnutrition. The camera can’t spot the fresh batch of tiny nits that claw their way along my scalp under my lank hair. We are dressed in the Dalwood uniform, and wear shoes. My feet, normally bare, cry out for freedom. Shoes were communal, unpaired, and reserved for school and the rare outing, and the once-in-a-lifetime event like this photo session. The butcher’s cousin, in a tweed jacket with a velvet collar, and her mother, dressed in black and a white lace collar, stand behind us. Dalwood crouches, watching and waiting in the background. My father’s out of the picture. Or, rather, he’s framing the picture. He’s holding the camera.

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, the newspapers advertised Dalwood as *The House on Happiness Hill*. I sometimes wonder if that’s why my mother put us in the Home. Did she really believe we’d be happy, and well-cared for there? Or was she trying to exert her powers from beyond her waiting grave, and keep us from our father and the butcher’s cousin?

I don’t go to Dalwood the day I’m in Sydney visiting my memory houses. I’ve already been back twice. Before the first of those visits I rang my brother. *Al, come with me?* A long silence, time stretched and stretched, and then Al said, *Jo, I can’t. For me, that way madness lies.* I suppose that when it comes to facing personal ghosts, no-one can do it for you or with you. It’s something you just have to do alone.

On the first visit I gazed at the high, stained glass windows and beautiful old woodwork. I looked around, and saw the bath-room with its twin-baths where I’d once been forced to lift my faeces in my bare hands. I glanced into the dining-room where the children of the Palm Avenue Schools Literacy Program were eating lunch. I told myself I was glad Dalwood had turned over a new leaf, helping children with severe learning disorders. Those terrible Dalwood years belonged to another time. They belonged to a small innocent child who was tossed around by the fates. I stepped outside and caught sight of the old laundry where I’d been half-choked, and sexually assaulted at five years of age. The ghosts were hiding under a tangle of purple morning-glory vines.

Shortly after this visit I fell ill and went to hospital. The doctor ordered an enema before the operation. A small child once again, I lay on a red rubber Macintosh crying with shame and shaking with fear. I left the hospital and went home to the Hunter Valley to convalesce. I healed. I made my second visit back to Dalwood to lay some more ghosts.
On my second visit back to Dalwood, I walked near the purpling hydrangeas. Drifting rain chilled my skin. The grey ghosts rose from the mist, and speared my soul with icy needles. I left Dalwood immediately and ran for the present-day reality and the peace and comfort of my Australian ranch-style house in the Hunter-Valley in NSW. My home is my ideal and the centre of my universe, made so by the presence of my husband, and my family and friends.

§

In Sydney, on the day I discover the spirit of my childhood home is alive and well in a shrine to my mother, I say to my husband, *There’s one more. The foster house where Dalwood sent us kids.*

Back when I was a child, I hadn’t known until I saw the foster house that houses could be so black. I don’t need a photo to remind me that the only glimmer of light about this Australian Inter-War Californian bungalow was the sour-mouthed grin of the front veranda’s cement capping, and the small lead-light windows in the front wall of the house. The only other possible source of light was a bubble-glass front door backed with yellow ruched silk. But in my sketch you can’t see the door because it was set into a deep, dark side-porch. My black house is a cold Pandora’s Box. It’s filled with writhing demons waiting to spring from its grave-like darkness.

I look at my drawing and my mind drifts off to another space and connects to dark confusion and a white fruit bowl. Once again, I see my mother, Kate. She’s throwing apples and oranges at my father’s stiff back, and screaming, *She’s not going to have my babies, you Bastard—do you hear me?* Even now I’m not exactly certain what she meant. She knew she was terminally ill, so it’s possible that she also knew my father
would take us children and join up with the butcher’s cousin. But I now know what I didn’t know back then. In those pre-Dalwood days while my dying mother was pregnant with my sister, the butcher’s cousin kept an appointment with a knitting needle and made certain that my father’s love-child was never born. I suppose that, as a member of a middle-class family with a somewhat skewed Victorian morality, bearing an illegitimate child to a married man would have been too great a disgrace for her to carry.

When I look into my drawing of the black house I see my sister. Renamed ‘The Baby’, she was petted and carried around in the foster-people’s arms, and taken into their inner-sanctum to be cured of tuberculosis in the days when there wasn’t a cure. I see my brother, a farm-boy bent to his chores, as a mere speck in the distance. Out of my father’s hearing, he was called ‘You Lazy Sod’. I see me as a child, a menial servant taught by the constant lash of a dog-whip across her back to remember her insignificance. I discovered that my new name was ‘The Bastard’. But for some reason, in my drawing I can’t see my father clearly. In the black house he was remote, and had nothing to say to me. There’s a saying: *Leopards don’t change their spots*. Maybe not, but the distant man in the black house who claimed to be my father, wasn’t the red-headed, Shakespeare-shouting father of my pre-Dalwood house. He didn’t wear a dashing purple cravat anymore. In the black house we three children were kept apart. We lived in separate worlds unknown to the others. Once, I asked Al about his life during those years. He looked up sharply and shutters seemed to come down over his eyes. *Not your business.*

Al’s been in Sydney visiting a mate. He calls in to our house on his way back up north. I make him a ham sandwich and coffee. I show him my drawing of the black house. He turns his face away. I look at my drawing of the black house and see me, as a child, lying on the floor behind the door in the butcher’s cousin’s room and scratching my night away on a prickly, back-breaking, horse-hair mattress. Night after night, there I would lie, holding my breath and sleepless with fear that Jack, the butcher’s cousin’s physically and mentally handicapped brother, would leave his bed across the hall and come creeping like some monstrous crab to my pallet, and attack me while I slept.

The nightmare found its way into the endless days. Down in Jack’s unlined, corrugated tin shed the spiders sat spinning in the rafters. They shrouded their small prey in layers of sticky web, and consumed their souls while they were still alive—leaving only the outer shells. Behind the locked door, I’d send my mind safely away from my body, and wait until Jack was ready to wind his old gramophone and play Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*—my “reward,” Jack called it. Children don’t know what’s
happening to them when they’re sexually abused. They feel guilty, dirty, ashamed, sinful, and very, very frightened of the consequences if anyone should find out.

Last year my brother sat on my back patio in the shade. He said he wanted to talk. He cleared his throat and fell silent. I began to talk about Dulwood, and about Jack. Al said he didn’t like me talking about my experiences. Why? Because, he said, he was the big brother and he didn’t protect me. I glanced at him. But you were only a child ... and that’s another thing, are you certain you’re my brother? Al stood up and shook his legs. He stamped around the patio and came back to stand in front of me. Oh, not that birth certificate thing again.

I looked up at Al and reminded him that just before she’d died our aunt had said she’d just remembered something—our English grandfather had married more than once, and his first and second wives had been somehow related. She also remembered Kate, Katey as she called her, had a younger half-sister whom our father had liked—perhaps a little too much. Al, we might be sort of half-brother and sister, or cousins ... I could be your aunt! Al’s humourless brows seemed to meet in the middle. He barked, Don’t say that ...

I can’t help but wonder if Al refused to entertain the thought because he was afraid it would upset his own world. At the time though, I gave up arguing with him. He looked at me and said gruffly, I wanted to tell you ... I’ve been to see Kate. I had her moved to a place of her own, and I gave her a simple headstone with our names on it. I cried, and I watched him brush his hand across his face and walk away into the
paddock. I sat back in my chair and marvelled at the sheer immensity of the sky. The cloud pictures shifted and reformed then shifted again. I couldn’t hold them long enough to grasp their meaning.

I leave the past, come back into the present. I look up and see we’re almost outside the black house. I turn to my husband. *This is it, right here.*

The house has an added storey now. But the downstairs section still shows the shape of the original house. I look, and wonder how a house that had seemed so big to me when I was a child could be so small now. A sudden southerly wind rises up, and moves a dark shrub. A flash of yellow on the wall under the leering veranda catches my eye. I can’t believe that this black house now calls itself a Child Safety House. Still, my black house life was a long time ago. I know nothing of the family who live here now.

At this stage, I’m not to know that the yellow triangle will be taken down. I’m not to know that the police sergeant, who was a main player in the Child Safety House Scheme of NSW, will tell me that the scheme was scrapped in this state because of problems in various communities.

People leave, families die out like my foster-people’s did, but do houses that have cried ever stop, I wonder?
PART II
Geoff Steele

Geoff was adopted as a baby. This does not make Geoff a Forgotten Australian. What classifies him as Forgotten Australian is that when he was a young boy his adoptive parents’ marriage broke down and he was placed in an orphanage. These circumstances, and what happened to Geoff while he was in the orphanage, have had long-lasting adverse effects on his life.

Geoff Steele’s Story

Australia is sometimes called a land of extremes. For over two years now, we have been experiencing unusual weather events, torrential rains, cyclones and such, and the summer of 2010-11 is the wettest on record. In the Hunter Valley where we live in NSW, temperatures soar into the 40s and storms roll down the valley. At our place, wild westerly winds tear at our orange trees and the rain turns the ground to slush, and when you walk down the paddock the mud oozes between your toes. Flood warnings come over the radio. But other than for minor flash-flooding in low-lying areas, our region doesn’t go under. In other parts of Australia the ground refuses the water. Thousands lose their possessions and their homes in the worst floods in living memory. In mid-January, on our television screen we see a family sitting helplessly on the roof of
their home in the Lockyer Valley, and we watch in horror as a crazily tilting roof-raft goes by carrying three, small, doomed children. I become so focused on the Queensland tragedy I forget to take stock of what’s happening in Victoria.

During this time I’m caught in a small storm of my own. In the May of 2010 I’m granted entry into the PhD programme. In a meeting at the university to discuss my new project, I say, -I’d like to write another book, but this time, not about me as I did for my MPhil.

My supervisor sits easily in his chair.

-Why don’t you write a book about other Forgotten Australians?

I say it’s a wonderful idea. Then I hesitate.

-But I don’t know how I could do that because these people like to tell their own stories.

We toss things around. The tall, quietly spoken professor moves a stack of papers to one side and rests his arms on the desk in front of him. I would have to interview subjects for my book, and use the interviews as the story.

Filled with elation at being made a PhD student, I say eagerly, -Oh, yes, of course! I’ll start immediately.

How dumb can you get?

The wise man seated on the other side of the desk raises one hand slightly.

-You won’t be able to begin yet, because you’ll be dealing with living people we have to submit a proposal to the university ethics committee and wait for approval.

I gulp, -You mean, until I get ethics approval I’m not even allowed to approach potential participants for their stories?

The wise man looks me in the eye and nods.

The months stretch, my elation turns to despair. For me the long drawn-out ethics process is pure hell. I worry my research project won’t be approved. In the early December of 2010 I finally gain approval from the university to begin work, and post the information sheets and consent forms away to the participants.

I arrange to leave on Saturday 5th February 2011 and drive south to begin gathering data for my book about Forgotten Australians. My husband Bob is my travel companion. On the Monday before we’re to leave I arrive home and walk into the family room. Bob turns from the television, glances down at the books I hold
in the crook of my arm, and says, -We have to cancel. We won’t get through. The south’s gone again and Shepparton’s under, two people have drowned already.

I gape at him stupidly. -But I’ve already made appointments to interview Geoff Steele and his sister!

§

The rain stops by the time we reach the freeway, begins again near Goulburn, stops again before we get to Yass, and begins again as we travel towards Holbroook and Albury. At Holbroook, the highway suddenly disappears under what looks like an oceanic expanse. We drive through cautiously and steadily with the floodwater fanning out from the tops of our wheels. Over to the right, the holed shell of the decommissioned submarine HMAS Holbrook is at sea. It sails on its massive, concrete plinth high above the drowned flowers in the flooded Tourist Park.

It stops raining the other side of Holbroook. The late afternoon sun shines down on a war-torn Albury, a mighty battle ground of uprooted trees, great torn branches, over-turned garbage bins, and the blue of make-safe house-roof tarpaulins. The storm has left the Albury-Wodonga arena and moved on.

Albury has a lot of motels, hotels, bed and breakfasts, and caravan parks. We have a quick look as we drive through to South Albury where Geoff Steele lives. It seems to me that in Albury all the rivers run, and they all run through the caravan parks. Only one park has a site that seems to be fairly dry and promises good run-off. We find the care-takers raking up debris and shredded palm leaves and book, and I go to meet Geoff Steele.

Worried that my waterlogged sandals will fall to pieces like wet cardboard, I pick my way carefully through the puddles in the shared driveway and make my way down to the pretty, brick Housing Department unit at the back of the row, and walk up the path to Geoff Steele’s front door. I puzzle over the presence of six or seven shiny coins under my feet. I almost stoop to pick them up. But the thought crosses my mind that if he sees me gathering the money then this man I’m going to interview, the man who has invited me to his home, who I’ve never met but am about to meet, might think I’m intending to pocket the cash he’s accidentally dropped. The house has a closed look, as if it’s keeping the world out. I ring the door-bell. There’s no movement from inside. I worry that Geoff Steele has forgotten our appointment, or has changed his mind about telling me his story as is indeed his right, or if I somehow have the wrong day. I ring the bell again and turn to study the pots of large fleshy bulbs that hang from the latticed screen of the little porch.
The bulbs sprout long, thin stems which flower out into strange mythological triffids. I stoop to peer inside the trumpet of one of the hanging bells and confuse it with a giant pitcher plant from a Peruvian marsh. I see, I think, a thin abdominal carapace and one transparent rainbow wing of a dead fly floating in the viscous fluid deep in the bottle of the trumpet. The front door suddenly opens, and I turn quickly.

Standing in front of me is a sandy-haired, heavy-set, square block of a man. His eyes, set deep in shadows, strike me as haunted. I gain an impression of darkness. Noting his olive complexion, I silently wonder if he comes from Italian stock.

-Sorry it took me so long to answer. I was asleep, had a rough night. Son rang me in the small hours again, stimulated by alcohol. He gets a bit aggressive over the phone, and when I get off those I feel exhausted. It gets me down basically, so I give Lifeline a little ring. Sometimes you need to talk to talk it out with somebody?

Pointing to the path, I say, -I think you might’ve dropped your money.

He laughs, -It’s super-glued onto the concrete. It’s a Dutch custom. It’s supposed to bring good luck and money coming into the house.

I say, -I just called by to introduce myself and arrange interview times.

The morning sky is dotted with small puffy clouds that for all their seeming whiteness are slightly tinged with grey. The sun struggles to dominate but gives up and goes skulking behind the clouds. We eat an early breakfast, and I return to Geoff Steele’s unit carrying my bag of recording equipment, spare tapes, notebooks and pens. Geoff’s in his kitchen washing dishes, you can see him through the window as you walk down the path. Inside, he gestures towards the dining-room and says, -I thought we might set your gear up on the table over there.

The tiny dining-room runs straight off the kitchen, separated only by the breakfast bar. The small lounge room runs sideways off the dining room in the short foot of an “L,” and is made distinct from the dining area by the arrangement of the lounge suite. Almost all the entire back wall of the living area is glass—wide, floor to ceiling windows and sliding glass doors.

I’m struck by the neatness and order and astounded at the attention to fine detail in the unit. A freshly-washed tea-towel hangs with precision in the shining kitchen. A small bowl of scented flowers graces
the coffee-table. The long-haired mat under the table has been carefully groomed. The glass in the windows seems to sparkle and I feel uncomfortable as I remember my own not-so-clear windows at home. I gaze out the windows and admire the narrow but private, walled garden.

I switch on the tape-recorder, and go through my spiel.

-So Geoff, are you still alright with being interviewed?

He glances down at the table, clears his throat, leans in to the tape-machine, and says loudly in a stilted voice, -Yes, and I’m very happy to do it.

I’m a first-time interviewer here, and I don’t know who is more nervous, him or me. How do I start this conversation, I ask myself, and search around for something to say to put him at ease. I glance over at the fine, old-fashioned, well-cared-for wooden dresser and catch a whiff of honey and bees’ wax and lavender. On the wall, a wooden-framed replica of an old railway waiting-room clock ticks the seconds and the minutes of the peaceful Sunday morning. I point up at the clock.

-We have a lovely old clock just like that at home.

-Yes. I’ve got an attachment to stuff like that. It gives a homely feeling to the place and takes me back to the early, more secure times.

Pen poised, I wait for him to continue. But he gets up and disappears down the hallway into the more private area of his unit. He comes back with a box of tissues. Placing them conspicuously between us on the table, he says slowly, -You … we might need those.

A small, black dog and a long-haired cat come running into the room. He bends down, ruffles the cat’s fur, and picks up the exuberant dog. -Well, here they are. Meet my little family. We all live here together.

He takes the dog out to the backyard. Through the window, you can see them playing on the lawn. Is this, I wonder, what I call a “white rabbit”—a magician’s sleight of hand to take the viewer’s eye off what’s really going on—something akin to delaying tactics on his part? I admire the cat, scratch around its ears with my fingers, and wonder if, perhaps, in his conscious mind Geoff wants to tell me his story, but if on another, perhaps more subconscious level, he doesn’t. Eventually, Geoff comes back into the room. We settle back down, separated by a scattering of note-books and pens and the tape-recorder whirring away noisily on the
heavy, tapestry cloth covering the dining-room table. I ask him what he means by “the early, more secure times.”

Unreadable expressions flit swiftly across his face. I’m reminded of cloud shadows on the hills, cast by the sun on breezy, late summer days. He turns his eyes from mine and looks somewhere over my shoulder.

-Um, a lot of creativity in me when I was a young person. Liked to draw and dream about the future—modern cars and buildings like those you see today—long before they existed, if you get what I mean? I could see all this in my head. I was very gifted …

I have frequently noticed how ordinary everyday conversation quite often hangs, truncated or unfinished in the air, and jumps around like a grass flea. Sometimes it’s a bit like someone who has accidentally stood on a bull-ant’s nest, briefly landing first on this point and then touching on that point. At other times speakers talk at cross-purposes and yet, normally, we understand each other—at least to some degree. It’s rather strange, but if you were to pen a story in exactly the same way as we verbalise when communicating spontaneously, readers would struggle to make sense of the written thing. This talk between me and Geoff Steele is, of course, not quite the usual ordinary everyday conversation because it’s being conducted and taped for a specific purpose. So it rather surprises me that, just when I’m convinced he’s following a certain line and about to offer up some rare jewel that’ll reveal a previously unseen world, he rambles on about his youthful creativity. I find myself thrown into confusion. The thought that jumps into my mind is, “what’s going on here, what in hell is all this about?”

I look hard at Geoff’s face. He shifts in his seat, and looks ill at ease. I try to imagine myself in his position. He doesn’t know me from Adam, and yet he’s preparing to tell me his life story, and with a sudden rush of understanding I know that I, too, would feel vulnerable.

Only the day before I’d left my home to drive to Albury, I’d been reading up on interviewing techniques. All the advice is much the same—when interviewing a participant who has knowingly and willingly given their permission to be interviewed for the sake of telling their story, be sympathetically objective and quietly and respectfully insistent. Probe; probe your subjects deeply in the interests of doing their stories, and them, justice.
-Geoff, what do you think was behind all this childhood creativity of yours?

-Well the “old” was the old to me, it wasn’t interesting history or anything and, this stuff was my life.

-Your life?

It hits me that he doesn’t know where to begin his story. I form a question in my mind. But before I can voice it, words seem to suddenly swim into his mouth, and rush out into the air between us.

-I’ve thought about all this but when it comes down to really talking about it, like we’re doing here now, it’s different, and sort of a bit frightening? Now how can I put it … um, I suppose it was Mum and Dad had their life and I was surrounded with their goods and chattels. I remember that in my early years they had a lot of nice things and it all added up to some sort of steadiness and security. But their assets changed over time and all their nice stuff had to go and they got shabby-cheap things—50s space-age lamps and round little tables with four legs sticking out—and none of this fad stuff was classy or durable (is that the right word?), and it didn’t mean anything to me, you know?

When I was in my teens I spent some time with Mum in St. Paul’s Cathedral, and I remember thinking that magnificent buildings like this were monuments to a proper, stable society, and that it all meant something because it’s solid and secure and it’s stood the test of time. So being a dreamer, being talented, I saw I could create a world of my own, something modern that was really nice and classy and solid, and would last, and mean something. So I began putting my ideas down on paper. Like, there was a whole row of nice little ultra-modern houses with flat slatted roofs. They were beautiful. But they wouldn’t have been very practical if you tried to live in them, they were too low. When you think about it, I suppose all this was getting away from what I saw around me.

One time, when I was grown up, I threw all the old stuff out, had a huge bonfire. I was upgrading, or maybe I wanted to erase my past basically. Then at one point my life collapsed completely. When things got a bit better … when I got a bit better, I realised that all I ever needed was stability and I set myself up with things that have value. So what we have here now is the good old-looking stuff, like that clock on the wall over there, and even though it’s all cheap compared to the tongue and groove furniture of yesterday, it means
something because it’s got something special and gives me a sense of security and place. What’s behind all this you might ask? Basically, it all goes back to when I was nine, I think.

“So do you still draw?”

“Oh, not now, but I did for a long time. Look, I’ll show you. I’ve got some of my drawings on the wall over here.

Geoff pushes his chair back and crosses the floor into his lounge room. I follow, and look up to where he’s pointing.

“I kept these because they have value, they mean something. See that framed letter there? Well that’s from Holden Motors to me. Holden didn’t actually make cars like these drawings of mine, but they bought a lot of my ideas from those and actually used them. I didn’t have the education to do all the designing myself. That was years ago, of course. Now, in this day of computers, they’ve got no use for designs done like this anymore.

§

“Geoff, can we talk now about what family you had?”

“Well, I’ve got two families. There’s the new one—that’s my natural family—and then there’s my former family, my adoptive …

“Oh, so you were adopted? How come? Can we go to the beginning?”

“Um, it’s a tangled story. See, for me, there were a lot of “beginnings” basically. Well okay … I always knew I was born in Victoria on the 28th February 1947, and I knew I was adopted by Mum and Dad, Estelle and Alan Steele. But that’s all I knew right up until I lived in Cairns, and the lady I was living with in a relationship at the time said, “Why don’t you try and find out about your natural family.” I said, “I don’t really want to know any of that, maybe about my natural mother, but I’m an only child.”

I eventually got hold of all my papers under the Freedom of Information Act in November 1989—and I had to have a National Police Check done to say I wasn’t a criminal and didn’t want my papers for any other reason than to find out who I was, and I had to enter that paper as evidence before the Department of Human Services finally approved and gave me my papers. I sat down to look through them and it was like
reading a Charles Dickens novel. I kept finding all these clues, you know? But it was a big relief to me because I found out what happened, sort of, and that I was born at the Royal Women’s Hospital at Carlton, Victoria, to Margaret Joyce Davis from the UK, and she was aged twenty-three when she had me. She gave me up, and on the papers under the heading “Cause of Commitment” is handwritten “no means,” and under the part “Previous History of—Child” the same authority has written “is illegitimate and cannot be supported by the mother.”

I’d always believed it would be hard for a woman to give her baby up. I thought for my mother to have done that either she’d been very naïve, or been raped, or deserted by a fella who wouldn’t stand up and put into the plate. Now the truth wasn’t far from that last. My father would just meet her down by the railway track to make babies basically, and then off he’d go again. Turns out, my mother was a bit of a floozy. She’d already had two babies to him before me and given them up. The eldest of us, my brother Norman, was sent off to Nanna to be looked after, then when my sister, Beverly, came along Nanna said “no”—I think it was sort of, well, once is a mistake and that’s forgivable, the second time around isn’t because twice is not a mistake? So Bev was given out to adoption straight away. But when I came along six years later, I um, just floated around the wards in Babies’ Homes.

Geoff puts out his hand, open, palm up, as if offering a delicate blossom that’s come adrift from its stem.

-My father wouldn’t give my mother any money so she could keep me because he wanted a motorbike. The bike won. But once she’d given me away they turned around and got married. Now that’s the part that doesn’t make any sense to me. They were having children left and right and giving them away only to get married and have two more. So my two younger siblings were born into wedlock and knew about each other. But until a few years back they didn’t know about me and the elder siblings, and my elder siblings and I didn’t know about them or each other, either. Anyway, there seemed to be something between my natural parents that drew them together.

I can’t help but wonder why my own father had married the butcher’s cousin, the plain, much older woman who had deliberately set out to destroy his first marriage. Maybe my young, good-looking father...
really loved her. Love, I have heard it said, makes strange bedfellows. Mentally, I shrug, and turn my attention back to Geoff and his story.

-When I was born the authorities of the day sent me over to the Carlton Babies’ Home on the 4th July 1947, and they sent me off to the Child Welfare Depot on the 28th July, 1947, and they sent me off to the Alexander Babies’ Home at Ballarat on the 5th May 1948. The Home was going to transfer me to another Babies’ Home down Geelong way when I got a bit older, and so on, because that’s what they did back then. The way I think of it I was a parcel … chucked in the back of an Australian Post van and dumped in a mail depot somewhere before being bundled off somewhere else again. But before I could be posted on Mum and Dad got me on what they called “under licence” back then—basically they had to prove to the authorities they were good people to have a child?

He reaches down beside his chair and produces a bundle of papers.

-You know, I think my papers might be a bit out. I always say I was a good two and a half years old when Mum and Dad came on the scene because I remember my first Christmas with them, and in my mind it seems to come right on top of them picking me up.

I glance at his birth and conditional release certificates. Quickly, I do the maths. I say, -Sometimes memories can be a bit funny, can’t they.

He carefully works his papers back into their plastic sleeves.

-Well, when I try to remember back to when I was only a bit of a baby, the things I remember are in patches, like little scenes or something, and it’s hard say which fitted where. It’s like a jig-saw puzzle. Anyway, Mum and Dad took me home to their grocery store—a rambling cream weatherboard place with a large residence attached, and a huge backyard—on the corner of Darling and Sturt Streets in North Ballarat. You were looked up to in those days if you were a shop-keeper. You were a very important figure in the community. But this business of getting me didn’t work out in the bigger family picture because Mum’s and Dad’s families, the older ones, were conservative people from Ballarat, and very narrow in their outlook. With Mum’s family it was sort of … I wasn’t of this earth? I was adopted. Dad’s people felt the same way.
See, it was alright if you were *born* into the Steele family and taken on by one of them, but you didn’t bring an “outside” child into the family because an adopted child came from a loose mother, so it had bad blood.

Geoff asks if I’d like a cup of tea. He fills the kettle and rattles around in his kitchen. He sets a cup of tea in front of me and walks around the table to his chair. He sits deep in thought for a few minutes, and then laughs cynically.

-My adoption papers went through in 1954 and Mum and Dad straightaway had me christened in the Church of England in Ballarat. I’d always used the name Steele, but on the day I was christened my name became official. I was a very important person.

Leaning over to the dresser, he picks up an A-4 Manilla envelope and reaches inside. He pulls out a couple of photos and places them side by side on the table’s tapestry cover. I look at the first photo and see a pretty child, an innocent. His pale blonde hair gleams, and his sweet, trusting smile reaches his eyes and seems to light up the photo from within.

*Little Geoffrey Steele*

*Photos by courtesy of Geoff Steele.*
These are the about only photos that escaped the flames when I tried to incinerate my past. I don’t know why I did it, I was angry, I suppose. But I wish I hadn’t done that, at the end of the day.

I don’t remember how old I was when that photo on the left was taken—might have been about eight? The other photo was taken when I was younger. I’m in my little coat and gloves and beret, and my new shoes. You can’t really see my shoes in this photo, but I loved those shoes. I’ve been obsessed with shoes ever since.

I was doted on. Mum and Dad enrolled me in Ballarat Grammar, and that’s where I started my schooling. I remember that while I was there the Queen and the Duke were on their 1954 Australian tour. Australia was into Royalty and all things British back then. And there I was, in my nice little uniform and hat, standing with my school and waving a little flag and cheering as I watched the Queen drive up tree-lined Church Street in her big black car, and pass under the big arch at Ballarat that marks the beginning of the road to Adelaide.

Looking back, I realise Mum and Dad were giving me lots of nice things that only wealthy children got back then, like one was a little red car? I think they were giving me more things than they would their own natural child if they’d had one. I call it keeping up with the Joneses, or maybe they were showing the world that we were better than the Joneses. But I know for certain I was loved, and I loved them. I was their little boy and very spoilt, there was no doubt about it, and I didn’t know anything different until I went into the orphanage and things went pear-shaped in my life.

As I move my hand to turn the page in my notebook, I accidently knock my pen to the floor. It drops with a clatter. I leave it where it falls, and wait for Geoff to continue. Then it hits me. Did he say he went into the orphanage after he was adopted?

-Sorry Geoff, I’m a bit mixed up here. Don’t you mean you were in the orphanage before you were adopted?

-No. I was put into the orphanage after I was adopted. Mum took me there, and Dad let her.

It’s a battle for me not to beg out loud, “Oh, please don’t destroy my picture of a much-loved child.”
Do some people treat children like puppies, I wonder? Do they love them when they’re babies, and then get tired of the mess in the house when they grow up a bit? Of course, I know from my own story that not all children in orphanages were orphans in fact. Many incarcerated children had one, possibly both, natural parents still living. But until now, I’ve never heard of a case where a child had been placed back into an orphanage after being adopted. I bend down to pick my pen up from the floor. Straightening up, I make eye contact with Geoff.

- Geoff. I have a picture in my mind of Estelle as a very gentle, loving mother.

-Well, yes, and I loved Mum. But the way she brought me up I came ready-made with a big “S” for “special” stamped all over me. Looked at from her angle as an adoptive parent back then, that doesn’t seem so wrong, and in a funny way knowing she thought I was “Special” got me through. But it was awful too because we were always on the move and every time we’d go to a new place Mum would tell everyone I was adopted, and she’d say it like I deserved special treatment and she expected everyone to give it to me.

I had a little certificate back then—it was nice and bright and blue and about the size of your little note-book on the table there—and on it was written my history. Mum used to produce it every time I went to a new school, and the teacher would say to the class, “Geoffrey’s our new boy and he’s adopted.” So I was “different.” I didn’t make friends, and I had all this super special treatment dished out to me. I got tormented, bullied, ostracised, and belted up by the other boys—“Oh your father’s not really your father.”

The way people looked at things back then, everyone knew that if you’d been put up for adoption you were somebody else’s bastard. When I got to be a teenager that took “special” out of the equation straight away because by that time I knew what “bastard” meant. We are a labelling world I think. My life was an emotional roller-coaster. It was all ups and downs.

I don’t think any child needs to be singled out in that way. But as a child I thought I was really “special,” and I couldn’t understand why other people didn’t. Like, we’d visit the relatives—all related to each other by birth or marriage and all very cliquey—and “we,” Geoffrey the special child and Geoffrey the talented, creative child, were only adopted. So for Geoffrey it was, “Get away over there, this is family business so it’s got nothing to do with you.” So little Geoffrey was an outsider and he felt it … and I felt very angry all the time. It got to be so that I eventually developed all sorts of anti-social behaviours. So Geoffrey
wasn’t happy and I wasn’t very happy with Geoffrey. But I’m not Geoffrey now, I’m Geoff, and I’m happy with Geoff these days.

An image of Siamese twins pops into my head. I brush the twins aside. Puzzled, I look across at Geoff, and say, -Geoff, when you talk about yourself, why do you say “we,” and why do you speak of yourself as two people?

I hear the words come out of my mouth and the thought immediately crosses my mind that he could take my question as personal criticism. I feel my face flush. I worry whether it was quite tactful. I’m embarrassed at my temerity. The Siamese twins won’t go away. They hang around the corners of my mind. Geoff’s eyes widen in surprise.

-Oh, I didn’t—

He breaks off and laughs. -Split personality?

-Seriously, I don’t know why I do it. But now, these days, I understand what happened and what went on back when I was a kid, and I understand why I was the way I was for years and blamed everything and everyone else for my own feelings and shortcomings. I understand where I’m at now because I faced it full on, and as I found out, you’re at war inside yourself when you go looking. You don’t always find things that you like or that you want to own or even know about. I’ve cried a lot, really cried. There were things locked inside me, but I didn’t know what they were? Turns out it was what happened to me when I was nine, and I’m still trying to come to grips with that …

His words strike a chord of recognition in my mind, and I shudder as I recall the struggle I had a few years back when I went looking at places inside me that I had never before allowed to see daylight. I suppose that to look deep inside oneself is to enter the unknown, and sometimes, when you dig up deeply buried memories, it can be like living in a nightmare.

-Yes. That’s a good way of putting it. I suppose that even if you know a bit about what the things locked inside you are, you’re still at war with yourself when you go looking.
He gazes down at his clenched fists. I want to reach and pat his arm, but I don’t, and seeing the tension on his face I search my mind for something to say to shift the focus. All I can come up with is, - Geoff, you keep this place beautifully.

He lifts his head and looks around with a pleased smile on his face.

-Oh, I’m a fussy bugger. Clean feels good and looks beautiful to me. But all those big windows and sliding glass doors you see here really worry me, I can’t manage them. So I put my odd cents in that beautiful old china jar you see over there on the dresser and get the window cleaner in once a month. It’s keeping up the standard of life—you can’t let standards slip. I remember Mum once told me I’d make a fine housewife. She said I was neat and clean and tidy. Well you had to be in the orphanage, even if you were only a little boy of nine.

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It’s one of those close, still days that give you a sense that something is waiting to happen. It’s hot in the caravan. After we’ve eaten Bob and I take a walk under the shady trees in the nearby park. It’s enough to clear my mind. Pleased with the way the interviews are going, I return to Geoff’s place feeling exhilarated and refreshed. Behind the locked screen, his front door stands wide open. Johnny O’Keefe screams “HI-IGH HOPE, HI-I-IGH HOPES …” from somewhere inside. I bang on the door, and wait. Johnny O’Keefe suddenly loses his voice and Geoff comes staggering to the door.

-Sorry, I was having a rest … this is very draining talking everything out, but I’m fine now.

We take our seats at the table where we’d sat previously, and chat. After a while I glance over my notes, and take a fresh page in my book. Picking up my pen, I look across at Geoff. He nods to indicate that he’s ready to go on taping.

-Geoff, you told me your Mum put you in an orphanage, and your Dad let her. So how did that come about?

-Well it didn’t happen suddenly. I mean, Mum and Dad were two very different people. Mum, Estelle, was softly spoken, and very religious. Alan, Dad, was a good dad, but sort of distant by nature—he
had war neurosis and liked his drink and his own little world and he locked himself in it? But he was very loud in his drink, and he’d say some vile things to Mum. He had a sharp way that would take away your sense of yourself—*bastardisation*, as I call it? Mum was a quiet lady and never said anything back. So there were never any rows, they just wouldn’t speak to each other. But they’d talk to me, I wasn’t in trouble. There I’d be sitting on the floor playing happily with my toys while everything went on above my head … it was a bit like living in a silent world? Still, they always seemed like a normal couple to me.

How do you define “normal”? Aren’t all couples, all families, individual in their behaviour?

-Oh, but still … they always gave each other a kiss. In fact, I never really knew what drove them apart.

-*But Geoff, in any relationship, there’s a lot goes on behind closed bedroom doors, isn’t there?*

-Well, yes, but there are a lot of families like that, like my parents were, and they stay together.

-*I suppose what works for one doesn’t always work for another as my old aunt was fond of saying.*

-I suppose so. Anyway, every now and then they’d have a social separation, as they called them back then. Sometimes Dad would go off to get straightened up a bit, and sometimes Mum would go off for a “break.” It was all done very quietly, and without hassle. Then in about 1955-56 Dad went walk-about to Adelaide and while he was away the grocery shop went into receivership. So Mum and I went to live with a cousin of Dad’s and her husband and their seven children in their new blonde-brick house. These younger Steeles were broader in their outlook than the older rellies. They didn’t fuss about adoption. I remember it was a lovely time. But it was a bit like a fun sleep-over in a way because Dad soon came back and moved us all into the Hotel Glenferrie, the “gentleman’s hotel” in Hawthorne, a suburb of Melbourne.

There, he began drinking more heavily and became even more verbally abusive towards Mum. But it didn’t affect me, I was used to having anything I wanted and that didn’t change. Like, if I wanted a model car or a magazine either Dad would take me, or Mum would say, “Just go over the road to the shop and get whatever you want and tell the shop-keeper to put it on Dad’s account.” So this one time I picked up some stuff and said, “Just put it on Alan Steele’s account.” And the shop-keeper turned on me. “NO. Tell your father to come and pay his bill.”
I was shocked, and hugely embarrassed, and I think humiliated, too, at the end of the day. All that came with the knowledge that my Dad wasn’t paying his way. My Dad put me, his child, in that position. I was very angry. People were always asking, “When am I going to see the money?” And he’d be over the road drinking the money he’d been on his way with to pay his bills. I wanted to run away and hide. But at the same time as I carried all those feelings around inside me, I was proud of him because when he was working he drove around in a big Pontiac with his really important boss.

His leans forward confidentially. His tone is half-questioning as if asking for my thoughts or begging my pardon for having felt the way he did. But I have nothing to say. I don’t want to say anything that could be taken as judgement of his father. So I sit very still, silently empathising with him, sympathising even, and continue to keep steady eye contact.

-Now Mum wouldn’t have wanted her little boy living under these conditions, so she decided to separate again and take me with her. She got a live-in job at the Windermere Orphans’ Asylum in Melbourne. I look back on what Mum said about this job as hurtful. She told me we’d be together, but that she also had to look after older boys—part of the job—and she told me I’d get to see the ocean all the time. I never got to see the ocean. I suppose Mum thought we would be living in a cottage in the grounds by ourselves as a family, and she would go off to work every day while I went to school, and she’d look after me at home just like she always had, basically. But that’s what she thought, that’s what she thought. I don’t think for one minute that there was any plan to stay away for good.

§

I’ve had a disturbed night, my head buzzing with endless questions that twisted themselves into my dreams, and now I’ve overslept. I rush through breakfast, and call to Bob I’ll be late. It’s frog hollow as we pull up outside Geoff’s place. I pull my cardigan tighter around me and climb down out of the truck. Geoff’s figure looms out of the fog and walks down the driveway towards me.

He lets his dog off the lead. -We’ve got to have an early morning walk. Clears the head and chases away the blues.
As soon as we sit down Geoff reaches over and thumbs the record button on the tape-machine. He addresses the tape, and without drawing breath goes straight into his story. I get the feeling that he’s been awake all night writing the book himself.

-So along comes the bright sunny day in 1956 when Mum and I got dressed in our Sunday best, and said goodbye to Dad. I remember he gave Mum a kiss, and I couldn’t understand why we were leaving him and I didn’t want to go. But Mum was reassuring, and off we went by train for a life of mother and son and her promise of our own little cottage by the sea. We arrived in Brighton in the afternoon and there we were, walking down the street together, carrying our two little suitcases. We came to a high wall, and when we went through the big iron gates I saw what I thought was the grandest Castle in the world. There was a long wide curved gravel drive leading up to this huge three-storied bluestone mansion surrounded by sweeping green lawns and flower beds full of roses and snap-dragons and lilies and other flowers—I’d never seen so many flowers in my life.

I remember my first glimpse of the Home I was in. I, too, was over-awed by what I thought at first was a grand castle. I’d always longed to live in such a place, and because my maternal grandfather had, in fact, been “somebody” in England, I saw it as my birth right. Later, when I saw the Home from the back, it reminded me of terrifying Gothic castles and vampires, and it chilled my blood. I force my mind back to Geoff, and his story.

-Geoff, was this a State-run orphanage?
-From what I’ve been able to find out in the last couple of years or so, our education and food was provided by the State Government of Victoria. But it relied on payments made by the orphans’ relatives, and donations from businesses and the well-off public. The orphanage was privately owned by some wealthy people in England purely for profit, and it was run by a Board of Management. Anyway, when we first arrived we were met by the CEO who said, “Mrs Steele, you’ll be over here working in the senior boys’ cottage, and Geoffrey will be over the other side in with the junior boys.” I think Mum knew there and then that she’d been sold a pig as they say.
You’re wondering why Mum didn’t take my by the hand and leave immediately? I’ve always supposed that she didn’t have the money to go back, and I think she didn’t want to go to the family and say she’d left her husband. She’d have been ashamed, and they wouldn’t have helped her with me—I was adopted?

So there we were, stuck in Windermere Orphanage. My thoughts are it was a military prison for unwanted kids, and everything was done on time to a bell that rung for this and rung for that—to get up at six every morning, and to go to breakfast, and to leave the dining-room after breakfast—and before breakfast we had to make our beds, iron our khaki military-type uniforms and polish our shoes, scrub the showers and toilets and clean the cottage. In there it was a dog-eat-dog world. You just tried to keep your head low but trouble came from nowhere because according to them you never did anything proper, if you know what I mean.

Windermere was a place of separation. The younger boys weren’t allowed to mix with the senior boys, and I wasn’t allowed to be with Mum. I once tried to sneak over to the Senior Boys’ cottage to see her. But a senior boy caught me and said, “Come over here again and you’ll get your balls nuggetted, brat.” That was a usual threat and they meant it. Little boys are terrified of that sort of thing. Mum wasn’t allowed to see me because that would mean I was getting preferential treatment and the other boys would’ve been jealous. I was only nine—poor, poor little boy. I was caught in a no-man’s land. I wasn’t a visitor, and I wasn’t a loved child anymore. I was an orphan because I was one of the orphans in the orphanage, but I wasn’t one of the boys—“Oh, but you’ve got a mother living just over there!” So I didn’t get all the privileges the other boys got and I had to do extra chores because I was a live-in staff child and not financed as an orphan like the others were. I remember thinking, “Mum didn’t make me work and do all these things.” I was only a little boy, I shouldn’t have been thinking about survival.

-So even though your mother was there, no-one was there for you.

-I always felt like Mum had adopted me and then put me back. Looking back, no one was ever there for me. I always felt, I don’t know … like I was an oddity.

His voice is steady, but there’s an undercurrent in his words. Instinct tells me that if I were to ask him if he feels bitter he’d deny it outright.
-That feeling never left me. As an adult, I’ve tried to tell a few people, and you know how it is—some don’t believe you, and some don’t want to listen. Like, they say, “that was a long time ago. It’s about time you got over that and moved on.” Now when I was living out here a bit in the country, a distant relative of Dad’s I used to call “auntie” just waltzed in out of the blue one day. I thought this was wonderful; family came to see me after all these years. So later, when she went into a nursing home, I went over to see her one time to return the favour, and I talked about trying to get redress for being in the orphanage. And this “auntie” said, “Oh, I know lots of people who’ve been in Homes and places and they went on holiday camps and everything else.” I said, “Yes, but we didn’t all have happy bus tours, sometimes people have a dark story … which they don’t tell,” and she said, “Well what’s wrong with you anyway.” Like what d’you reckon, that what happened to me was just a little cold or something? You know, you’ve been through things, too.

I was three when I went into Dalwood Children’s Home. In there, I was abused and exploited. When I was eight years of age, the Home sent me into foster care. There, my treatment was no better. Over the years I’ve talked to enough people to know for certain that in the 1900s terrible things happened to many kids in care.

I face Geoff across the expanse of his dining-room table, and nod my head in understanding and watch any walls that he might have built between us crumble. His eyes seem to become translucent, and, strangely, I feel as if I’m looking deep into his soul. I’m shaken, and I shift in my seat. This man is freely and openly discussing his inner-most thoughts and feelings with me, a virtual stranger, merely on the strength that I’ve lived through similar experiences. Possibly, too, he’s willingly telling me all this because I’m recording his oral account of his experiences for a literary work. Geoff looks steadily back at me with frank eyes and continues talking.

-Oh yes, the very nice outings. But you knew all the time you were out and giggling and carrying on that at the end of the day you had to go back behind the walls. And while you were out you’d see other kids who weren’t in the Home and you’d wonder why they were walking around free and eating ice-creams while you had nothing and were kept locked up and abused. I was confused, mixed up, any child would be, and I couldn’t adjust to society afterwards because of what happened to me in the orphanage. I felt like a freak …
and I was one of the lucky ones if you know what I mean because I got out. Some never did, there were babies who grew up there and children who were in there for years. It was hell—they didn’t care for you, and they didn’t care about you, and they made it plain. You weren’t even a person. You were just a number—in my case, “52,” and I remember that clearly.

Tears spill from his eyes. He makes no pretence of reaching for the tissue box. When I was in Dalwood, I wasn’t a person either. I was just a very frightened number “23.” I feel for Geoff, and I lift my hand towards the tape-machine.

-No, please don’t turn the tape off. This story’s got to be told. I’m very big on social justice. I want to tell what really happened in the 1900s because I feel things shouldn’t be brushed under the table. It’s a shameful part of Australia’s history. It’s not one where they can say, “well we looked after all these children,” because they didn’t. And, you know, I may have only been in there for eighteen months but I might as well have been there eighteen years. It’s still within my system, it’s affected me. Sometimes I stutter. I get emotional, I get withdrawn, and sometimes I find it hard to relate to people.

Geoff dries his eyes and swallows hard, but his emotional hurt is out on show. I tell myself it’s his right to be treated with dignity. I look away and say calmly; -My stupid foot’s gone to sleep. Mind if we take a walk?

The narrow, private garden you can see through Geoff’s dining-room windows is an idyllic place. The only noise that can be heard is the chirping of birds and the breeze rustling through the long sweet grasses in the wasteland on the other side of the high, vine-covered back fence. At one end of the lawn is a wooden gate that’s almost hidden by greenery. When you go through you find yourself in a larger garden. Peaceful, and enclosed by a six foot paling fence thickly covered in vines and overhung with the fronds of untamed shrubs, it’s seemingly remote from the world. I can’t rid myself of the sensation that I’ve stepped through some magic mirror into a yesterday place only glimpsed in story books. I feel the sun hot on my arms and look up at a now clear blue sky. My eye travels down and I’m surprised to find I can see the trig station that’s perched on one of Albury’s high, bush-clad hills. If I were to stand up there on that hill instead of down here in this garden, and if I understood trigonometry, I could use the station to locate various points
of reference and take measure of the land that lay before me. But would you be able to pin-point this contained, secret space, I wonder? I breathe in the heady scent of privet in flower, stifle the urge to sneeze, and give up on altitudes and positions.

Geoff stands still and looks around his garden, and says in a despairing voice, -It’s a mess.

We watch the butterflies and tiny, wild finches flitting among the privet and passion flowers, look at the stunted banana palms, examine the over-ripe fruits of a vine Geoff had thought was merely an ornamental, and discuss the futility of trying to grow coconut trees that far south. After a time, we return to the dining-room and talk off tape until lunch-time

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It's late afternoon before we start taping again. I sit listening to Geoff’s story about orphanage life, and even though I give him my full attention and don’t miss a beat, there’s a cinematic picture playing itself out in my mind—a tiny child of three and a half is holding a wooden-backed bristle scrubbing brush and moving it back and forth across the red tiled floor of the kitchen of the orphanage I was in. On another different level, I’m conscious of keeping an eye on the tape-recorder for how far we’re through the tape, and I’m jotting down a word here and there in my note-book. Mentally, I feel like I’m running a marathon.

-Oh, the meals in the orphanage. Yes, they were lovely. McDonald’s has got nothing on it. Breakfast: porridge, a piece of half-cooked toast pre-spread with a scrape of jam and no butter. Lunch: two slices of bread stuck together with peanut butter, or cheese and vegemite, or dates or raisins laced with shaved coconut. Dinner: one small potato, a tiny helping of broccoli or spinach, one small thin slice of corned or boiled meat, and sago pudding every night. We weren’t allowed to ask for seconds. We drank water. It filled the empty corners in my belly. But every day the school provided us orphanage kids with a small cup of Milo for morning tea. I can’t eat any of those things now.

The school was a State School right next door. There was a hole in the side fence between it and the orphanage. Every school day we were mustered into a herd, like cattle, and made to crawl through this hole into the schoolyard. So you went to a school that was attached to the place that dulled your senses, and the place was so top-heavy with orphanage children there was no balance in the place and no bright sparks in the class and no individuals who stood out, and they didn’t really expect anything of you because you were a
Home Boy. All our books stayed at school, nothing came back to the Home—no pencils and papers to do a bit of drawing, nothing—and no-one asked about your day. It was “do your job, eat your tea, and get to bed.” So you had nothing to shout with joy about, and no sense of achievement. The one bright light in the day was we were out of the orphanage for a little while, and mixing with a couple of kids from normal homes. At school we were the “insiders” and all the other kids who didn’t live in the orphanage were the “outsiders.” There was a big old peppercorn tree in the yard. We’d play “allies-and-enemies” in the dirt under the tree at play-time and run riot around the school. You could forget who you were just for that little while.

In recent years I went looking for the school, but could never find it because I’d kept this mental picture of it being attached to the orphanage, and I didn’t know the orphanage had been pulled down bluestone by bluestone. See, in the late 1960s Windermere Orphans Asylum was renamed Melbourne Orphanage, and later on it was all sold up—fifty acres of prime real estate. A new estate was built on the site. The bluestones of the main building pave the streets of that estate, so I’m told.

In Australia, the Children’s Homes of the 1900s no longer exist. Some have been sold off for use as private schools or private residences or function rooms. Some have taken on a new lease as Children’s Courts or government centres that provide services to the public and some have been pulled down, and the land sold off to property developers.

-Some people I’ve spoken to feel that all those buildings, all ex-Children’s Homes, should be pulled down.

Geoff spreads his hands wide. -Well, yes, but what would you do with all the stuff that come out of them? The evil seeps into the stones, doesn’t it?

-Geoff, do you want to tell me how you came to get out? Did your mother get some money together?

-Mum was only at the orphanage for three months. She got sick. Superintendent Halliwell signed her into Royal Park Mental Hospital in Melbourne—it closed in the 1990s? I didn’t even know she’d gone. Then one day, the new Superintendent called me into his office to tell me she was in the nut house. I broke down and cried and the Superintendent’s wife put her arm around me, and they told me they’d be looking after me—they were nice people, I remember that.
Previous to this, even though I’d felt alone I always knew, or thought, Mum was there somewhere, and I had hope that we’d be reunited and that we’d leave that place. But when I found out what had happened to Mum I knew I was really alone. I was angry, she’d deserted me to work with other boys, and she left me there when she went off. But at the same time I loved her. I was only a little boy. I didn’t understand her issues back then.

A few months after I was told Mum had gone to hospital, I was one of the lucky ones who got taken to see the opening of the 1956 Olympic Games at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. There, I sat on one side in the Orphan’s Group. Near us, there was another group. I didn’t know they were from Royal Park and Mum was with them. From where I was sitting, I could’ve reached out and touched her.

My heart aches for the young Geoffrey, and I wonder if his mother had seen him. At the MCG, surely the Home’s khaki uniform would have drawn her attention. Maybe she thought at the time that her silence was for the best. I wonder how often in life people who have an affinity with each other miss the opportunity to either be reunited, or move within each other’s sphere, simply because they don’t realise the other is standing within reach, or because nothing is said for some reason.

-Geoff, maybe your mum didn’t see you, either.

-Oh, I don’t know. You see, there was one other time. The orphanage sent me down to Cottage-by-the-sea for a week’s holiday—sounds lovely, doesn’t it? But you couldn’t see the sea from there though. While I was there we kids were taken on a picnic and I saw my mother. She was with this group … I think from the church? I called out “MUM, MUM,” and she looked straight at me, and turned and walked away. That affected me badly because, in adult life, every time one of my ladies up and left me, it felt like I was being deserted by the woman I loved all over again.

Back when I was a little kid, about six months after Mum was put into the hospital Dad came to the orphanage to see her, couldn’t contact her I suppose. Now up until then I didn’t know where in the big world Dad was in relation to me in Windermere. The Home agreed to him seeing me once a fortnight. I’d meet him beneath the big clocks at Flinders Street railway Station in Melbourne. He’d take me out for a big lunch—spaghetti, and cappuccino and banana split—and then he’d take me to the movies or the museum or the art centre, sometimes the City Baths, or we’d go to the Botanical Gardens and look at all the statues. I didn’t
speak about these outings to the other boys, and they didn’t speak about theirs because the memories were
the only things no-one could take off you. So years later when I split with my first wife and my son stayed
with her, I did the same for him.

I’d come down from Cairns on the bus and meet him under those same big clocks in Melbourne
where my father used to meet me. And because we had nowhere to go we’d wander around, and I’d take him
to the same places my father used to take me, and we’d eat what I used to eat on those days out. It was *déjà vu*—there you were doing what you tried to prevent in your life—a son separated from his father. You never
wanted your son to have to go through the same experience, and I felt so guilty. There was irony in standing
under those big clocks waiting for *my* son where I had stood as a son waiting for *my* father. It brings me to
tears …

§

He cries silently in the way men do. Eventually, he comes back from the space he’s been in, and turns
around. Shock runs through me. His face is deathly white. He draws a long shuddering breath.

-It takes a long time. I know from speaking to others that usually with people like us we don’t have
the strength to talk about our childhood until we’re in our late fifties or sixties. I still feel very uncomfortable
talking about it, but there’s not much point to me wanting to be part of all this and having my story told to
the world if I don’t speak out, is there?

What happened to me in Windermere stands out more in my mind than any other thing that’s ever
happened in my life, and, in one way, it’s coloured my whole life ever since. It’s at the base of my … the
black dog that I can never quite shake.

Whenever I’d been out with my father I was supposed to be back in the orphanage by 7.30 p.m. Now
trains, as we all know, are never on time. But this one time the train was very late. I sprinted back to the
orphanage and tried to sneak in like I normally did. But the Cottage parent met me and gave me a wallop
across the left side of my head—and he grabbed me, and threw me across the room. Then he said, “Get to the
laundry and get a bucket of warm soapy water ready.” He followed me out and stood in the doorway, and
told me to undress and get ready to scrub the floor as punishment for being late in. Then he came right into
the room naked and made me look at his huge erect penis and told me to lick him basically. I was in fear of
my life. And then he spat on me—and made me kneel down with my back to him and he shoved my head in
my bucket of soapy water and … oh, excruciating pain …

I screamed and screamed. No-one came. When it was over I knelt on the laundry floor in my warm
sticky blood. He told me to clean up my mess and never to say anything about it or I’d get worse—but
what’s worse than that? I was too sick to get up the next morning, and was told, “Get to sick-bay.” I stayed
there all day and no-one came near or checked to see what was wrong. But that evening one of the staff stuck
his head around the door and said, “Get to tea,” and that was that. I think that sort of thing had been going on
for some time and all the staff were all on it. So there was a danger that if you did tell another adult they
might do it to you too. In that place we had no voice—back in those days, children didn’t have a voice
anyway.

For some reason I never told Dad about the rape. But he must’ve picked there was a change in me
because he said one day, “We’ll get you out of there, mate.” He took me over to live with his second cousin
and her husband at their art-deco, cement-stuccoed house in North Bourne. But then Mum turned up from
wherever she’d been and took me away with her. She went back to nursing and we moved from place to
place. But during this time we had a lot of what I call laughing moments.

First we went to live at Port Arlington in a bit of a timber holiday shack—it was small, and a bit of a
step-down for me to live in such a place, but Port Arlington was blue skies even when it rained sort of thing,
and in the summer the city came to a meeting of the town and the country by the sea … visitors in the
summer, colours everywhere, a juke box in the shop down the road, fish and chips, picnics, and lemonade,
and me catching pigeons and trying to sell them, playing in the fields on the farms where some of my friends
lived, and my first girl-friend. Her parents owned the guest-house in the town. She used to wink at me, and
she always had a ready supply of biscuits. There was nothing else in it, I was only eleven.

While we were there Dad came home, but he soon left and went back to the Hotel Glenferrie. I tried
to tell Mum about what happened in the orphanage and she said, “Well, we’re out of it now, so it doesn’t
matter anymore.” Like it was sort of irrelevant?

The day has clouded over. I watch the birds darting through the vines outside Geoff’s dining-room
window, and ponder the question of why people don’t listen to children. With Estelle, did she think that the
least said the better, and let nature do its healing?
By agreement, we take a break. We step out through Geoff’s glass sliding doors into the little, narrow back garden and stroll to the end. We take the opposite direction to Geoff’s secret garden, and I’m surprised to find yet another enclosed garden—a strange gravelled place in which grow three very stunted banana palms, and a thin scattering of cacti and weirdly-shaped plants from exotic places far away. Dock weeds reach tall in one corner. A few stepping-stones, widely spaced, lead to nowhere.

-It’s my problem area. I don’t quite know what to with it at the end of the day. So I hang my washing out here.

We stare at the would-be garden. I have nothing to say. This garden does my head in, and I shiver. We turn away, and go back inside, and continue working until it grows dark.

§

Time is a funny thing. The regularity of the changing seasons and the rolling around of the sun and moon, what we call day and night, is time that is not man-made, but measurement of these, and so clock time, is. So is personal time man-made in a way, for somehow time seems to crawl along when you’re bored or waiting for something you’re looking forward to, or not looking forward to, but it seems to have wings when you’re in what is, to you, interesting conversation.

Now, in Albury, the new day slips by unnoticed as I gather background material for my work. We sit with the tape-deck on the table between us, clicking it on and off as we talk. We chat about Geoff’s present life in Albury, about the town, the district, the country, art and drawing, and how he gets on well with the old lady across the way. –She’s good company, a very understanding person and nice to talk to.

We talk for a good while more, and then Geoff excuses himself and gets up off his chair. He goes to find his dog and put her to be bed in the laundry. -She’s only a baby, she needs her little naps.

While he’s away, I give some thought to how I’ll voice the next question. I want to ask in what way, if any, his rape experience has affected his adult relationships, and if the experience itself has impaired his ability to relate to women. It’s a delicate area, and it’s not one I’m approaching out of morbid curiosity.

-I believe it’s something that people need to understand. Well I’m a normal man, but I’m different. In the orphanage the other boys used to tease you about your size—like little boys do—and I suppose I’m still conscious of that even though I believe I don’t have any worries there. You never heard any other boys
talking and you didn’t say anything because if you did, you’d be looked on as some sort of thing. Later, when you were a man and had unlocked your memories you just knew it had happened to them too. But your sexuality as a male is definitely under question. Like, as a child you wonder if you had asked for it to happen, and as you grow you ask yourself “Am I still a boy?” And as an adult, when you’re shaving you look in the mirror and ask yourself, “Am I the man I see?”

Now, I definitely don’t like groups of men, and I think contact with a lot of other men would shudder me straight back into the darkness of the orphanage days. But I’m a normal man and I only like to go with women if you know what I mean. But I think it did affect me there in some way. I had no problems in the bedroom, but I always had the feeling that I had to prove myself in the relationship. I’ve been married twice, but I couldn’t make the marriages work even though I loved both my wives. I couldn’t make my wives happy. I also lost several girlfriends over that period of time. Looking back, I realise part of the problem was that I had to be the big boss of everything because I thought that’s the way men should be in a marriage—strong.

Oh I’m willing to admit the other side of things too. I was a fairly arrogant, angry young man and if I’m to be totally honest, I have to say that the way Geoff was at those given times, nothing could have sustained a relationship, I couldn’t have lived with me. But I think I tried to control other people as a way of controlling whatever was happening around me at the time and by doing that I lost control of everything in a way—my relationships collapsed. All I can really say is I didn’t know how family worked and sometimes I wonder if that’s because Dad was really weak and left me and Mum to manage as best we could, and because of that my life went bottom-up.

§

-Getting back to when I was kid, Mum and I left Port Arlington after a while, and moved to a tumbling-down wreck of a little boathouse on the beach in Queenscliffe in an area they called the Neck. This shanty appealed to a boy’s nature and I was gloriously happy. It was a time of magic in a magical place. I used to climb up on top of the stacks of newspapers that lived in a corner of one of the rooms and pretend I was a pirate, and I went to Queenscliffe High—I was happy there.

I was left on my own a lot. Every night Mum would come home after work, and go moon-lighting to earn extra cash. She’d tuck her mop and polishing cloths under her arm and walk down the sandy track to
clean the church. See, Mum believed in not letting standards drop. All during the time we lived alone together and moved around, she still had the David Jones’ delivery van pulling up at the front of our cheaper and cheaper rough-and-ready little rentals. From the time I was thirteen I went looking for odd jobs, and gave Mum the money to help us out. I did messages for people and tidied up their yards, and I mowed the Church lawns and filled in as a Sunday-school teacher. I remember thinking that the Church people weren’t paying me enough, so I took the plate in the church to the cleaners … if you catch my drift?  

Geoff’s tone is serious, and he speaks with a poker face. I sit quietly, taking in everything he says, and then what he has just said about the church collection plate, and the way in which he has said it, suddenly hits me. I laugh spontaneously, more in reaction to the unexpected than anything else. Geoff laughs, and then he carries on with his story.

While we lived at The Neck my working days almost came to an end for good. I got run over by a truck. It came straight at me and I threw myself off my bike and rolled between the wheel ruts in the sandy track. The truck passed over me, but it put paid to my bike … and I dislocated my elbow. The doctor couldn’t come and see me until very, very late that night because that was the night the Navy were doing exercises from Portsea to Point Lonsdale and everything went wrong, and all these marines and sailors got swept into the sea and some drowned. There was a huge search and rescue mission. Some bodies were picked up off the beach. It was a significant time in Australia’s history when this military exercise went foul crossing the Rip on the 17th February in 1960, and it was then that Dad came home again to live. But before long he left again. I started to resent things that were happening in my life. Basically, I wanted things back the way they had been before the orphanage.

Now, I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting lately, and I can see my parents gave me everything they could. Like, even when times were bad for them they gave me the best opportunities any child could get. And all I gave them in return was a hard time. I really hurt them with my rebellious ways … I say now that I was a “rebel without a cause.” And that all started to happen around this time in 1960.

Mum and Dad were the only two adults I ever really belonged to, and because I was so like them I thought I was their natural child and they’d somehow given me up, and then re-adopted me back? The mind runs amok when you don’t know your whole history. Like, Dad was bigger than light in my eyes, and during
the time we lived at the Neck I made him bigger than he was. He’d been an Army Captain in the Second World War, but the war was long over and I told everyone at school my Dad was an Admiral in the army. I didn’t even know what service an Admiral was in! Later on, when I found out that an Admiral was navy personnel and not army, I was hugely embarrassed, but I kept quiet on that score basically, and I told that lie for a long time.

Geoff splutters, and sits there laughing at the memory of his childhood fantasies.

-No-one said anything—not to me at least. Maybe others were too polite to point out my mistake, or maybe they thought I was a nutter\textsuperscript{8} and best left alone.

I sit laughing with him. Partly I’m laughing with him about his “lie,” and partly I’m laughing in secret about my own childhood “lie.”

After I came out of the orphanage I held my school peers enthralled with my increasingly exaggerated stories of my poor dead mother—she’d succumbed to tuberculosis—as a world renowned ballerina. I prayed that no one at school would go home and tell their mother, and that she wouldn’t tell my foster-people. I used to think that God heard my prayers, but as I grew older I knew I was just plain lucky, and I was gratified to learn that my lie wasn’t totally black. My poor mother actually had been a reasonably good ballroom dancer. But she was never an \textit{artiste}.

Still laughing, I look across at Geoff and gasp; It’s called the Orphan Syndrome—of the kind that could affect children who were or had been in orphanages. It’s not just Australian kids it affects, it affects kids world-wide.

-I think I did it because I would’ve liked to have stayed in the boathouse at the Neck and had Dad in my life all the time. But I didn’t. So I consoled myself with making him outshine all the other kids’ fathers, and that kept him with me, and it made it that others could “see” and admire him. I got some attention from the other boys, and at the same time I could kid myself Dad hadn’t really left—he was very important, and that’s why he was away.

Anyway, after Dad left we moved to a little weatherboard half-house that looked a bit like a Welsh-miner’s cottage, in Kent Street, Hawthorne, and I went to this horrible school. Six months later we got kicked out of there because of my loud music, and we went to live in a flat in Victoria Road, Hawthorne. I
still went to the same horrible school. Mum could see I wasn’t happy. So she had a talk to her uncle. He
 taught at Swinburne College, and I went there instead.

One of the things I most regret in life is not making more of my opportunities for a good education.
But I didn’t really stand a chance. In the orphanage I’d missed out on the ground work, and at Swinburne the
kids were clever, and it scared me. So I clowned around, and when I wasn’t mucking up I was dreaming
about great weird and wonderful things that had nothing to do with schoolwork but everything to do with the
future.

I suppose there are a lot of people who aren’t educated and make good. I took on every job I could
get, and always had money to jiggle in my pocket. I see that I could easily have been rich, but life was
always working against me. I’m only on a pension now, but I save my money and I go out to tea to the
Chinese restaurant with the nice old lady next door sometimes, and I don’t get dressed up like I used to
because I feel comfortable in myself. I sit before a nicely set table with a white table-cloth and silverware on
it and get waited on, and I’m a king. That’s success.

§

The thrumming of cicadas in the trees outside is pleasant to the ear, and, to my mind, somehow speaks of
summer fullness. Their songs camouflage the squeaking noise of the tape-recorder as it whirrs away. Geoff
sits quietly, lost in his thoughts. Every now and then he lifts his head and looks up at the certificates hanging
on his wall. I leave him to it and busy myself with labelling today’s tapes: Geoff Steele. TAPE 5: Side A;
Side B. TAPE 6 …

Suddenly, he unlocks his clasped hands, places them flat on the table in front of him and says, -I
suppose you’d like to hear how it eventually came about that I really faced up to things?

I put my pen down, check the recorder, and say, -Are you okay to talk about it?

-While I was married to my first wife, I had a car accident. I wasn’t at fault, but because of my
injuries I lost our immediate income and I worried about how we were going to buy food, pay the mortgage,
that sort of thing. On top of all that I began having really bad headaches and nightmares, and half-memories
about what happened in the orphanage. And all this anger bubbled up to the surface against Mum and Dad. I
didn’t know it back then, but I was clinically depressed. I thought I had cancer of the brain and no-one could tell me different.

All during all this time I was seeing a lot of different doctors, and I was resentful and insulted at having to see a psychiatrist so I could sue for compensation for the accident. I didn’t want him digging around inside my head. I was frightened he’d say I was mental and write his little letters and make it official. But he was only trying to figure out why the car accident made me so anxious and depressed. He said, “Physical injuries shouldn’t really come out that way.” So I had psychological problems we didn’t track down because we were only looking at the physical injuries, and in fact I think we’re probably only just dealing with them fully, here now, today, while you and I are talking. I wish I’d known at the time what was wrong with me in that sense instead of going crazy wondering why I became unhinged with issues that were unrelated to the car accident, I could’ve dealt with the beast when it first popped out.

Now, because of my physical injuries the doctors started me on pain-killers and other medications, and the next thing was I was hooked. During that time our domestic situation was, well … just before she died my wife—ex-wife by then—mentioned stuff I’d forgotten about and going by the things she said I did back then, the domestic situation was obviously fuelled from my days in the orphanage. Like, if the wife and I were having an, um, unpleasant conversation, there I’d be going back into that orphanage thing inside myself again, and I’d do some rare and wonderful things. And I’d excuse my actions—“You don’t know what it’s like to be me, you don’t know what I went through.”

I listen intently to what Geoff is saying. The sudden shrill ring of the phone breaks into my cocoon of concentration. Geoff swings his head around towards the noise and with a look of annoyance on his face gets up and goes into the kitchen. While he’s on the phone I busy myself with writing. Geoff finishes his conversation, and comes back to his chair.

-That was the son.

My mind flies to what Geoff had said when I first met him, and working on a mere hunch I say, - Geoff, what do you think might be behind your son’s behaviour towards you?

It’s a battle to stop myself from clamping my hand over my mouth. I say to myself “oh, the hide of the writer.” I’m very conscious that Geoff is a Forgotten Australian. As children, these people were subjected to the authority of officialdom and their lives were damaged as a result. I’m very aware that with my tape-
recorder and my university card and my questions I might seem to represent a figure of authority, and hope I haven’t overstepped the mark. Geoff pales and, as if he is on a court stand facing the prosecutor, he lifts his chin slightly. An involuntary tic twitches in his cheek.

-I’m talking to you about this because you’ve been through things in life, too. And I know you’re interested, and I hope you’ll understand. I’m well now, but when my son was nine I wasn’t a very well person mentally. Up until he was about five I think I was a good dad, but then things fell apart because of the accident and the memories and the drugs. I did things I’m not proud of. One of those things was I tried to implement my nine year old self in him. So whatever made me angry or ticked me off when I was nine years old, came back to me in him when he was nine years old … it was like I was looking into a living mirror—like, here I am in my nine year old son and I’m standing in front of myself? I was the adult father acting out being nine years of age all over again through my son. Of course, it was all to do with how I was treated in the orphanage. I wanted protection for my son, wanted him to be able to fend off the world. I instilled a lot of anger into him, and I did it on purpose. But I was sick.

He’s never forgiven me for all the things I did. It makes me feel guilty. I know I can’t fix things up backwards, but now I try to be the good dad I should’ve been all along. Like, I’m only on the pension and I’m struggling. It’d be nice to have money to buy what you need in life to make you feel comfortable and have the house you want—Gold Coast would be nice, I dream of that. But I’ve got plenty of mates who are scratching for two plates and a glass, you know what I mean? They’ve got nothing, they do it very tough. So when you see all the trappings I have here I’m probably … but at the end of the day I’m not rich, yet I try to juggle things and help the son out by slipping him a bit of money. And I do things like build his retaining walls and fences. I don’t know what else to do. He’s a grown man now.

-I guess when they’re grown all you can really do is just be there for them.

He sighs sadly, and sets his mouth in a grim line. I shift my eyes from his and stare out through the window at his neatly mown back lawn to where a shaft of sunlight angles down, turning a small patch of the grass a brilliant green. The unreal light accentuates the shadows of the lawn beyond.

He turns his head to look out the window, and then turns back towards me, and I lean forward and say gently, - So Geoff, you were telling me how you faced up to things?
While I was living in Caboolture in Queensland, I had a second car accident, and I told the doctor I’d been in an accident before and had suffered delayed depression and shock, and he thought it was a good idea that I see someone. So I saw this second psychiatrist and that’s when I got to understand about things and got right off the drugs.

After my last lady and I parted company in 1998, I hung around Queensland in all sorts of shared accommodation and worked at whatever, just keeping my pets and myself together, and every time I moved I had to start looking for work all over again—the cane-fields in between places were enough to say you’d left town. In the end, all this got to be a bit much. It was all over red rover, if you know what I mean. So in 2004 I packed up my animals and all our goods and chattels in the car and went on a drive to see my old friends in Rosebud in Victoria. There were floods somewhere, and I cut around through the back blocks so I could come out at Albury and get over the border between NSW and Victoria. It was getting late and it was stinking hot, and I was tired, so I pulled up in this sleepy little one-horse place called Howlong and parked under a tree in a quiet street, and across the road I saw this nice little house and it had “For Rent” on it. So I went there to live, and decided to stay by myself and put my love into my animals. I’d love to show you the place.

§

Early this next morning, I sit in our truck with Bob and Geoff Steele. The farmlands look well after the recent rains. An hour and a half or so out of Albury we drive into Howlong, and park the truck under shady camphor laurel trees. Geoff points to a red-brick house. It looks modern, and not so small.

We cross the road and stand in the shade under the carport. We can’t go inside the house, someone else lives here now.

We peer over the side gate at the jungle in the back yard.

I take a photo of Geoff standing on the patchy lawn at the front of the house. The haunted look has left his eyes. He says, -Out here, nothing much changes from one year’s end to the next.

It’s mid-afternoon when we get back to Albury. Bob drops Geoff and me off at the Albury unit. My recording gear, my notebooks and pens, are still on the table exactly where I’d left them the day before. Geoff’s fired up and begins immediately.
Out there in my little house at Howlong, I had privacy and time, and I did a lot of soul-searching. Some days the sky could be blue outside but inside my head it would be a terrible day. Whenever that happened I’d talk to my dog and cat, and then I’d stop looking under dark bushes and look at the sky instead. I started to question my own existence, and I thought I’d get everything straightened up for once and for all. So I wrote all these letters and eventually got onto a social worker from OzChild—that’s what the mob who ran Windermere Orphans’ Asylum call themselves now—and she thought I should be due for compensation. With me, the money was a very minor thing. What I wanted was acknowledgement that terrible things had happened to me while I was in the orphanage. I said, “Look, I’m not greedy, all I want is a small amount … say, $20 000.” A week or so later she rang back, and said, “Come along to our Head Office,” (Park Street, South Melbourne, I think it was) “meet the CEO, and you can have your say.” So along I went in my best clothes, and we sat around this grand table in their beautiful boardroom there, and this meeting was all very cordial and, you know, a cup of tea and a biscuit. They asked me about what I knew and what I recalled, and that meeting wrapped up, and, “thank you very much.” A couple of weeks later they had me back and asked me more questions. And one question that popped up was, “Do you have any photos.” I said, “As far as I know no-one had a Brownie camera in the building, let alone a nine-year-old child, to record the events that did happen.”

Now, a third meeting was set up, and they said straight up that although they didn’t disbelieve me, I didn’t have any real evidence, and I tried to argue my case. So a fourth meeting was called. There was a different feeling about this meeting, and they showed me through the complex and it was all “how busy they were,” and “all the good work they doing,” and they were buttering me up. Then they sat me down and said, “Look, we’ve had legal advice and we can’t offer you compensation, but we sympathise. And now you’ve told your story you can get on with your life and good luck.” There was no cup of tea this time, but they said, “We’ll get a copy of that picture of Windermere that’s hanging on the wall over there, and send it to you as some way of a connection with your past.” So there was no compensation pay-out, so no apology basically, but that framed photo hanging up there on my wall. I’ll give you copy of the place that doesn’t exist anymore, if you like.
I turn my head slightly to the right, and gaze up the great heap of blue-stone.

-It’s Victorian Gothic, no, wait … I think it’s Gothic Revival?

A shiver runs down my spine and I feel the skin on my arms goose bump. What would it be like to live with a constant reminder of Dalwood hanging my wall at home? Would I get used to it, in time? I remind myself I have a job to do, and shove the thought of Dalwood away. To each his own I suppose.

-By the time I got to bottom in the elevator the war shoes were on and I decided to take civil action and sue OzChild. My solicitor took the case on pro bono—and he flicked my file off to his off-sider who was a bloke in his thirties. This young solicitor didn’t understand about people like us and how hard it is for us to speak out, but he convinced me that if I told him everything in detail, we would have a case. So all the little shameful things I’d kept quiet about until then came under intense scrutiny, and in the end I felt like my credibility was being questioned and my life was exposed in black and white, no reason, no understanding. Now there was no record of me being in the orphanage … only my say-so. So as part of this civil action process, in 2006 I had to make a statement to the police about the sexual assault in the orphanage. I was the criminal—that’s what I felt like—they grilled me for something like six or eight hours straight. Then at the end, this young solicitor turned around and flipped his fingers and snapped, “No.” On top of that, during all that entire period, he never once told me there was a Statute of Limitations, and I was out of time. So my story didn’t get to court and I didn’t get a chance to speak out, and I had no voice all over again. I’m still intensely angry about that. I feel he betrayed me.

One morning out at Howlong I was eating my breakfast and doing a bit of thinking about the old houses across the road, and they reminded me of my travels and how Australia’s changed, and about my
adoption papers which I’d brought with me. And it hit me that now was the time to find out where I actually came from. Through the authorities I discovered that my natural mother had passed away in 1995 and was buried with my father in Boot Hill Cemetery at Lancefield. I also found out I had an older brother who’d died, and a younger sister and a younger brother still living. So I went to visit my mother’s grave, and then I went to Ballarat to see where my elder brother was buried, and eventually, I met my young sister and her family, and my younger brother.

Now, I don’t know why, but all my life, even at those times when I was happy, I’d always felt that someone was missing. In the last months of living in Howlong I rang Freedom of Information and said, “Look, I have this strange feeling there’s still someone out there.” The lady said she’d open the file again and have another look. A year later she rang back and said, “You do have another sibling, a sister.” I said, “Oh, look, I’d like to meet her.” Freedom of Information said they’d get in touch with Bev and tell her about me, and they asked me my colouring and features and if I’d give a profile. I said, “Oh, this is like a blind date. Well I’m a bit of a joker but I’m also very serious, and I’ve got a bad reputation so there are a lot of things I’m probably not going to talk about.”

Suddenly, my interviewer’s antenna shoot to attention, and I wonder if I’ve missed something here. I look at him sharply, but say in a calm, objective tone, -Why did you say you had a bad reputation?

-I wasn’t coming from a high place. I didn’t have any money, or any security, or any real substance. I saw myself as a bad risk sort of thing basically, and not knowing what Bev’s circumstances were, I felt I had to be truthful from the word go. Anyway, I was living here in Albury by this stage, and Bev rang and we arranged a meeting in the park at Albury, and Bev and her husband, Tony, came over from Shepparton. Bev looked unsure at first but we sat down and had the picnic that they’d brought with them, and while we chit-chatted Bev and I kept glancing over at each other sort of silly and shy like we were two lovers almost. It was a magic feeling.

So we siblings all know about each other now, but we’re aware we’re two families. There are the two younger ones that were brought up together, and they’re close to each other and make one family. Then there’s us two older ones and we have a special bond, we probably feel we were the discarded ones, and we’re close to each other and make one family. Yet we’re all one family really, and we all talk to each other.
At my age it was emotionally stressful, meeting my family for the first time. Don’t get me wrong, I’m very blessed in them, and I’m blessed to have them. But it’s still a big thing at the end of the day and I’m very tired and agitated after we’ve been visiting. I shouldn’t feel that way, there’s no reason. It all goes back to what happened to me as a kid, I think.

The orphanage had other effects on my life, too. As Bev’s found out, if something gets to be too much I get defensive and lash out. I love Bev very, very much, and she’s good to me, but she had it in her head to mother me—control me, as I saw it. I shouted at her to make her back off. See, Mum controlled my life and she let me down and I got harmed. As well, with Bev and me, our natural mother had control of our lives and she let us down. I was cruel in the things I said to Bev, but I had to make her realise I don’t need a mother.

Now I’ve found Bev I want us to be properly a part of each other. So I show her the other side of things to make it like she was there in my life all along—“while you lived your peaceful life in Shepparton this is what was happening in my life?” One time I took her to Bribie Island to show her around and I took her down this track the dog and I used to walk along when I lived there. Bev was timid from the time we first set foot on the track, and then a piece of grass hooked on her sandal and wrapped around her foot. She ran around like a two-bob watch, screaming “Snake! Snake!” I shouted “SHUT UP!” and then she was under control. But see, in the orphanage, that’s how the bigger boys treated us younger ones whenever we got in a panic, “SHUT UP!” It was so funny—you should have seen the look on her face when she realised it was only a piece of grass!

Bev and I need to make up for all those lost times and like she said, “Do all those things you missed out on.” So we get hooked up and go to the different restaurants and get off on ice-cream-sodas. The way Bev and me carry on it’s like we’ve gone back to being teenagers or somewhere in that zone. But my sister and I are grabbing everything while we can, and Bev’s husband is very accommodating.

You know, Bev got the lucky draw—nice adoption, a fulfilling and purposeful career, a close family, a good and loving husband, lived all her life in one town. I’m happy for her, but I envy her that type of history. All I ever wanted was a steady life. At different times Mum and Dad had me in the Scouts, the Police Boys, the Sea-Scouts, the Church Clubs—all the things you could say are pillars of society in a way. But from the time I was born, basically, until I went to live out at Howlong my life was nothing but an egg-shell existence. When I was a kid we moved around so much we were never in one place long enough to
have a cup of tea sort of thing, and wherever we were at the time I wanted to say, “Why can’t we just stay here.” In finding my natural family I’ve got a more steady life. But I don’t think I’ll ever lose the sadness, it goes too deep.

Some time ago I dropped the “rey” right off my Christian name and became just “Geoff.” While I was out at Howlong I thought about all this and I realised I’d been trying to escape my past and who I was, but I was denying my identity. You can’t do that, you are who you are. So I’m Geoff now, but I’m still Geoffrey? I mean, I know who I am, and I know I can’t escape what’s happened, it’s a part of me, part of my make-up. I know I’m still healing. But I know I’m getting better because I know myself more now.

§

On this final morning Geoff seems a lot lighter in mood, and at ease inside himself. I tell him I’ll travel on this afternoon and go to see his sister, Bev.

-It’s funny, but I feel like I’m living life backwards. Most people have a fairly care-free childhood and end up with the worries of life as they grow older. I’m living my life in the opposite way. First there was all my troubled period of life, and then came Howlong, that peaceful place that gave me the time and space to reflect. Then along came my natural family and all the happiness they’ve brought with them. Then you came along just when I needed to really talk it right through with someone who isn’t exactly family but who understands. There’s just one more thing I would really like to happen, and that would make me complete. I’d like to be lucky in love. I’ve got rid of my baggage now and know how to treat a lady. But when you meet somebody nice you could go out with they want to know, “Why did your marriage break up … why, why, why,” and all you want to do is start from the day you meet, not bring your school books with you and open them for correction. So I tell them all about me straight up. I just wish I could find a nice classy lady who thinks I’m special. I want to feel “special” again, if you know what I mean?

At the door I turn, and shake his hand goodbye.

I step onto his money-strewn front path, and say, -Oh Geoff, who knows what’s around the corner in life. Maybe you will find someone, and that would be really lovely for you. But if you want someone who thinks you’re special, I suppose you’d have to make her feel special … show her she’s very “special” too?
He stands in his little screened front porch, and pulls a weed from the pot of one of his triffids and flicks it aside.

-Well, yes, of course, definitely that too, I suppose.
Beverly Osborne

Beverly Osborne is Geoff Steele’s natural sister. Adopted at birth, Bev always believed she was an only child. When she was sixty-six years of age, Bev suddenly learnt that she had siblings, and, most importantly, the brother that she’d always secretly longed for.

I have included Bev in this work to show what it means to be the natural sister of a person who is a Forgotten Australian, what it means for that person to suddenly discover in later life that they have siblings, and show the effects of that on that person’s life.

Beverly Osborne’s Story

There’s not a cloud in the sky on this perfect day. I stand on the footpath in front of the unit block where Geoff Steele lives and wait for my husband. The air hangs heavy with the sweet, warm scent of fresh-mown clover.
grass. I’m on a high, over the moon about the rich interview material I’ve collected. Bob pulls up and puts my gear in the truck.

Instead of turning towards the caravan park, he heads into the city. -Have the afternoon off. It’ll only take us an hour and half at the most to drive the hundred and thirty kilometres to Shepparton.¹

Tired out from the interview process, and exhausted by the heavy concentration it demands, I welcome the thought.

I ring Bev Osborne on my mobile. -Bev, we’re booked into Victoria Lake Caravan Park at Shepparton, and we’ll be there late this afternoon.

In her steady voice, Bev says, -Jo, when you get to Shepparton come to our house first and say hullo, then after you’ve set up your van come to the top barbeque in the park and meet me there. I’ll give you both sausage sandwiches and rissoles. You won’t have to worry about cooking tea tonight.

I say, -I’m sorry, but I’ve got food allergies and can’t eat those things.

-Then I’ll feed Bob, she says.

I ring off, and Bob and I spend a happy couple of hours looking around Albury. It’s a hot day. Our light cotton clothing sticks to our skins. Believing it might be cooler on top of Albury’s highest hill, we go up to the trig station and peer off into distance. I try to pinpoint Geoff’s place, but I don’t know enough about things to know what I’m looking at. We walk through the dry bush and wave our hands at the pesky little black bush flies, and try to talk over the shrill singing of thousands of cicadas. Between the sandals straps, our feet sting from green ant bites. Under my wide-brimmed hat my hair drips with perspiration. I turn to Bob and say, -Funny, isn’t it, sometimes things just aren’t what you think they are.

-Depends on your expectations, he replies.

We descend from the hill and walk along the river bank. We marvel at the water-wheels from the old Murray River paddle-steamers, and then drive into town to delight in the railway station—a grand Italianate affair built in 1881, it boasts the longest undercover station platform in the world.² We leave these left-over pieces from yesterday, and go back to the van to eat a quick lunch and pack up, then drive south along the Hume Highway and over the wide Spirit of Progress Bridge to the NSW-Victorian border.
Similarly to daylight saving and the question of whether clocks should be wound forward or back, a State border in Australia is a concept I can never quite get my head around. To me, it seems to be somewhat artificial, or not quite real somehow. Other than for, perhaps, a metal sign and a fruit fly bin and a cattle tick warning, Australian border crossings are virtually invisible. Even so, as with any State border, jammed between the parallel edges of the dividing line between NSW and Victoria there’s a centre point, a dot that belongs to both States at once, and yet doesn’t belong to either. That dot has intrinsic value. It is its own private territory. At Wodonga, at the point of crossing from NSW into Victoria, I ask Bob to pull over. I want to satisfy my urge to straddle the border line and say that even though I’m standing with a foot in each State a part of me is centred in that dot. I say, -I sort of feel this is what it’s like for Geoff and his sister, Bev.

Bob looks at me as I’ve lost it altogether, and he says, -Don’t be stupid, there’s nowhere here to pull over … if you get out of the truck you’ll get bowled over by a bus. Look at the traffic!

Leaving Wodonga behind, we take the turning to Shepparton. The smooth surface of the divided Freeway seems to go on and on to nowhere through flat, scrubby country.

We swing off the freeway and take the loop to have a look at Wangaratta. It starts to sprinkle. Not knowing what to expect, and worried that we might run into floods if it rains heavily again, we glance at colourful pots of flowers hanging from a Wangaratta shop awning, and, without stopping, take the curve back onto the Freeway.

Eventually, the long divided freeway merges into one, and becomes a two lane road. We drive through the flat country between stone fruit orchards, through the puddles left by the recent floods, and come into Shepparton through an industrial area. We pass the canneries and drive over a level crossing and turn left.

§

Bev’s house is tucked into a layby. A clipped hedge runs along the front of the tidy property. “Peace” roses, creamy white and tinged with pale pink, edge the house verandah. The little Australian post-war cottage has a homely look. We walk up the front path and I turn to Bob and say, -I’ll bet this place has seen a lot of life and happy times.
Bev’s husband, Tony, answers the door. He insists on bringing us inside. I step through, straight into the comforting simplicity of their small lounge-room. The warm, peaceful atmosphere of the house wraps itself around me and I feel instantly at home.

I’ve never seen Bev before in my life, but she walks across the room and flings her arms around first me and then Bob, and kisses each of us on the cheek. It’s odd, but I feel like I’m family. I look at her and see the likeness to her brother in the stocky build and the olive complexion and wonder if they have Italian heritage. But whereas Geoff’s fine, straight hair is sandy and his eyes are fairly light, Bev’s eyes are dark, and shaped differently to those of Geoff, and her hair is thick and dark and wavy. For a fleeting moment, I question the blood relationship, and then my own brother and I come to mind—to look at us, you wouldn’t know we were related. Apart from looks, there is another difference between them, but I can’t quite put my finger on what it is.

Bev sees me watching her, and says, -Jo, come into the kitchen, I’m just finishing a cigarette.

In the kitchen, I say, -Bev I want to thank you for agreeing to talk with me. I hope what I do might help people to learn a bit about what happened to kids in care last century.

My puny efforts to convince her that I’m genuine sound phony to even my ears, and I feel embarrassed. I tell myself that I sound like a pompous ass, “Why couldn’t you have just left it at thanking her? You don’t even know if this docu-memoir you want to write will get published!”

Bev picks up a plain glass ashtray and stubs her cigarette, and then she looks up and studies my face closely. She doesn’t speak, and I begin to wonder if I might have misjudged the situation and be poking my oar in where it’s not wanted. Suddenly she smiles, and it strikes me that the difference between Bev and her brother is not so much a physical difference as an inner difference. Geoff has a haunted look, hunted even, and despite all his laughing there’s a deep well of sadness behind his eyes. Bev’s eyes are lit up from within by a soft, warm glow. She has a restful nature, even though I discern in her an underlying alertness, a cautious watchfulness.

Later, we leave Bev and Tony and go to the caravan park. Our site is shaded by leafy gum trees. To the back of us is the slightly elevated railway line. The steam train doesn’t run anymore. Instead, two or three times a day, a great, diesel engine pulls the long row of timbered carriages from Shepparton to Melbourne and back again. Bob and I finish setting up our van and walk along the edges of Victoria Lake.
The crowded lake-side park has a carnival atmosphere. But it’s not difficult to spot the top barbeque on the right. Bev and two other women move around quickly as they wrap sausages and rissoles and onions in slices of buttered bread. They fill foam cups with coffee and tea. People wander in and sit down at the tables under the shelter.

Bev pushes a generous sandwich into Bob’s hand, and says, -There’s plenty more from where that came from. Want sauce? Have a seat and talk to anyone who comes along and cheer them up.

It’s late. People finish their meal and their talk and drift away. I arrange to meet Bev at her house the next day.

She says, -But we won’t talk there, it’s too noisy—the television on and people coming and going all day. We’ll go over to my youngest daughter’s place. She’s lives on her own with her dog, and she’s out at work all day. We won’t be disturbed.

Bob and I wander back to the van. I eat fruit and drink a cup of weak green tea.

We climb into bed and fall asleep to the night noises of water insects and the croaking of frogs, and the call of plovers guarding their eggs on the grassy ground.

§

In my sleep, a monster is roaring and pounding and rushing straight towards us. I come suddenly awake and jump from the bed. Only metres behind the van the great train hurtles by on its first run of the day, and heads towards Melbourne. The train whistle’s long mournful cry spills out into the early morning.

-Sounded like the thing had come off its tracks and was going to flatten us, says Bob.

Still shaken, and laughing, we pull into Bev and Tony’s driveway.

I climb out of the truck and make room for Bev in the back. But she walks out of her house and puts her basket in her car. I climb back into the truck and say we’ll follow.

-Put your stuff in here, Jo—silly, really, to take two cars.

Bev pulls a heavy, silky table-cloth from her basket and spreads it over the polished surface of the mahogany
dining-room table. Her movements are smooth and economical, and everything about her seems unhurried and well-organised.

Patting the patterned cloth into place, she says, -I’d hate to scratch my daughter’s new furniture. Now let’s get your gear set up.

I open my notebook, and say, -You’re in charge of the buttons on the tape-machine.

Bev sits with her back to the wall and at an angle to the dining-room’s large glass doors. Despite the heat of the summer day and the noise of the traffic on the road out the front, inside the house it is cool and peaceful. Somewhere, away off in the distance, a dog howls.

-That’s the Border Collie-dog across the street. Its people-parents go to work and leave it alone all day—it gets lonely, poor little thing.

Instinct tells me that Bev’s soft-hearted, and as straight as a die, and I tell myself, “A person could trust her with their life.” Yet there is about her an air of wariness, and I sense that here is something like what I call the “mill-pond syndrome”—smooth and still on the surface with strong currents creating havoc underneath. I suppose we all do that at times, create a façade and try to mask the little insecurities and negative feelings we might experience at various times throughout our lives. Silently I wonder if she’s feeling anxious about what the interviews might reveal.

Bev settles herself comfortably into the cane-backed, polished wooden dining-room chair. She presses the play button. I place a copy of the Participant’s Information Sheet, and the Consent Form for my study in front of me on the table.

-Are you absolutely certain you want to do this, Bev? It’s just that you’ve ticked both “yes” and “no” to some questions on the consent form.

When she answers, she speaks slowly and thoughtfully.
-I guess it’s just that when I got the forms it was suddenly real, and it’s the reality of it, that you’re actually doing this and you’re going to tell the story of your life. It’s just … you think it used to be just me and it was all inside here, and now you’re going to let it all out. Not that my story will shock anybody. But it was just the fact that it will be out there. It won’t be private anymore. It was a bit silly of me really because there’s nothing to be afraid of. Everyone in the district knows me, and I know them.

For all her apparent openness I’m still not convinced that there isn’t something more, and I wonder what, or who, she’s guarding.

-And your wider family, what about them? After the work is finished, they might say why did you do that?

-I don’t know, Jo. I’ll face that if and when it comes. This story is important to tell. But you’ll have to ask me questions because I can’t talk straight off just like that, and there’s something I should warn you about. I cry a lot, sometimes for no reason at all. I told my specialist—I had a brain tumour removed—and he explained my sudden bursts of weeping as a side-effect of the neurosurgery. My daughters were worried about me doing this because the doctor warned me against getting tired or stressed. I told my girls I’d be alright. I know my own body. Jo. I want to do this and I’m pretty determined. I stick with things once I’ve made up my mind. So ask me some questions.

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The sun has risen higher in the sky and comes hotly through the window. Bev walks across the room and adjusts the blind. She comes back to her seat at the table, and even in the sudden dimness of the room I can see the firm resolve in her eyes. Her manner is very straightforward.

-Bev, Geoff tells me you had a truly beautiful adoption and a lovely life.
-Yes. In an ideal world I wish all children could be as well done by as I was. I always felt very safe, and
I was very happy. Mum and Dad genuinely loved me and I loved them, and I was a very much loved child in
their wider family. I was adopted as a young baby. I never even knew I was adopted until my mother and father
sat me down when I turned sixteen and told me, and they asked if I wanted to find my natural mother.

I lean towards her slightly. -And how did you feel about all that?

She looks at me calmly.

-Well I didn’t feel any different to what I always had. I was their daughter, and they were my mother and
father. We were a solid family and we all loved each other and it didn’t make the slightest difference to anyone.
It didn’t matter at all, and I didn’t feel any curiosity about my natural mother. She wasn’t my mother, and I never
even really thought anything more about it. But I felt I had to tell my Tony when he asked me to marry him, and
my Tony said, “It makes no difference to me whether you’re adopted or what you are, and it makes no difference
to who you are.’

In my mind, I go over Geoff’s past attitude towards being an adopted child, and I ask myself if that had
made any difference to whom he was. Geoff had said that it had taken a long time, but once he had rid himself
of resentment he came to realise that underneath it all he was himself—the child and the adult.

-But I suppose being an adopted person might make a difference to some people. Say you know you’re
adopted and don’t know your history—might that not, in some cases, cause problems with your sense of identity?

-I don’t know, Jo, but in my case it didn’t matter. I knew who I was—me. I am who I am. I’m an
individual, a woman, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a helper, and now a sister. I hope I’m a good person, but
I also know I’m nothing special, and I don’t want to be anybody out of the ordinary. I’m happy being me.
What’s being an adopted person matter? You’re still who you are. If you have a bad adoption it will probably
give you problems, but that doesn’t mean the adoption is responsible for making you the person you are. But
you’ve made me think. I suppose it’s difficult to say what makes a person who they are because there are always so many things in the mix.

Surely, aren’t we all a sum total of parts? Aren’t we in part what we’re born with—our gene list and personalities—and in part the modelling of our significant others, and in part all the things that happen to us along the way?

-So Bev, if it’s alright to ask, what do you know about your natural mother?

-Jo, I only know what Geoff’s told me, and I guess I didn’t absorb a lot, possibly because I didn’t want to know. I do know that her name was Margaret Davis, but I’ve never gone into depth about her, you know what I mean? I guess because I’ve thought … she let me go, so I’ve always left it at that.

She had three children out of wedlock to the same man, and she let the first one, Norman, go, and then she let the second one, me, go. As far as I’m concerned I feel that with me she made the right choice. But then she let the third one, Geoff, go. I think one mistake, okay, and we’ll allow for the second one because I wasn’t harmed. But when it gets to the third one, Geoff, very bad decision, very bad …

Bev’s eyes fill, and she pulls a tissue from the packet near her left hand. I sense that this is not one of what she calls her sudden emotional moments, rather a soft-hearted woman’s moment of quiet distress. She dabs at her eyes with a tissue, and her voice comes broken, and thick.

-She had him in the Royal Women’s Hospital in Carlton, Melbourne … that’s to my knowledge, and instead of giving the baby up for adoption straight off she mucked around pretending to try and bond with him and all the time knowing she was going to give him up anyway. Possibly, the papers she signed in the hospital to relinquish her rights to him prevented her from having a say about them sending him somewhere better than where he went—and that’s what I find very hard to take. If she could make a good decision with me, why did she have to be so cruel and let him go where he went? It’s really scary for me to think that the position could
have been reversed. Geoff might’ve gone to the safe place, and I might’ve got parents like his and ended up in a Home. I think I was just lucky.

-Bev, from what Geoff’s told me, and from the papers he’s shown me, your mother couldn’t support him.

Bev has stopped crying—she stopped while I was speaking. She pushes at her face with her fingers.

-I don’t like to judge the mother because I wasn’t in her position, and she was young and it was a different day and age. There wasn’t any birth control or sex education or social support much in those days. Look, to be fair, it might not have been the mother’s decisions all the way through. It might have been the father had a lot to say. I think she had to make that choice because I think the father, the natural father, just couldn’t take any responsibility whatsoever.

So in that way, one part of me says that the mother can’t be held accountable for Geoff’s bad adoption and his life going wrong. But there’s a piece in me that says yes, yes she can, because she knew the chances she was taking when she set about doing what makes babies, especially after the first one. So things just didn’t happen to go wrong—she had some sort say. Uh, I just think it was a terrible decision, and it was her decision. But I don’t know, and I really shouldn’t judge them. I really don’t know what their lives were like or what they were going through.

I ponder the question of what is versus what seems to be, and I look at Bev and say, -I don’t suppose anyone ever really knows what someone else is going through, really.

Bev puts her face in her hands and sobs. She pulls another then another tissue from the packet.

-Jo. It’s just me and how I feel about what happened to Geoff. You know, the mother could’ve had him in the same place she had me, “The Haven,” the Foundling Home at North Fitzroy, and he would’ve been just simply adopted out at birth like I was and he wouldn’t have ended up in an institution and gone through hell.
**-Bev, are you referring specifically to the assault on him in the orphanage?**

She blows her nose, pushes her chair back, walks across to the kitchen to put her bunch of used tissues in the tidy bin, and then comes back to her chair.

**-Yes. Yes I am. I think the experience of being raped is worse for a boy than a girl. But I don’t really know, maybe it’s not really worse, just different perhaps? But maybe the males come out of it worse. It’s not a natural thing. It’s a very bad thing to happen to either a boy or girl, but a boy isn’t physically built that way, you know? Boys are supposed to be boys, and I think it would change everything in their lives and probably affect them in marriage. The rape haunts Geoff a lot, and he’s very much a heterosexual.**

A lot of thoughts go around in my head and I wonder if the experience of being raped is, in fact, any worse for a boy than a girl. I know from my own story that the experience has the potential to destroy a little girl’s mind, and their soul. It changes everything in a little girl’s life, and can affect them as adults, and in marriage. I don’t say any of this to Bev because I find I’m unable and unwilling to open such a discussion. I stand up and cross to the kitchen sink and pour us both a glass of water, and carry them over to the table.

**-Bev, from what Geoff has told me, his adoptive parents at first seemed to be lovely.**

**-Yes, and then things went wrong. I was adopted by the right people, and I think that makes all the difference in a child’s life. If you don’t get the right people I think it causes all sorts of problems in a child, especially if the adopted child knows all along they’re adopted and resents it for some reason.**

Myself, I think adoptive parents should be screened more thoroughly. But there’s no guarantee that just because a couple adopts a child their marriage is going to work. There’s no guarantee that anybody’s marriage is going to work. Unforeseen things happen in life, and things can go wrong for anyone. It’s all the luck of the draw, I suppose.
All morning we talk on and off tape, because that’s the way Bev wants it to be. All morning I jot notes into my book, check and label tapes, and keep eye-contact with Bev for lengthy periods. Now, we sit at the glass-topped table on her daughter’s back patio and relax over our lunch.

Bev reaches for her cigarettes and I leave her to it and go back inside to get myself a cup of tea and load a new tape into the recorder.

Bev walks back through the door from the patio, puts her cigarettes in her basket, and her unopened vanilla yoghurt in the fridge. She comes back to her chair and sits down. The morning’s session has been intense. Mindful that she’s not a well woman, I search around in my mind for a lighter topic.

-Bev, can we talk now about your life as a much-loved child?

-Jo. I was an only child, but I had cousins. I got along with everybody, yes, there was no question with that, and I was accepted and loved by everyone. Mum and Dad were very loving with each other, and with me. They were the very best—

She makes a sudden lunge at her tissue packet, and says in an aside, -Don’t mind me, it’s just the emotional see-sawing thing caused by the brain operation.

She wipes her eyes, and continues speaking.

- I was blessed. Mum and Dad loved me so much—I was their own child. We always talked a lot amongst ourselves, the three of us were just meant to be together. We’d go on picnics and drives, to the Eildon Weir and places like that, and do all sorts of things together. In those days you didn’t use the car like you do today, you rode your bikes all over the place, and you caught the train to Melbourne. I’d go rabbiting with Dad. He’d dink me on his bike, and we’d take our two ferrets with us, and off we’d go to the bush and catch rabbits, and Mum would cook roast rabbit, beautiful. I don’t know how Dad had the strength to dink me and carry the
ferrets in their cages—it was quite a way we had to go out of town to go rabbiting. Our lives were beautiful and peaceful and serene, I don’t remember any disasters ever happening in our lives. My parents were just beautiful.

Bev sighs happily. I find myself smiling and sighing with her, for, even though my own childhood was far removed from that of hers, her talk of her childhood makes me feel strangely nostalgic. I’m captivated by the picture she paints of a happy and serene childhood, and I long to hear more so that I, too, might revel in the warmth of the memories even though those memories aren’t mine.

-Dad was very talented and very practical. He could do anything, and fix anything and everything. And oh, he made beautiful cakes and pastries and did most of the cooking at home. Mum cooked a lot, too, and she was very good at making fruit cakes. I think she made everybody’s wedding cake, and my father would ice them and do all the decorating. They did it for the whole district. Every birthday I would have a Dolly Varden cake. Do you know the Dolly Varden? It’s a half-doll, from waist up, in a long, wide, bell-shaped skirt made of cake? The cake-skirt would be iced and elaborately decorated all over with roses and fine scalloped piping and silver cachous, and her long hair and her wide, old-fashioned picture hats with their laces and flowing ribbons were very, very beautiful.

I remember Dad tried to teach me to cook, but I was too busy just being with him, too busy helping him and wanting to see the final product, I never really absorbed the skills, which is silly. We had beautiful meals, we had really beautiful food, but you had to eat everything put before you. Sweets were quite simple. Bread and butter pudding meant so much that all those horrible green vegetables went straight down without argument. I guess you could say I was a plump child. I took the loveliest cut lunches to school. I loved left-over roast meat and tomato sauce sandwiches. This might sound a strange choice for a child, but my favourite dinner was lamb’s fry and bacon and onion gravy and tomato sauce—we don’t have it here at our place because I’d be the only one to eat it. And I’d never cook it for Geoff. He hates offal. He was forced to eat it in the Home—
My thoughts fly to the Home I was in as a child. We weren’t given offal to eat. In fact, we weren’t given any meat at all. Our breakfast consisted of two spoons of porridge no milk or sugar, and a half cup of cold sugarless cocoa. Lunch at school was half a baked bean sandwich, and lunch in the Home was two spoons of thin root-vegetable stew almost minus the vegetables. Dinner at night was half a slice of butter-less bread pre-spread with a thin scrape of blackberry jam.

I don’t tell Bev, but I see her eyes tear up, and in an attempt to swing the conversation back to her own happy memories, I quickly interrupt. -Oh, I like lamb’s fry and bacon, too. But Bob doesn’t. So we don’t have it our place.

Her face lights up and she beams. -We’ll have to get together some time.

-So, Bev, when you were a child growing up, where did you all live?

-All my life I’ve only ever lived here in Shepparton, and I’ve only ever lived in three houses. Our house, Tony’s and mine, is the third of those houses. So while I was growing up we lived in two different houses. We lived in the first house for a long time, all during the time I went to Infants and Primary School. I was only talking about it the other day. If you could have that house today you’d be so proud of it. It was a very, very big weather-board place with a veranda all the way round. It had a big long passage, a breeze-way, up the middle, three or four beautiful big bedrooms—which was a lot in those days—big kitchen, high ornate ceilings, lounge-room, dining-room, sun-room. It was just an amazing house. As a child, I used to walk around it and think, “I live in a beautiful mansion.” It was built on a big corner block and surrounded by a beautiful garden—all these flowers, larkspurs, snapdragons, petunias, violets, roses, lilacs, azaleas, and bushes and hydrangeas, all those nice things. There was a big peppercorn tree down the back, and in the summer—we didn’t have air-conditioning back then—we’d sit out there of an evening. It was just magic. As a child, you could go into the garden and play on your own but you’d feel like you were in fairy-land with the fairies. It was a place full of imagination, and my parents kept it just beautiful. It’s such a waste, such a shame, but the house was demolished a while back and a steel works moved onto the site. That’s progress, I suppose.
I too, had lived in such a house once—in the time before my mother placed me in a Children’s Home—and in my imagination I drift into a picture of living there as a child. Quickly, I pull myself back to the job in hand and realise that, for a fleeting moment, I’d been caught up in the gossamer web of Bev’s dream. My thoughts turn to her brother, and how, as an only child who was much doted on, his adoptive parents spoilt him.

-Bev, as an only child who was much-loved were you spoilt?

-No, not at all. I knew exactly where I stood and what was expected of me, and I knew I was a child and had to take my place in the family. I was brought up to know that I was a much-loved person in my family, but an ordinary person like anyone else just the same. But I always had a lot of toys and dolls and more dolls, beautiful dolls.

Beverly Osborne as a young child

Photo by courtesy of Beverly Osborne.
I still have my favourite doll today. She’s made of china and her hair’s painted onto her head. I remember Mum made her the most exquisite clothes. Oh isn’t that awful, I can’t remember her name—was it Shirley? But I do remember we had to go on the train to Melbourne a couple of times to the Doll’s Hospital because maybe the eye wasn’t working properly, or something like one of the elastics that held her limbs in place to her body had broken. So you’d take her to Melbourne and you had to leave her at the Doll’s Hospital, and then you had to make another trip back in about two weeks’ time and pick her up. Oh, it was all very traumatic because your child was in hospital and Melbourne was a long, long way away in those days. And I owned a doll’s pram that was a miniature of a real baby’s pram. In those days it was very flash, not many children had doll’s pram like mine.

I was dressed like a princess. Mum used to take me to her friend who was a dress-maker, and I was always getting a new frock for some reason. Every occasion that came up you had to have a new frock. Beautiful, beautiful frocks I had, and I had lovely hair ribbons and beautiful shoes to match every dress. A lot of people used to say I was spoilt. I wasn’t spoilt—it was only because I was only child, and because I always looked the part.

So I got all those things, but my parents were very strict with me and I was brought up to be polite, and respectful to others, and always knew right from wrong, and you would get into trouble if you did something wrong. I don’t think I ever did anything really wrong, but you had your jobs and you had to do them. Like, you knew you had to dry the dishes. That was your job. I hated drying the dishes, so as soon as I’d eaten tea I always made the excuse that I had to go to the toilet now—I was possibly only about eight at this stage—and I was soon told it didn’t matter what I did, if I didn’t dry those dishes they’d be sitting there on the drainer waiting for me and that was all there was to it. Mum and Dad never smacked me or went mad on me. I just had to do as I was told, that’s all, and they’d sit me down and talk to me and I’d feel really guilty, really terrible, because I’d let them down.

While I was very young Mum stayed at home and looked after me. Once I started school she took a job in the haberdashery departments of major department stores here in town—that was very important in those days, if you worked in haberdashery. Then later, she worked in the local cannery in the fruit season. But I never,
ever came home to an empty house and I was never left alone. Where I went to school was not far from where Mum worked, and I used to go straight from school and sit quietly, like a little mouse, behind the counter where she worked, and read until it was time to come home.

Every night after tea I’d get told, “Off to bed now,” and I’d have a bed-time story, and be given a kiss good-night. My father would be the last one to come home of a night. He’d get home just as I was ready to nod off, and he’d say, “Right, it’s time to tuck you in now, Sissy,” and the last thing I heard every night was my father saying, “Goodnight, we’ll see you in the morning.”

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-Bev, what age were you when you started school, do you know?

-Oh dear, now you’re asking me something, I’ll have to work it out. Now, how old would I have been? I’d say five? School was just up the next corner from where we lived and across the road. I loved going to school. I’d be up very early every morning, dressed, long black curls that hung down my back brushed and tied with ribbons, shoes polished, school case beside me—I had a really lovely little case. I remember sitting beside the combustion stove waiting to go school while my father held the bread on a long fork and cooked toast over the open fire box, and I’d have to eat that toast before I left the house. High School was a different story, I wore a school uniform for the first time and rode my push-bike to school, and I couldn’t wait for the time to come when High School was all over and I could get out of there.

I had lots of friends at school. They’re still my friends. I’m always meeting one or the other or another. Whenever we go down the street Tony will say, “We’re not just going down the street to get something and come home, we’re going down for a full social event and you know it.”

I had one very special friend I made in High School. She was Russian, and she came out to Australia with her mother. When they arrived in Australia they were sent to Bonegilla Migrant Camp—it was a big place up at Lake Hume, about twelve kilometres from Wodonga—and then they got transferred to Shepparton. I remember her coming into the classroom with the teacher, and the teacher asking for someone to be her friend and look after her because she was new, and couldn’t speak English. I put up my hand, and we’re still best
friends today. We left school when we turned sixteen, and my friend went off to Melbourne and became a radiologist. She found herself a doctor, and they got married. I was her bridesmaid, and we carried bouquets of “Peace” roses. They’ve just had their fiftieth wedding anniversary and I sent her a very special letter by email, and a bouquet of “Peace” roses through Interflora.

-Bev, after you left school, what did you do?

-Well, Jo, I always wanted to be a nurse, so that’s what I did. I went to see the Matron at Echuca.

Things click into place in my mind, and I say to myself, “Ah, so this explains her careful watchfulness, she’s been trained to be ready to jump in and act at a moment’s notice.”

-My parents were fine about me going off to nurse. In fact they were proud of me, but I guess they missed me a terrible lot. On my days off my father would be waiting out the front of the hospital in his grey Vanguard to pick me up and drive me home to Shepparton, and then at the end of my days off he’d drive me back to the hospital.

The country between Echuca and Shepparton is flat and it floods. But even in flood times I knew I’d always get through from the hospital to home, and back again, because Dad would take me. I never had any worries I’d be stranded even when we had to hop out of the car and push it through the flood waters. I never ever once stopped to think, “Dad has to go back through that flood water and push the car on his own now to get home.” But he always got through, and that’s the way we went on for years. I always went home to Mum and Dad and when it was time for me to go back to work they were sensible about it, just gave me a kiss and said, “Be safe, we’ll see you in a week or so.” I could have taken the bus I suppose, but travel from Echuca to Shepparton wasn’t quick in those days. The bus used to take more than half a day. It only takes forty minutes now. I couldn’t take the train because there wasn’t one. Back then, like now, the train-line from Melbourne ended at Shepparton. You still have to catch the bus to get out to places like Echuca.

I finished at Echuca and began nursing at the private hospital here in Shepparton and met my husband, Tony. It’s a love story, but there’s not a great deal to tell. Tony’s elderly auntie was a patient in the private
hospital, and I got along well with her as a patient and as a friend. Tony’s mother used to come and visit her, and I met Tony when he came with his mother one time. Tony’s a beautiful man, always has been, and when we met he thought I was the best thing ever to come along. Tony came from a big family, and I got on well with them, too. My parents thought the world of Tony. I was thirty-six when Mum and Dad died, so they knew all their grandchildren, my children, and loved them. My children remember their Nan and Pop, and they adored them.

Tony is, and always has been, a very, very hard worker. I went to work too, but stopped when we started having the children. I went back to work once they were all at school. We sent the kids to good schools, and school fees and things were expensive. Our eldest daughter and our son went to university, and our youngest daughter has her own business. They’re all lovely kids and very well adjusted and hard-working and they’re all very loving towards us, and we have two beautiful grandchildren. So we’ve had a good steady life surrounded by loving friends and family, but we haven’t always had it easy because we’ve had to work very, very hard, and we’ve had to struggle for everything we’ve got. But I wouldn’t have it any other way because, that way, you appreciate what you’ve got and you look after things. I’ve been happy all my life, Jo. I’ve felt safe and very much loved from the time I can remember, and all my married life I’ve always felt the same.

Bev goes outside to smoke one of her cigarettes.

She comes back to the dining-room. I wait until she’s ready to go on, and then I say, -Bev, talking about hard work, there’s something I’d like to ask. Yesterday, just after I met you, you said “Come to the top barbeque in the park after you’ve set up your van.” And there you were, feeding all these people. At first I thought you were raising money for some charity—but you weren’t charging. So what was that all about?

Enthusiasm flares in her eyes.

-Jo, I know a simply beautiful Albanian couple who have a kebab business here in town—we call them the Boss and Mrs Boss—and they work very hard. One day, I saw a piece in the local paper that said the Boss was starting up a soup kitchen. So I went down to see him, and he put me in charge of the top barbeque at the lake. The two Red Cross ladies who help me out at my station sometimes bring blankets and clothing and we
hand that out to the poor and the homeless, too. There’s a little community of rather proud homeless people
camped further down around the lake. They wouldn’t come forward, so bit by bit we sent some of the others
along with food for them, and you should see the change in them now—they’ve opened right up, and they’re
looking better. We don’t question. But it turns out a lot of them were victims of the big floods. The Boss said to
me, “Feed anyone who comes along, or even just talk to somebody and make them feel needed or happy.” I’ve
learnt a lot from this man. He’s a good man, the Boss. He’s also the chaplain from the prison twelve kilometres
from here, so he’s in touch with what goes on when people in real need lose hope.

-Bev, you do all this, and yet you’ve had major brain surgery only a couple of years ago.

-Jo, I was given a second chance of life, and I’ve been sent my brothers and a sister. When you’re given
those things you don’t just lay back and take it all as your right, you want to give back. Geoff does charity work,
too. He works at the Salvation Army every Wednesday and helps those worse off than himself. A smile doesn’t
hurt you, and it doesn’t take much time and effort to hold someone’s hand for a moment, does it?

Enjoying the conversation, and wondering if it will lead to further revelations, I say, -Bev, you have just
won the lotto, you’ve got $ 2.5 million, how does that make you feel?

-Oh, I’m supposed to say “wonderful,” aren’t I? But money doesn’t mean everything. What is important
to me is … take Tony’s and my house for instance. It’s only simple, but it’s ours. We paid it off bit by bit over
the years. I’ve lived all my married life in that house and raised my family there. It’s where my happiness is.
Even if I had all that money I wouldn’t move, and I’d rather have my family and my pets and my new brother
than all the money in the world.

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Bev pulls up under the tree in front of our van. She stands with me and Bob and we watch the train come up out
of the fog and go roaring down the track on its first run of the day towards Melbourne.

-It’s going to be another hot day when this clears, she says.
Bev’s a competent driver. She runs her car smoothly into her daughter’s driveway and parks in the garage. It’s dark with the garage door down, and we stumble as we reach for the light.

We go through into the house and set up, and we sit down in the same places as we had the day before.

-So, Bev, how did it come to light you had a brother?

-Jo. All my life I’ve thought, “Gee, I’d like a brother.” I don’t know if it was security or what it was, I just thought it’d be very nice to have a brother. Other girls at school had brothers, and possibly I thought that if you had a sister you could do things, but if you had a brother you could go more places and do even more things. A brother would look after you, protect you, and I used to think, “Well never mind, it’s only me. I’m an only child so let’s get on with it.” Years later, when my parents died I said, “It’s times like now that I wish I had a brother and I could share this.” Dad died when he was seventy, and Mum died when she was seventy-one. Neither of them were what you’d call old, but they both had heart attacks and died within six months of each other. They were the saddest days of my life. I just wish they were here today to know all about this.

Suddenly Bev laughs, and laughs again, and then says to herself under her breath, “Stop that now.”

-Jo, when I tell you about things you’ll see why I can’t stop laughing.

Four years ago I went to the mail box, and found a letter from Human Services. I looked at it and turned it over in my hands and I said, “Why would these people be contacting me. I have nothing to do with Human Services, so what is happening here?” But inside myself I thought, “This isn’t going to be easy to open this envelope.” I don’t know why that thought came to my mind. My instinct just told me something wasn’t right.

So I opened the letter and read: “You have a brother, and he’s looking for you.”

I thought, “Oh my God! I always wanted a brother, and I got one!”

I read the letter twice. It was hard to take in. I felt a bit mixed up.

“So alright, I’ve got a brother, just one brother. It’s not a whole family looking for me so that’s alright. I’ve only got to deal with one person.”
I thought I could handle it being just one person, and I thought, “Well, if you want to go ahead with this you’d better ring this woman whose name is on the letter.”

So I rang, and said, “What’s going on here, I’ve got a letter.”

The woman said, “That’s right, you’ve got a brother and he wants to make contact with you.”

“Okay, so what do we have to do?”

“Well, it’s going to take time.”

“Look, I want to get on with this, we need to solve this now.” I was anxious I guess, I just wanted to find out what was going on.

A few minutes later Tony just happened to ring me from work, and I was trying to be normal on the phone but he said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“There is something wrong, I can tell, I think I’d better come home right now.”

When Tony walked in the door he said, “Sit down now. You’re as white as a sheet.”

I just looked at him and said, “I’m scared. I don’t know what’s happening, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Did you get a letter in the mail?”

“Yes. How did you know about that?”

“I didn’t … have you got a letter in the mail?”

“Yes, but you don’t know what it’s about.”

“No, but I think I’ve got a fair idea. You’ve got family, haven’t you?”

Over the years Tony used to say to me, “Have you ever thought you might have someone out there somewhere?” I used to say, “I haven’t. This person had a baby and put it up for adoption, and it was a one-off thing and there is no-one else.” Tony would say, ‘How can you be sure. If you don’t do something about things, you might get a letter in the mail one day.”

So on this day, I showed him the letter, and he read it and said, “Don’t let anybody see this letter.”

I said, “We have to! It’s not going to go away!”
Bev’s laughing so hard she can’t speak. I sit there laughing with her.

-Oh, oh, Bev, oh, “Don’t let anybody see this letter!” What did he think!

-I know, Jo, oh, oh …

We break into fresh paroxysms of laughter, and grab for her tissue packet at the same time. We dry our streaming eyes.

-So what did you do then?

-Tony and I both looked at each other and thought about the children not knowing I was adopted. I’d never told them, Tony had never told them, Mum and Dad had never told them, no-one had.

Tony said, “There’s only one thing to do—have a little meeting and tell them.”

But this was going to take too much time. They were adults, the two girls lived near us but my son and his family lived in Melbourne.

So we got the two girls together, and I said, “I have something to tell you.”

They said, “What’s wrong, are you sick?”

“No, it isn’t that, but you might feel very sick when I tell you. It’s something I should have attended to years ago, but I just didn’t. I’m adopted.”

“So? Is that all? Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

Then they cried, and I cried, and I said, “I guess I just thought it’s my business, and just not let’s go there.”

I guess it’s possible I felt a little bit ashamed in a funny sort of way.

They said, “But you’re so much like Nan and Pop, your mother and father.”

“Well, yes, but sometimes this happens, and now we all have to go to Melbourne tomorrow so I can speak with your brother and tell him the news because you all have to know it at the same time.”

So we went to Melbourne and my son said, “Well, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. Like, what’s the big deal?”
I took a breath and looked at them all in turn, and said, “It’s not so much the fact that I’m adopted … it’s the fact that I’ve just found out I’ve got a brother who is looking for me.”

They all seemed to say it at once—“Oh … my … God! What are you going to do?”

I said, “I don’t know! But I’ve got to do it!”

After I told my children we went straight back home and I rang the Human Services lady and she asked, “How do you feel about all this?”

I said, “I want to do it, but I am scared. Because you know, a lot of years have passed, and this person is six years younger than me.”

-Heavens Bev, I suppose for all you knew he could have been from Mars!

-Well, that’s it, isn’t it? I didn’t know what I’d find. I thought, “I could have a millionaire on my hands! No, if he was a millionaire he wouldn’t come looking for his sister, would he?”

That’s how silly my thinking got in all this confusion. I even thought of a homeless person, or a drifter, or someone who was penniless or an alcoholic. So I looked at it from the top of the scale down and thought, “I have to do this and I will do it regardless, because this person is my brother. He’s my blood.”

The lady from Human Services said, “You don’t have to meet him. You can walk away.”

I said, “I won’t do that. I have to meet this person face to face, and it has to be done as soon as we can do it.”

She said, “Go slowly with it. Go slow.”

-How did the kids take all this?

-Oh, it rocked their boat, definitely. I think they thought, “Oh, what’s ahead of us now; how will this new uncle affect our family.”

I told them, “Look, things will change, but it’s something I have to do.”

As it was, things didn’t change much. Tony and me always have been, and still are, a close couple and us and our kids are still the loving family unit we’ve always been. Nothing will change that, and I still feel the same way about my dear, dear parents as I always had. I just have a natural family now as well, and a special brother, that’s all.
I didn’t know it right then, but later it came out that the whole thing really upset some of our children. It was all very hard for everyone to take, really. It was hard for me to take as well.

It was such a big shock.

One day there I was living my lovely life as normal, and the next day I had all this suddenly plonked on me.

I’m ashamed to say I even wondered if this person who was saying he was my brother was really an imposter who was after something.

So all these emotions were running around inside me, and all the time I was scared for my family. The children eventually took it all in that Mum was still Mum, and this thing wasn’t ever going to just go away—“so you’d best get on with it and adjust.”

They’ve all had their chance to have their say. And even if they did object, I want it for me.

I keep eye contact with Bev while she’s speaking, and see the magic as it happens. Her eyes seem to suddenly go clear, and I feel as if I’m looking straight down, deep into her soul just I had with her brother Geoff when I interviewed him only a couple of days ago.

-Jo, I guess that in a way, at first I didn’t know if I wanted this. I was sixty-six, it was late in life. I’d lived all my life in peace and quiet and harmony—and I didn’t know what was about to happen or what I’d find, and whether all this would upset our lives and be just too much for me and everyone else.

I can’t know what it must feel like to be in the situation in which Bev found herself. But the anxiety concomitant with such uncertainty, and the fear of the reactive chain such an action might set in place, must be terrible.

-After I talked to the lady at Human Services we went through all the procedures. Geoff wasn’t allowed to have my phone number or know where I was. It was all up to me. I had to make the step, and that’s right and
proper I suppose. The lady from Human Services gave me Geoff’s phone number but she said I was not to ring him until after she had set a time and date for a first meeting.

I said to her, “But what if this person lives a million miles away?”

When I got off the phone Tony and I went through the phone book and discovered that Geoff was just up the road in Albury—too easy, no problem. When I finally got the go ahead from the lady at Human Services I rang him, and poor Geoff … poor Geoff tried to tell me his whole life history right then and then over the phone. I felt like I’d been run over. I couldn’t take it all in.

I don’t think I got the chance to speak for two hours, and I thought, “If he wants to tell me his whole history in this space of time it’s because maybe he’s frightened I won’t come and meet him, so at least I know all about him.”

So then I said we’d meet him at eleven o’clock, on Saturday morning the twenty-second of October, this was in 2007, in the park at Albury, at the water-wheel—it was off one of the old Murray River paddle steamers? But I wouldn’t tell him anything, I didn’t want him to know anything about me. I thought, “I don’t really want you to know anything at all about me until I’ve met you and I feel safe.”

The lady from Human Services had told me to be wary, and to be safe about the whole thing—“You have to be very cautious and protect yourself.”

Unknown to her, Bev’s words provide me with new insight. A few years ago my brother called me and said, -Now that Dad and the butcher’s cousin and all her lot are dead, d’you think it might be time to try and contact our sister before we all get planted under the turf?

I said, -Al, it might lead to terrible heartache.

When you open your life to a new-found sibling in late middle-age, rather than unite a family, you could easily tear a family apart.

But we made contact with our sister through a third party—a minister of the church.

My sister sent a message: “No contact.”
After forty-odd years, perhaps it came as a huge shock to my sister to learn that Al and I were still alive and kicking. Or perhaps it raised her own memories, and perhaps she didn’t want to open her Pandora’s Box.

My brother and I decided not to pursue the matter further. I don’t know what Al thought really, but for me, it was the only way. I decided to give it all a big miss and let my sister go on her merry way because in a personal message to me, as it was relayed, she had said, -What are you after, money?

So I acknowledged my contempt and closed that door for good and left my sister where and how she wanted to be.

I brush the thoughts aside and concentrate on Bev.

-And how did that all go, Bev?

-Jo, I cried a lot between the phone call and the day we went to meet him because I was scared everything might go haywire. I went with Tony and the girls and we got to the park early, and I thought, “It’s time for me to go to the toilet, and have a drink and try and do this now because here I am.”

I came out of the toilets with my daughter and he was already there talking to Tony.

I thought, “No, I can’t do it,” and I turned on my heels.

Then I thought, “Why did I do all this if I didn’t want to go through with it. So stop being so silly.”

So I went over and Geoff said hullo, and then he began talking, non-stop, just like he had over the phone. Tony and I had packed a picnic. All during lunch Geoff kept peeking and peeking at me, and I saw him and I thought, “This is my brother.”

Geoff said later that he loved me from the very moment he first set eyes on me.

-So how did you feel, were you shy with this new brother of yours?

-No, just very cautious. I was wary. I think some of the things that went through my mind were “is this person okay,” and “is this person sick, or is he terminally ill and needs someone to look after him, or has he just been divorced and he doesn’t have anyone.” I just didn’t know what to expect.

Looking back, it was all just so stupid. He’s a wonderful person, and very, very honest.
I’m ashamed to say that sometimes in the early days I wished I hadn’t started all this, but of course I don’t feel that way now. I like him, and I just wish I’d been there for him before.

Anyway, after we had our day together Tony and I and our girls drove off and I looked back and thought, “This is so unfair. Here I am happily going home with my dear people and I can share all my thoughts and feelings with them. And there he is, standing all alone, and going home to an empty house where’ll he’ll talk to himself or his dog and cat about how he feels about everything.”

-Bev. Maybe it’s okay for him to do that. Geoff said it himself; He’s still healing and this is his gathering space.

-I rang him the next day and he said he felt things went fine, and he asked me if I’d come up to his place to visit. Tony and I took him out to lunch, and Geoff talked the leg off the table again. As I said to Tony, we’ve got to understand, he’s had it bottled up for a long time. He’s got to get it all out, every bit of it, so he can heal properly.

§

I stop the recorder, check the tape, start the machine again, and say, - Geoff told me that when he went looking for his natural family, he found the other siblings first, and then he found you.

Her eyes widen in surprise.

-Hoh! Geoff found ALL the family and he met them all long before he first met me. And when we first met and he told me we had all these others, I just didn’t know in myself how to handle it. I still feel a bit overwhelmed by all this at times. Just to think I never knew or even thought … I never had an inkling. But it’s all good. It just takes a long time to get used to.

The kids were blown away. They said, “Oh, how many is there.”

-Well, do you think there could be others?

-Geoff and I have spoken about this and I’ve said at home that there could be more of us out there, and the kids just look at me in horror. It wouldn’t surprise me at all really.
-Are you going to try and find out?

-No. I wouldn’t want to know. It would be too much. I’m not going to dig around. I’ll let it go.

Anyway, Geoff told me that our eldest brother, Norman, was buried in Ballarat, and our natural parents were buried at Lancefield. In the early November, just a few weeks after I first met Geoff, a relative of Tony’s died and we had to go to the funeral in Ballarat. Tony said, “Let’s make a long day of it,” and he took me first to Lancefield to Boot Hill cemetery to see where my natural parents are buried. We visited their graves and I felt absolutely nothing. I guess I just went out of some sort of respect, and that’s probably a terrible thing to say. But I didn’t know them. They were just two unknown people. Then we went on to Ballarat.

I wanted to find Norman’s grave. Ballarat has two cemeteries. He could have been in either. As we were driving out the back gates of the cemetery to go Tony’s cousin’s wake, I had these funny vibes and I jumped out of the car and walked through the unmarked section where the paupers are buried, and stood up against the back of a blue, unmarked wooden cross. After the wake we went back and inquired at the cemetery office, and were told that Norman was there, in the unmarked section near a blue cross. We went back to the cross, and my daughter was with me and she said, “Mum, I’ll just ring Geoff and check to see we’re in the right place.” So she rang him and what Geoff said confirmed it was the right place. So there I was, standing at the back of the cross that belonged to someone else, looking down at the unmarked grave of my eldest brother. I felt so sad. He was so alone. I don’t know why he’s in an unmarked grave. But not to worry, Geoff and I are going to give him a simple headstone with our names on it. At least he’ll be acknowledged.

I talk to a lot of people about all this, and some people are interested, and others aren’t—like, “Why do you want to talk about all this?”

But I feel good talking to you about it because I know you’re interested and there’s meaning in this for you. And I’m humbled that I have this opportunity to be able to tell you how I feel about it all. I’m able to tell you how I feel because you’re the only person who possibly … even though we’re strangers … really understands. But we’re not really strangers at all because I feel I know you, do you know what I mean?

It was just after visiting the graves that I got sick, and had to have brain surgery. And about six months after the surgery I started feeling better and wanted to do more things. So I wrote our youngest sister a letter
saying about finding all this family—“this is a big shock to both of us,”—and because we’d never met, I asked if she wanted to meet. She agreed, and Tony took me to Lancefield to see her. Oh, and I must tell you that I met my youngest brother—a really *sweet* man, but very shy. I also met my sister’s son, he’s a lovely, *lovely* man, and he’s a digger. He digs *all* the graves in the Lancefield cemetery, has done for years.

I can’t help myself. I break out in a belly laugh. And then I laugh again, but this time I’m laughing at Bev. She has this trick of being able to look at you deadpan whilst saying something that is not in itself funny, but which, because of the way in which it is said, and because of the context in which it is placed, becomes suddenly outrageously funny. Like a very good joke, it catches the listener unawares and shocks, and becomes instantly and absolutely hilarious.

Bev sits in her chair and grins at me with satisfaction, and then she chortles.

-There. I knew that’d tickle your fancy.³ Jo, at that short meeting my young sister said our natural mother had two sisters and a brother still living. So I met our natural mother’s youngest brother—Uncle Jimmy—and he’s a real *sweetie*. At our meeting, my sister also told me that one of our natural mother’s sisters was in a nursing home in Sunbury, and I wanted to visit her straight away.

Jo, she’s lovely, really *lovely*. When I walked into the room our lovely Aunt said straight off she knew who I was. Geoff had met her before she’d gone into the nursing home, and after he’d met me he had visited her and told her everything. This lovely aunt loves all of us. She doesn’t make *any* difference between us two older ones she didn’t know, and the two younger ones that she’s known all their lives. Somehow I think she’s *always known* about Geoff and me, but not where we went or what happened to Geoff. It’s clear from what she says that she loved our natural mother, and she obviously knew all her secrets but she protected her by keeping it all to herself—not even our two younger siblings knew about Geoff and me.

This lovely aunt is very old and frail now. So the only thing I really asked her when I met her was “did we all have the same father,” but it wouldn’t have worried me to find out that we hadn’t.
Geoff’s said from day one, “Regardless of whether or not there are different fathers involved here, we’re never going to be just halves.”

Funny, but when I was a young woman I used to look in the mirror and think my father was Italian. I had this vision—“wouldn’t it be nice if he was Italian and he’s somebody grand and he lives in a nice big villa somewhere in Tuscany.” Of course, it was all imagination. Fact is, though, all us brothers and sisters have the same Italian-type looks, but no-one can tell us anything much about our father. I laugh about it all, but it would be nice if he was Italian, I think.

-What about the other aunt, the other of your natural mother’s sisters?

-She’s in a nursing home in Wodonga. We were up in Wodonga one time, and I wanted to visit her, and Geoff rang around and found the nursing home. It was in Wodonga.

Gosh, she was a sweetie. But she had dementia, and after about four hours of trying to tell her his story and get somewhere with her poor Geoff had had enough and took off. I still go and see her, but Geoff doesn’t. I think he finds it a bit distressing that she doesn’t remember anything he tells her. But my real point is, I suppose, that with that lovely, lovely quiet brother and those two lovely, lovely quiet sisters, I think our natural mother must have been a very lovely person too … but weak, I think.

I’m happy I have all this family, and I think they’re all happy, too.

§

We resume talking as soon as Bev finishes her cigarette and comes inside and sits down in her chair. I take the lead and cut straight to the chase.

-Geoff told me he took you on a holiday to Queensland?

-He wanted us to go on a holiday alone together because we’d never had that chance earlier in our life. Oh, while we were in Queensland we did some very magical things. I met my youngest brother again, and one time Geoff took me to the Glasshouse Mountains. I had to be up at four-thirty that morning because you have to be there when daylight comes.
Geoff took me around to see his life. He showed me all the places he’d ever lived in, and took me to visit all the people he knew. I liked his friends. But I felt like I was falling down into a black hole, or being dragged down and down, back into his past, and I felt really terrible. I feel so, so guilty that he had all this horror while I lived my life happily here in Shepparton. Poor Geoff, it’s not fair.

-But, Bev, as Geoff himself said, there was little you could have done. You were only a child yourself.

Silently, I wonder why this seemingly sensible woman is indulging in excesses of guilt about something over which she had no control. Until a few years back, she hadn’t even known her brother existed. Bev blows her nose, and disposes of the tissue.

-I know, but I still feel bad. Anyway, while Geoff and I were in Queensland Tony got sick here at home in Shepparton and was taken to hospital. I was contacted to come home straight away. So I asked Geoff to take me straight to the airport or the train. But Geoff pointed out that the train from Queensland to Melbourne was a very slow trip, and because of where we were at the time, we’d have to go back up the coast to get to the nearest airport and then I’d have to book a ticket and wait for a plane anyway, and once I got to Melbourne I’d still have to get back to Shepparton. Geoff said we might not get the chance to come away like this again, and since we’d be heading in the direction of home anyway, we might as well finish the holiday. And he said we’d still get home quicker than if I’d gone on the train, and he said there was nothing I could do for Tony that the hospital couldn’t do even if I was there right now. So we went on, but I probably spoilt things a bit because I was so worried all the time. It was a great relief to get back to Shepparton to see Tony. I don’t think I’d go away again without Tony.

-Well Tony’s your husband. On another note, Bev, Geoff tells me he’s come a long way to healing himself inside.

She delves into her basket and produces a fresh packet of tissues and put them on the table near her left hand.
-Geoff tends to beat himself up about things, and he shouldn’t. He’s such a beautiful person and he’s got so many good qualities. He’s a credit to himself. He’s very clean and very neat and never lets standards slip. He’s such a gentleman, his manners are simply beautiful—like, he even stands when a lady comes to the table, and he opens the door for her, and pulls out her chair and seats her … not many men do all those things these days. If only he could meet a nice, genuine lady who’d care about him, it would be the answer to a lot of things I think.

-Bev, Geoff also told me he used to be a very angry person, but he has that under control, now.

-Yes. I haven’t seen much of that in the time I’ve known him. But did he tell you about the time when we were in Queensland and he really shouted at me when a piece of long grass got tangled in my shoe and I thought it was a snake, and screamed and screamed? He did? It was really, really silly of me, I think. I have this deathly fear of snakes. But it was funny, too, I suppose.

There was another time he shouted at me and that wasn’t funny. He was telling me about his breakdowns and how he’d managed to pull himself up by his boot straps and get on with life. I was feeling low at the time, and I talked about my brain tumour and how it got me down. And he turned on me and roared, really roared at me to stop feeling sorry for myself, and he said he was sick of hearing about the tumour and he didn’t ever want to hear about it again. I think he was genuinely trying to make me get up and get on with it, and he thought he could give me that determination. Or perhaps the possible long-term outcome from my brain operation really frightens him and he’s terrified he might lose me after he’s just found me. Maybe he doesn’t want me to remind him of that possibility by talking about it.

There was one other time he shouted at me. I was concerned about him and told him not to do something—oh, he told you about that? So I know from experience I have to be cautious here. I have to handle this very carefully so that I don’t put pressure on him and he erupts again, you know what I mean? I tell myself, “Just go gently. You don’t really know this person properly yet, you think you do, but you really don’t.”

I suppose that no-one really knows themselves or others, and none of us really know what things might happen to trigger something in another person, or even in ourselves.
-Jo. Since I’ve met Geoff I’ve surprised everyone and myself by doing things I never imagined in my wildest dreams. Geoff and I were robbed of our childhood together. So, now, he and I have fun. We’re not really trying to relive our childhood, we just do those kid things together so we know we’ve done them.

-Oh, he told me about a couple of things—like going for ice-cream sodas.

-What we do might sound silly to other people, but that doesn’t matter because we think the things we do together are pretty special. Sometimes he thinks up the things to do, and sometimes I come up with something. So we’re together on these ideas, but in other things we’re a bit different.

One thing that shows how we think differently, happened early on. Geoff told me about his poor little teddy bear, and he said how much he loved it. He said he took it to the Home with him in his little suitcase, and lost it. In fact, he was always talking about this teddy bear and telling me how much he missed it. So one time I was out and just happened upon this little teddy bear and thought it looked special, so I bought it and gave it Geoff. I thought, “Now he’ll have a special teddy bear and it will be more special because his sister gave it to him.”

We were talking about this bear one day not long ago, and Geoff said, “I hope you don’t mind but I gave it to my son for the new baby when it’s born.”

I said, “I gave that to you because it was pretty special, but that’s okay if you feel you want to give that to the baby because the baby’s special to you.”

But what he did hurt me. Oh, I can see now that it shouldn’t have, and the hurt came about because I was putting my romantic ideas onto a man who is practical.

Bev and I sit quietly just looking at each other for a moment, and then I say, -Bev, no matter how much we like each other or how well we get along, we’re all different inside, aren’t we?

-By now, I think we’ve done most of the things we feel we would’ve done as kids if we had been together. But we’re probably at the stage now where we want to go to Melbourne and visit the plaque that’s been
put up for Forgotten Australians, and look at it and remember all those other poor children like Geoff who were robbed of their childhoods. Oh I know, like our youngest brother says, “It’s just life, and these things happen in life,” and these things did happen to us. But I’m so very blessed because it’s been a wonderful thing to meet my family and to have Geoff, and know we have the rest of lives together. Something came right, I think. But if I could have one wish that’s what I would wish for, I would wish that I’d had him all along.

§

It’s only mid-afternoon, but Bev and I agree that there’s nothing left to be said in a taped conversation. We switch the tape-recorder off, and we sit companionably and talk about life in general, and about Shepparton and the recent floods, and about more mundane matters.

An hour or so later Bev looks at me from her seat across the other side of the table, and says, -Are you sure there’s nothing else you’d like me to tell you? No? You’ve got enough for what you want to do—to write about?

-Heaps, Bev, and thank you so much for doing this. Are you okay?

She nods her head and smiles. -Yes, it was good. I don’t know what I expected when we began, but it was nothing like I thought it was going to be. I’ve enjoyed it. It’s cleared up a lot of things.

I pack away my recording gear and gather up my notebooks and pens. Bev walks across the room and locks the glass sliding doors that open onto the patio. She pulls the silky table-cloth from the table and folds it and pushes it into her basket. She turns off the dining-room lights, and we go out the garage and climb into her car.

Bev drives me home to the caravan and stays for a cup of tea. I tell her we’ll be going home on Sunday morning. She puts her cup down carefully, turns, and puts her arms around me. She says, -I wish you could stay.

She gets in her car and leaves to go home to Tony, and Bob and I go for a long ramble around Lake Victoria and watch the parent ducks teaching their babies how to swim.
We return to the van and sit outside. I try to read through my interview notes, but I’m too tired to concentrate. I put my notes away inside the van, and pick up a magazine and go back outside into the late summer afternoon.

The lives of the Hollywood movie stars don’t interest me. It’s all a publicity stunt, a fiction, and I tell myself, “Truth is stranger than fiction,” and I wonder what their truth is, for surely everyone has one—even Hollywood stars.

The magazine slips from my fingers and falls to the ground. Worn out after the last week and the intensity of the interviewing process, I lie drowsing in my chair.

The sound of a car engine shakes me from my stupor. Bev walks across the grass and puts her hand on my arm. -Jo, I’ve brought my eldest daughter to meet you and Bob.

We sit around the camping table in the shade of the caravan awning and talk. Bev says, -We have something to ask you and Bob. Will you come to tea with our family tomorrow night? Good, Tony and I will pick you up about six o’clock.

Bev and Tony arrive at our caravan over an hour early, and we sit inside the van out of the sudden wind and drink tea and coffee and talk. At half past five we climb into Bev and Tony’s little white car. For the next half hour they show us around the township of Shepparton.

We drive past the hospital, and talk about nursing days—Bev’s and mine. We look at the milk factory on the left, and marvel at Shepparton’s life-size resin statues. Cows, cows and more cows painted in bright colours, each cow sporting a different pattern and forever holding a pose that belongs to that cow alone.

Bev’s daughter and her husband live almost in town. We drive through their open gates and pull into their short, shady driveway. Under my feet the pavers have a look of dampness. Thick clumps of violets edge the driveway and seem almost to grow from the foundations of the house wall. A cool breeze plays through the leaves of the trees that hang over the side fence. The wind swoops low, becomes stronger, and ruffles the deep purple faces of the violets. Even though I’m wearing a warm fleecy jacket I shiver. I say to no-one in particular, - Look at the violets! Aren’t they blooming out of season?

We’re welcomed at the door by two lively dogs.
Bev and Tony’s eldest daughter catches at our hands and pulls us inside, and we’re drawn in as family. We sit and talk and eat and fun around with Bev and Tony and their two daughters and their eldest daughter’s husband, and play with their dog “children.” An insider-outsider, I feel greatly privileged to sit with them and watch the inner workings of a warm and loving, united family.
Barbara Walters-Smith

When Barbara was eight years of age, she and her elder sister and four younger brothers were removed from their parents and made Wards of the State. Barbara was placed in Bidura Children’s Home, and shortly after was sent from there into foster care. Barbara has found it very difficult to come to grips with her past, and to this day she says she still has no closure.

Barbara Walters-Smith’s Story

The cool southerly wind of the night before has died out, and by sunrise of this final Sunday morning of our stay in Shepparton, it’s already uncomfortably warm. Bob and I eat a quick breakfast, and make the van ready for the twelve hour drive back to the Hunter Valley. Promising each other we’ll come back to visit beautiful Lake Victoria one day, we deposit the keys of the amenities block in the overnight box outside the park office, and go to say our goodbyes to the Osbornes. We find the family out in their front yard. They’re mowing lawns and clipping spent heads from Bev’s “Peace” roses.

Bev leans on her grass rake. -I’m ready for a break. Would you like to come in for a while?
We thank her and tell her we won’t stay, and we say, -We’ll stop and say goodbye to your other
daughter and her husband, and go straight home.

As sometimes happens in life, things take longer than planned. It’s nearing mid-day, and the heat is
upon us as we drive along the flat roads past Shepparton’s stone fruit orchards, and head towards the border.

By the time we reach the hollow in NSW in which Goulburn is situated it is late afternoon, and our
home in the Hunter Valley seems a long way away. It’s chilly in Goulburn, and the air is misty with light,
soaking rain. We find a caravan park. The caretaker sits in his office under his radiator and basks in its
warmth. He takes his feet off his desk and sits up in his chair, and says, - Hundreds of people have come to
town for the horse races, but ya might be lucky …

We stare at the last available caravan site. It’s clay mud, and slopes steeply sideways.

We climb back into our truck and take the gentle slope of Governor’s Hill to the top of the town, and
make a sharp turn into the entrance of Goulburn’s only other caravan park. Bob manoeuvres our van onto the
narrow, obliquely angled concrete slab of the one remaining block. We sit jammed between two other vans,
and eat grilled tomatoes on toast, and listen to the sounds of a town that’s partying hard.

-Must’ve been doing some winning at the races, says Bob.

For the six or so days we’re at home I go to meetings, keep appointments, wash clothes, shop, clean the
house, and write. I sit at my lap-top until late into the night, trying to capture my subjects, and lure the words
onto the page. As I write, I listen to Giuseppe Verdi’s lovely piece, The Hebrew Slaves Chorus. The beauty
of the music and the yearning and longing and nostalgia in the lyrics make me cry, and it hits me that the
Forgotten Australians are not unlike the people of long-ago Judah, for, in a way, they too were exiled into a
“foreign land.” As children, they lost their freedom, and were denied a childhood that might have been.

On the fifth day, Saturday, we repack the van and I phone Barbara Walters-Smith.

-Hello Barbara, is it still alright for me to come down and talk with you this week?

-Yeah, she replies in a despondent tone. Come Tuesday, but don’t leave it any longer will you. I’m
not too good … might have to go back to hospital and have more tests done on me lungs and heart and I need
to get this story told.

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It rained again last night. Now, on this fine, hot Tuesday morning we’re up before five o’clock, and half an hour later we’re on the road. Sydney’s west-bound peak-hour traffic is heavy, and snail slow. It takes us over three hours to drive the two hundred-odd kilometres to Barbara’s house.

Bob carries my recording gear and my lap-top and sets them down next to the pots of flowering cacti that sit on the crazed concrete surface of Barbara’s front verandah.

-Pick you up for your lunch break, he says, and leaves to take the van to the tiny park at Denham Court out past Ingleburn Army Camp, eight kilometres west of Liverpool.

I step around my bags and look for the door-bell. A loud burst of barking comes from inside the house. The front door opens a crack. Suddenly I’m surrounded by what seems to me to be a great pack of dogs. A short, elderly woman in a clean t-shirt and skirt stands in the doorway and calls to the dogs to “sit.” Her long hair is caught to the back of her neck and carelessly held in place by a large elastic band. The kindness in her unusual blue eyes is somehow at odds with the expression of anxiety, and certain wariness within. She looks like a woman who has been cowed-down by life, yet there is about her a peculiar air of complaisance. I wrack my brain for what it is that I’ve seen before, and an image of the brutally kicked, but faithful and loving pet flashes into my mind. I sense her watching me surreptitiously, and I’m aware that she’s summing me up.

She opens the door wider, and says, -Yeah, I’m Barbara. You’re the lady who wants to write about people like us—you’re the answer to a prayer, come in.

She points her thumb at her dogs. -Don’t mind them, they won’t bite. But I’ll put them out the back while we talk. Go in there, and I’ll be back in a minute.

Three, four, piles of magazines, ticketed “doctor’s office,” are stacked against one side of the hall. I stumble as the uneven floor seems to fall away under the worn, green carpet. I reach the doorway of the lounge-room, and am undecided as to where to put my gear. Every corner, every space, is jam-packed with china dolls, statuettes, ornaments, small tanks of live Siamese fighting fish, and a million other things like Christmas cards and decorations. A television set stands on a cupboard that’s all but hidden under strings of beads and costume jewellery and tiny, sparkling crystal things and framed photos. A sofa, set off against one wall, is littered with a tumble of rugs and cushions.

-I’m what some people call a hoarder, says Barbara from behind me. But everything here means something—it’s all a part of my story, of who I am.
I gape at Barbara’s collection, and silently ponder the mystery of how personal belongings help us to shape our story and establish our sense of identity.

Barbara sinks onto a single lounge, and points me to a folding, wooden-framed deck-chair alongside. We’re separated only by a tin television-dinner tray on a metal frame. She reaches over to the tray and pushes aside a jumble of packets and medicine bottles.

She points to the cleared space. -Put your little recording machine there.

We sit and chat about the heat, my trip down, and this and that.

After a while Barbara stretches out her hand and presses the record button on the tape-deck. I sit bolt upright with my open notebook on my lap. There’s a heavy dog blanket hanging over my chair and it’s taking up most of the seat. From my elevated perch I look at the quiet, seemingly downtrodden woman.

-Barbara are you still happy to tell me your story and have it recorded and written about?

Opening her mouth to speak, she exposes toothless gums. For all that her answer is delivered in a firm voice the word “yes” comes out as “yesh.” I take my eyes from her mouth and look at her rather pretty blue eyes.

-I don’t ever want anyone else to go through what I went through, and this is why I want my story told. But don’t shorten my name, and you won’t leave the “s” off “Walters,” will you? Some people leave it off, and I don’t like it.

She settles into her arm chair, and props her swollen left leg on a threadbare ottoman. In myself I feel uncomfortable, for, from where I sit, I’m forced to look down to make eye contact. In the books I’ve read about interviewing techniques, the advice is to have the interviewee sitting either level with or higher than the interviewer in order to encourage the subject’s sense of control over the interview process.

Silently hoping that she doesn’t feel disadvantaged by the seating positions I look at her and say gently, -I’ll make certain to put the “s” on the end of your name.
-But in doing this, you’re aware that while we’re talking or even afterwards you might start having nightmares or flashbacks? If that happens, it would most likely be passing. But if it isn’t, do you have your participant’s information sheet handy with the help numbers if you need them?

Again, she nods, and then speaks slowly, forming her words carefully.

-Yes, and I’ve got a very good friend I can speak with. But flashbacks don’t worry me because I remember everything that happened as clear as day. I can’t forget. I always think about it anyway, and I have nightmares. I might feel guilty, though, I mean, feeling like I’m bad in talking about some things I shouldn’t—like I have to tell you about me Mum because that’s my story, too.

-Barbara, do you mean you might feel disloyal to your mother in talking about what happened to you?

-Yes. But I want to make it clear that me Mum couldn’t help the way she was. With the kind of life she was forced to live anyone would have low self-esteem and suffer from depression. What was done to her would drive anyone to drink. She was my mother and I don’t want people lifting their snooty noses or pointing their bloody self-righteous fingers at her.

People need to understand that back when I was a child things weren’t what they are now. There wasn’t the help or the support for poor women that there is now, and contraception back then wasn’t worth a grain of salt, either. A lot of women were used up … and they copped the blame for the faults of those bloody men who were mongrels—oh, and for the way things were back in them days, you know?

-Barbara, have you heard of the writer Catherine Cookson? Her mother had a hard row to hoe, too, and Cookson said in her books that it wasn’t the women’s faults. The sorts of lives they led were forced upon them.

-I might as well tell you that I’m what you’d call illiterate. I mean, I’m not dumb, I can read a little bit, but not much, and it takes me a long time. I use a ruler under the lines and a yellow highlighter to mark things out. So I’ve never read a book. But my friends have told me about that lady, and she’s right. With my Mum … well, I loved her no matter what happened. I feel sorry for her and for what happened, and I want to make that quite clear.
It’s very hot in Barbara’s lounge-room. I take a small sip from my water bottle, and focus on what I’m supposed to be doing here.

-So Barbara, let’s start with when you were born, is that alright with you?

-Well, okay. I was born in Wagga Wagga\(^1\) in 1940. Mum always said she had me in a milking shed on a dairy farm out of town, but the official birth certificate says I was born at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. Mum always said the ambulance arrived just *after* I was born, and took us to the hospital. Dad was a dairy farmer, so I always supposed she must’ve been working in the milking shed when she got caught short and went into labour with me. Could be I was premature.

What was that you asked? Oh, no. My parents didn’t own the farm. It belonged to a real dairy farmer. Mum and Dad just worked there and the house was chucked in as part of the deal. Eh? What was that? You’ll have to speak up, I’m deaf in that ear …

-I said, is that where you spent your childhood?

-No. Think I must’ve been a baby when Mum and Dad left the farm because I don’t really remember it. I think they left because my Dad joined up and became a soldier in the Australian Army. Well a lot of men did in those days. If you were a man and didn’t care about King and Country you cared about a reliable job and steady money. See, it was at the end of the Great Depression. The army was the first job a lot of men had, and the army weren’t too fussy in those days. They took anybody they could get with two good legs and two good arms. It was World War II. So the men didn’t get a lot of choice anyway. They had to enlist. Anyway, me father became a soldier and got posted to New Guinea.

I see a flash of something akin to contempt mixed with anger in her eyes, but, oddly, when she continues, her tone is detached and it’s almost as if she’s telling the story of someone other than herself.

-I don’t remember my father joining the army. Think I must’ve been too young to register. My friend got me State Ward files for me, and she also got hold of me father’s army records. I didn’t know until then that he was an army mechanic.
But do I know that after World War II, when the Korean War began, he went to Korea to fight and the bombs didn’t git him but T.B. did. That killed him. But it took a little while.

I know all that because the State had put me in care and me old foster-mother’s daughter was a Nursing Sister at Concord Repatriation Hospital where he’d been admitted.

She said to me one day, “He’s dying Barbara. He wants to see you before he goes.”

“And you tell him I’ll see him when he’s dead. I’ll dance on his bloody grave.”

She came home not long after this, and said, “He’s dead. Do you want to go to his funeral?”

“No.”

I didn’t go.

I was about sixteen when he died.

I say to myself, “Well, she definitely hates him,” and I wonder why. Suddenly, she seems to subside, and I realise her seeming emotional disinterest is a front. I leave those deep waters alone for now, and go back to the farm.

-So where did you all go to live after you left the farm?

-Well I’m thinking we went from Wagga Wagga to Surry Hills. See, my first memories are of when we lived at Surry Hills at the Victoria Army Barracks. In Surry Hills, I used to go up the road with me parents and aunts and uncles—any friends of my parents were called that, you did that in those days—to the Rose, Shamrock and Thistle. They’d git me to stand outside the pub on the footpath and sing and dance, and the drunks would come out and give me money. I got sixpence once.

The drunks would ask me my name and I’d sing, “Babwa Squartters”—just like that, “Babwa Squartters”—I was a funny little thing. I’d tap and twirl and do the splits, and the drunks would cheer me on. I suppose I was like a busker. I always wanted to be a dancer, I loved dancing and singing.

She laughs, and twirls her hands in the air to demonstrate. Suddenly, she drops her hands into her lap, and when she begins to speak again, there’s an edge to her voice.
-My people used to come out of the pub and gather up all the money I was given and then they’d go back into the hotel and buy smokes and beer. But they’d make me sit on the step outside and wait.

Sometimes one of the drunks’d come out and give me a glass of lemonade. One little old bloke used to buy me a newspaper twist of hot chips with salt. During the war a lot of people couldn’t stomach salt, so you’d get a little sachet of salt to sprinkle on your chips if you wanted. That’s what I remember most about that place. I don’t remember much else, so we couldn’t have stayed there long.

-So where did you all go—

Well the next place we landed was Bankstown. It’s a city now, but it was out in the bush in them days. Across from where we lived there was a big tomato and cucumber farm that was owned by an old man. Us kids—Faye and Viki and me—used to sneak over and git into the old man’s paddock and pinch his vegetables, and eat them then and there. But if we saw him coming we’d run like buggery and take our vegetables home with us and have a good feed after our hearts stopped banging away in our throats and chokin’ us half to death …

Barbara’s words trail off, and she sits as if lost in her memories. The tape is whirring away, humming into the silence which seems to stretch and stretch. All of a sudden she begins speaking again.

-One time us kids and some boy called Michael were pinching the old man’s vegetables and the big boy who lived at the farm called to us. Michael went over, and I saw him take something from this boy and drink it. By the time we got home Michael was white in the face and began to vomit and couldn’t stand up. The people next door came over. They called an ambulance. Michael stopped screaming before the ambulance arrived. He was taken away and I never saw him again.

I’m not really sure who Michael was, I don’t know if he was one of my brothers or someone else’s kid. My sister Faye says there was no such person. But I remember Michael. So why would she say that? I know Mum and Dad had a lot of kids together and I heard there was one of us that died, so Michael might be that one. I’m just not sure.

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Barbara reaches up and pushes the off-button on the tape-recorder. She struggles out of her chair and leaves the room. I hear her come back up the hall. She calls would I like a cup of tea. Barbara makes room for the tea cups amongst the medicine bottles on the tin tray.

-Leave the tape turned off for a bit. I want to talk to you about some other things I don’t want you writing about, and I want to tell you all about how I came to be a top dog-trainer, and all about me dogs. There are only three of them left now, even if it seems like there’s a lot more.

She laughs, and scrubs at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

-You should’ve seen your face when they swarmed you on the front veranda.

She talks at length, and then she starts the recorder.

-So, okay, before we go any further I need to tell you I’ve got a lot of brothers and sisters, and I don’t really know what happened to them. It bothers me knowing they’re all out there somewhere, but I don’t know where. All those poor little babies, I can’t sleep for thinking and worrying about it all, and I cry. It’s got a lot worse since I got my State Ward files because they say I’ve got a lot more brothers and sisters than I knew I had, and I can’t git it straight in me head.

So I’d better tell you all about the kids me mother had so’s when I tell you my story you don’t get all mixed up, too.

Well, to begin with, I always thought there was just one kid older than me, and that’s me big sister, Faye, who lived at home with us. But not too long back, when I got my State Ward Files, I found out that there were actually three girls older than me and they were all called Faye, and I don’t think any of them was my father’s daughters. I think I was the first of his children. The first two girls were adopted out at birth as far as I know, and I hope they had happy adoptions. Anyway, I call these big sisters of mine Faye-1, Faye-2, and Faye-3. None of them came with numbers … that’s just me so I know which Faye I’m talking about.

It takes me a minute to absorb what Barbara has just said, and I try to get my head around it but I’m finding it hard. I look at her dumbfounded. She lowers her head, and looks at me from under her lashes. The thought that jumps into my mind, is, “This isn’t America. We’re talking about Australia here.”

I once read a story in an American magazine about a family whose consecutive children all carried the same Christian names.
Barbara, why were your three older sisters all called “Faye”? 

-Well, I’ve had a good think about that, and I reckon Mum had this thing where she needed to replace each lost Faye with another. Some people do that you know. Like, one child dies or gets lost to them so they call their next one by the same name so they’ve still got their kid? Sad, isn’t it.

I don’t think badly of me Mum for giving Faye-1 and Faye-2 up because I don’t know what her circumstances were back then. She might’ve been too young when she had them, or maybe she just couldn’t keep them because she didn’t have any means of support. I just don’t know, but there’s got to be some reason because things weren’t good for women back in them days.

Anyway, she kept Faye-3, and then she had me, and she kept me.

After me came Viki—I have to also tell you to avoid confusion that Viki is Viktor, he’s a boy not a girl—and Mum kept him.

Then there was the twins Ronnie and Keith, and she kept them.

Then Mum had Johnny, and she kept him, too.

-So, eight kids, nine if you include the one who died, possibly Michael, and your mother kept six.

-Yeah, sort of. Like I told you, the State took us six kids off Mum. But one time, after we were taken, the Welfare gave the twins back to Mum for a trial run, and if that worked out they were going to give us all back to her bit by bit.

But I think she went camping on Bondi Beach—and she must’ve become mentally unwell because she packed up and went, and left the twin babies lying on the sand in the hot sun, near the remains of this make-shift camp, with a dirty baby’s bottle half full of sour milk in an old saucepan sitting on the sand between them.

How do I know this? Well, because it says in me State Ward files that a lot of people saw them and rang the police. The Welfare picked them up and took them to Myee Salvation Army Hostel—it was sort of like a Children’s Home where all the babies were up for adoption or fostering or waiting to go back to their mothers?

Now I was only thinking about Johnny last night. My files say that like the twins, he was given back to Mum on trial, too. After she got him back she must’ve got sick again because she wrapped him up in old
newspapers and put him on the toilet floor in an old steam train and walked off the train. He was only about four months old at the time. The Welfare took him back, and I don’t know where he went after that.

So the trial didn’t work out, and we all stayed Wards of the State.

Barbara suddenly laughs. I look over at her, and she laughs again. - Look at the two of us sitting here with our hands stuck up in the air and counting all the kids off on our fingers.

I put my hand down, pick up a pen, and open my notebook. Barbara moves deeper into her chair. She turns her head, and looks at me over the tin tray.

-After us six kids were taken off Mum by the State, Faye-3 and me were eventually sent to the foster house. Now it started off that Mum was allowed to come to the foster house for an access visit once a month. But early in the piece me foster-mother said, “I don’t want that woman in my house, I’d rather they meet at the nearest railway station and go to the pictures,” and then I wouldn’t be allowed to go to the pictures for one reason or another

I remember one Christmas Eve me Mum came to the house and the old foster-mother answered the front door, and she said, “You’re not due to see the children, it’s not your access time.”

Mum said, “Can’t I just see the kids and give them their presents and give them a kiss and a wish for Christmas?”

The old foster-mother snatched the presents out of her hands and said, “On your way,” and slammed the door in her face.

I could hear me Mum walking away. I opened the window and called out to her, and the next thing is the old foster-mother grabbed me by me long hair and whapped me across the mouth.

While I was at the foster house I didn’t get to see me Mum a lot. But every time I saw her on an access visit she was pregnant, and then she’d have the baby, and then she’d bring it with her, and I’d see the baby, and I’d get to hold the baby, and then the baby was gone.

Well, so, while I was in the foster house me Mum had me new little brother who was called Johnny like me other brother. I call them Johnny-1 and Johnny-2.

I never knew Johnny-2, I only saw him as a new baby. I don’t know what happened to him.
Then me Mum had me new little sister, Gaye, and I know that somewhere in between Johnny-2 and Gaye there was another baby because Gaye wouldn’t have been old enough to be that baby—and I don’t know what happened to that baby either.

After that, my Mum had my other little sister, Denise.

I’m feeling rather stunned, and a little more than confused. My head is whirling. But I need to get this story straight, so I turn the page of my note-book and begin a fresh list of names. As I write, I go through the list with Barbara—“Faye-1; Faye-2; Faye-3; Barbara; a child who died (Michael?); Viki; Ronnie; Keith; Johnny-1; Johnny-2; another baby (name unknown); Gaye; Denise.” I write the number 13 under the list, and with a sigh of relief I put my pen and my book down on the floor.

- **Barbara, apart from when they were babies, have you actually met Johnnie-2 or either of these little sisters of yours?**

- Well I never met Johnny-2 after, and I only ever saw Denise a few times when she was a baby, and I’ve never spoken with her, and I don’t know much about her.

  But not too long back I met Gaye. I only ever met her once, and that was on the only day she ever came to my house.

  It didn’t work out too well.

  It feels terrible, knowing your flesh and blood doesn’t want anything to do with you and will say things that hurt you even though you’ve done nothing to them. I think that mostly, when brothers and sisters are separated by the State they never get back together, and they never seem to get along even if they find each other, or one doesn’t want to the know the other … others, I don’t know why.

  My own sister springs to mind, but I don’t suppose that sibling rejection is limited to people who were once in care as children. In fact, I’ve heard of a few cases where siblings who’ve been raised in “normal” homes have rejected each other in adulthood. I suspect that the reasons behind such rejection would be different in both cases, though. I leave those questions to chew over later when I’m on my own, and turn my attention back to Barbara.
-I wanted to tell you that when I lived at the foster house, and was about fourteen, the old foster-
mother called me to come and see me Dad on the tellie, on the Bob Dyer or Jack Davies show—can’t
remember which. He won a pair of woollen Onkaparinga blankets. They were worth a king’s fortune in
those days. The show host asked him how many kids he and wife had and he said, “We have twelve
children.”

So I heard that. But if you leave off Faye-1 and Faye-2, and if you count the kid who died with the
four that were born after us other six kids were taken, it only makes eleven kids in the marriage.

My mind reels, and I say, -So where did the twelve—

Barbara looks at me as if her eyes are hurting, blinks nervously, and drops a bomb-shell.

-My State Ward files say that when we lived in Surry Hills me Mum had another baby at home one
day. That would make twelve kids in the marriage, wouldn’t it?

-Yes, and fourteen children altogether... so what happened to that baby?

-Well, I didn’t know anything about it until I got my State Ward files. It says in me files that as soon
as the baby came out, Mum was taken to Crown Street Women’s Hospital, and she gave the baby away.
That’s all I really know about that.

I also found out from my State Ward files that after me Mum had Denise and Dad left for good, she
had a second set of twins. One was a boy and one was a girl. I don’t know their names or anything, all I
know is that it says in me files the girl had a ruptured navel and haemorrhaged to death. There were two
more babies after that. But they might’ve been the babies the court claimed as Wards of State while Mum
was pregnant with them. They took them off her as soon as they were born to give them a better chance in
life. And I heard something about a third set of twins, a pigeon pair of girls. But I don’t really know how
many kids there were. I can’t work it out.

I give up, and stop counting children. Incredulous, I just listen to Barbara. She avoids making eye
contact and keeps moving her eyes sideways. Suddenly it occurs to me that she’s worried that I might not
altogether believe what she’s telling me.

Barbara peeps anxiously at me, and it is as if she’s read my mind.
-You’re probably wondering how the State knew all this to put it in my files. Well, you see, it just so happens that except for me, Mum had all her babies at Crown Street Women’s Hospital—I think. That’s how the Welfare would’ve kept track. So Mum had a lot more kids than she ever let on, but they weren’t all my Dad’s kids, and she didn’t know how to look after them.

What was that? Oh, don’t know if I’d want to meet any of them now, it’s too long gone. It’d be too much of a shock. But it really depresses me that I’ve got all these brothers and sisters out there and don’t know where they are or what happened to them.

The sound of a car horn interrupts our conversation. Barbara heaves herself out of her chair, walks into the hall, looks through the screen door, and says, -Someone’s here—oh, it’s your husband, isn’t it?

I glance down at my watch. -He was coming to pick me up for lunch. But Barbara, how do you feel, do you want me to come back later, and we’ll talk some more, or would you rather we leave it for today?

She says, -Well, I’m a bit tired and I need a bit of a rest. But can you come back later? I’ve got a lot to tell you.

I pack up my gear, and Bob carries it from Barbara’s front verandah and puts it in the truck.

As we drive away from Barbara’s house, Bob says, -I’ve discovered something you’ll love. I’ve found the old power station on the Georges River at Casula. It’s an art gallery and artists’ studios now.

In one of the little workshop studios, I meet a potter. I buy four little clay faces, each with a different expression, and carefully wrap them in tissue paper.

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Barbara lifts the little clay faces from their wrappings.

–Oh, she says, they’re lovely. Look! One’s depressed, one’s smiling, one looks worried, and one’s got a bit of a blank face like he doesn’t know what to think and it’s all too much. They’re my faces—they’re me. I’ve got just the spot for them. They’ll live over here and become one of me precious stories.

She limps across the room, and carefully positions the faces amongst the framed photos on a high glass shelf. Coming back, she sits down, and sets the tape-deck going.
-Barbara, we’ve talked about all the children, so can we leave all that now and go back. Can you tell me more about your time at Bankstown?

-Yes. Well, back when we lived at Bankstown it was all farms and small-holdings and you could see clear across the paddocks. I lost me teeth in a paddock. They’re probably still there somewhere in the dirt. See, a fellow who lived behind us had a tiny, dear little bull calf and oh, I wanted to pat that little bull calf. So one day I was taking a flat iron back to the lady who lived up the hill behind us—we didn’t own an iron, so I’d be sent to borrow one—and I was crossing the man’s paddock and saw my chance to git at this calf. So I walked towards him, and the bloody mongrel took to me and kicked me teeth out. That’s why I talk funny. I’ve got these false teeth but I only put them in when we go out because they hurt me mouth. I don’t need me teeth to hurt me, I’ve been hurt enough in my life.

There are tears in her eyes. I take a packet from my bag, and gently press a tissue in her hand. She sits wiping her eyes.

-You know, I love all animals, but I hate bulls. I remember one time at Bankstown a full-grown bull escaped from this bloke’s farm. It was the middle of summer. We didn’t have a fridge inside the house, so we’d been into the yard to put sausages and mince in the old fridge outside. The fridge didn’t work. But we’d had a hail storm, and we scooped up the hail and piled it into the old fridge and put the meat on top. We had just finished doing that and were feeling a bit pleased with ourselves when this huge old bull came into the yard. We just made it inside, we locked ourselves in the house and it was stinking hot.

You can imagine—thin, old weatherboard walls and an unlined tin roof in the dead middle of summer and the little black bush flies and some fat green-bottle blowies … they come from nowhere, you know? God it was hot cooped up inside in that house all day with everything shut tight and this bloody great bull sniffing around under the doors—Sniff! Snff! Snort! We were terrified. And we were hungry. But we couldn’t get outside to get some sausages from the fridge, so we fried up a bit of bread and ate it with tomato sauce because that’s all we had in the house. Oh I love fried bread and tomato sauce. Apart from the scary old market-gardener’s vegetables, it’s the only good memory I have of Bankstown …
-Back when we lived at Bankstown, I think Mum had been sleeping with the man next-door-but-one because the lady came over to our place one lunch time, and she just barged in and swept everything off the table, and took to Mum with a stock-whip. We kids got down on the floor under the table while she was belting into Mum and ate the food that had been swept onto the floor because we was hungry.

We were always hungry, there was never enough to eat, and you didn’t waste anything in them days.

I don’t know Barbara’s experience. I didn’t live it. But when I was in the Home I knew what it meant to be hungry. I knew what it was to be starved. But, before I was put in the Home, even though it was the wars years and you couldn’t always buy the variety of food you’d like, food was available, and there was always plenty of food in our house. I don’t tell these things to Barbara. I just sit empathising with her, and watch her face as I try to imagine what it must be like—not to have enough food in the house when you live at home with your parents.

-Well, I know what you’re thinking, but you see, I remember me Mum didn’t give me Mum much money, and she drank—people who are alcoholics can’t help it, it’s not something you can blame a person for, they’re sick, and they need love and understanding and help—and she smoked.

Whenever Mum was given any money she drank it all away, and then she didn’t have any money left for cigarettes. I remember me Mum gathering up all the cigarette butts. She’d undo them and get all the good tobacco out, and reroll it into a cigarette paper and make a new cigarette.

When she drank she didn’t have anything left for food either, and me Dad didn’t give her money or food for us. So when she didn’t have any money to buy food she’d go and get a man and then she’d buy us some food.

Just after the lady belted into Mum that time, we moved from Bankstown to Herne Bay Army Camp. People keep telling me it was a housing commission camp, but it wasn’t when we lived there. It became that later, and then people were sent there while they were waiting for a Housing Commission house to become available. Some people had to live there for two or three years before they were given a house. It was a bad place.
When I was at High School some of my classmates lived in the old army camp. But later, it was called Herne Bay Housing Commission Camp. Then, when I grew up, I learnt that in 1959 the council or the government changed the name to Riverwood Housing Settlement. I’ve since been told they were trying to clean up the image of the place. But no matter what name they gave the place, there were a lot of social problems.

-Yeah, it always did have problems, bad problems. But before it was ever a housing settlement, we lived in Herne Bay Army Camp in a hut.

Well, okay, it was stinking hot in summer and freezing in winter. All the huts were unlined and stood in rows, and each row had three to five smaller hut-houses in it, all joined together. You see the sort of place it was in movies about the war. Those army huts looked sort of the same wherever they were in the world I reckon. They were standard army huts?

Each hut-house had one, two or three bedrooms and one big room that was the kitchen-lounge-dining-room all in one. The hut walls were timber outside and fibro inside. It probably wasn’t fibro it was probably asbestos, but we didn’t worry about that because nobody knew the dangers of asbestos in them days. They say what you don’t know won’t hurt you. All we cared about was we had walls to keep the outside from the inside, and we had walls to divide the rooms up one from the other and to separate our place from the neighbours’ places. There’s nothing like a bit of privacy and a place of your own no matter what it looks like.

On the end of some hut-rows was a laundry-bathroom for all the families who lived in the row. It had an old enamelled iron bath on legs with a bit of a shower over it—people pay a fortune for them old bath tubs these days—and a concrete laundry tub and a fuel copper. We used a chip-heater to heat the water for a bath. People used to fight over first turn for the bath, and whose turn it was to use the copper and tubs to wash.

If you didn’t want to go down the end of the hut row and fight, you could put one of those big tin baths in the kitchen space and do your washing or have a wash all over there. Some people washed their smalls and bathed their babies and children in the kitchen sink. They washed their baby’s shitty cloth nappies in the kitchen sink, too. In them days there were no such things as disposable nappies.
Tacked onto the side of the wet room was a lavatory. You had to wait in line if you wanted to go, and that meant a fight—a lot of the men pissed on the grass at the back of the huts. Some women kept pee buckets in their bedrooms. But everyone had to get into line to poo. The women in the row took it in turns to scrub out the lavatory. Lysol soap and Jeye’s Liquid, we used to use. I can still smell it. But there wasn’t much you could do about the maggots that crawled around in the piss and the shit that ran all over the floor.

There was no back door or side door to your hut, just a wooden front door and a window in two of the rooms. Once you were inside you could see the bones of the hut—all the studs and noggins and joists and beams and uprights, and all the timbers that supported the corrugated roof. I remember I used to think the wooden cross-beams in the wall frames were little shelves. We used to put vases of flowers and small ornaments on them.

In Herne Bay, some people used to drive nails through the inner walls of their huts so they could hang clothes and pictures. But the nails would pull out under the weight, and then there’d be a hole in the wall and you could see through into another room. Sometimes that other room would be the next door neighbour’s bedroom or their big general room.

One time, when one of the neighbours was dying, Mum took me over there and told me to stay out in the big room. She went into the old man’s bedroom with his wife. There was a hole in the wall and I remember looking through the hole and seeing the old man lying in the bed … and right under me hand, sitting on the wooden frame on my side of the wall, was a little ceramic penguin.

I wanted that penguin more than anything in the world. So I pinched him. I had him for a long time. Can’t remember what happened to him. I suppose that makes me a thief, doesn’t it? I didn’t tell me Mum—she wouldn’t have cared anyway.

Have you seen me penguins? Yeah, I know it’s a bit crowded here in my lounge room with all this stuff, but everything here from the littlest thing to the biggest thing means something to me and has to stay. They’re the stories of my life.

Barbara stops the tape and stands up. I want to show you something.

She walks across the room and points at the top of a low cupboard. Jammed in amongst a crowd of glass and plastic penguins, a pair of ceramic Emperor penguins sits head and shoulders above their smaller cousins.
-Oh, I do love little penguins.

Alongside the penguin colony, a bright blue Siamese fighting fish swims helplessly up and down the height of its narrow glass tank.

I leave Barbara admiring her menagerie, and check the tape-machine. Barbara comes back to her arm-chair, and starts the tape rolling again.

I feel incredibly sad. My heart aches for Barbara—for the little neglected girl that she was, for the adult woman who is so affected by her childhood experience. I suppose that contrary to the fairy stories, in real life there is rarely such a thing as poetic justice. Sometimes, though, things come right.

As a child I lived a life of horror, but I didn’t live Barbara’s particular horror, and, for me, when I grew up things came right.

Shame washes over me, and I drop my eyes to my notebook. At the same time that I feel compassion for Barbara I feel relieved that I didn’t live her story, and I’m doubly relieved that I don’t have the burden of seeing it out in front of me every day.

When we watch the cars speed around the circuit at the Bathurst races, do we all shiver when there’s a smash and someone gets hurt, but at the same time are we all secretly relieved it’s not us? When there’s a smash-up, could it be that we choose to think that we’re alright as long as it isn’t our own story?

-Barbara, did your life improve any at Herne Bay?

-No. Whenever Dad came home on leave he’d get drunk and he and Mum would have an argument. They were always at it. We kids used to run outside whenever they got down to it properly. One time, Sid, the soldier who lived in the hut next door called out to us to come over to his place. He took us inside, made us fried bread and tea and told us not to worry, and then tucked us up in his big double-bed and slept outside in his kitchen-lounge-room all night. We went home the next morning after me Dad had gone away. I’ll never forget Sid’s kindness. He would’ve been a wonderful dad to have.

Our Dad came home about once a fortnight and he’d bring a very small box of food with him. I can remember it all so clearly. He’d walk in, push me Mum into the bedroom, get her pregnant, get plastered, belt her up, and eat everything he’d brought with him. And then he’d piss off. All that time and for years
after I thought that he’d gone back on duty. I still say that sometimes. But me State Ward files say that he was off living with another woman.

In Herne Bay Army Camp everyone called Mum a slut, but I didn’t see it that way even when all the men kept coming in. I saw it as an act of love because she’d do this and then she had money to get some food, and then we’d have a feast

Everyone in Herne Bay Army Camp called me “little mother” because whenever Mum’s blokes came there I’d be, outside under the clothes lines at the backs of the huts, pushing all our babies up and down in me big old coming-apart cane pram until me Mum had finished her business.

Sometimes Mum would take us all into Central Park in Sydney, and just on evening as it was starting to get dark, she’d find a park bench and tell me to sit on it and stay there with the falling-to-bits old cane pram full of babies and not move. Then she’d go and stand over away from us, and any man that came along she’d take him into the bushes so we couldn’t see what she was doing. Then she’d come back and take us across … there’s a place in Pitt Street in Sydney called the “Hasty Tasty” or “The Greasy Spoon” or something like that—it’s where all the prostitutes used to eat—and Mum would take us over there and she’d buy us a big feed, hamburgers or chips and eggs and baked beans or a mixed grill and fried onions. Sometimes some of the men would call me over and get me to puff on one of their cigarettes while they lit it, and then I’d take it over to Mum and give it to her to smoke.

I never saw Mum being a prostitute because I never actually saw her doing it, and I don’t really count it as prostitution anyway. I don’t see anything wrong in a mother doing that to feed her children.

Barbara pours herself a glass of water from the little jug perched on one side of the tin tray that stands between our seats. She takes one of her tablets “for me diabetes,” and then another, “for the pain in me poor leg,” and then moves her leg into a more comfortable position.

-Oh, that’s right, there’s something I forgot to tell you, and it’s important because it’s one of me clearest memories.

Whenever Dad wasn’t around Mum used to take us down the street and make me stand outside this babies’ wear shop with me big old wreck of a pram full of our babies—Viki and Johnny and the twins—and not move. Every time we’d go down the street it was the same thing. So there I’d be, and me Mum’d say,
“Back in a minute,” and then she’d rack off and be gone a long time. I think she went to the pub because she was always pissed when she came back. I think she thought that if she parked the pram full of babies outside the babies’ wear shop and then wove her way backwards and forwards and sideways through the streets and the back lanes, no-one would know where she was going.

Well one time it was my birthday and she told me to stay there with the babies while she went and bought my birthday present. I dreamt of this beautiful china doll with blue eyes and blonde ringlets like mine, and a ruby-red or sapphire-blue velvet dress and a big, rose-covered picture hat.

Off me Mum went, and came back a long time later with me birthday present—a purple balloon. My cheeks ached and ached with trying to blow it up and then it burst and I remember thinking, “What sort of a birthday present was that?”

Now I think of that time with love. My Mum cared enough about me to buy me a birthday present. She’d thought about me. So it doesn’t really matter what it was because when it comes to reality sometimes purple balloons are more precious even than a beautiful big porcelain doll that’s worth a king’s ransom.

Mum always told me she bought the babies at this particular shop. Well there were two life-size dolls in the window of this shop—twins—a black one and a white one. The black one was dressed in blue and the white one was dressed in pink. Well I wanted a doll—I really wanted a doll, a doll of me own. I remember one time I picked up one of the babies and took him into the shop, and I asked the lady if she could swap one of her twin babies for our live baby.

I don’t join in with Barbara’s laughing. I’m cut up at the thought of a small child being so desperate for a doll that she’d give away her baby brother.

-I suppose I thought well, this is a shop that sells everything to do with babies. The shop lady was horrified. She told me Mum when she came back from wherever she’d been … the pub I suppose. I loved me mum no matter what. She never hurt me like me father did.

I have one photo of me as a baby sitting on me father’s knee. I’ve wanted to take his face right out of that photo, because I can’t look at that photo without feeling sick. They teach kids to be careful of strangers, but nobody warned me about my father …
I sit in our caravan and eat breakfast on this fine, warm Wednesday morning. Suddenly, the pathos in Barbara’s story grabs me, and I put my toast down on my plate, bury my face in my hands, and cry.

-Come on old girl, says Bob. That won’t help anyone.

No, no, indeed it wouldn’t.

I say, -I’m alright; it just got at me, came at me out of the blue.

I pull myself together, wash my face, and get ready to go back to Barbara’s place and continue interviewing.

As soon as I carry my bags into Barbara’s lounge-room, I set up the recorder and make for my deck-chair. I open my note-book and watch as Barbara settles herself into her seat.

From the soft depths of her lounge cushions, Barbara says, -I forgot to tell you. Sometimes me Mum would get really sick—too sick to go and git some money to buy food for us. So then I’d go out and find some food to feed me babies.

I let my breath out slowly, and then ask her how a young child finds food for her siblings.

-Well, okay. I had two methods. One was going down to the school at Merrylands, just after it had closed for the day, and going through the garbage tins. Sometimes I’d find an apple with just a bit of a bite taken out of it, and sometimes I’d find a half a sandwich in the same condition as the apple. To me, it was all food, and that’s what I’d give my babies for tea that night. I knew I had to have milk for the babies because they were only little and they weren’t very well. So I’d go across the road to the little shop that was near the camp, and the lady in the shop was really nice. She’d give me milk.

The other method I had was, first thing on a Friday and Saturday morning I’d go down to Merrylands Station to where a man had a fruit and vegetable barrer parked next to the railway steps. He’d have it piled high with all this fruit and vegetables, and he’d have more fruit and vegetables pre-packed in paper bags under the barrer.

I think he knew I was pinchin’ it. But he was nice, he never said anything. I’d take a whole bag of tomatoes or oranges and apples or bananas.
Then I’d go across the road to this shop that opened up onto the footpath like a market stall. Food was piled in tall wire racks out the front. I’d just reach out and take a loaf of bread. I’d have the old falling-to-bits cane pram with all me babies in it with me, and I’d shove the food down under them where it couldn’t be seen. You had to be quick!

But one day when I went down there the man in the shop was crouched down behind these racks and his arm shot out and he grabbed me ear so hard I thought he was going to pull it right off me head. He hauled me across the road to where there was a little police station … it was like a little wooden shed, remember those? It was right next to the railway line, and just down from the fruit and vegetable barrer. Well, he wanted me punished. But there was this nice red-headed policeman, and he said, “When a child pinches lollies then that’s a child who is mischievous, but when a child pinches fruit and bread, that’s a child who is hungry.”

The policeman asked me where I was living and I told him, and he said, “Right, now the next time your brothers are hungry you bring them down here and I’ll feed them.”

Okay, that sounded all right, so the next time I needed food for me babies I put them in the coming-to-pieces old pram and went down, and this policeman fed us. We sat there in his little box of a police-station and ate cereal and milk and sandwiches until our bellies were full. So from then on that’s we did whenever we was hungry.

The police-station was on the opposite side of the railway to where we lived. It was terrible hard pushing that rickety old pram with-a-mind-of-its-own full of me babies across the railway line, and I’d get puffed out. But just before where you actually had to go to get across the line there was a little shop and I’d often stop there for a rest.

Then this one day when we going down to the police to get fed, there was this ute-truck standing there outside me rest shop, and this man in a coat got out of the ute-truck and told me to get in. I yelled bloody blue murder and took off across the railway line with me old pram full of babies.

When the police asked me to tell them about this man, his coat was easy to describe. I knew it was an army coat because I’d seen the men in the camp wearing them. Anyway, a couple of days later the police arrested this man for the murder of two little girls in the camp. It was in all the papers back then. I can’t tell you exactly what year it was but it would’ve been between 1945 and 1948 so you can look up the papers and
read all about it if you want. He must’ve committed the crime the day after he tried to get me, I think. Lucky I didn’t get into that ute-truck. What would’ve happened to me babies?

My thoughts are, “What would have happened to Barbara?” What indeed? I don’t say this to Barbara. Instead, I ask what happened next.

-Well the day after they arrested this man in the coat, after we’d been to the police box and eaten, I took the babies home as usual and did all me jobs. I must’ve been home for about two hours because I’d cleaned everything up and washed me Mum and brushed her hair. I loved her hair, it was long and it curled, and it was the colour of burnished copper-wire with the sun shining out of it. I’d just finished doing everything, and there was a knock at the door. I opened it and this awful lady and two huge men stormed in. The red-headed policeman was standing outside.

-And how do you see that?

-He probably did the right thing in getting the Welfare because the food I was feeding my babies could’ve killed them. Johnny-1 now, was only a few months old and I was feeding him bread and milk, I could’ve choked him—and besides, it wasn’t enough or good enough food to keep them alive, and there was hygiene, and infection. And I don’t know how long I would’ve been able to keep it up.

But I always blamed myself that we were picked up by the Welfare. I suppose that’s silly really because if I hadn’t been caught stealing food we wouldn’t have been taken away, and we had to be taken away or we all would have died of starvation. But as it turned out, we all went from the frying pan into the fire, and I can’t live with myself knowing I was the cause of it all.

§

At home with their parents, Barbara and her siblings were neglected and starved. Surely it was the right thing in this case that the Child Welfare did step in? Shouldn’t she be congratulating herself that she had saved all their lives?

She leans forward and lifts her bad leg with both hands and repositions it on the ottoman. She sits back in her chair and gives a doleful sigh. I make eye contact, and this time I keep it.
-Yeah, I suppose so, but that’s my problem. Perhaps I just better tell you my story and then you’ll understand what I mean.

The day the Welfare came into the hut at Herne Bay we all began screaming and running around. They grabbed me mother and threw her across the room, and they caught all us kids and dragged us out to the two cars that were standing out the front of our hut. They pushed me big sister Faye-3 and me brother Viki and me into the back of one car with the policemen, and the lady got into the back of the other car with the twins and Johnny, and the two cars took

![Image](https://www.clan.org.au)

*Bidura Children’s Court – once Bidura Girls’ Home*

*Photo by permission of Care Leavers Australia Network*


us away. I looked out the back window of the car I was in and saw the car with the twins and Johnny drive off in the opposite direction to us. I didn’t know where they were going. I didn’t know where we were going, either. But it wasn’t together, that’s for sure.

They took Faye-3 and me and Viki to Bidura Children’s Home in Glebe. The next day they took us to the courthouse. There, I saw Mum and all the babies, and the red-headed police man stood up and read a statement—“After a thorough check, we found all the children of this family to be living in a state of moral and physical danger.”
The court charged us with being neglected children and made us Wards of State, and us three older kids were taken back to Bidura. The Welfare didn’t try and keep our family together, that would have been bearable.

They didn’t see that we only wanted to be all together and stay with Mum, and they didn’t try to get me Mum the help she needed. They never even saw that she needed treatment and support.

§

I sit opposite Bob and chew thoughtfully on a mouthful of lamb and crisp lettuce and cucumber. I’m enjoying my lunch and going over the morning’s interviews in my mind, when suddenly I’m off in another space and my thoughts centre on the food I was given in Dalwood.

Bob’s talk about his morning’s explorations goes on over my head and washes around our caravan’s tiny kitchen.

By the time I return to Barbara’s place to continue our conversations, my thoughts of Dalwood have translated into a question that tumbles out of my mouth.

-Barbara, what was the food like in Bidura?

-Oh, it was good—and I was never hungry again. Breakfast we got milk, porridge or cereal, toast, jam, eggs sometimes. For tea we got peanut butter or vegemite sandwiches and little pieces of all different sorts of fresh fruit. We’d get beef or mutton, and boiled or mashed potato and peas or beans or cabbage, and sometimes carrot or pumpkin as well, and a bit of gravy—that was for lunch every day. And I still love all that food.

Sometimes we’d get sausages. I like sausages. I remember when we lived at home Mum used to take us down to Haymarket to the free soup kitchen at the Salvation Army place. We’d take a billy-can with us, and you’d tell them how many people in the family and they’d fill the billy-can up with soup—it was more a broth than a soup—and you’d each be given one sausage and a piece of bread to sop up the sausage grease. I think that the soup kitchen was near the place that later became Paddy’s Market?

I didn’t like being at Bidura. I was all the time scared. One of those things that frightened me was the broom closet. It was dark. I’d get locked in there if I did something wrong … like hoarding food. Whenever
we were leaving the eating room and I’d see a left-over biscuit or sandwich I’d shove it in me pinny pocket. I hadn’t got around to realising the food was going to be on the table every day. All I could see was waste.

We used to get the strap in Bidura. I never got the strap at home. Mum was very soft with us.

Another thing I hated was we had to sleep in these little cots. In the dormitory where I slept there was this great clock hanging above the door, and the mad tick-tocking used to keep me awake all night. In Bidura I missed the other three children—the twins and Johnny—and I worried about where they were, and even though he was there in Bidura with me I worried about Viki. He was a nervous little boy. I used to climb out of me bed and creep into his dormitory, and sleep all night with him in his cot and comfort him. But one night I went in to see him as usual and he was gone. I checked every cot. “VIKI! VIKI!” Then I raced downstairs and screamed into the kitchen and threw plates down and, oh, I made a real mess, I really did. I couldn’t calm down. I’d gone mad.

Matron was a terrible woman. She and another lady came into the room and chased me around. When they finally caught me, Matron tied my hands behind my back and dragged me up the stairs to the dormitory and then she tied my feet together and made me stand under this clock. The mad ticking of that fucking excuse-the-French clock got into my head and sent me crazy and made me worse.

I loved Viki, he was my baby. Funny, but Faye-3 and I never ever became friends, and maybe that was because Faye-3 was older than me and I didn’t see her as my baby. Yes, that’s what it would’ve been, I suppose.

Barbara blinks at me from under her lashes, opens her mouth to speak, and then, as if uncertain about what to say, closes it again. Suddenly, she looks up. I see a query in her eyes.

I lean forward, and say gently, -Barbara, what is it? Did you want to ask me something?

-Yeah. Did you … was there a doctor who came to the Home where you were?

An involuntary shudder runs through my body, and I say, -Five-fingers Brown.

-Yeah, that’s what I wanted to tell you. He used to come to Bidura. If any child was made a Ward of State he’d examine them. He’d get the nurse to hold you down and whack! with his fingers up inside you and say, “Yep! This child’s been sexually interfered with.” It was … the pain and the terrible humiliation, God it was …
I don’t tell Barbara, but I remember Five-fingers. He peered down my throat and up into other places the day I was admitted to Dalwood. I was three and a bit.

I put the memories away, they have no place here in the present.

-That’s all recorded in the 2004 Senate Inquiry report into children in institutionalised and out-of-home care in twentieth century Australia, you know ... about authorities like Dr. Brown. I think he went to all the Homes in the Sydney area. He might’ve been the M.O. for NSW Children’s Homes—or something like that.

Barbara sits hunched over, her shoulders shake, and I reach forward and stop the tape-recorder. I stand up to walk across to her chair and try to comfort her.

-I’ll be alright in a minute. It’s just the memory of that horrible dirty old mongrel. It just catches me every now and then.

-**Barbara,** I know it’s difficult ... you don’t have to tell me anything if you ...

-Yes, it’s hard, but it’s a big relief. And now I want to tell you something else so’s you see what it was like for me.

I know me Mum was an alcoholic, but no matter how sick she was she always used to cuddle me up to her in her bed and give me kisses and hugs. I’ll never forget that feeling of love and warmth I got from being held in her arms. In Bidura we never got any love or affection. They never asked you if you were alright or feeling okay, or told you were good. Every minute of the day it was orders and more orders. “Sit down. Get here. Go there. Do this. Don’t do that. Clean this up. Scrub that floor.”

And they had this floor-wax, cheap bloody awful stuff. We had to git down on our hands and knees and polish the floor so’s we could see our faces in it. Matron would come in and inspect, and sometimes she’d say, “That’s the worst polish job I’ve ever seen, scrape the wax off and start all over again.”

I remember that when I lived at home with my parents, even though I was only three years of age the local school agreed to start me in kindergarten because my mother was terminally ill, and there was no such thing as a pre-school back then—not where I lived, at least. Much to my disgust and frustration, when I was
put into Dalwood the Home kept me back from school until well after I had reached legal school age. I was deemed that I wasn’t old enough to go to school, but from the very first day of my incarceration, I was put to work just the same.

"You were, what, eight years old when you went to Bidura? So where did you go to school?"

"Hah! I didn’t go to school while I was in Bidura. All day long I had to do jobs in the Home like washing and ironing and cleaning, and when I wasn’t working I’d sit in the sandpit playing with the little kids and, oh, then I was in my glory.

I’d never been to school. When we lived at home Faye-3 used to go to school because she had a school-dress. But I couldn’t go to school because I didn’t have a school-dress.

Clothes …? Well we didn’t own any. When we lived at home we’d go down to the Salvation Army sometimes though, and they’d give us something to wear. I only had on a pair of pants and a singlet when we were taken to Bidura because that’s mostly how I was dressed. Bidura gave me clothes.

§

It’s Thursday now, and it’s another relentlessly hot day. I drink two, three cups of tea with my breakfast. I arrive at Barbara’s place and all morning, while we’re talking, we drink tea and I sip from my bottle of water.

Barbara’s like a flea, she’s constantly jumping on and off her chair.

"I’m on fluid tablets …"

I wait for Barbara to return. Rivulets of perspiration run down my back, and now, added to this discomfort is another.

"It’s out the back. It’s one of the old-type dunny-houses but the sewer is on. The landlord’s going to put a new toilet in me bathroom so I don’t have go outside any more. I’ll come out so’s the dogs don’t go mad and bark at you.

I take the steep flight of stairs at the back of the house in bounds, and sink onto the seat with a great sigh of relief. I breathe in the strong scent of Dettol, look at the scrubbed concrete floor, and remember that I’ve left the tape-recorder running.

I hear the dogs barking near the side wall of the toilet.
Barbara calls, -It’s okay, they’ve cornered a snake—forgot to tell you to keep an eye out … snakes come into the lavatory at times.

I leap from the seat and bolt for the back steps.

Barbara laughs, and says, -Yeah, I’m really scared of them too.

Then she stops laughing.

-But I’m more scared of outside dunny-houses—I never use it of a night.

We go back into the lounge-room to pick up where we’d left off.

-So Barbara, you mentioned you were in foster care?

-Yes. I stayed at Bidura for a little while, and then the court sent me and Faye-3 off together into foster care.

The first night I was in the foster home we’d had tea and I was in me pyjamas, and I was told that the rule was I had to go to the toilet before I went to bed. Well it was one of those old wooden outside dunny-houses, a pan affair, and it was right down the back and covered in vines, you know the ones. The old foster-father said he’d get a torch and take me because he said I’d be scared in the dark on my own, and he’d make sure that nothing bad happened to me.

He made me leave the door open, and after I’d done he came in and told me to stand with one foot on each side of the seat while he pulled my pyjama bottoms up for me, but he didn’t. Instead, he undid his trousers. He said I had a choice. Either I kept very quiet or he’d take his leather belt, and give me the hiding of my life.

Some while after the old foster-father started his filthy business I started to feel really awful, and I couldn’t work out why my pants were always smelly and wet and why I always felt so sick-like and shaky. Eventually the foster-mother took me to the doctor, and the doctor gave me some awful stuff to take, but it took months before he said I was clear.

I didn’t know what was wrong with me. But the old foster-mother said I was a whore like me Mum. She told the doctor and the Welfare I was sexually promiscuous—what, at eight years old? I wasn’t, but I was scared for my life. The old foster-father said he’d kill me if I said anything about what he’d been doing. And who would I tell, anyway? Who would’ve believed me? I was just a little girl the old foster-mother called a liar.
Yeah, well. I’m sixty-nine, seventy, now and I’ve only just found out from me State Ward file what it was. At eight years of age I had venereal disease.

Funny how nowadays it really bothers me about having had V.D. when I was a kid. Perhaps I tried not to think about it too much before because I was so ashamed, and perhaps it bothers me a lot now because I’m old. See, I’ve begun to look back and think about my life more than I ever did. Perhaps I’ve just got too much time on me hands or something.

There’s a fair bit that I haven’t told you about the old foster-mother.

Once, she bought this new celluloid doll. It had these beautiful blue sleeping eyes like Snow White in those colouring-in books you used to be able to buy. She crocheted all the doll’s clothes and made a good job of it, and she asked me if I wanted roses embroidered on the bonnet and the front of the dress. I chose the colours.

I was in heaven because I knew she was making the doll beautiful for me. I began to think she wasn’t so bad after all. One day her granddaughter came to visit and she brought me doll out and I said, “Oh it’s me beautiful baby, oh, thank you,” and she said, “Whatever gave you that idea. It’s not for you, it’s for my granddaughter.”

God she was a cruel bitch, you know. Fancy doing that to a little girl that no-one loved.

While I lived in the foster home I didn’t know who or what I was. I didn’t know what my place was in that house, and I didn’t know what my place was in the world.

In the foster house I was always in trouble, and she’d belt me with anything she could grab and would almost kill me. I’d always ask, “What did I do?”

One night I broke the old foster-mother’s cup, this stupid bloody old cup, and she said I didn’t deserve to sleep in a bed or in the house at all. She said I was only fit to sleep outside the back-door on the back door-mat like a dog. So she put me out there and she said, “Now the ghosts will come and get you.”

I was petrified. I don’t know if you’ve ever been so scared … it’s pitch black, and suddenly in your brain you see white. I heard a chain rattle, I heard a low woo …

She was such a fucking bloody bitch that I wanted to kill her. I had to take her a cup of tea in bed every morning. She liked it luke-warm and she’d toss it down in one go. So this one day I put caustic soda in her tea, but when she went to drink it I banged into her because I just couldn’t do it, and the tea spilt and ran
down all over her bedspread and ruined it. I felt like I deserved the belting I got afterwards, but she thought she was only belting me for banging into her and spilling her tea and wrecking her bedspread.

I don’t know why the old step-mother hated me so much, she adored my sister, but she just hated me. They didn’t abuse my sister.

Please, just tell me, what did I ever do to deserve all that?

Barbara pauses, and looks at me as if waiting for me to speak. I don’t talk about her treatment at the foster house, instead I ask again about school. Did that bring her some relief from the foster house?

-Well, the day I started at the school from the foster house the headmaster stood me in front of everybody and said, “This girl is a foster-child, do you all know what that is? They’re children who are taken away from their bad parents by the Welfare, and sometimes these children are taken away because they’re very naughty, and decent Christian people take them into their homes and look after them, and teach them the right things to do.”

The other kids went home and told their parents. “We’ve got this kid at school who was in a Home because she was naughty and her parents didn’t want her anymore because they were no good.”

Notes came to school from the kids’ parents next day. I wasn’t to sit near “Jimmy” or “Mary,” I wasn’t to play with them, and the kids wouldn’t have anything to do with me. So I sat in a single seat desk at the back of the class, and nobody alongside me in the row even.

No-one realised I was deaf in one ear. So I sat there all those years not being able to learn because I couldn’t hear anything. I didn’t learn to spell, I didn’t learn to read, I sat there day-dreaming—“Oh, there, she’s gone walk-about again,” they used to say.

The school said I didn’t try. You know, I wasn’t dumb, but what could I learn when I couldn’t hear? I got twenty-five per cent hearing in that ear and that’s it, and it wasn’t until I was in High School that a teacher picked it up and by then it was too late for me to expand and make something of myself.

I wanted to be a hairdresser or a dress designer. That was my ambition. I created all these hairstyles, and designed dress patterns, and one time I even designed a car, and I drew it all on paper. People were amazed that I could do this, but I left school when I turned fifteen—that was normal in those days. Only clever kids stayed on.
The Welfare and the teachers and the old foster-mother got their heads together and said it was a waste of time keeping me in school because I would never be able to learn.

I was stumped. 8

The nearest I ever got to me dreams was as a machinist on a production line sewing bit pieces of dresses from other people’s designs.

-Did you ever want to challenge yourself, and prove them all wrong?

-Oh, sometimes I’ve thought I would’ve liked to have had the education to become a teacher. But that’s all “what if,” and then I tell myself it doesn’t matter because it would be no good if we were all schoolteachers, who would do all the other things that have to be done?

The truth is education wouldn’t have been of much use. See, part of the problem with me was that every time I tried to do anything the old foster-mother used to say, “Oh you’re useless, you’ve failed again. Why did you even bother when you knew you’d only fail?”

So I was frightened to challenge myself. I knew I’d only fail, and then I’d be in trouble with the old foster-mother again. So rather than taking anything a bit further and failing, I always stayed back at the level I’d reached pretty easy. I still do that, and I don’t go outside of the boundaries I’ve set.

-How do you do that, Barbara?

Well, to give you an idea, when I first meet people I stand back in myself and sum them up real quick, and I only mix with people I feel safe with, and I don’t like to go to places where I don’t know people.

It doesn’t take much to throw me into a panic. Being surrounded by strangers puts me in a panic. When I go up the street I’ve got my own little set of shops where people know me, and I’ve got what I call “safety shops”—I know that if I come over in a panic I can go in and they’ll sit me down and look after me. Liverpool is a big busy city. It’s even busier than Sydney used to be in the old days and you feel like you’re surrounded.

I used to see a psychiatrist and he had me on twenty-four tablets a day. But now I’ve taken charge of me and since the middle of last year I’ve stopped going to see him and I’m down to four tablets a day—one for me nerves, and three for me physical health. So I’m better now than I used to be.

So I’ve got more confidence than I used to have, but I’m still not very confident and I still don’t want to want to challenge myself because it wouldn’t be safe.
I don’t try to do anything now because if I do something I might fail, and I’d rather not try at all than fail because I don’t ever want to be a failure again.

All my life I failed myself, all my life I was a failure.

§

Barbara gives me little sideways glances. She sits without speaking. I stay silent and give her time. Then she lifts her head and looks at me straight on.

-I suppose all this abuse stuff sounds unbelievable, doesn’t it? But it really happened, and it happened to me. I know you will understand, and I’m telling it to you because you know what it was like, and you’ll write to tell people who don’t know what things were like for people like us.

See, while I was in foster-care, the Welfare decided that we had to spend some time with our grandparents—me mother’s people. So, Christmas holidays and some weekends, we used to stay with Nanna at her place in Roseville in Sydney.

I’ll start with the good bit. Uncle Tom was my grandfather’s relative. He owned all the land next door to their butcher’s shop, and there was a lot of it. Someone wanted to buy the land and build a cinema on it, but he said “No, put up the picture theatre up but I get to keep the land and I can come into the pictures any time I like and I can get chips and lollies and drinks for nothing, and that goes for all my relatives too,” and this was written into the agreement.

Uncle Tom was very nice and gentle and good, but I think not quite right in the head. But he wasn’t so silly because that was a smart move keeping the land. Whenever we stayed at Nanna’s we’d go to the pictures right next-door and we’d get free chips and lollies and drinks, and on Sundays we’d go over to the picture house and help clean up, and that was smart too, method in the madness. We’d go through the theatre and find all these things—lollies still in their wrappers, money, clean hankies that hadn’t been used, and all this stuff, you know—and we’d go home to Nanna’s with our pockets brimming full of goodies.

Now I’ll tell you the bad part. Me grandfather died either on my eleventh or twelfth birthday. But when he was alive, whenever the Welfare sent us to visit with our grandparents, he used to grab me hard and hold me on his lap and stick his hand up under my dress. Back then they used to call it “harmless fondling.”—and him a Mason. Think he’d be more moral, wouldn’t you? I think me grandmother knew
what he was like because she kept an eye out whenever I was with him. But she didn’t bother keeping a good eye.

You wanted to know my story? I said I had to tell about me Mum because her story is mine. Well, me grandfather, Mum’s father, was the start of her story, so he was the start of my story, too. When I grew up I found out that he’d got at her when she was young, and he’d kept at it until she grew up and left home. So, it was something that went on down the line and I say that apparently Nanna knew about Mum and me all along.

It’s no wonder me Mum was emotionally unstable, it’s no wonder she was so depressed all the time and didn’t think much of herself. She didn’t have a chance. No wonder she drank and had no will to get up. It wasn’t her fault she was like she was. If the old man had only left her alone she’d have been alright, I think. She was such a warm loving person, you know. She had a lovely soft nature underneath everything.

§

I don’t return to Barbara’s place immediately after lunch. I feel the need to travel down roads I haven’t been along for many, many years. I tell myself, “I’ve lost my fear of the past.”

I want to take a look at one of the farms that once belonged to my foster-people. After their daughter, the butcher’s cousin, had married my father, the foster-people had become my step-people. Then, after I had finished school, my father and my step-people sold the black-house at Bankstown, and moved us all further out into what was then the country. I remember them saying at the time, “Now we’re free to be our own little group, far away from nosy neighbours.” I remember that after we moved I used wish there were some nosy neighbours.

We drive through Austral and Bringelly and end up in some other place.

-You sure the farm was out this far? Bob asks.

I say, -I can’t find it, everything’s changed.

I look around at market gardens and small-holdings and wonder if I had only dreamed the open farmlands and the thick brush-covered hills of my past. I don’t know where yesterday has gone, or where it fits in with the reality of the broken and holed fibro shacks and Italianate brick mansions I see before me. But I clearly remember that, here, in this area somewhere, I was kept locked away from the world behind a six-foot cyclone wire fence and, with the aid of a whip across my back, I was worked unmercifully. When I was
eighteen I literally escaped my prison by ducking and weaving through the trees to the back fence and climbing up the high wire to freedom. A tremor runs through my body and I realise that a trace of my old fear still lurks within.

Back at Barbara’s place after my trip into a past that no longer exists, I look at her across the medicine bottles on her tin television tray, and imagine that, even though many people took foster-children as a cheap form of labour, most foster-children were allowed at least some freedom.

-Yeah, I had friends of me own age and we’d go down to the park and play sometimes after school. Then once I was working, if I did all my jobs at home and did everything I was told, the old foster-mother used to give me back a shilling from my wages and I’d go to the pictures on a Saturday afternoon. I met a nice quiet boy from going to the pictures. We went together for about a year. He was about my own age, and he was caring and very loving and understanding and we got on so well that I had dreams of escaping into a future with him.

When I was seventeen I became pregnant to him and I tried to do the big cover up because I wanted to keep the baby. I was turning eighteen early in the October, and I thought if I could just hang on until then maybe we could get permission from the court to get married because I knew the old foster-mother would never say “yes.” Back in them days you had to be twenty-one to get married without permission. But the old foster-mother found out and contacted the Welfare and she told them I was an embarrassment and she wanted me removed. So I went to Myee—the Salvation Army Hostel at Arncliffe.

Myee was like a live-in job. I worked there while I was waiting for my baby. I cleaned and did washing and ironing and took me turn at looking after the babies … there were about fifty, and most of them were up for adoption, and some of them were up for fostering? A lot of unmarried girls went to live there while they were waiting to have their babies. All the girls went to Crown Street Women’s Hospital to give birth. My little boy was born just a month and half short of my eighteenth birthday.

As soon as my baby was born, the hospital gave me a form and told me to sign it, and I said, “What is it.”

“Oh,” they said, “Your baby was still-born, but he still has to be registered.”

I signed the papers. I called my baby “James.”
At the time, there were little things that happened and little things that were said, and I thought about all this later, and I began to wonder if he had been born alive.

Over the years I’ve wondered, and when I joined Care Leavers Australia Network and told Leonie Sheedy she said I could make a search now if I wanted, and she gave me a number to ring. So I rang and I told the lady everything, and that I’d had the baby at Crown Street Women’s Hospital.

She went through all the records and she said, “Oh yes. That child was put up for adoption. You signed the papers.”

I had really no idea at the time. I thought I was signing the registration papers. They took advantage of my lack of education.

I look over at Barbara with sympathy, and I say, -Did you trace your son?
-No.
-Oh, would you like to, and would you like to meet him?

She sits in silence, and then she gives a deep sigh and looks up at me. She looks so sad, and speaks slowly and thoughtfully.

-I’ll tell you like I told that lady. I don’t want to know anything more now, I wouldn’t know what I’d find, I don’t know his life, and I wouldn’t know what they’d told him about me. I’m frightened he might ask, “Why did you give me away?”

I’m frightened he’d turn his back on me. I couldn’t take it. Best let things alone, you know? But even now I feel sort of empty. So I try to fill the gap by taking on old dogs that have been badly treated and I give them love and a good life. I suppose if I’d had children I wouldn’t have been able to take all these dogs in. Anyway, back when I had the baby, as soon as I turned eighteen I got myself a room in the Salvation Army Women’s Hostel while I looked for somewhere better.

One good thing came out of it. While I was living in the Hostel I saw me Mum again. One day I got the bus up to Central Station and I looked out the window and saw her sitting in the park. I jumped off the bus and ran over to her.

She had a broken leg and she was wearing a beautiful royal blue dress, and I said, “Are you Mrs. Walters?”
“Oh, I was, but I’m Mrs. Longford now, and who the bloody hell are you?”

“I’m your daughter, Barbara.”

“Oh! I don’t believe it! Would you have a shilling so I can go and get a bowl of soup?”

I gave her last shilling and I thought, “I’m bloody gunna have to walk home now because that was me bus fare.”

She put me shilling in her pocket, and she said, “We’re staying at the People’s Palace in Pitt Street.”

I went to see her there and she had Viki with her—he was sick then, he was an inmate in a mental institution and she only had him out for the week-end—and she gave me her contact number.

Well later on I got married, and moved to the country. I let me Mum know I’d moved, and some time down the track I got a telegram to meet her at Central Railway Station.

Mum and her new husband had bought a house out the back of Mudgee somewhere.

See, Nanna had died, and left me Mum all her money. I better explain that Nanna was pretty wealthy. She owned all these big butcheries in Sydney. My great-great-grandparents, Joe Hammond and his wife Emily, came from England and started these businesses, and they owned the first ever butcher’s shop on Sydney’s North Shore, and in 1868 they started their own slaughter yard as well, and the businesses just kept on expanding.

I went up to visit with me Mum, and stayed for about a month. We had a good time. Mum was really generous. Then not long after this poor Mum went to live in Queensland and while she was there she died of a stroke.

I love me mother, and I always loved her. Now, you might think this next bit is a bit weird. I never got to mourn her, I never got to go to her funeral, I never got to send her birthday cards or Christmas cards or Mother’s Day cards, so every Mother’s day and every birthday and every Christmas I write a card for my mother and I keep them in a special pile.

Like I told you I didn’t have much education, I’d love to be able to read and write properly. But it’s too late now, I couldn’t go through all that stress of trying to teach this old dog new tricks.

I can write a little tiny bit and I can’t spell, but a couple of years ago when I was sixty-seven I wrote my first letter to me mother. It took me ages but I did it. See, I think she’s up there somewhere and I think she’ll know.
-A while after I’d accidently found me Mum and Viki I began searching for my family. I searched for a long, long time, and eventually found some aunties and uncles and cousins, and then I found one of me sisters. But even before all that, after I saw Mum, I got Viki from the mental institution and took him home with me. He was a little boy in his mind, and I think in a way he saw me as his mother and he wanted to hold me but he tried to hold me too tight—

Alarm bells ring in I my head. I gain a mental picture of Viki and I suspect that there is something more, something sinister, in Barbara’s words.

I break in quickly, and say calmly, -So, Barbara, do you mean he tried to hold you too tight physically?

-Well, he wasn’t right, you know? Was I frightened? Oh, yes, I was … very. I was only a little bit of a thing back then, and he was really strong. One time he got me in a bear hug and squeezed until I felt me bones cracking, and I screamed and he had to be pulled off me.

And he tried to hold me too tight … emotionally? I had to watch everything I did and everything I said and even how I moved around him. He was jealous and he wanted to git rid of everything I loved. He wanted me to himself. It was creepy.

One night he had a pen-knife, and he kept making downwards slashing movements on the table, at the table-cloth. I said, “Viki don’t do that, that’s my favourite table-cloth.”
Well, so, it was me only table-cloth. Anyway, when I got up in the morning that table-cloth was slashed to shreds.

At that time I also had two dear little birds, and Viki said to me, “Which one do like the most?”

Without thinking anything I said, “That one there,” and he killed it.

It was too dangerous. I was scared of what he’d do next. I had to take him back to the mental institution and leave him there.

§

It’s Friday the twenty-fifth of February, and it’s the final morning of our interview sessions. Barbara waits for me on her front verandah. She picks up one of my bags and pulls me into the lounge-room.

She takes the dog-blanket off the back of my chair, and asks me to sit down, and then she asks if I’d like to see her family photo album.

I sit with the album on my lap and gaze at sepia-tinted pictures of old butchers’ shops and great two-storey houses that belonged to her maternal family. I look at the photos of her great-grandparents and different cousins and aunts and uncles, singly, and in pairs, and in groups.

Interspersed between the photos are newspaper cuttings and greeting cards, and scented hand-written notes.

The tape-machine is on record, and while the tape is running Barbara explains each item and its history, and tells each story.

She leaves me looking at her photo album, and goes inside, into her bedroom. She returns with what appears to be an even larger, thicker album. She puts the book on my knee.

-These are me State Ward files. I’ve never read them. See, I’m not that good. I know a little bit of what’s in them, though, because the lady who got it for me and my good friend I told you about, told me a couple of things. But they don’t know everything because I only let them read one or two pieces. I didn’t feel comfortable with other people seeing me files. I was ashamed and I never really wanted to know what was in them, but will you go through them—all the letters and reports and receipts and everything?

-Oh, Barbara, are you sure? Oh, you do me such an honour.

-No. You’ll do me an honour if you read them out and explain everything to me as you go.
It takes me hours to go through the files and explain what’s in them. In the files, I find letters written by Barbara’s mother to the Welfare. In these letters, Barbara’s mother inquires after the whereabouts and welfare of her children, and she begs for the system’s help and assistance with her problems and for access to her children. These letters are receipted by the court.

Barbara cries.

-I didn’t know about those letters before now.

-So Barbara, these letters are proof that your mother tried to keep track of you. Barbara, don’t ever lose these files, they are very important. They’re proof of the things you’ve told me, they are proof of everything that happened to you.

-You believe me?

-Yes, yes I do.

She looks at me with her eyes wide open and shining, and she smiles. I see the magic happen, and I feel that I’m looking into her soul. A goose walks over my grave.

She says, -I guess the files have helped me work out about all the babies and about how old they’d all be now.

I find some of the entries very confusing, and they seem to indicate Barbara possibly had even more siblings than twenty.

Just as I’m about to close Barbara’s State Ward files, I stumble over a single entry and straighten in my chair. I bring my head up quickly and look at her.

-Barbara, did you ever hear anything about a set of triplets—did your mother have triplets at some stage, do you know?

-No, I never heard anything like that. Anyway, I feel a bit better now because you’ve helped me by telling me what’s in files and that’s cleared up a lot of things and put a lot things in place for me about all me brothers and sisters.
You know you said I shouldn’t blame myself that we were taken by the Welfare, and I told you I can’t forgive myself? Well, while we’ve been talking I’ve been thinking, and yeah, we had to be taken … it’s true, and in me mind I also know that they would be old enough now not need me any more in the same way as they did when they were little. But the reason I haven’t forgiven myself entirely for getting caught when I was kid out getting food, is that I know that because of what happened from that, being split up and everything, I’m never going to find them all now. I still don’t know what happened to them all and I don’t suppose I ever will, and that worries me something awful.

But then there’s this thing that goes on in me head.

If Johnny-1 is still alive I suppose he’d be in sixties now. I never laid eyes on him again after we were taken away by the Welfare. I used to think I’d like to find him. But of the two kids I found when I grew up, both of those findings turned out to be such disasters. It was like a stab in the back. So I know I wouldn’t like to meet Johnny-1 or any of them now because I couldn’t stand another knife in the back if things didn’t turn out alright.

It gets me down. At times I’ve thought it might be best if I just put an end to it all. The psychiatrist I saw for years didn’t help much, all he ever said was, “you need a holiday.”

He doesn’t understand that we don’t need to be patronised and psychoanalysed, that all we need is love and affection and for someone to listen.

He doesn’t understand because he doesn’t have a clue what it’s like, how could he? He’s never been in a Children’s Home or in a foster home, and I’ll bet he was never fiddled around with when he was a kid.

I don’t need someone giving me advice about something I’ve lived and they haven’t, you know? I’ve given him up, and I’m feeling much stronger. I can see me now.

I know why I get depressed. It’s because of me Mum’s story which is also my story. But it could be other things, too. Emotional instability is a family thing, it runs in me family. Nanna wasn’t too stable, she had depression. Me Mum used to get terribly depressed, too, and talk about suicide, and I think I could’ve inherited the feeling from her. But mostly I get depressed because of the things that happened when I was a kid.

§
Oh, these days, I don’t get the feeling that I want to end it all quite as often as I used to. See, now I have people who understand, and I can ring them up anytime and talk to them. I’ve got me cousin and me good friend, and my dog-training group, and even though I’m basically illiterate I’ve started to read some stories of my fellow Forgotten Australians and that helps me a lot. And there’s you, you’ve talked about things with me and you’ve helped me by doing that. I feel that you understand and that you care.

Me dogs are me friends, too. I just love them. I look at them and they look back with all the love in the world in their beautiful soft eyes. They’re me babies. How could I ever let them down? If I did anything silly they’d be the ones to suffer. Who’d look after me babies if I wasn’t here?

So I’m better than what I was. But I did regress when I got my State Ward files and I still haven’t got rid of all my anger. See, I feel I’ve got to keep that going to protect myself. And I don’t trust men, and I’m always looking out for the baddie people. I pick up the signs real easy.

What did you say? You want to know if I feel sorry for me as a child? Well yes, I do feel sorry for that little girl that was me, but I don’t feel sorry for the me I am now because now I make my own decisions. But I think I can’t completely one hundred percent come out of it. See, I believe in God—and I believe we’re all put here for a reason … we all need to be here, we all need everybody. But I often look up there and say, “Why me, what did I ever do to deserve all this?”

So everything that happened to me still does rule my life because I got no answers. I never got to confront all my abusers, and I never found all my family.

I got no closure.
Mick Riley

For reasons of his own, Mick has asked that I not use his real surname or the real names of his family in this work. I will call him Mick “Riley.”

Mick was born and raised in England. It was there that he spent a part of his childhood in a Children’s Home. He migrated to Australia when he was about fifteen years of age, and took Australian citizenship shortly after.

Mick’s story has been included in this work to provide a contrast to the Forgotten Australians, to show that life as experienced by children in a twentieth century Children’s Home in England was, in essence, no different to that experienced by their contemporaries in a twentieth century Australia. It is also to show that the impact of that experience on those people’s later lives are much the same no matter whether they were in care in England or in Australia.

Mick Riley’s Story
Mick is solidly built and stands about 169 cms tall. He sports tattoos and a trimmed beard, and he’s a skinhead bikie with a bent for philosophical discussion. In his spare time he’s an artist. He’s my painting buddy, and, like me, he’s a confirmed tea-drinker.

One sunny day in the autumn of 2010, Mick and I stood in the big shed down the back of my paddock, and drank tea and chatted while we worked on the skies in our landscapes.

Mick stepped back from his easel, and squinted at his painting to gain distance and perspective. He walked up to his canvas and scrubbed more colour into the clouds.

Without taking his eyes from his work, he said, -Funny, in’it, how people think of white clouds as being all white.

I said, -Yes, and try to convince a new chum that white things look whiter if you put colour into them … takes a while to get that concept over.

Mick applied a little more lemon yellow to the upper edges of his clouds, and blended the colour back through and into the zinc white.

He looked at his illusions, added the merest touch of indigo, gave a grunt of satisfaction, and then said, -So what are you doing at uni now?

I laid more cerulean blue into the sky-patches between my clouds. -Oh, my PhD, and writing a docu-memoir as a part of that.

-What, you writing another memoir?

-Oh, not exactly mine this time. I’m going to interview people who’ve had unusual lives and tape their conversations to use as resource material for a literary work … so in each of the stories the memoir is overtly that of the person whose story it is, and the documentary bit is like photos I add, and the names of places and historical information and stuff they talk about that’s to do with their experience.

-So who are the people you’re going to talk to?

-Oh, Forgotten Australians. You know, people who were in Homes and foster care when they were kids?

Mick carefully washed his brush in the jar of turps and wiped the bristles clean on his painting rag. He laid his brush on his palette, and turned to me and said, -Mate, I’d like to help—you can use my story in your book.

-What?
I was in an orphanage when I was a kid—yeah, it was in England, but I came out here when I was about fifteen and got made over into an Aussie—you know, naturalised, Maccas,^1^ meat pies and football.

I closed my mouth and looked back at him. Then I said, -I’d never have guessed. Funny thing, but I was in an orphanage, when I was a kid. I’m a Forgotten Australian.

I watched his jaw drop.

It’s rather odd how sometimes you can click with someone as soon as you meet them, and converse on just about any topic. But it’s strange how you can know someone like that, and think that you know them well, and not know much about them at all, really.

A friend once told me about her friend from Europe. She’d known her for years, they were partners in a cleaning business, and she always believed she knew her friend’s life story backwards. One morning over coffee her friend let slip, and she pulled an old newspaper cutting from her apron pocket. Back in her own country she’d been a well-known scientist. She told my friend that here, in Australia, she just wanted to be an ordinary person, and live quietly.

Who knows what’s in anybody else’s life? Who knows what secrets are hidden in the past of the man in the street?

I looked over at Mick. He was standing in front of his painting staring at it, and he suddenly said, -Funny that, in’it— both of us having been in a Home. But I’m serious … talk to me. Use my story in your book.

I picked up my brush and returned to my painting. -I’ll keep that in mind, Mick, but I can’t do anything until I get ethics clearance from the uni.

On the seventh of December, 2010, I get the go ahead from the Board of Ethics, and immediately post the Participant Information Sheets and the Consent forms to people who had previously asked if I would, sometime, write their stories.

The consent forms come back signed. Mick’s is the last to arrive. It lands in my letter box in the New Year, at the end of the last week in January 2011.

Before I travel south to begin interviewing Geoff Steele and his sister Bev Osborne, I ring Mick and ask when he’d like to start our talks, and if he’d like me to come up to his farm, and bring my recording gear.
He says, -No need for you to travel up the valley, mate. I’ll come down to your place as I usually do when we paint. But we’ll have to talk just whenever I can get there, and only for an hour or two at time … see, I’m working shifts and I’ve got to look after the house because Linda’s crook.

We arrange to have our first session after I return from the south, and before I go to Liverpool to see Barbara Walters-Smith.

§

Friday, the eighteenth of February 2011. It’s another warm summer morning. Mick works a three week roster—day, afternoon, night. He rings very early, and asks if it’s alright if he comes to my place straight from work. I say, “Sure.”

I set up my tape-deck on the breakfast-bar in my kitchen, pop bread into the toaster in readiness, and fill the kettle.

Mick roars up our driveway on his Harley Davidson, and parks in our carport. He knocks on the sliding glass door, pulls off his boots, and walks into the kitchen-family room.

He pulls out a chair, and says, -Got the kettle on mate?

I pour him a cup of tea, put a plate of food down on the bench in front of him, and start the tape-deck rolling.

Mick bites into his egg and toast, and says quietly, -Sorry about not sending that consent form back sooner, mate … but when it came to actually signing on to talk about things you’ve never talked to anyone about before …

I sit down opposite and ask if he’s really certain about going ahead with the interviews.

-Oh, I want to give you my story, but I’m just saying it’s not an easy thing to do, that’s all.

I feel a twinge of guilt mixed with gratitude and hesitate briefly, but I open my folder, and take out my paperwork to begin my spiel.

-Well, as long as you feel okay with it. So, first, Mick, thank you for agreeing to take part in this—

-But you’ll change the names of the people I speak about, won’t you?
He pours himself another cup of tea and adds milk. The spoon clinks against the sides of his cup as he stirs in two heaped teaspoons of sugar.

-Yes, and you can tell me anything you want, and if there’s something you don’t want revealed to others you have the right to say “but don’t use that,” and I won’t. You’re aware of what’s involved and what the potential dangers are?

-Yes, but I’m not worried about anything like that, I’m adult.

-But what if you did have some emotional backwash or something, how would you handle that?

-I’d talk it over wiv me wife, Linda, I guess.

-So is Linda agreeable to all this?

-Yeah—no problem.

-What about your kids, do they know?

-Yes. The kids … well it doesn’t bother them, they would never worry about all that.

Mick and I have always talked so easily together that I tell myself, “this interview is going to be a piece of cake.” But to my surprise he comes over as suddenly shy and clams up.

Then it dawns on me. We’re accustomed to conversing naturally, and being in a controlled interview such as this is like being chucked on the moon and having to learn a new way of communicating. I’m conscious that the strange situation in which we find ourselves—that of suddenly becoming interviewer and interviewee—shifts our relationship, and, in my mind, this raises all sorts of questions about issues of power.

Mick shakes his head. -I don’t think like that.

Puzzled, I say, -Then what is it, Mick?

He pushes his chair back a little, and says, -I’m a bit scared—it’s the unknown, I don’t know what to expect.

I’ve known Mick a long time and he’s never struck me as someone who would be scared of talking about things with me, and I wonder if he’s pulling my leg.

He says, -No, mate, it’s true—this is me.
I still can’t see it, and I wonder if it’s because he’s my friend, and friendship is a type of closeness, that I can’t gain objective distance. Such distancing is necessary if, as a writer, you are to do your subjects and their story justice. In one way, interviewing and writing are not unlike creating a painting. The closer you stand to your work the harder it is to gain a true perspective and tonal value, and you have to step back in order to see those things clearly. How else could you properly judge where to place your next considered brushstroke, one that may enhance the work and bring something to the viewer?

Interviewing someone for their life story is, I find, never an easy thing to do. Each subject is very different in their way of looking at things, and in the way that they relate to the interviewer. Each time you conduct a new interview the process is not unlike driving along a deeply pot-holed country road, one that you’ve never travelled on before but nevertheless must travel in order to reach your desired destination.

I suddenly feel that interviewing Mick is going to be an even more difficult drive than usual. I tell myself I can’t do this thing, conduct this interview satisfactorily, because, being friends for many years we have an emotional attachment. I drop my eyes and look down at my note-book, and hope that Mick hasn’t seen my near panic.

As with all of my interviewees, I’m worried I might do Mick harm in some way. I’m frightened of causing him undue stress, and I’m scared I will let us both down—Mick as the interviewee and the owner of his story, and me as the interviewer-writer. But at the same time, because I know Mick personally I’m worried that I might not be able to maintain sympathetic objectivity. I tell myself that’s a major pot-hole in the interviewing road and to get a grip. I search for a safe way around the seemingly insurmountable problems.

-Alright Mick, let’s start at the beginning. What date is your birthday? And don’t look so hopeful. I’m not asking so I can buy you a birthday present or anything.

-Oh that’s an easy one to answer. The twenty-ninth of March, 1951—one minute to midnight, just scraped in. Ahm … I was born in the hospital outside of London at Basingstoke, near Reading. I was two weeks old when me mother brought me home. I had a sister, Mary. She was older than me by eighteen months. She’s the one who died in a car accident when we grew up. I felt terrible guilt when that happened. The first thing I said was “why wasn’t it me, why didn’t they take me and not her.” Course, I was wild and all that, but she wasn’t. The loss of her still hurts, cuts like a knife. I can’t talk about that.
I steer our talk back to Mick’s babyhood.

- **So when you were born, what family did you come home to Mick?**

- Like you mean the family in the house? Well we all lived wiv me maternal grandmother and grandfather and their sons, me uncles, in Hornsey at Crouch End—a suburb of North London.

Before we go any further mate, I’d better explain. Where I come from in England we say “wiv” not “with” like you do, and “kitchin” not “kitchen.” And we say “me” when we refer to any family who live, or lived, in the same house as ourselves—like me Dad, me Mum, that sort of thing. Everyone else in the family is referred to as “my”—so if I say “my” uncle, I mean that particular uncle didn’t live, and never had lived, in the same house as me.

Anyway, we were all together in me grandparents’ brick house where they’d lived for a long, long time … but it was rented because I remember the rent man coming around.

- **So what was the house like, Mick?**

Mick looks at me in surprise, and then he places his arms on the breakfast bar and leans forward. - What, you want me to describe it? I’ll try, but I’m not very good at this sort of thing.

He sits in thought, and when he eventually speaks, I sense an underlying nostalgia.

- The house me grandmother had doesn’t exist anymore. They pulled all those old houses down and moved us all into housing estates.

All the houses in our street were tenement-style row-houses. Seen the attached row-houses in the English show *East Enders* on tellie mate? It looked like them. Like everyone else’s, our house was in stories, and the whole big house was divided into two houses. We lived in the downstairs house, and upstairs from us there was another family’s house.

The houses were getting on for a hundred years old back then, but me mother and me grandmother were both scrupulously clean women and good housekeepers. The dark red stone of the front step was always scrubbed, and the mosaic tiles of the ground-floor hall were always clean, and the wooden stair-banisters and rails were always polished to a high shine.
What would’ve originally been the basement was our kitchin. To get to it, you came through the front door off street level and you went down a flight of steps. We mostly lived in the kitchin. Like that was the centre … the hub of our house.

Our kitchin was also our laundry. The clothes line was on a pulley, and it hung from the ceiling. You lowered the line to hang your washing, and then hoisted it right up so the wet washing hung above your head to dry in the heat that rose from the kitchin fire.

-Sounds like a big room.

-Well, no mate. There was only room for a cooker and a boiler—I think we had a boiler—a dresser, and the table and a few chairs, that’s all.

We didn’t have a bathroom. The kitchin table was a piece of timber that sat on top of a bath-tub, and when you wanted a bath me grandmother took the timber off. There was no running water for the bath, so we carried the water in buckets and tipped it into the tub.

At one end of the kitchin was a curtained doorway and you went through that into the lounge-room which was just big enough to hold a set of drawers, a t.v., and a single lounge-chair. From there you went up one flight of stairs to the ground floor and there were two bedrooms, and then you went up another flight to the first floor to another bedroom. To get to it you had to walk around by a corridor to the back of the house. The rest of that floor, and the floor above that, belonged to the upstairs family’s house. They had the attic, too, I suppose.

What, where was the lavatory, is that what you want to know? Oh, there was a row of privies out the back lane that belonged to everyone in the street—one privy to each big house, and each big house was divided into two “houses,” so one privy to two families.

Just like everyone else’s place, our house always smelt of boiled cabbage. The smells used to get trapped, air flow wasn’t good. We only had the front door and a back door. The front door opened onto the street, and it always stood open because the house belonged to the two families—us and the family upstairs? So it was never closed.

Yeah mate, you’re right there, anyone could’ve wandered in. But nobody did. There wasn’t any danger in them days. People moved around and saw everything, and word spread quickly. We all looked out for each other. Everyone knew if a stranger was walking around long before he took two steps, and you knew long before he even got near your place.
The whole street, and even further up, was all uncles and aunts and Mrs this and Mr that. Everyone knew everyone. Our streets were a close-knit community. All the streets were the same, but you only counted so many streets as being in your area, or what we called “our streets.” Other streets belonged to different “areas.”

Our kitchen and lounge-room was always dark. We only had one small window downstairs … I’m talkin’ a couple of foot. It looked out onto the backyard that wasn’t big enough to play in or hang washing out. I remember me grandmother growin’ rhubarb there. It wasn’t giant, not big leaves and things, but it grew like anything. It got too much for me grandmother in the end, and she tried for ages and ages to kill it off. But it wouldn’t die, it just wouldn’t. So in the end she gave up and it went wild. Even then she still picked it, though.

For me, rhubarb has some nasty connections. It was forced upon me in the foster house—“it will clean some of the rottenness out of you, you little bastard,” my foster-people used to say. As well, my taste-buds naturally reject it. Rhubarb has the same effect on me as chalk squeaking across a blackboard. Both put my teeth on edge, and send a shudder through me.

I grimace, and Mick laughs at my reaction.

-What, you don’t like rhubarb mate? Oh, I love rhubarb. Me grandmother used to make a nice rhubarb pie and these baked dinners on Sunday. It was a big thing wiv me grandmother. She used to bake these dinners in lots of dripping. We used to scrape the drippin’ afterwards and spread it on our bread.

§

Today, Saturday, Mick sits in my kitchen in the same chair he had occupied yesterday. He says, -I can stay for about two hours this time

I get our usual cups of tea going, and we take out our pencils and cartridge drawing paper and spend considerable time in sketching. Mick fiddles around drawing and re-drawing the old houses he lived in as a child in England, and then erases his work.
-Sorry mate, there’s too much in the memory, I can’t capture it all on paper, it would bring it all too close.

We put our sketching pencils and papers to one side, and I pick up the conversation about his childhood from yesterday.

- Mick why did you eat dripping on bread, was it because butter wasn’t available?
- Everything was rationed during the Second World War, and some things were still rationed for a good while after the war ended. Butter came off the ration around about 1954, but we liked the taste of dripping on bread, and it was cheap.

Mick seems at ease now, and I tell myself, “Maybe he finds this conversation non-threatening.”

He folds his arms across his chest and leans back comfortably in his chair.

- Here, I’ll give you an idea of what our diet was like. Breakfast was basically wheat-biscuits or cornflakes wiv a very minimal dob of milk. You couldn’t afford much milk, and you know wiv all of us, well …

At home we always got sandwiches for lunch and a cooked tea.

Once we reached school-age and started school we were given lunch there. It cost five English pence a day and you got, oh, you know, potato, pumpkin, meat—shepherd’s pie and stuff like that—and for afters you got custard and apple pie or something, and at morning break they gave us a quarter pint of milk and you had to drink all of it. Then at home for tea at night we always had sandwiches, jam or banana or fish paste and watercress—that was a big thing back then, watercress and fish paste.

Sunday nights we ate left-overs on sandwiches.

Apart from the banana sandwiches we didn’t get fruit. We didn’t get salads. We didn’t get green vegetables—only on Sundays—and we didn’t have tea on Saturday nights.

Alarm shoots through me at the thought of children who live at home with their family not being fed on Saturday nights. I look at Mick in horror.
-Well, on Saturday arvos we all went up the pub. See, it was pub night. All the grownups in the area went and they’d play darts or cards or dominoes. Me father had a motor-bike, and we had to stay in the side-car while our parents were at the pub because kids weren’t allowed in the pub. We weren’t allowed to get out of that side-car. So we’d sit there and talk, and me father used to come out there and say, “Do you want a bag of chips?”

We’d say, “Yeah, we want some chips,” and we’d get a bottle of lemon or orange drink and bag of potato chips.

No mate, not from the fish and chippery, a bag of what we called swift chips, crisps?

-What about winter?

-Well, if it rained or snowed the side-car had a cover that you could pull over, and we’d pull the cover up, and we had coats and things on.

What, you want to know if that was safe? Course we were safe. It was a safe area, and we were in the side-car in the car park just down the road from the pub. Oh, no mate, not a general car park—it belonged to the pub. See, where we lived there wasn’t room at the back or the side of the pub for a car park, so they had it a little way down the street—walking distance.

Holidays? Well, we’d get out and play up and down the street, and when we were hungry we’d just go into the kitchin and grab a sandwich to eat. Oh, no, there was no goin’ away or anything. Sometimes we used to go forty or fifty miles away into the country or to Marlowe on the Thames for a picnic. Just for the day. How did we …? Oh no, not by public transport, in me father’s bike and side-car.

-You said it was safe in the streets or small “area” you lived in—was the whole bigger area like that?

-Oh, hang on. For us, I’d say it was mainly only our streets that were safe. See, everyone sort of lived … well, in your streets you all done the same things. Like on Saturday nights our streets all went up the pub and that’s where you sort of met people from round the area. But your street itself was tight, close-knit, and even more tightly close-knit than the area. I mean you’d say hello to the bigger area but your street was where you could borrow a bit of sugar or milk. You could just go along and ask anyone for some. But you wouldn’t go into the bigger area and ask.
Wednesday, the second of March, 2011. I’ve finished interviewing Barbara Walters-Smith. Bob and I arrived back home a couple of days ago.

It’s almost mid-morning when I hear the Harley Davidson coming down the street. Mick hangs his leather bike jacket over the sun-chair on my back patio, and says, -Only got a little while, mate, is that okay? I say, -Yes, of course Mick, just whenever you can spare any time. But I feel awful in you doing this when I know you’re so busy. He laughs dryly. -Par for the course, mate. That’s life, you know?

Just as with the first of our interview sessions, Mick and I sit in my airy kitchen over cups of tea and talk.

Gently, I ask careful questions and hope they’ll lead to memories, to revelations, and I don’t like myself. I feel like a sticky-beak, with my prying into the intimate corners of his past, and I hesitate. I brush my misgivings aside. I know I need to probe so I can to do my job properly and write a book that will show readers what Mick’s particular experience was like.

When I was a child in Dalwood I didn’t play with toys. In Dalwood, there were no toys. So I made up stories in my head and thought about things and asked myself questions and played hand-games. One of my favourite games was “Congregation.” I’d make my hands into fists, and with my knuckles pressed tightly together I’d interlace my fingers and stick my index fingers in the air with the fingertips touching. Once I had achieved this difficult task I’d look through the door of the “church” at the “congregation” sitting in the pews, and then flip my hands over, palm up, so that I was looking down on my interlocked fingers. I’d wriggle my fingers around and chant, “Here is the church, and here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people.” I’d watch the people moving and pretend they were talking when they shouldn’t, and hear everything they were saying. I was fascinated by my finger-people’s lives, the bigger picture that was hidden inside my “church.”

Now, as an adult and a writer, I need to see Mick the child that was so I can see Mick the adult in a clearer light and gain a fuller understanding of his childhood.

I sit looking across my breakfast bar at Mick and rummage around in my mind for a circuitous way to open the conversation and gain access to the bigger picture.
-Mick, you said that the street where you lived as a kid was where you could borrow sugar or milk, so were you a long way from shops?

-Around the corner from our street there was a small bank of shops, butchers, bakers, that sort of thing. If you wanted other stuff you went up to the High Street—that was a main street where all the shops were, sort of like a shopping centre? But you didn’t buy your sugar or milk there. You went around the corner to the green-grocery.

Nowadays you get your milk delivered but in them days you didn’t. Well you couldn’t, there wasn’t any such thing as a delivery service.

-So, if you had the money, you could buy milk or sugar close by to where you lived?

-That was the thing. You borrowed when the shop was shut, or if you ran out of cash between pay-days.

Now me father always worked, he was a builder’s labourer. But because of the weather and work conditions, like strikes and that, he didn’t always bring in what you’d call good money. Later on, when I was about nine, maybe a bit older, he became a long-distance lorry driver and then the money was a bit better. But same as everyone else we had to get from one pay day to the next. Wiv food, if you ran out of money before pay-day and needed anything more than a cup of sugar you just put it on tick until you got paid.

You put things on tick in them days. Everybody did. It was just the usual practice. You lived behind wiv your money, not in front.

But wiv big stuff like gear, you always put it on tick. But you didn’t buy a lot of gear, not like people do now. Anyway, back then there wasn’t the gear you can get now—mobile phones, computers, cars two-a-penny-on-the-streets. Everything was tight. Like at Christmas you only got one present, and that was your main present, and the rest of the bags were just sweets and nuts and fruit and things like that.

I don’t remember the things I got when I was real young, but I remember some of the presents I got later on when I was older. I remember me first racin’ car thing—scale electrix? I remember me Dad made me a wheelbarrow once. Another time he made me a billy cart for Christmas because they couldn’t afford ...
Then there was the year me mother went crazy. On Christmas morning, all strung out in a line down our hallway, was a bike for each of us. She’d forked out for all these different sizes of bikes and she’d put them all on tick. We borrowed a lot of cups of sugar that year.

I wonder if things are much different today. Look at credit cards for goodness’ sake, most of us wouldn’t be caught without them, handy little pieces of plastic that they are.

Yeah, well, as a child, when we lived at me grandmother’s place we didn’t have much gear but we always had a lot of fun. They were good times, and I didn’t worry about money unless I was sent out to borrow stuff from the neighbours—that was embarrassing, it was painful for me. But apart from that, as a child you didn’t involve yourself in anything else that was going on in the adult world … except when they had a party.

Going to parties, being included in your adult family’s world, what would that be like? I gaze out the glass doors of my family room at the farm across the river and try to imagine what such closeness must be like for a child and I can’t. I never knew such things as a child.

The two bedrooms up on what I call our first floor—but which was really the street level—were big, really big, and they had concertina doors in between them and they opened up into one huge room. Well Saturday nights, after the pub, about once a fortnight, me mother’d open them up, and roll back the carpet and push the beds against the wall, and put on these parties.

Everyone would come, all the relatives and all the neighbours and all the work people, you invited up and down the street. Basically everyone brought their own drink and some food. Like you’d put so much on, and everyone’d bring more.

I remember when one of me older uncles had his twenty-first. Crikey, that’s goin’ back a bit now, I mean me old man would’ve been … dunno, he’s been dead for a few years. Anyway, they made these blancmanges in cups, you know, what you’d call jellies? You never bought anything in them days, everything was self-made—you’d say home-made, I say different. So they put all these blancmanges out on the table, and us kids sat under the table just reaching up and grabbing them. In the end we got told off
because we’d eaten so many they had to take them off the menu. So we did get into trouble that time. But for all that they were good times. Like, people got drunk at these parties, but they behaved themselves, except that once.

I sit on my American hoop-back chair in my kitchen and wonder again what it must be like for a child to be a member of a big happy family. I almost envy Mick his childhood. But then what he has just said hits me, and I snap out of my dream.

-Mick, what do mean, “except that once”?-

-Well there was this one time when I was young and we were having this great party and there was a bit of a disturbance because my father played up a bit.

Apparently my mother went looking for him for some reason and found him in the upstairs bedroom fooling around with some girl. But I didn’t find out that this is what caused the hoo-ha until I was grown-up.

Like, at this party, one minute everything was normal—people were four sheets to the wind and laughing and chattering and singing, and us kids were on the floor under the table filling our faces with great food and fooling around and talking—and the next minute there was this huge eruption and the whole party went mad.

There was my crazy mother running wildly through the house, round and round in circles, yelling her lungs out and carryin’ on, and then everybody started jumping up and rushing round in circles and yelling “what’s the matter, what’s the matter,” and the next thing I knew there she was, my screaming mother, tryin’ to get at my Dad to knock his head clean off his shoulders.

Well he was a man of not many words, like I should say a man of few words. So all through this carry on and screaming he didn’t say much at all. See, he was the sort of person who’d let you cool down and come back tomorrow and say, “Righto, let’s talk about it,” rather than try and have it right there and then. And that’s what he did. He just walked out and come back the next day or the day after that, and said, “Righto let’s talk.”

So they stayed together, sort of. But only because of us, I think, for the kids.

The girl my Dad … did he really like her? No, not really. Well the story is she belonged to one of my uncles. They got married in the end—like that was before my uncle turned camp—but when that
happened wiv me Dad it was while me uncle was only goin’ out wiv her. I think wiv me Dad it was all beer-talk, you know? A bit of mucking around at the party, just one of those one of things, it was nothing.

§

Yesterday, after we’d talked, Mick took himself home to get some sleep. Before he left, we arranged that he come back today, Thursday.

But Mick rings and says, -Jo, I’ll have to cancel because me wife’s got an appointment at the hospital wiv her specialist.

Mick worries and frets while they wait for the results of Linda’s tests. He’s sick with anxiety, and he says he’s decided to take Linda away for a few days.

Mick phones on the Monday night after I get home from Bankstown from interviewing another participant for my book and says, -The news is good, it’s a load off my mind, but it’s going to be the end of the week before I’ve got time to come back to your place and talk.

Friday the eleventh of March.

Mick steps through my door and says he’s been on night duty. I glance at his face and tell him he’s looking a little ragged. I ask him if he really wants to talk today, or if he shouldn’t, perhaps, just go home and rest.

-Nah, it’s my day off. If I sleep now I won’t sleep tonight. I had to come down this way because I had to go to me daughter’s place this morning and fix her new bathroom taps. Thought I’d kill two birds wiv one stone and come here afterwards and talk for a while. No mate, nothing to eat thanks, just had me breakfast.

I put the jug on, and start the tape-deck. A cooling breeze has sprung up. I open the sliding glass-door in the family room wider, and I sit down with my note-book in front of me on the bench.

-Mick, the other day you were telling me about your grandmother’s place. How long did you live there?
-It must’ve been … can’t remember really. I’ve tried not to think too much about my life back then because it’s when things went wrong, and thinking about it brings all the bad stuff back. But I’ve got to face it all now so I can tell you my story.

I think I might’ve been about seven or eight when we moved out?

-So why did you leave there?

-Well, it was gettin’ too small. All us kids were all sleeping in one bedroom, all me uncles and Mary and me, and me second sister, Eliza—she’s the one who’s next youngest to me.

Where did we move to? Well, we went into a similar half house to me grandmother’s place, but on the other side of Crouch End, on a corner block. We had rats in our basement. We had to call the rat man. But even after he’d been, they still kept coming in. So because of the rats we didn’t have our kitchin in the basement, and we didn’t stay in our house a lot. We used to go around to me grandmother’s house for tea and to watch the tellie. In them days, t.v. never used to come on until six o’clock at night and it went off the air about ten or eleven p.m.

I remember that when we first moved to our own house in Crouch End me and Mary used to walk around to me grandmother’s place and pick up one of me uncles who was only three years older than me, and we’d all walk to school together.

We all went to Roxley School. The school’s not there anymore, they knocked it down when the re-building of that area went on.

Mick has gone white in the face. Tears well in his eyes, and he breaks eye-contact. He turns sideways in his chair and looks away from me and towards the front window of my family room.

I ask, -Are you alright, Mick?

He swallows hard, and says, -Yes mate, it’s just bad memories, that’s all—they just hit me all at once instead of in little bits, that’s all.

I nod, and say, -Mick, let’s leave your schooldays for a later conversation.

He turns back to face me, and says, -No, best go on. It’s not the schooldays themselves that upset me … it’s thinking about how Mary was wiv us then—

He brushes his hand across his eyes.
-Roxley School was good. Me and Mary were privileged children. See, me uncle was the school bully, so no-one pushed us around and everyone treated me nice, and me and Mary never had any trouble.

We were a threesome—me uncle, Mary, and me.

Now, of course, there’s just the two of us left, me uncle and me. And even though we mightn’t see each other for years, when we do it’s like we’ve never been apart. I’m goin’ over to see him again in August, and it’ll be just like we saw each other an hour or so before.

So me uncle was the school bully and later on I sort of came into play. Not an out-and-out bully so much, but I had to make me mark physically. Roxley wasn’t a tough school but you had to make your name? If you didn’t, then you were on a sort of downward slope.

In the area I grew up in, if you didn’t sort of make a certain name for yourself then you were either teased or of no account much, and I think wiv me and Mary, well she was a girl and in between me and uncle, and we sort of protected her a bit.

§

Mick’s mobile rings, he walks into the family-room to answer. He finishes his phone call and comes back into the kitchen.

-Mick, how are you going with all this? Are you alright?

He laughs. -Well nothing that another cup of tea wouldn’t fix.

-That’s easy. Are you ready for the next question?

-Looking back, what sort of child would you say you were in those days?

-What sort of a kid was I? Crikey, that’s a tricky one. Well, I was always a nervy kid, always scared, and I think that was because of me mother being a top nag-come-screamer. Like, to give you an idea … at dinner time, say, she wouldn’t just come out and just sort of call you, she’d yell all over the district “GET YOUR SELF IN HERE MICK, NOW,” scream, scream, scream, type of thing, you know? Bye, she had a good set of lungs on her.

Yes, I laugh now, but I didn’t back then. I was plain embarrassed.

But I wasn’t embarrassed when she’d scream and play up and carry on like anythin’ when I’d wet the bed—I was just plain scared. And I wet the bed a lot.
How did I feel about that? Oh, terrible, really terrible.

Like, you’d wake up in the middle of the night and first thing is you’d panic straight away—‘Oh I’ve wet the bed oh Christ oh what am I going to do.’

Oh, I used to get up in the middle of the night and try and wash it … the sheets … Funny though, I never worried about my pyjamas, and how they were.

I used to take the sheet up and tiptoe down to the bath—we’d moved to our own place by then and we had the water connected to the bath—and I’d run the tap and try and wash the sheet out and go back and make the bed up wiv the wet sheet and get back into bed and lie there waiting for morning because I knew she’d play up. Didn’t matter at all to her I’d tried to wash the sheets.

Sometimes she’d drag me out in the middle of the night and scream ‘WHAT! YOU WET THE BED AGAIN?’ at the top of her lungs and of course it’d be sheer panic then.

What, did she smack me you mean? Well yeah, she smacked me, but I wouldn’t say abusively. It was the screaming, non-stop, she wouldn’t stop. I dunno what it was, whether it was her voice or what … used to scare the b’jesus out of me. I suppose I was scared of her.

When me father took up long distance lorry driving he’d be away for a week or two at a time, and she’d say, “You wait ‘til your father gets home, he’s goin’ to belt you,” and I lived in dread of me father comin’ home—right up until he pulled up in the road. Then I’d think, “Well I’m just goin’ to tell him and I hope she doesn’t get there first.”

So I lived in fear all that time.

It went on for years. I’d wake up wiv a wet bed. Me brother never did it, none of me sisters did it, just me. I used to think, “Why’s it me.”

I was still doing it when I came out here to Australia when I was about fifteen. And the worst thing was she used to say to all her friends, even out here in Australia, “He still wets the bed you know.” Bye, that was embarrassing.

What, has she ever said sorry?—well, no. She’d never do that. What? Oh, no. I’d never ask her to say sorry because it wouldn’t seem right, it would have to come from her first.

I did ask her about that once, about her screaming at me, and she said, “But that’s just what they did in them days. I didn’t know any different.” That’s her excuse, you know. But I suppose that’s just the way it was in them days. What can you say?
Me grandmother never interfered. She and me mother were alike in some ways and different in
others, but me grandmother wasn’t a screamer, never a screamer. Wiv me mother and me grandmother there
was a lot of friction between them. There was never enough room wiv us all livin’ together in the one house.
Me mother always wanted her own house, as you do when you get married. But me father didn’t bring in
really good money, and money was always a thing.

Me mother used to say, oh, “Your grandmother’s this and that, she’s always whinging.” I didn’t see
me grandmother that way at all, I always found her brilliant. But I was her grandson, wasn’t I. Its horses for
courses in’it … it’s how you interpret, how you get on wiv a certain person, how you yourself find them? I
always got on very well wiv me grandmother—I always thought, anyway. I really loved her

Me father was a good Dad to me, gentle and spoke quietly, and he used to take me away long-
distance driving wiv him in school holidays. We were good mates, got along well.

He only ever smacked me the once, well, not smacked—he just grabbed me by the collar and shoved
me down the hall and give me a cuff round the ear-hole. I think he was upset at the time because she told him
she having another baby—me youngest sister, Donna, she’s the youngest of all of us. I wonder sometimes if
he felt like he was working and working and getting nowhere. He was angry wiv her, but I was starting to get
me oats and I, well I faced-off to her and back-lipped him, and that sort of pushed him and he exploded. But
he never used to say anything to me mother—he’d just used to let her go on. I’ve seen her throw baked
dinners at him and he’d just sit there and she’d run out and he’d just clean up the mess. When I grew up I’d
say to him, “Why do you just sit there, why don’t you say somethin’ back,” and he’d say, “Because that
annoys her more so than if I did.”

So apart from that, what sort of a kid was I? Well I think I was sort of happy most times, at least up
until I went into the orphanage. But I always lacked confidence after I came out of the Home, and then I was
really scared like. And partly that was because of me mother—she always frightened the daylights out of
me.

Again there are tears in Mick’s eyes. My heart goes out to him, and I tell myself, “and there you
have it, the nut of the thing.”

*I understand, Mick, I was a bed-wetter and I always got screamed at, too.*
What does it mean to a child to be a bed-wetter? It’s embarrassing, and humiliating, and it’s a terrible thing. You’re forever dogged by the shame and the guilt and the fear of thinking there’s something wrong with you, or different about you. Added to that, there’s the worry and the fear of discovery, and the fear and the dreadful anticipation of looming trouble. There’s an added burden, the fear that other children will torment you, and they do.

What does it mean for a child to be continually berated and screamed at? It feels as if you are nothing, it feels as if you want to sink into the ground and become invisible, it feels like you are going to go insane if it doesn’t stop.

§

-Mick, you said you were in an orphanage, so where in all this moving around did that fit in?

-Well I was fairly young when our mother got pregnant with me brother. Mary and me sort of noticed our mother was gettin’ fatter, but we wouldn’t have known why. All we knew was that the fatter she got the more explosive she got, and then the first thing I knew we were put in Muswell Hill Home in Crouch End, North London.

I wasn’t to know at the time, of course, but the Home was just around the corner from the house we were to move to later on—the one that had rats? But when our mother took me and Mary to the Home, we hadn’t yet moved from our grandmother’s place.

We walked with our mother from our grandmother’s house to the Home, but we didn’t know where we were going. She didn’t tell us. She took us into the Home and said, “You’ll both be staying in here. I can’t keep you.” I felt rejected.

Rejection is probably the worst thing you can come up against … if you’re a man. I don’t handle it well even now. But that’s probably a man thing because when a man gets rejected he reverts to childhood—you feel hurt, upset, confused, it’s just knowin’ you can’t have what you want when you want it, so you want it more. Like if you want a new car and your wife tells you that you can’t have it—“But why, I want it … look, I’ve already got it.” See, I’ve already planted the scene in me head and its growing and there it is, the car I bought standin’ in the driveway out the front. And when you’re told you can’t have it, flat, like that, no reason given, suddenly the scene pops, and the car drives off into the blue—“Oh, but I had it in the
driveway!” You know it’s not right because you know it should be you behind the wheel, and you’re not. The car’s gone, and no-one’s really explained why.

Back when Mary and me were left at the Home I wanted me mother even though she was a screamer and scared me to death. She didn’t tell me why she couldn’t keep us. I suppose even if she had it wouldn’t have helped me understand, not back then anyway. I still would’ve felt rejected—me mother wasn’t a new car, but she took herself off into the blue and disappeared from me life. That sort of thing happens.

So anyway, me mother just took me and Mary and left us there in this Home. But she kept me sister, Eliza, wiv her. She wasn’t put in the Home. I was never that close to Eliza. But Mary and I were close, always had been, and been’ in the Home brought us even closer together.

-How did you feel when you were put in the Home?

-Confused, dumbfounded, and like, “what have I done, what have I done wrong, what have we done wrong to deserve this?” We begged her not to leave us.

I was cryin’ and cryin’, “Don’t leave, don’t go, Mam what did I do—what have I done wrong?”

I thought me and Mary had done something really awful because she kept Eliza. So I cried and cried, “What have I done wrong?” and me mother said matter-of-factly, “It won’t be for long, it won’t be for long.”

Mick’s eyes fill, and he looks at me and says, -I’m feeling really unsettled by looking back at the past.

I stop the tape-recorder, and say, -Mick, I’m so sorry. Look, I’m making the decision not to go on.

He reaches over and turns the recorder back on, and says, -No, I’m going on. I asked you to use my story to help you wiv your book, and it might help someone who reads it, too.

I say, -Mick, I don’t want to do this at the expense of your well-being.

-Mate, I’m an adult. I can make me own decisions. I’m just saying it’s uncomfortable, that’s all, but I wouldn’t have started all this if it was going to be too much for me to handle. Let’s get on wiv it.

-You’ll be wondering why me mother put Mary and me in the home. Well it was because she and me Dad split up. I can’t remember me father leaving but I remember askin’ where he was. He was there one day and just not there the next. There wasn’t any fight over it, not as far as I knew, anyway. But then you wouldn’t do that in front of your kids, would you … fight, I mean. You’d go into your bedroom out of the
way. In those days kids didn’t ever go into their parents’ bedroom, and you didn’t hear much of what went on. I couldn’t even tell you what me parents’ room looked like. I never once went in there. You weren’t allowed. So if they argued it would’ve been in their bedroom out of the earshot of us little pitchers.

But it wouldn’t just be a matter of him leaving, would it? No, it would be what had led up to him leaving. I think me parents had been having trouble for a long time. Now you wouldn’t necessarily leave because of that, but there’s trouble and there’s trouble.

I didn’t know until I was grown-up that me brother wasn’t me father’s child.

What, am I sure? Yes. See, I don’t know where me father went, but he was away for a long time once—working, I suppose—and he wasn’t around when me brother was conceived. Me mother was already getting fat when me father came back from wherever he’d been. So obviously she, me mother, played up somewhere.

How I came to know about it was … one time, years ago now, this was over here in Australia, me and Mary were just sittin’ in the car and talking about her birthday, and the penny dropped—“Oh, they got married and you were born five or six months after.” So we came to realise that me mother was already having me sister when she and me father got married. But in them days that’s what you did. If you got a girl pregnant you got married.

From that, we began talking about me brother’s birthday and worked out that when me mother got pregnant wiv him, our father was away. And then we remembered that me mother used to say to me brother, “You’re just like your father,” and Mary and me knew me brother wasn’t anything like the father we had.

And I know me brother’s not me father’s child because one time—long time after—me mother accidently let slip.

To me personally, no matter whatever else you do—I’m not includin’ wife beating because a man should never ever hit any woman no matter what—absolute fidelity is the one unspoken law of a relationship, it’s the one law that must never be broken.

If you’re disloyal to your partner you break the bond, and that can’t ever be righted or made whole again. Not like it was. Something valuable’s been smashed. Trust has been broken, that’s it. Without trust you’ve got nothing. I mean people do go out and do it, but once it happens the relationship has been destroyed.
So I don’t blame me father for leavin’. I would’ve left if my wife had done that. It’d be hard for me to give her any more of my self ever again. Like, say if you’d been having trouble for years and years and then your wife did that … you’d know for certain you could never trust her ever again—and on top of that having her put your kids in the Home because you’d broken up over it. To me that’d be the last straw.

I watch Mick’s face closely. -And then, of course, there’s the actuality of the baby?

Mick unfolds his arms. -It’s not the matter of the child. It’s the act that leads to it.

I eyeball him, and say, -I always thought that generally speaking, a man doesn’t like taking on a baby that’s born to his woman by another man—I’m not talking IVF or sperm donor here, I’m talking act. It hurts a man’s pride, his male ego, doesn’t it?

-No, you’re wrong there. It’s not a matter of ego. When a baby’s born from his woman’s extra-marital affair there’s a problem for the man because it’s evidence that his woman has broken trust. To me, it’s nothin’ to do wiv the baby. The child’s the innocent … beautiful. A man can love a baby no matter what. I could, anyway.

But it takes time for a man to love a baby—even if it’s his own flesh and blood. See, a man’s different to a woman. A mother falls in love wiv the baby straight off, but as a bloke you feel affection, fondness, you feel proud, and you admire the baby, but you don’t love the baby as soon as you set eyes on it. A bloke has to learn.

Like, when you’re a bloke and you pick up a baby, any baby, to take home as yours, you’re a father, sure. But you don’t know that child, you don’t know anything about what it’s like as a person … but that doesn’t matter because even if you didn’t make that child you’re that child’s father and you’re bringing it up. And without tryin’ or knowing that you’re doing it you fall in love wiv it, and love grows. That child needs you and you need that child, you need each other, and that’s what you do as a father. That’s me speaking as a man, anyway.

I sit quietly, turning Mick’s views over in my head, and then, just to see where it might lead, I decide to go back to the matter of trust and throw a curly question into the mix.
-So what if, say, a married man went with a prostitute or had a one-night stand, would that be breaking the trust?

-Depends on the circumstances. Say if you went out and got drunk and just carried on, or woke up in the morning and saw someone alongside you in the bed ... well, no, for men, that doesn’t mean anything much, it’s different. But if you weren’t drunk that’s deliberate and that’s unforgivable. It’s breaking trust. That might sound like double-standards, but that’s how a man feels about it.

Mick sighs heavily. He turns his chair sideways, and crosses one leg over the other. He rubs his chin with his thumb, and says, -Time for truth, in’it.

-I told you we had to move out of me grandmother’s house because it was getting’ too crowded. But I think the real reason we had to move out was because of me mother having me brother to another man. That wouldn’t have gone down well in them days. I mean, in the community in which we lived you wouldn’t even dare tell a fib or cheat or get into bad trouble. So you can imagine what it was like if you got pregnant and you weren’t married. It was a terrible disgrace. Oh, no-one would ever want to know you or speak to you, or even look at you. But to have a baby outside your marriage to another man ... ohh, that was the worst possible sin. You wouldn’t be welcome anywhere. Not even your own family would want you, and they certainly wouldn’t want you livin’ under their roof.

I suppose that while me Dad lived wiv me mother, even if she was havin’ a baby to another man, me grandparents didn’t mind her livin’ there in their house wiv them. But without me father’s protection, and once the reason for him leaving me mother became known around the area, they wouldn’t want her there. So I suppose she had nowhere to live, and that probably meant us, too.

Me grandmother never came to see us in the Home. For a long time I used to wonder why she didn’t come and get us out. But later, when I got a bit older, I realised she was sick, in a lot of pain, and she, crippled up wiv arthritis, couldn’t get around much. And I think the cancer had already set in. Me mother wasn’t at all understanding. Me grandmother used to love her can of Guinness, and me mother used to say to her, “Shut up the whining’, have another can.”

§
I really have no idea of what the Children’s Home in Crouch End, North London, looked like. For some reason I’ve never researched for photos of Children’s Homes in England.

-No, I don’t think it was a Church Home. I think it was one of them orphanages that sprung from the old work-houses—Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* sort of thing?

In Australia most Children’s Homes were of the European-style—architecture imported into Australia. There was nothing Australian about them other than they were erected in Australia and terrified the Australian children who lived in them.

In my mind’s eye I see the Home Geoff Steele was in as a child, and I see Dalwood, the Home I was in as a child. Both were distinctly European, both were very terrifyingly Gothic, yet they differed one from the other in appearance and dimensions. I imagine the Home Mick was in as a child was somewhat similar.

-It was a brick building, tall, four stories, flat front, frightening, all these narrow windows, it looked like a gaol, or some sort of warehouse. Inside the Home … downstairs was just like a long room, a big hall, really.

My image bursts like a soap bubble. Mick’s picture is based on reality, and it’s different from the one I painted in my head.

-What, draw it! Oh, no, I’m sorry but I couldn’t do that mate, it’d make me sick and shove me straight back there. I wouldn’t want a picture of it, and if you ever come across one don’t show me, ever.

-*In some of the Homes in Australia, like the one I was in, children were numbered and known as their numbers.*

-I was initials. If someone else had the same initials then you were a number. So you were initials or a number, and sometimes “you”—like “you get here, get here you”—but you were never a name. You were nobody, nothin’. You had no identity. I mean they put down mongrel dogs, and if they could’ve got away wiv it they would’ve done that to us, too. One or two kids disappeared from the Home. Like they were there
one day and you never heard or seen them anymore. You always assumed they’d gone home, but now I
sometimes … just different things make me wonder what did happen to those kids? I just don’t know.

All I can say for sure is you weren’t there to enjoy yourself, and they made sure of that. It wasn’t a
holiday camp. You were a pain to them, an inconvenience.

I always wet the bed in the Home, and whenever I did I got screamed at—just like me mother used
to do—scream, scream, scream, and it’d go right through you and mess wiv your head. They used to make
me parade around wiv the wettest part of the sheet over my head, and I got belted up for bothering people
and makin’ more work for the laundry.

Then when I came out of the Home I continued wettin’ the bed every night, and things were just the
same as they’d always been with me mother back at it again, and me bein’ terrified of her. So first me
mother, then the Home, and then me mother screaming and screaming at me, and that sort of reinforced the
screaming in the Home, and one fed the other. I think that’s why I was always so nervy, so jumpy, and felt so
down and depressed—because of all the screaming. It struck the fear of God into you.

I honestly think that the people who ran the Home were probably ordinary people, and their family
and friends probably thought they were nice. But in the Home environment they became different … hard,
cruel, heartless, cold, and regimental. Perhaps they worried that they’d end up on the outer wiv other workers
or the establishment if they showed kindness to the kids, or perhaps they were worried that the kids might
take advantage of them if they were soft. I think they were frightened to show affection for some reason. It
was a job to them. For a kid, bein’ in the Home was like being in a gaol.

What, was I scared? Oh, I was scared of everything, all the time. It was never a question of if or
when you felt scared, it was more a question of how much more scared you were at certain times than at
others.

Mick trembles, he says “Sorry mate,” and pushes his hand into his pocket. He pulls out a large,
white handkerchief, wipes his eyes, and goes on talking.

-The answer to your question is “no.” We didn’t go to school while we were in the Home, and they
didn’t give us any schoolwork to do. They weren’t interested in getting us educated. They didn’t want
thinkers, they wanted robots, servants who did what they told when they were told. Mary and me and all the
other kids in the Home had jobs—clean and polish, and wash and scrub. One of my jobs was to clean the tiles in the bathroom.

They beat us up in more ways than one.

Whenever the big kids got upset they’d sort of come round and belt us smaller kids up. So we got it from all sides.

-The clothes …? We had our own clothes taken away from us and we were given Home clothes. No, there was no uniform. Where we come from, people couldn’t afford to provide uniforms, and the Home couldn’t either. You had to wear a shirt and plimsolls and them baggy pants, you know the ones? That was all, no underwear. We were always cold.

Yes, mate, every night you got a bath. You took it in turns, three or four kids at a time, and you all bathed in the same water. I always felt dirty.

They didn’t talk to us in the Home, they talked at us. There was no please or thankyou about it. We had to fold our hands and sit down cross-legged on the floor of this long room and listen while they, nurses of some sort I suppose, stood up above us on the stairs and talked at us—“Do this now, do that now, don’t do this, don’t do that, sit still, don’t look around, don’t talk, you’re not listening.”

Whack! wiv the cane.

Robots … oh, we were told what to do and when and how to do it every minute of the day—you could never be alone. The only way you could be alone was to go inside yourself.

§

Looking across the breakfast bar at Mick, I see the unshed tears in his eyes. He turns his face from mine, and moves sideways in his chair. I feel guilty and ashamed just knowing that I’ve caused him pain by asking about his memories.

He catches his breath on a sigh, and turns back towards me. He puts his hand protectively over the record button on the machine, much as someone does with their wine glass when they don’t want it refilled.

-Linda often says to me, “You always hold things inside.”
I’ve never talked about things like this before, never sat and talked it out. You’d rather just get on wiv life, wouldn’t you? So I don’t open up even though I’m an adult now and I’m out of that country and I know the past can’t hurt me anymore.

-Mick, I’ve always found you to be a naturally funny man, and pretty realistic, down to earth ...

-Well, I’ve always managed to cope because I joke around a lot to cover up how I really feel. I’d have liked to be a comedian in real life, always fancied doin’ that for a living. Laughter is good medicine, it breaks depression. But at times you feel down because of what happened. I mean you’ll be busy going along happily and something’ll suddenly come up from inside yourself and you start remembering and goin’ back. When that happens I have to get out of there straight off and rush back to reality as quick as I can. But sometimes it takes time to get back out. I suppose that’s me moods that Linda says I have, and she always says, “What’s wrong—what’s wrong.” But I can’t say, can’t tell her even though I know, so I try to pass it off wiv a quick joke because I don’t want to worry her wiv me rubbish.

For all that, though, I’m no victim. I don’t dwell on the past, because the past is past after all, and if something suddenly pops up I just push it back.

But sometimes I just suddenly close up, go quiet, and then Linda says, “There you go again, sulking or something.” But I’m not. I don’t sulk. Sometimes I just like to sit quietly by myself and think about things, that’s all. I learnt how to do that in the Home … go inside myself and think. I’m not deep, but I’m a thinker. I like thinking.

-What do you think about when you do this, Mick?

-Oh, I think about everything and anything—like what makes flowers grow from seeds or what makes birds fly … how they fly, I mean. I know the mechanics and the science of it, but that doesn’t explain the mystery, does it?

§

-You’re talking about meal times in the Home? Breakfast was a bit of lumpy porridge wiv sugar but no milk. But once a day, morning tea I suppose, we did get a half glass of milk. Lunch was one jam half-sandwich—a piece of bread folded over. Dinner at night was boiled cabbage, boiled cod, and a boiled spud. Because of the Home I can’t stand the sight or smell or thought of any of that food now. You got any food hang-ups from your time?
Oh yes … vegetable stew, baked beans, blackberry jam—any jam at all, can’t take jam, ugh.

See, you know—even if you’d said nothing I’d have seen that you know.

I think I hate that stuff because it made me sick, and when it came back up they’d force-feed you your own vomit.

Do you ever tell anyone?

No, not really, oh, only Bob sometimes when he tries to push something in front of me.

What’s he say?

Not much, he just looks at me as if I’m putting it on and says, “You should be over all that by now.”

See? Other people don’t understand. Well unless you’d been through it yourself you wouldn’t, would you? A little while ago we were at the supermarket and I’m just walking along wiv the trolley, enjoying being together wiv Linda, and not thinkin’ about anything much and Linda says, “That looks good, I’ll get some of that for our lunch,” and she points at something white behind the glass in the counter.

I looked over and there’s this white fish, cod, and straight off I almost threw up on the spot, almost fainted, felt all wobbly and weak, and Linda looks at me says “You’ve gone dead white. What’s the matter with you?”

I told her, and she sort of said, “Oh, but that was a long time ago, you should’ve gotten over that by now.”

Most people don’t seem to really understand how we feel—course you wouldn’t if you hadn’t lived it, would you. But you don’t ever really get over it, do you?

No, and I think that’s one of the saddest bits for people like us. You never do get over things really. You think you have, and you live your life and then you see or hear something, and wham! You’re instantly back there and it really shakes you up. It takes a conscious effort to get back on an even keel. Even Frank McCourt said that same thing when he was talking about the making of his book Angela’s Ashes into a film.

Oh yes, that Irish writer. Well he knew, too. He had a bad childhood. But he was never in a Home; he was raised in the slums in Ireland.

I look out my back door at the clouded sky, and wonder at the mystery of how memories of lived experience can evoke deep emotion. It seems even more of a mystery how some unrelated incident, or some object or thing, can suddenly trigger a flashback that temporarily turns your emotional centre upside down.
Not many years ago now, I went with my husband to the golf course one day, and while he played I walked and enjoyed the peaceful spaces. I wandered over to the creek that ran through the course and looked down. The world around me suddenly disappeared and in its place, falling away beneath my feet, was the steep cliff face of Middle Head in Sydney Harbour.

I had once stood at the edge of that cliff. I was five years of age. My intention was to jump. I wanted to escape the Home and my tormentors and fly free with the white sea-gulls, up and up into the clear blue sky, and go to live with the angels. Three big Home girls came running. They caught at my pinny and said, “You can’t go, Joanie-Anne.”

Just as suddenly as the golf course creek had disappeared, there I was, back on the edge of the creek looking at the tall reeds and the rocks.

Bob came rushing over and grabbed me to him. I pulled away in shocked surprise.

He said, -You’re as white as a sheet, what happened?

I said, -Nothing, just the creek and the rocks and the reeds tangled with blue convolvulus flowers, that’s all.

I come back to the reality of Mick’s presence and the squeaking of the tape-recorder. I don’t tell Mick about my remembered flashback. But he looks over at me and nods.

-See, mate, I can see by your face that you’ve been there, you understand. Like, you’re busy just goin’ along normal, minding your own business and all unsuspecting, living your life, and then you suddenly see something or stumble across it and the next thing you know the world around you disappears and you’re right back there where you were and you want to run and get away from it … get out of there quick, but you know you can’t because you feel like you can’t stand up, you go wobbly, you feel defenceless, scared.

It’s like the smell. There was a smell about the Home. It seemed to hang in the air or something, this awful sickening smell.

No, it wasn’t a food smell … I can’t describe it but it’s one you never forget. No mate, I don’t know what it was or where it came from … I can’t tell you. But I know this smell and even now, if I get a whiff of this smell I go white—ask Linda, she’ll tell you. And when this happens I always go in myself rather than out.
In Muswell Hill Home there was a tiny yard out the back they called the garden. But there wasn’t any garden. It’s where they hung the washing. We used to go out there, Mary and me. We never used to play, we were too scared to move, just sat there wiv our arms around each other, taking comfort.

I learnt to hate in the Home. They said if I didn’t do things right they’d separate me from Mary. I was so frightened of being taken away from Mary I tried to do whatever they said. Mary was put in the girls’ part of night—into one of the girls’ dormitories—and I was put in wiv the boys. But we used to meet up at breakfast and cling together all day long. We never mixed. I mean, we sometimes talked to the other kids but we kept to ourselves. I suppose it was a survival thing really. But we didn’t talk. We didn’t have to, we just knew what each other was thinkin’ and feeling.

We just sat there together, wondering when me mother was coming back—or if she was comin’ back at all. Course, I don’t know what was going on me mother’s life back then, but it couldn’t have been good.

The next time we saw her was a long time afterwards. It felt like years but it wasn’t of course. She came to the Home wiv me father and we didn’t know what was happening. It’d been ages since we’d seen them lookin’ like they was really together, and we didn’t know what was goin’ on until they said, “We’re takin’ you home,” and they walked us home to our new place at Crouch End, not far from me grandmother’s place.

When we first came out I thought it was just for the day. I remember for a while we, Mary and me, were waiting to be taken back because we thought it was only goin’ to be for a short period. We didn’t know how long we were goin’ to be allowed to stay wiv me parents. We thought we’d done something really wrong and had to go back soon. We didn’t think we were home for good. We’d sit on the lounge and cling together wiv our arms around each other and we didn’t move or even blink. We were scared in case we did something. We were too scared to breathe almost.

Food was nothing, tasteless. We couldn’t eat or sleep properly because we were always tense, waiting and wondering what was happening.

Mary seemed to take fits after we left the Home. I don’t know what they were. She never used to take fits before we went in. So the Home might’ve affected her, I don’t know. It went on for years, but after a long, long time she seemed to grow out of them.
Life back at home wasn’t enjoyable. For one thing, when we came out me brother was just there and I thought, “Why’s this new baby here and I’ve got no home.” I wanted to say, “Why’d you leave me in there to get a new son, what have I done for that? You had me but you dumped me, you wanted him more than me, and I needed you.”

I was jealous.

-Mick, can I ask, did you hate your parents for what happened to you? Did you blame them?

-Well, I don’t think I hated or blamed them. But you don’t when you’re a kid, do you. I was confused more than anything. I don’t hate them even now. I mean, I never hated me father, I loved him. I think the thing I most regret in life, the thing I could’ve done when I was older but didn’t, is spend more time wiv me father … let him know how I felt about him. But I never did. I remember when I left home and I’d go back to visit and he’d ask me to help him wiv the garden … and I didn’t, I wouldn’t. I’m sorry about that now.

But wiv me mother, it’s different. I don’t hate her or resent her, and I don’t feel angry wiv her, but I don’t feel close to her, and I don’t love her.

I always ring her up once a week, though. But that’s from a sense of duty, she’s me mother. She’s gettin’ old. I’d feel terrible, guilty, if I didn’t keep in touch and something happened to her. I do talk to her, but only about superficial things.

I don’t think I’ve actually pushed her away, but I’ve not let her in, do you understand that? You sort of build this wall up around yourself and you only let in who you want to let in. Like, you’ve got to get away from, or lock out, people you don’t trust to do well by you, look after you. I mean, you’d want to get out of their hands, quick, wouldn’t you?

Anyway, goin’ back, when me and Mary came out of the Home me brother was just there, and she, me mother, never seemed to go out after that. She stayed at home, the housewife and the mother. And as time went on all us brothers and sisters sort of bonded together and made a group. Me parents seemed to have patched it up.

I think me father only came back to get Mary and me out of the Home. He was a good Dad to all of us, and he loved all of us no matter what, and he didn’t treat me brother any different to any of us.

But I think I was me father’s favourite.
I think me mother put us in the Home because she knew that’d be the one thing that’d bring me father back. Mary thought that because she was me big sister, our mother put her in the Home wiv me to look after me. Mary was a serious little girl, and a really good girl, and she always looked out for me—we looked out for each other. I think we would’ve stayed in the Home until we grew up if me father hadn’t come back. Me mother would never have given up me younger sister or me brother. She kept them. So it wouldn’t have been them that brought me father back.

§

When you’re painting, seeing a subject from a different angle alters perspective. So if you paint the same subject from two different angles, you’ll end up with two very different paintings even though they will be both painted in your own style.

I ask myself that if Mick were to stand in his parents’ shoes and yet look at the thing from a distance and apply reasoning, if he might not, perhaps, see things from a different angle.

I throw a sudden U-turn to play the devil’s advocate.

-Mick, put yourself in your mother’s shoes—couldn’t work, no support, and you’d put your elder children in a Home because you were abandoned ... for whatever reason. Don’t you think your heart would break?

-But she caused it in the first place.

-How would you feel knowing that?

-God, that’d be terrible wouldn’t it. You’d feel so guilty knowing you’d let yourself and everyone else down. You’d know in yourself that you’d upset your family, hurt everyone badly and destroyed all their lives, and all this destruction came about because you’d let this happen under whatever circumstances. And you’d think about what led up to it, too. You’d be in terrible conflict, wouldn’t you, and if you were left alone because you were havin’ a baby to another man you’d feel like you’d been let down twice over, too.

I leave Mick with his thoughts and go to make him some raisin toast and a fresh pot of tea. I carry clean tea cups over to the breakfast bar.
-But rather than come back and patch it up, if I’d been me father I’d have taken the kids away and looked after them myself.

-How could you do that in your father’s day, do you think? As far as we know, no day-care back then, no social welfare for dads, money is tight ... 

-I get the picture. Relatives won’t or can’t help out—like happened wiv us—and you’d have to go to work and leave the kids when they need you at home. Yes, alright, for that I’d have to go back. I couldn’t see me kids in a Home, kids need their father. They need their father and their mother, don’t they? It has to be a package.

-Well they need stability, don’t they—no matter if it’s a single or a two parent family.

-I don’t think any kid should be put in a Home. It’s hard on them mentally and physically, and sort of saying to them, “I’m shoving you in here because you’re in me way.” Just like unwanted puppies—“Okay, off to the pound.” No matter what the family situation there has to a better solution.

Now, now, there’s probably better foster care here in Australia and in England than there was before, and no orphanages. But there’s still orphanages in other countries, isn’t there. I don’t think there’s an answer to that. There’s always goin’ to be people who will spill over, there’s always goin’ to be kids who are not wanted.

It’s too easy to have kids, having kids is such a fun thing to do. People don’t think of the consequences. If you had to do a university higher research degree and qualify to have kids, a lot of people wouldn’t have kids.

I believe that the world would be a better place if people were kind to each other, and treated children wiv love and kindness. What children, all children, really need most of all is to be loved, to know they’re wanted, and needed. They’ve got to be shown they’ve got some worth because I think if you’ve got no worth you’re not anybody, you’re lacking. In the Home they never showed us love or affection or kindness. We never got anything for our inner needs, for our souls, and you’ve got to receive to learn how to give, and then you’ve got to give to receive. We couldn’t do that in that harsh environment. We were too busy tryin’ to survive to care about anyone else. It was dog-eat-dog. You tried to exist.

I make a few notes in my book, and take my time before speaking.
-So Mick, getting back to your parents, perhaps they did the only thing that was possible for them to do back then—patched it up.

-Well, alright. Because of what me mother did, me parents were caught in a double-bind, and what they did was the only reasonable way out for everyone.

Now that I think on it, I remember her saying once, “Because your father left us, you kids had to go in the Home because I didn’t have any money to look after you.”

So I suppose me mother wouldn’t have put us in the Home for spite … she would’ve put us in because she couldn’t manage. Wiv me mother it was always about money. But I can see now she must’ve loved us, too—in her own way, mind.

To be fair, she did keep me brother and sister and got us all back together. But still, she caused all the trouble in the first place.

§

-How long were you in the Home, Mick?

-Well, it felt like a long time. But I asked her, me mother, once, and she said, “Oh, about nine months I suppose, that’s all.”

That’s all she said, “About nine months, that’s all.”

Yeah, that’s all.

But basically, those months in that Home changed me in a way that I lost all confidence in myself.

-So when you came out of the Home and moved to the house at Crouch End—

-The house wiv the rats in the basement. We lived there for a year or so, and then the London Council moved us into Marquis Court, a high rise building in a Council Estate. We started off in a flat on the ground floor, and then we moved up to the second floor because me mother was fed up wiv people, young fellas mainly, running in and out of the hallways and muckin’ around. We didn’t have a lift in Marquis Court, so we had to climb the stairs to get to our flat.

-Tony Parker the English writer wrote a book The People of Providence about those Council Estates and the problems for the people in the high-rise flats. Have you ever read it?

-No, but I remember Marquis Court. After we moved to Marquis Court I left Roxley School and went to Stroud Green Elementary School.
I remember when we went to Marquis Court there was this boy who used to tell me I had to do whatever he said because he was my friend. He said he was the only friend I had in the world—“If you don’t do what I say I won’t be your friend and nobody else will be your friend”—and I believed him.

I honestly thought at the time that if he wasn’t my friend, that if he didn’t like me, then no-one else would either. See, he seemed to be popular. So I did whatever he told me to do, even if I didn’t want to, because I thought if I didn’t I wouldn’t have a friend in the world. And I thought it would be the worst thing in the world not to have a friend. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like. It would be terrible not to have even one friend, wouldn’t it?

So I gave him all me lunch money and went to his house at the time he said, and I walked wiv him to school, and picked things up for him when he dropped them because he told me to, and if I did anything he didn’t like he wouldn’t talk to me.

Now I wanted to play in the courtyard of the flats where all the other kids played. But my friend said if we were to stay friends we had to play alone, out in the streets together.

There was a boy who lived at the top of the flats who wanted me to play him, and I would’ve liked that, too. But my friend said if I played wiv that boy or any other boy, he wouldn’t play wiv me that day or maybe he wouldn’t want to know me anymore.

Later on when I was a bit older I got a job as a golf caddy and got paid twelve and six for it—that was a good wage in them days, a man’s wage—and this boy, my friend, made me pay for things for him.

Now, now, when I think about that, I feel guilty, ashamed, disgusted wiv myself for being so weak and for being untrue to myself and what I knew to be right … toadying after this fellow because I didn’t want to be left friendless.

No mate, he wasn’t nasty or anything. He just dominated me. To show you how stupid it was I even now remember his birthday, the thirteenth of March, 1951. I mean, sometimes I have trouble remembering Linda’s or the kids’ birthdays and I’ve got to look in my book—and I’m ashamed of that—yet I always remember his. Why? Well I think it’s because I always had to get him something for his birthday because he said so, and I wasn’t game to forget.

I gave him my soul in exchange for “friendship” because I knew if I didn’t have a friend my world would collapse. See, mate, I didn’t have any self-confidence left at all after I came out of the Home. I
thought I was just a “nothing,” and not worthy of friendship. I was truly grateful to him for wanting me as his friend.

Mick falls quiet. I break into his pensive silence and say, -So how did you manage to break away from his influence? You did break away, didn’t you?

-Well, yes, sort of. I got to the stage where I thought the only way out of it was to fight a little bit and become a bully. So that’s what I became, and that was physically as well as mentally, and I started picking on kids bigger than myself.

Course I got a floggin’ every time. But after I got a few bashings I got a name for myself and the bigger boys called me into their group as the speaker—a speaker was the boy the group sent into another group to agitate, to say something that would stir up a fight and give them the excuse to get at it boots and all?

All the bullies used to hang around together. We weren’t wide boys. We were just hooligans, ratbags. We used to walk into school dances and start fights and everyone’d sort of walk out of our way. The aim was to swagger around and fight and get a reputation. I used to fight all the time. And probably, at the time, it saved me because I became one of the boys—and if I hadn’t done that I would’ve become a weebit—what you’d call a weakling?—because that’s the way I was headin’.

I was a street bully until I left England. I got me confidence back, and I wasn’t a “nothing” anymore—at least on the surface anyway, but inside meself I was still the scared under-confident kid I was when I came out of the Home. It was all bravado to cover up how I really felt inside. Me parents would of heard about me but they never said anything.

Mick carries his cup over to the sink, and says, -Need to stretch the legs a bit mate.

He comes back, but remains standing, and leans against my kitchen bench. He puts his hands into his pockets.
-I left school as soon as I’d done the school leaving certificate, that’s what you call it here, to come out to Australia wiv me family to look for a better life. We sailed over on a ship, The Himalayan. It took us seven weeks.

§

Saturday the twelfth of March 2011.

Mick arrives just as I finish the water-colour I’ve been working on. I hurry to pack away my painting gear and set up the tape-deck. But I fumble and drop things, and walk around in circles. I stop myself from wandering around aimlessly, and I say, -Sorry Mick, I’m all over the shop this morning.

He grins at me, and says with a wry expression on his face, -This getting at you, mate, is it?

I laugh, and say, -No, not really, just had one of my … what I call a white night—couldn’t sleep.

Almost before I have time to sit down, Mick stretches out his hand and pushes the record button on the machine.

-I wanted to tell you that before we come out here I didn’t even know where Australia was. Me parents heard about it from one of my uncles who was a merchant seaman. I was angry, really angry, that I was forced to leave England. I wanted to stay behind. Me mother and father wouldn’t hear of it. They said, “We’re a family, we stick together.”

When we arrived in Australia I swore I’d return to England as soon as I could. I was only goin’ to stay in Australia a few months. Now, I’ve been here forty-odd years, wouldn’t want to move back for quids.

Anyway, we moved to Newcastle.

For a long, long time I hated it in Newcastle, and I hated living in Australia, I felt like I’d left everything behind.

I think one of the worst things about coming out here was that I felt alone. In England I’d been one of the bully boys, true, but at least I was accepted, part of the group. I was “somebody,” a kid to be reckoned with. Out here, I was nobody, nothing, all over again, just like I’d felt in the Home.

I had terrible trouble, I didn’t know how to make friends, I didn’t know how to meet people, and I didn’t know how to talk to them. Well when I think on it now, it was just like when I went into the Home, I was too scared to talk to anyone.
I’d lost all me confidence again and I just used to come home from work and stay at home every night until it was time to go to bed. When I wasn’t at work I was in me room, and that went on for nearly twelve months. I was deeply depressed. Eventually me brother said, “Come on Mick, me mate’s brother’s in a band and he wants to meet you.”

So in the end, to shut him up, I said, “Alright, I’ll go.”

When we got there I didn’t know what to do. I just stood there like a dummy. But this bloke my brother had taken me to meet was more out-goin’ than me. Now he couldn’t read, and I couldn’t play the guitar, so he said, “You teach me to read and I’ll teach you to play the guitar.” So that’s what we did. We became mates. He was a good guy. Then I met the others in the band, they were a quiet group, but then I met their mates and some of those mates’ mates, and then things stepped up. I left the quiet group and moved into a rented house wiv five other blokes, and I got on the booze and started takin’ drugs.

Now, now I know that—same as joinin’ the bully boys—that was just me hiding from meself so I didn’t have to think about what had happened to me as a kid.

And then I got out of that scene because I joined the army.

And that’s how I straightened up.

I think that I must’ve put in for the army when Mary, me sister, died in a car accident because it was then that I made a conscious decision. I knew if I didn’t straighten up I was letting Mary down, and that would be a terrible thing to do to her. She’d stuck by me in the Home, and all those years after.

In the army I went into the medical corps. I liked the army. It was a good life, mentally and physically active and all that. I went in as a ragged-arse street bum and ended up as a registered nursing sister.

In light of your history, how did you get on when they screamed at you in the army?

Well mate, I didn’t like it one bit, brought back a few memories and made me a bit edgy. But it’s something you have to deal wiv, isn’t it? You can’t lie down and give up just because some things remind you of what’s happened in the past.

Nah, you can’t run away from your past, can you? You have to accept it. You’ve just got to take all the bad feelings and put them in a drawer and close it and get on wiv it. And you have to keep doin’ it over and over again, every time it happens.
Those feelings are part of your make-up, aren’t they—and help make you who you are, make you more determined to succeed, too, I suppose. Like anybody else, what has happened to me, and that includes my father’s and grandmother’s influence on me as well as my own make-up, makes me what I am now—

-So how would you describe yourself now, Mick?

-Oh, I think I’m balanced, more level-headed now, and more self-assured and assertive than I used to be, a bit more conscious of things that go on, more in control. I don’t mean that I feel okay wiv me all the time, sometimes I like me and sometimes I don’t. But I’m not a drunk or a drug addict now, and I’m a steady worker and I’m financially secure, and I care about Linda and me kids and me friends. I think what’s happened to me has made me a better father, I hope. Anyway, I try to be.

But I’m self-conscious, and I don’t like talking about me. I’ve never thought about who or what I am because I feel uncomfortable thinking about it deeply.

I’ve never done anything outstanding. I’m just a typical sort of Joe Blow. I’m just a husband and a father and a grandfather. I’m just me, and I’m everything that’s gone into making me and everything that’s happened to me and everything I’ve done. I’m not anything out of the ordinary, I’ve made mistakes. But since I’ve grown up I’ve tried to be a good person.

-Mick, do you think you’ll ever get to the stage where you can put your childhood experience behind you properly?

-All I can say is the whole thing has affected my life. I suffer from depression at times, and I’m always evaluating myself, like wondering if I’ve done anything wrong when something happens. And when I get tired I doubt myself, question myself, and get very self-critical.

I certainly think I would’ve reached more of my potential if I hadn’t been put in the Home. The effect the Home had on me stopped me from doing what I really wanted, and that was to become a doctor and work out in the field. At the time I had the opportunity to do that I lacked confidence. I mean, I was already a nurse, I just thought I couldn’t go that extra step up. But, to me, that’s the quarter you’re given, and that’s the way you go. What can you do?

All I know is some of us go through hell. But I don’t think things happen in life for a particular reason—like so’s you’ll end up becoming a great man or anything. Me being put in a Home, well, all I can say is it happened. I think it’s just the path that your dice has thrown, and that’s what you’ve got to wear. It’s your reality, in’it. I mean, it’s not like Oliver Twist, “Can I have another plate?”
So my reality is all I’ve got and it’s made me what I am and I figure I could be a lot worse. But wiv people like us you have to accept you’ll always have that monkey on your back. You can’t throw it off because it’ll just jump straight back on. So you’ve got to learn to try and carry it wiv dignity. It’s either that or go under, in’it.

For me, I think you’ve got to stand up and face the world and get on wiv it yourself. No-one else can do it for you. Life is like a personalised ladder, you’re the only one who can climb that ladder. Sort of like us, you and me, and like what we’re doing here right now, and in a way it goes back to that question of why are we here, doesn’t it? I don’t mean we were put here specially to do what we’re doing right now, but if these things hadn’t happened to you and me when we were kids and we hadn’t tried to climb that ladder then we wouldn’t be sittin’ here, would we.

Funny, in’it, but sometimes people’s lives run parallel. Like what happened to us in the past. I don’t mean your story is the same as mine because life’s a journey and everybody’s journey is different—and then they meet and something new, something good grows out of that. Like these talks we’ve had, they’ll help you write the book you want to write and when you write that it might help people understand others more. But I suppose it all comes to how you look at things and what sort of a person you are doesn’t it?

This is the first time I’ve ever really talked to anyone about these things. I am who I am and I don’t go round talkin’ about it. I mean, you’re the only person I know who has been in a Home … besides myself, of course. But I wouldn’t know, would I, because people who’ve had our kind of history usually don’t talk. I wouldn’t have known about you only that we were talking generally one day while we were painting and it happened to come up and you mentioned you were goin’ to write a book to go wiv your work. It’s strange how things work out, in’it.

-So, Mick, now that we’ve almost finished here, how have you been, talking about all this?

-Well, at first I was a bit dubious about talking, and now I wonder what I was worried about. But I still feel a bit uncomfortable in myself because I’m goin’ down into places I’ve never been before. We’ve all got bedrooms we don’t want to go to. We’ve all got things in the closet we don’t want to come out, and while that closet door’s closed you don’t have to look at them. But wiv people like us there’s so much crammed into the closet there’s always a danger of things falling out. But now, now I’m not scared of things suddenly falling out because I’ve looked at them.
I’m not frightened of what’s back down there in the past anymore. I know it can’t hurt me, not now, but it’s in the past and best left there.

So yes, it’s helped, definitely helped. It’s funny, in’it. It’s made me think, and helped me see things clearly.

We’re weird, aren’t we … people. We have to label things to understand what things are, and that might be half the reason why some people like us can’t get out of the past because they can’t label things? You know, “Oh, why is it like this,” and all they get told is, “Oh because that happened or this happened.”

“But why did it happen?”

“Oh because it did”—what sort of answer’s that? That doesn’t give it a label and help us understand what it is, does it. I mean, if you can’t label something then you’re not at ease wiv it because you can’t give it a meaning and put it in its place.

Look, see that pantry door over there? Say I didn’t know it was a door, or what a door was, didn’t even know the word “door,” I’d be terrified of this thing that opens, terrified to open it, terrified of where it goes or what is on the other side—it’s the unknown, the not understood—a place or space or a black hole full of terror of some sort. But once you know it’s a door and can call it by its name, and you know it for what it is and what it’s for, what it does, where it leads to and what’s on the other side, then it’s not so terrifying anymore even if you still don’t like what’s behind it.

Since we’ve been talkin’ I can put a name to things. Now I can see things because I’ve labelled them. That doesn’t mean everything’s … I mean, unexpected things can still come up suddenly and shock me back, and when that happens I’ve got to get out quick. There are still ghosts from the past, and even though you face them they’ll never go away. They’ll always be there. But now I understand what a door is, I can close it on them, can’t I?
PART III
18 October 2004

Ms Jo Parnell
bobnjo@coscom.net

Dear Ms Parnell

Institutional Care Inquiry—publication

Thank you for your submission which was forwarded by Ms Leonie Sheedy relating to the Committee’s inquiry into institutional care.

In accordance with Committee procedures, and as you have not asked for confidentiality, your submission will be authorised for publication by the Committee. This authorisation provides your submission with protection of Parliamentary privilege. Should you wish to alter the submission’s classification please contact me by email community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 3515 within 7 days.

In accordance with the forms of reference, the Committee emphasises that during its examination of the subject of children in institutional care, the Committee cannot deliberate on cases of particular individuals that are under consideration by courts, tribunals or other bodies which may grant some remedy to those individuals.

The Committee will hear the details of individual cases, but will only use these in its deliberations to build a picture of the problems of institutional life and to assist in the identification of remedies to deal with these problems. The Committee will not recommend remedies for any particular person. This is because the federal Parliament has only limited power to deal with child protection, which is primarily the responsibility of State parliaments.

The Committee may make recommendations suggesting remedies for the general problems that it identifies; however it cannot force the Commonwealth or State parliaments to adopt those remedies nor make recommendations that are binding on other jurisdictions.

The Committee reported to the Senate on 30 August 2004. A copy is loaded onto the Internet and may also be accessed at www.aph.gov.au/senate_ca. Should you prefer to receive a hard copy of the report, please advise the Secretariat by email community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au or phone 02 6277 3515.

It is the Committee’s intention to produce a second report by December 2004 that will focus on foster care and other contemporary issues of child protection and child welfare.

Yours sincerely

Elton Humphery
Secretary
Leonie Sheedy

From the age of three, Leonie Sheedy spent her entire childhood in care. She was raised in a Catholic orphanage in Victoria.

For this docu-memoir I did not interview Leonie for her personal story as a Forgotten Australian, rather as one of the two co-founders of the Care Leavers Australia Network.

Leonie Sheedy’s Story

Early February 2011. I stand in my sunny family-room and ring the Care Leaver’s Australia Network to arrange times to talk to the co-founders, Leonie Sheedy and Joanna Penglase.

I speak into the cordless phone.

-Leonie, I want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. I’ve arranged to speak with Joanna when she gets back from overseas. So, could you give me a date to talk to you?

It’s good to hear Leonie’s cheery voice again.
-How about once in early March, and once later that month? But Jo, I’ll only have about two hours each time and you’ll have to come down here to the office and talk. You see, there’s a lot going on, and at long last we’re getting our own premises.

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Monday the seventh of March 2011. My appointment with Leonie is for ten a.m., and I’m worried I’ll be late. It’s peak hour, and the Sydney roads leading south-west to Bankstown are choked. Cars sit bumper-to-bumper. A long line of almost stationary traffic stretches away off into the distance, and disappears over the horizon. My anxiety mounts, but I daren’t say anything to Bob. He’s driving, and he’s doing his best to get me there on time.

At last we arrive on the outskirts of Bankstown.

I feel a gloom descending over me as the ghosts begin to rise.

On the eve of my eighth birthday the orphanage I was in sent me off to foster care. The foster house was in East Bankstown, now Greenacre. I look around and see the names of streets from my childhood. Nothing else seems quite the same as my memories of the area.

After finishing primary school at a very young eleven years of age, I then completed my education at Bankstown Girls’ Home Science High, now Bankstown Girls’ High School. I loved school. Oh, how I loved books and learning and escaping the foster house even if only for a few short hours every school day. I fled the foster-people when I was eighteen, and swore I would never return to the places of my childhood.

But as I discovered, sometimes what you say you will or won’t do, and what you actually do, are at odds with each other, and sometimes you find that what you have to do is not at all what you would want to do ideally.

After I grew up I revisited Bankstown a number of times for various reasons. One of those times was when I graduated from the University of Western Sydney—a university college back then. To my dismay, I learnt that the graduation ceremony was to take place at Bankstown Town Hall. For me, that knowledge somehow stripped the veneer from the joy of achievement. I panicked, and said I would not attend. But in the end, I did go, and it wasn’t all bad because I was able to ignore the surrounds to a certain extent. It was winter, and the days were short. So I arrived at the graduation venue after dark and, immediately the ceremony was over I returned to my home which was many kilometres away from Bankstown.
A few years later again, I found a need to revisit those areas when I was searching for my past. I thought that if I could retrace my steps and find out where I came from, I could establish a sense of place and identity. So I went looking, and all I found was that sometimes that sense of place is the country inside yourself, and your identity is just you, it’s just who you are, and these things can’t be found in some proverbial cabbage patch.

I next went to Bankstown in 2004. I went to see Leonie Sheedy, and to my surprise learnt that I am one of those people now known as a Forgotten Australian. Not long after that, I went back to Bankstown to attend a meeting for care leavers like myself. On both of these occasions I was so involved with my own story and with listening to the stories of others that I didn’t see the area and its ghosts. Even so, I found that I desperately wanted to get away from the pathos and high emotion as quickly as possible and run to the peace and the safety of my home in the Hunter Valley of NSW.

In Bankstown, on this hot Monday in early March, Bob and I drive into Chapel Road where the head office of the care leavers’ network is situated and pass the building that was once the Christadelphian temple. There, in that mysterious place, the foster-people’s daughter, the butcher’s cousin, once threw fits and spoke in tongues, and wove her spells over my love-sick father. I glance out the car window at the chapel, and my emotional self tilts out of balance. I tell myself, “Get a grip, you have a job to do.”

We pull up outside the network’s office with time to spare. I push the memories away, back into the place where they belong, put on my professional mask, and gather my books and recording equipment from the back seat of the car.

I wave goodbye to Bob. He says, -I’ll go for a long walk and look around, and be back here about twelve to pick you up.

Laden with gear, I struggle across the footpath, walk in through the front door of the office, and look around at the chaos of moving day.

Leonie is seated behind her high-backed desk. We find room for my tape-recorder and I balance my note-book on my knee.

Through the large front window I see flashes of colour—a silk sari here, a white Muslim skull cap there, and somewhere between them a Chinese cheongsam. Fascinated, I look out at men and women of all ages, shapes, and sizes in various national costumes. The Anglo-Australian throngs that once roamed the streets of Bankstown in my childhood have now disappeared under the slippered feet of a horde of all
nations. My memories of the distant past remain, but as I gaze out upon the present day reality I wonder what it was that I was so afraid of when we drove into Bankstown this morning. But still the ghosts lurk, and despite my calm exterior, my stomach is taking it’s time to settle.

The world inside this office is mad, phones turned onto loud ring constantly, the office staff call to each other, people knock on the now locked front door and are directed to the entrance at the back of the building, and cups of tea appear as if by magic. I fight a migraine, and in between the shouted instructions and the noise of machines I ask Leonie how the care leavers’ network came about.

Leonie’s mobile phone rings. She apologises, takes the brief call, and then turns towards me.

Pointing down at the tape-machine, she says, -Is that recording now?

I nod, and she begins immediately in the confident tones of one who is well used to speaking publically. A strong woman of firm belief, she speaks from the heart.

-I suppose the beginning of things was in October 1992. I was sitting in the back room of my home reading the local newspaper and I saw an advertisement, “Children’s Home,” and it said, “Did you grow up in a Home?” The contact name was “Joanna Penglase.” I couldn’t believe that somebody was interested in us. I rang my husband at work, and he said, “Well ring them up!” I said, “Oh … no. You don’t know what they want, what they want to know about us.”

I was scared of who was this person. But at the same time I was excited. My husband encouraged me to ring. I don’t think I rang that day. Later though, I did, and Joanna explained she was doing research for her PhD. But she didn’t interview me because she was interested in NSW Home children and I’m a Victorian State Ward. I instinctively knew she wasn’t out to exploit anyone, and that she was asking about things for the right reasons, the ethical reasons. So I gave her my contact details, and that was it. But the seed of an idea was planted in my mind.

Eight years later I got a phone call from Joanna, and the first thing I said to her was, “Oh, you’re the lady from the North Shore.”

Now, we’d never met, but she told me she’d finished her degree, and she said, “Leonie, you’re the one I remember from a hundred and fifty people as the one who was saying ‘where are the support services for people like us.’” So you’re the one I’m ringing to ask if anything had changed in the intervening years.”
I said, “Well, there have been no support services given,” but at that time I had been working on my own trying to get the issues up, and I’d started a small support group for people like us.

I face Leonie across the stack of papers teetering on the edge of her desk, and while I marvel at what it is that’s stopping the pile from falling on the floor, I wonder what it is in Leonie that drove her to set up a support network for people who, like herself, had grown up in care.

-To go out on my own you mean? I’d been in a group in Victoria. But for various reasons I felt that this wasn’t a true support group, so I let it go. There were a couple of other people on the scene at the time as well. For instance, about this time there was a lot of talk about the sexual abuse of State wards in NSW Homes, and there was a Wood Royal Commission\(^1\) also took place around then? A TV show called *Witness* advertised that they were going to do a show on it. So I rang them up and said, “Look, if anybody needs support, you can give out my phone number.” One fellow did ring me, but as a Victorian State Ward in NSW I didn’t seem to fit anywhere and it struck me that there must be others in the same situation. I’d had experience running a national support group for people who had donor families, so I used my experience and started a small support group for people like us in my house.

In those initial stages we were a support group of only six, and so we could get the word out there we mailed out one of our flyers to everyone mentioned in “Connecting Kin” and “A piece of the Story.”

“Connecting Kin” is the NSW guide to records for people who were in orphanages and Homes and foster care, and “A Piece of the Story” is the national guide to records for people who were in Catholic Homes in Australia?

We got three replies. One was from a nun in the Northern Territory to say, “It wasn’t us, we only took Aboriginal children, we didn’t take white children.” It was ironic, and so disheartening.

Back then we didn’t have a name, but we were holding meetings. In essence, we had established the embryo of the support network as it is now.

I’m filled with admiration for Leonie, for her determination and drive, and sensibility. But I wonder what she means by “donor families.” I search my mind for something I might’ve heard, for some scrap of knowledge I might’ve picked up from somewhere, but I can’t find anything.
- Leonie, can you tell me about donor families?

- Donor families—children who were created through donor sperm equal embryo? My husband and I had three children from donor conception, and I wanted to tell my kids the truth and all about this, Jo. So I set up the Donor Conception Support Group² for people like me who didn’t want to live with a big secret.

Leonie sits in a relaxed pose with her arms loosely folded on the desk. Her right hand is lightly clasped over her left wrist. She looks straight ahead as if concentrating on what she is saying. I make notes about “donor families” and scribble a reminder to myself to research it on the internet. I put my pen down on my book, and look up at Leonie from where I sit on a low chair, placed almost side-on to her desk.

- So, from what you’ve just said, I take it that you feel it’s important to tell children the truth about their identity? I told my children I’d been in a Home and in foster care and that I wasn’t sure of my parentage.

- Well I feel that people like us, like you and me, actually do tell their children the truth. People like you and me wouldn’t want our children to feel they didn’t have an identity. As kids in care, we were denied an identity ourselves. I didn’t know my identity either, and I didn’t want to replicate that with my children. But I would’ve told my children about themselves regardless.

But there are others out there with a similar story to ours, who don’t tell their children because they want to hide their past, or they can’t face their own past, or they see it as their own past and not anyone else’s business, not even that of their children. Now I can’t explain that because, you know, how can you deny others what you were denied? It could be the case with some people that they just want to forget, or they want to create a new identity for themself, or even pretend to themselves that they have a different story—a fantasy that they’d had a normal life.

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- So Leonie, can you tell me more about how you established Australia’s only national network for people like us?
-Well when Joanna rang to ask if anything had happened since we’d last spoken and I said I’d been doing things on my own. I also said, “I’ve got a meeting with a lady in the NSW Community Services if you want to come along, too.”

Joanna was working full-time at Macquarie University then, and I was working at the Child-Care Centre. But she joined forces and came with me and … will I tell you that one? It’s a good a story.

This person from the Community Services met with us, and there she was … dressed up, scarf around the neck, not a hair out of place, polished … and we explained that “our network is to support people like us who’d been in care as children because we people don’t have families to turn to for support, we lost our families, we don’t have connections with family, we lost everything,” and, you know, telling her the whole sob story.

She looked at us with sad eyes and said, “Oh, yes, I know what that’s like, my children don’t … my children’s grandparents live in Italy—it’s so far away.” And I’m kicking Joanna under the table.

Joanna came back very politely and said, “Yes, Ma’am. But at least your children can ring their grandparents in Italy and write letters and receive parcels, and they know who their grandparents are.”

It didn’t seem to sink in with this person, though, and she basically said, “Come back when you’ve got the numbers.”

By this time we’d grown to twenty-two members, but that wasn’t the real issue … the numbers I mean. The truth is she didn’t want to deal with us.

Did we …? Oh, no, we didn’t get back to her—she wasn’t in that position for very long.

So after this we decided to call a public meeting for care leavers who were State Wards, Home children, and foster children. Nikki Barrowclough, the journalist from The Sydney Morning Herald, did an article on us and the public meeting we planned to hold. It was the year of the Olympics, and she kept saying that, you know, we didn’t know when it was going to be in the media. It finally appeared in The Good Weekend section on the 14th October 2000, one week before the public meeting was due to take place.

You want me to tell you about that meeting? It was Australia’s first ever national public meeting of this type. Obviously, a lot of people had read the advertisement in the paper because over three hundred people attended and they came from everywhere, and from as far away as Cairns, Melbourne, Wollongong, Newcastle, and …
What this meeting showed was that no-one knew the damage those people felt, we ourselves didn’t have that understanding of how hurt people were by their childhoods. We held the meeting at Bill Crews’ church at Ashfield. Some people couldn’t even walk into the church because they were so angry at what had been done to them as kids. Oh, some brave people did walk into the church, but a lot of them walked straight out again, and a lot of others couldn’t even walk in the gate.

SBS filmed that meeting and people couldn’t believe what they were seeing … and they just got in their cars and drove over. They were very late but they came just the same. It went on and on. People were crying, people were calling, people were yelling out, “Was anybody in Bidura, was anybody in this Home or that Home,” you know, trying to find some sort of a connection.

At this meeting all the members of our group pitched in and took down people’s names and addresses, and after the meeting we sent them out information. So our network grew and grew from that day on.

The most membership we had in the first ten year period was about 1040, but that’s with past providers and government agencies and members as well, and we lose about two hundred members every June. That loss happens for a whole lot of reasons. Like, either it’s not what some people want or the newsletters are too sad for them, or they’ve moved on, or they don’t like paying the $10 membership fee, and then there’s natural attrition.

-I read in the Senate Inquiry reports that there were over five hundred thousand Forgotten Australians, children in out of home care in Australia in the twentieth century.

-Yes, well, we’re an aging group, and I think the government hopes we’ll just all die out and all this will die a natural death, and we do die. But we know from Joanna’s work and from what we’ve been told by the different people that there must still be thousands and thousands out there who haven’t come forward, and might never come forward for some reason or other.

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It’s so hot. Trickles of perspiration run between my shoulder blades. The glass front door of the office which normally stands open for breeze is tightly latched. Around me, volunteers pack boxes and carry them out to their vehicles for the short drive up the road to the new premises.
Leonie goes to the back of the office to take an urgent phone call. I stay seated and turn my head and look out at the street. Shoppers thread their way along the footpath where groups of men stand and talk, or sit at tables and huddle over hookahs or some form of chequers. Even though the office is closed up, I can clearly hear what the man who is standing outside the window with his back towards me is saying to his friend. But I can’t understand the words because he speaks in a tongue other than English. He’s waving his hands around in earnest, and I wonder if he is, perhaps, discussing some political issue, or sorting the intricacies of a family matter. Suddenly it strikes me that, as a metaphor, this scene before me and which is so strange to my understanding because it’s new to my experience, could translate to that of the Forgotten Australians. I ask myself, “Is this something of what it seems like for people when they first hear about the older care leavers and a history they never before knew existed?”

Leonie returns to her seat behind her desk, and says, “Now, where were we?”

I grasp the opportunity to dig a little deeper into Leonie’s personal involvement in the venture.

“We were talking about the history of Australia’s only national support group for older care leavers. Can we talk about your struggle to get the word out there and achieve some form of understanding?”

She glances over at me and, shaking her head slowly, she says, “It was, is, hard. I use everything I can.

“Leonie, you’ve got some powerful names you’ve drawn on, still draw on—

“Well, after the Ashfield meeting, Wayne Chamley from a group called “Broken Rites” told us about the Child Migrant Inquiry that was going on, and he said, “You’ve got to get your members to write their stories.” So we did that, and we put in a submission—“Hellooo, we were in the same orphanages as the Child Migrants,” you know, the British Boat Children.

Our submission was sent to Senator Andrew Murray who was on that committee, and he said, “The committee didn’t know this history, they didn’t know about all these children.” They only thought Stolen Generations and Child Migrants.

So then Joanna and I met with Andrew Murray in Sydney—there’s a photograph up on the website … I look very young there, Joanna does too, she’s got black hair—and he said to us, “We’re going to have to work very, very hard to get an Inquiry for your people,” you know, care leavers, and he said, “I’ll work from the political end, and you do the lobbying.”
I didn’t know how to lobby, so all during this time I used to come home from my job at the child-
care centre, and get straight on the blower and ear-bash people.\textsuperscript{3}

It took a long, hard battle, but we eventually got our Inquiry, and it was at this event that the
Senators started to cry … if you remember that news coverage?

Back then, we weren’t called the Forgotten Australians. The term came out with the Senate Inquiry
in 2004-2005. Up until then there was no such language or labelling. I know that language is important. I
didn’t mind the term “Forgotten Australians” at the time but now I’d like something more positive for us
care leavers—that’s my thoughts, anyway.

I give it some thought, and I say, -I prefer Forgotten Australians because I don’t know that we’ve
truly been remembered.

Leonie nods slowly, and says, -Everyone’s different. Some of our people don’t like the term “care
leavers” because they don’t feel they were cared for.

From where I sit, I look at Leonie’s face in three-quarter profile and say that to me, the term “care
leavers” seems a natural term or label, a foregone conclusion, just a part of our language, and I say, -Like, a
“retiree” is a retiree, and a “care leaver” is a care leaver?

Leonie turns to face me, and says, -No, in relation to our support network name, not a natural in that
sense.

-We couldn’t call ourselves State Wards because there were all those other people who had been in
care as children who weren’t State wards and they would feel excluded … and I thought there must be lots of
people who didn’t reside in the state in which they were raised, and like me, wanted to feel they belonged
somewhere.

That’s right. I haven’t told you the full story. In 2000 I was listening to a British psychologist on
ABC radio, and she was talking about a group that had started in England for people who had been in
orphanages.

I rang the ABC and said, “I’d like to speak to that lady,” and she gave me the contact details for the
UK group, the Care Leavers Association (CLA), who were starting up that same year. Our support network
didn’t have a name, so at a meeting with Joanna I said, “Why don’t we call ourselves the same sort of thing,
Care Leavers Network of Australia?” So CLNA was the first acronym we had, and at one of our group meetings one of the fellows said, “Why don’t you change that around and call it Care Leavers Australia Network—and it will be CLAN the Gaelic word for ‘Family.’” And that was in 2000.

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-So you had your Senate Inquiry, and ...

-Do you want to know more about how people found out about us? Well, I’d been annoying the ABC for ages, and I did research on the Four Corners programs and found that a lot of their stories were on things and places outside Australia? And I got a piece of paper, Jo, and I categorised their stories and found they had two programs on the justice system in America, but none on the Anglo-Celtic children in care in twentieth century Australia.

I wrote to the Chair and said, “I thought your charter was that you did stories that affect Australians,” and they said they did a program on the value of milk in Australia.

I said, “And I bet the viewer figures for that were riveting.”

They didn’t get back to me after that. Oh, ah, I was angry and they probably wouldn’t have wanted to have deal with me.

Anyway, there were other people calling for a program on Four Corners. There were a lot of men who, as children, had been in Salvation Army Homes in Queensland? So the ABC finally agreed to do a story on that, and our committee helped them with research and they didn’t even give us a place in the show. So Joanna rang them, and they offered us a chance to be on the panel at the end of the show. They put us on at the end of this “Homie” show, but they didn’t say about the Anglo-Celtic children who’d been in care in Australia in the twentieth century.

-They didn’t?

Leonie shakes her head. -No. They just added a quick, one sentence (a mere mention on the sideline) about the Inquiry.

-Now a lot of people who were in Homes when they were kids don’t watch the ABC. Why? Well because a lot of them missed out on the education that people who weren’t in Homes got, so they don’t want
high-brow stuff, they want light relief. But some did watch the show because when we watched the show at my home that night the phones went hot. People used the phone because most of us Homies prefer to actually speak to people, and, besides, a lot of Homies didn’t have internet, and a lot wouldn’t have known how to use it anyway.

So through that show on *Four Corners*, we managed to get the message out to other care leavers that someone was there for them.

Then after this the Senate travelled around the States.

-Leonie, when you say the Senate travelled around the States, I take it you’re talking about the *second Inquiry* now?

-You mean the second round, the review of the Forgotten Australians, that one? Well, the first Inquiry didn’t really close. We just kept asking the Senate to extend it, to keep it open for people to come forward. We had good people on the Inquiry. They cared about that Inquiry and wanted to keep it open for people to be able to tell their stories.

-Leonie, I must admit that I couldn’t have actually come forward and told my story at the Senate hearing. With me, I didn’t want to rake it all up. I was dead scared that if anyone got to know about me it would change everything and destroy my life … the life I’d built, and my happiness.

-Well some people have to be drunk to ring you up, and people have told me that …“I had to have a few wines first.”

Seriously, there’s a lot of pain … shame and stigma, to growing up in an orphanage or in care—- “And what are my friends and family going to do, are they going to reject me once they find out I grew up in an orphanage?” When you disclose, all the feelings and insecurities and doubts rise to the surface.

But some brave people did come forward and tell their stories at the hearing. Remember you told me the first time we met that you’d read about that in the paper?

I sit with my note-book open on my knee and listen to Leonie, and I say, -I still have the clipping.

I distinctly remember Wednesday February 4th 2004. It was a perfect summer’s day. The blue sky was cloudless and the light breeze carried the scent of hay grass from the farm across the river. My husband walked in the back door, placed the *Daily Telegraph* down on the kitchen bench, positioned it precisely, and said, -Jo. Have you seen this?
A frisson of fear ran through me. There’d been talk in the news lately—about things I didn’t want to hear. I knew instinctively that “this” would upset my world.

Without glancing down, I said, -Why, what am I supposed to see?

My husband tapped the paper.

-Page thirteen.

I said, -What is this Bob …? Oh, No!

**Innocence Betrayed:** … the courage of the now adults who yesterday shared their experiences in the NSW institutions from the 1920s to the 1970s, with the Senate Inquiry into children in institutional care… Dr Joanna Penglase, president of CLAN (Care Leavers Australia Network) believes more than 100,000 people make up a ‘lost generation’, many permanently scarred by their experiences in care.

Bob pushed the phone into my hand. -Call this number in the paper and tell them about yourself.

I didn’t, I couldn’t, I felt I’d been turned to block of ice. But three days later I did ring, and on Saturday the seventeenth February 2004 I went to Bankstown and spoke with Leonie and told her my story.

A few months later, even though it was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever made myself do, at Leonie’s urging I sat down at my computer and wrote my submission for the second round of the Senate Inquiry into institutionalised and out of home care for children in twentieth century Australia. In the March 2005 written reports that arose from that Senate Inquiry, I’m submission number 474.

-So, getting back to the Senate Inquiry hearing, Peter Quinn also came forward. Have you read Peter Quinn’s thesis? He was a NSW Child Welfare officer and did his thesis on the NSW Child Welfare system. He wasn’t ever in a Home, he wasn’t in care, he was employed by the NSW Department of Child Welfare, but he made an appearance and he said basically that, “In those days, you could do what you liked to a kid in care as long as you didn’t get caught … and not one public servant had ever been charged with assaulting a child. They were either moved on or given the option of leaving.”

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Monday the twenty-third of March, 2011. Another fine humid day, there’s no relief from the heat. I return to Bankstown for an early appointment, and go to the new headquarters of the care leavers’ support network.

As I step out of the car it hits me that I seem to have gained inner strength. Coming here doesn’t seem to bother me as it had on my visit two weeks prior. I don’t feel threatened, and I don’t want to run and hide. But I still don’t like the memories, I still don’t like Bankstown, and I realise that at the end of this day I’ll happily turn away and go home to the Hunter Valley.

The network’s new home is a shabbily genteel two-storey cement stucco house built in the art deco style. Like the old office, it’s in Chapel Road. But it’s not as far down the street as the former premises, and it’s out of the way of the shopping precinct and the crowded footpaths.

Leonie is in her new office taking a phone call. I’m directed to the airy kitchen. While I wait for Leonie, I set up my tape-machine on the table and sit down in front of the fan.

Leonie comes into the room and I say, -This is quite a move from the old office.

-Well, I didn’t want to leave our little old office—the fox-hole down the street from here. But I realised we had to move because the rent was going up and we couldn’t afford it any longer. Our office manager found this new house for us on the internet. Now it’s not the Ritz, but it’s not the pits either. We call it “The White House.”

How we got the finances to make this move … do you want to know all that? When Prime Minister Rudd eventually issued his Apology to us he said there would be some money for CLAN. AFA, a national advocacy, got equal funding at that same time. The funding agreement runs out this coming June, 2011, but we’ve budgeted well and tried to save wherever we can—

I see an opening to ask how the Apology came about, and clear up what is, for me, a mystery. Quickly, I draw my chair closer to the table, grab my pen, and flip my note-book open.

-And that brings us around to the matter of recognition in the public arena for what we went through and for how it’s affected our lives?

- Well, how it all came about was … the sitting Member for this area was retiring and a young bloke was standing for pre-selection. I thought, “I’m going to go and meet him.” I rang up and made an
appointment, and when we met I said, “We want a NSW enquiry, and we want the recommendations for an Apology taken up from the Senate Inquiry Report,” and he basically … well, I had tears in my eyes, telling him the story, and he had tears in his eyes listening to it, you know. Anyway, we became good friends, and he became a champion of our cause. So I became a member of the Labour party and our branch, the Georges Hall Branch, passed a motion to Jenny Macklin. And when Labour got in, they said you know, we should say “Sorry.”

At the same time that this young bloke was going for pre-selection, Richard Marles, the brother of my friend from the Donor Conception Support Group, was going for pre-selection for Corio down in Geelong, my home town. I used to ring Richard up and annoy the living daylights out of him, and one day he offered to be the patron of our care leavers’ support network. Richard Marles said he would do whatever he could to get the recommendations implemented.

But it was a long struggle to get that National Apology. They weren’t going to do it, for various reasons they weren’t going to do it. But as you know, in the end we finally got our Apology—and that happened more than a year and a half after the Stolen Generations got theirs. The Stolen Generations got their National Apology, their “Sorry” day, on the thirteenth of February 2008, and we Forgotten Australians got our National Apology on the sixteenth of November 2009? Rudd included the former Child Migrants in our Apology.

“Yes, and the Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull gave his National Apology at the same time. Then after Rudd apologised the British Prime Minister Anthony Brown came forward and made his Apology to the British Child Migrants.”

Leonie is there one particular moment you think about more than any other?

-Yes. I think the day that Richard Marles rang and told me that the Prime Minister was going to issue us Forgotten Australians with a National Apology. When he first told me the news Richard cried, but I didn’t, I just couldn’t believe we’d achieved it. I was overwhelmed.

I heard Richard and I went, “You’re not joking? That’s blooming fantastic!”

I wanted to race around and tell everyone.

Then Richard told me that I couldn’t tell anybody and I said, “But can’t I tell Joanna?”

In the end he agreed to me telling Joanna, and we hugged each other and laughed and cried and danced around and screamed, “We did it!”
Leonie’s face lights up.

I lean towards her and say earnestly, "Leonie, that National Apology made a lot of people like us feel that we can at last come out and tell our stories, and be believed instead of being labelled as liars. But the Government of the time got all the kudos for that Apology.

-You know, Jo, I’d been asking for a National Apology for a long, long time. But then when it finally looked like it was going to be given, Richard Marles rang to tell me it wasn’t going to be Prime Minister Rudd who apologised, it was going to be Jenny Macklin instead, and I exploded and told Richard, “Definitely NO.” So when he rang back later on and told me the Prime Minister was going to do it after all, I probably got very emotional and teary.

I fiddle with my pen and think about how I’m going to voice the next question without seeming too negative, a Doubting Thomas. I can’t seem to find a way around it, so I ask Leonie outright.

-Leonie, a lot of people think, and I’ll admit I’m one, that because we’ve now had our Inquiries … many thanks to you, and because we’ve now had our National Apology … again, many thanks, that in the main, it’s considered to be all done and dusted?

-Oh, I think there’s definitely a blockage. People feel, “Yes, you’ve had the Inquiries and now you’ve got the National Apology, that’s the end of it,” but it’s not, it’s really only the beginning.

Like you and I have found, people know about the Child Migrants and the Stolen Generations and the Unwed Mothers, but they still don’t know about us—The Forgotten Australians. So wherever I go I try to educate and create awareness of our issues. Every antique shop I go to, every Op shop, I spread the word, and every taxi driver in Australia gets one of our network’s flyers because I take the attitude that, “You’re a tax payer just like me, and you need to know where your taxes are going because those taxes are propping up all of us care leavers who might happen to be in drug and alcohol programs and in the goals and, you know, the mental programs because of what happened to us in care.”

Most people don’t know this history. Only last week when I was in Canberra one bloke said he knew that the Prime Minister had said “Sorry” to the British Child Migrants but not us. And there was another
bloke who said he didn’t know that the government had apologised, but he said he knew a Homie who was in Vietnam with him, and he told me this amazing story. So there are a lot of people out there who do know of people who have grown up in Homes, but they don’t take it all in and think about it until you bring it to their notice.

Mick Riley pops into my mind and I wonder at how, even though Mick and I have been friends for many years, neither of us even suspected that the other had been in an orphanage as a child. Later, when we discovered the truth about each other’s childhoods, I mentioned the National Apology to Mick, and he had said, -That was the Apology to the Child Migrants, wasn’t it?

-Leonie, does it ever give you a shock to discover that some people you’ve known for yonks but have never suspected … like, it could be the woman next door or one of your close friends or a work colleague, are actually Homies?

-Yes, sometimes. Now you can’t altogether categorise a person, but a lot of times I can sort of actually pick a female Homie. They usually look old before their time and have long hair, and there’s just something about them, something in their eyes, a deep sadness. Men have that sadness, too. But it’s harder to pick men because a lot of them wear their hair short.

-Long hair?

-Yes. The long hair gives them away because when we were little girls none of us had hair in the Homes, they cut it all off. So we hang on fiercely to our long hair. Even I had long hair until about four years ago. What, you too? I don’t think I would have picked you. But generally you just have to look at an Anglo-Celtic person. If they have that air of a deep, peculiar sort of sadness about them … well, I’d put my money on it.

How, I wonder, would anyone have picked Mick? With the sudden knowledge of after-sight, I realise that Mick has that deep, peculiar sadness in his eyes. I first noticed it the day I first met him. How did I overlook that?
The front-door bell rings. It has rung on and off all morning.

I say to Leonie, -It’s peaceful here in this new place, but it’s busy. You get a lot of people coming in, don’t you?

-Oh, not so many at the moment, we’ve only just finished moving. We call that door-bell thing our “ghost,” but it must be the wind sets it off, or something. But all this space and peace is great. We don’t know ourselves

Thoughtfully, I say, -Leonie, that reminds me of what I wanted to ask.

-When you’re dealing with car leavers you have a sort of peaceful, assured air that I see as being born from your sense of purpose, but ... and don’t get me wrong here, you also have another side, you have an intensity—

-Well, I think I used to get very upset when people talked only about the Stolen Generations and the Child Migrants and never mentioned us. No, more than that. I’d say I’d get really quite angry and I’d have this sense of injustice, you know—“Excuse me it happened to us as well.” I always say, “We all deserve mention.”

There’s work to be done in this country so that there’s a balance that shows the Australian Aboriginal history in child welfare and the Anglo-Celtic Australian history in child welfare and the Child Migrant history in Australia, and acknowledges that all three groups sat side-by-side in the same orphanages and the same foster homes. We’re all Australians, so we’re all actually related to each other really. We were all children of Australia, and we all suffered the same humiliations and abuses and sense of displacement, and our histories should sit together in the curriculum, side-by-side where they actually were.

I think that as a nation Australia must acknowledge all our children.

-At home, I have an early 1950s Australian history text book aimed at primary school students, and oh boy, it’s unbelievable what they taught us back then ... no mention of us, no mention of the Stolen Generations other than to pump “assimilation,” and a highly romanticised version of the so-called Child Migrants, and lots of wealth riding on the sheep’s back!

-Well it’s been that way. But slowly, very slowly, people are beginning to learn about what really happened to our Indigenous Australians. The truth has been slow to come out because they’ve been treated as the under-dog and because what happened to them was shameful, but it’s time now for our history to
come out. The Australia of the twentieth century wasn’t the land of milk and honey for poor children, you know, it wasn’t wonderful for the Australian Aboriginal children who were taken away from their families, and it wasn’t wonderful for us Anglo-Celtic Australian children who were abandoned by our families and sent into care, either. We Anglo-Celtic Australian children weren’t privileged, we weren’t rich or advantaged in any way, and we were unwanted by our own society.

I think this country is based on sadness really, the things we did to our people and our children, and that has passed on down the generations. The Aboriginals lost their country and their families were broken up and lost to them, and that was sad for them and their children and their children’s children. The first Anglo-Celtics to come to Australia were mostly transported convicts, and others were exiled by their family, and they lost their country and their families were broken up and lost to them, and that was sad for them and their children and their children’s children. From the very beginning terrible things happened to both sides, and both sides suffered displacement. And later, terrible things happened to children from both sides in care.

To me, it doesn’t matter how you arrived here or what your heritage is, we all were children who suffered at the hands of the system in Australia, we all suffered the same things—the abuse, the lack of care and nurturing, the loss of identity and our individuality, the loss of our family and parents, the dehumanisation, the sense of displacement, and, you know, the run-off from all those things. I don’t see that race has to come into it at all, you know, it frustrates me that angle of stuff. I just couldn’t, and still can’t, believe the injustices of it all.

“So is this where your drive came from, do you think”

You know, I can say my drive came from becoming aware of injustice. And it came from seeing cruelty, and from being badly treated by the nuns.

One thing, I was a wetter. I suffered double the humiliation that children who do that usually feel. In the Home you suffered terrible humiliation and abuse and shame if you wet the bed but I also wet my pants during the day and … oh, that was added on to your humiliation and, oh, it was terrible.

Another thing, I saw how other children were treated. I think witnessing, being a witness to abuse, is just as traumatic as it happening to you. You feel so helpless and hopeless. I don’t think we talk enough about the effects of the witnessing of abuse. It can’t be stressed enough just how terrible witnessing is, how badly the act of witnessing affects a person—in a way it’s probably even more traumatic than suffering the actual thing.
One time in the Home we had a little girl with leukaemia. The nuns were doing the right thing; they were taking her to Melbourne to have treatment. But she’d come back so pale, and with her glands so swollen that she could barely swallow. Anyway, as happened to all of us if we didn’t eat our meal in the allotted time, she was made to stand in the corner and finish her food. I was about eleven at the time, and I went up to her, and said, “Listen, if any of the nuns ask you if you swallowed your food, you tell them you did … now spit it out in this towel and go outside and play and don’t tell anybody about this.”

At the time, I thought I was helping her. Looking back, I can see that I probably wasn’t. I can also see that I did what I did as the result of witnessing the injustice of her being made to stand in the corner and eat all her food. She was so very sick.

And oh, just reading about injustice.

In the Home, the only time you got access to reading material was if you were chosen by the nuns to pick up the newspaper from the driveway. Oh, being chosen to get the newspaper was so wonderful, and oh, just being able to snatch those couple of minutes, walking up the driveway slowly so you could read the paper. Sometimes the nuns would cut out newspaper clippings on interesting things and put them in these shadow boxes\(^8\) that hung in the hall. Those clippings would be left there for bloody months and months and years and never changed. But that was at least something to read, you know.

The orphanage would sometimes send me on a holiday. Where? Well I went to a series of people, hosts, to work for them. I remember that on one holiday I went to live with a family who taught me a love of reading because they only had limited television coverage and the reception was all foggy. Were they good to me? Oh, at the orphanage Reverend Mother told me they needed help with meals and cleaning, and I’d be paid a wage. But when I got there these people said, “No, we’re going to treat you as a member of the family because we like you,” and so I did the work but I didn’t get paid.

So same old story, a lot of people took foster children and holiday-hosted kids from Homes because it was a cheap form of labour. It was slavery.

I was twelve when I was sent to Hamilton, Victoria, on holidays with a spinster lady, and read in a newspaper about Ronald Ryan. He was hung—murdered by the State, and I felt such an outrage that somebody should kill another man, that the State should do that.

My pen slips from my fingers and falls to floor with a clatter.
-But Leonie, Ronald Ryan was a cold-blooded murderer!

-Jo, Ronald Ryan was a murderer, yes, and he was also actually a Homie. As a child, he was put first into Rupertswood at Sunbury in Victoria. I didn’t find that out until later, so why did I feel a connection to that bloke … was it my sense of social justice?

-But does the fact that he was a Homie excuse him his cold-blooded murderous actions?

-Well, there’s very, very few of us like Ronald Ryan, it’s true. But it’s a fact that what was done to kids in care back then could turn some kids’ minds. Have you seen the website article on the Tamworth Boys’ Home in NSW, “Getting screwed at school”?

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We sit in the breeze from the fan. Leonie says she didn’t have time for breakfast that morning. She says that with the heat and her hunger she feels as if she might faint if she doesn’t eat soon.

She asks how I’m holding, if I’m hungry, and I say I’m okay and will wait until we’ve finished talking and have lunch with Bob.

-Would you like a cup of coffee?

I say, -Thanks, I don’t drink coffee, but I’d sure welcome a cup of tea.

While Leonie eats her toasted sandwich and drinks her coffee, I sip at my tea. We sit quietly with the fan clanking away behind us.

My thoughts turn to Geoff Steele and Barbara Walters-Smith. Even though he was middle-aged by the time he discovered the truth about himself, Geoff feels he is lucky to have found his natural family. Barbara is not so lucky. She didn’t find all her siblings and it didn’t work out with those two siblings she did find. It seems unlikely that she’ll ever find them now, and, moreover, she doesn’t want to find them now for fear of the hurt she might suffer as a result.

I don’t say any of this to Leonie. Instead, I see the opportunity to gain distance and perspective by getting someone else’s view on those aspects of care leavers.
-Leonie, what’s your take on the effects of displacement on people who were in care as children—
I’m thinking about how they were ripped from their families and how in many cases their siblings were lost to them.

-Well for those of us who did go looking for our families it was so difficult, almost impossible to discover anything because there was no support …

Oh, I forgot to tell you Jo, that that’s where a lot of my passion came from because I used to be so pissed off that there weren’t any support services for us to help find our families.

In 1994 I was turning forty and my husband was going to give me my first ever birthday party, so we started planning for it in 1993 and that’s when I went looking for my youngest brother and found there was no help or support to do that. So I employed a private investigator. As well, I paid for ads, I went to the Salvation Army, I went to the NSW Missing Persons, and I went to the Victorian Missing Persons. I went to the Victorian Police, I went to the Christian Brothers, and I went everywhere.

I was so hurt and upset and angry that there was no help from the authorities for us to find our families when those same authorities had separated us, and put us in Homes. And they didn’t care about us when we left those places. We were left to struggle with those issues. So there I was left on my own trying to find my youngest brother … and my other sisters who didn’t want contact and, you know, they don’t have contact now.

My thoughts fly to my own experience. My siblings and I were placed in care and separated. Now, in adulthood, my brother and I are close as siblings and associate as family, but my sister has refused to acknowledge either of us. So she’s lost to us for all time, and that’s the way she wants it. But it’s a direct result of having being pulled apart nevertheless. It’s our legacy of having been in care.

-Leonie, it seems to be fairly common with people like us that one or two of our brothers or sisters reject us, their siblings. In a way, that’s our heritage. We’re truly broken families.

-Jo, I think that our presence, the knowledge of us, brings up their memories. I think we’re a reminder to them—those brothers or sisters who reject us—of a past they want to forget, or they feel ashamed of everything even though it’s not their fault any more than it’s ours, you know … and if they see us then they have to confront their own life stories. So they want to keep us at a distance, and really, you
know, they’re going to end up as little old ladies and little old men in nursing homes and they’re going to be the difficult ones, aren’t they, because they’ll be suffering from depression?

Barbara Walters-Smith pops into my mind again, and I say, -Yes, depression. But that works both ways, doesn’t it? I mean, the other side of the coin is that even some of those people who do want to find their families and can’t, seem to suffer from depression because of that fact.

-And why is it, do you think, that so many care leavers have this intense anger and this depressed awful feeling where they can’t seem to move on ... I mean, that doesn’t apply to all of us of course—like, you’ve moved on, and I’ve moved on, and I’ve bumped into a couple of others ...

-Well Jo, I think it’s that some of them haven’t been helped? Some of them haven’t got the skills because some of them haven’t had love in their hearts. I mean, you and I have been lucky, we’ve married decent men who love and care about us and we’ve learnt to love and care in return, and we’ve learnt to care about ourselves. We might still be works in progress, but basically those people loving you and caring about you does help to heal you. I know that without that help and support I couldn’t bear up and do this job with all this sadness, all this anger coming in and surrounding me, all these sad stories from these people who need somebody calm and understanding to sit there and listen.

It’s a heavy load this job … it’s not easy, but I wouldn’t not be there for our people. I don’t care what country you grew up in, I don’t care what colour your skin is, and I don’t give a rat’s fig. If you grew up in care and want some help to deal with your life I’ll do my best to help you. But I don’t have all the answers and I’ve never said that I did.

You know, what we went through either makes you a fighter or it makes everything all too hard. With me, you don’t even need the ropes and bell, I come out fighting and jump straight into the ring and I’m off and away. I get so frustrated with myself … “Why do I always have to come out fighting?”

But I think that some of us fight in the wrong way—like, we fight authority and we try to fight the system, but we make it difficult for ourselves and others because some of us are so angry, and nobody listens to angry people, they just get switched off.

So what’s the way around this, what do you do with this anger so that it can benefit yourself and others? I suppose you could channel that anger into advocacy as long as you don’t contaminate others with
your anger and send the wrong message about care leavers. But there are very few people amongst us who could advocate because we’ve been downtrodden and we didn’t learn those social skills and niceties, you know, even me. And it’s only through trial and error that I’ve learnt these things.

-**Leonie, let’s backtrack a little. Do you think all care leavers are works in progress?**

-I think everybody on this earth, every single person, is a work in progress. But I think that people like us, people who’ve been in care as kids, just have a few more issues to deal with than most other people who were never in Homes, you know?

I say, -But I wonder if that’s altogether the case. I mean, it seems to me that, generally speaking, society has its fair share of screwed people—people who were never in care as kids, and who grew up in “normal homes.”

Leonie draws a deep breath, and sighs wistfully.

-Yes, but the Homes, being in care, did leave us with extra issues to deal with and partly because nobody gave us love. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be born into a normal family with a mum and dad and raised to adulthood as a member of a good–enough family, and just live a normal life.

Can I ask you something, have you ever been given a birthday party, Jo?

Her question comes out of the blue and catches me by surprise. Puzzled as to where she’s coming from, I don’t answer immediately. I just sit and look at her dumbly, and wonder why she’s asking such a thing, and about where it might lead. For some reason, I feel a little winded and I answer warily.

-**Yes, one when I was two... and I had one as an adult, I threw it for myself, why?**

-Throwing yourself a birthday party isn’t the same thing as being *given* one, Jo. That would be a good question to ask care leavers. You know, my son said to me one day, “Have you ever sat down to the table with all your brothers and sisters, Mum?”

Well, no, at that stage I hadn’t, and no-one, not one person, had ever asked me that before. I hadn’t really thought about it before he asked me that.
But what would that be like, to be someone who, as a child, was loved and nurtured and given a birthday party, what would it be like to have grown up with brothers and sisters, what would that be like to know where you belong in the world, and what would it be like to have your parents there with you as you grew up? Wouldn’t that be nice to have been a child like that?

- Leonie, I remember when I first came to see you in 2004, and one of the things I told you was that as a child I’d been belted and belted, and my husband broke in and said, “Oh, but when I was a child I was belted too.” And you turned to him and asked, “Where did you grow up, Bob?” And he said, “Oh, at home with my Mum and Dad.” You said, “Did they love you?” And he said, “Yes, very much.” Then you said, “So Bob, you had what we didn’t; you had both sides of the coin.”

- Well, Jo, it was his Mum belted him? So when she got over her anger she would’ve given him a cuddle or told him that she loved him. So he knew she loved him regardless. But the children in Homes—people like us—when they got belted there was no balance. When the angry nun or the angry worker got over her anger, she didn’t give you a cuddle and make you feel better about yourself.

Bob knew where his mother was coming from and why she was doing it. Well we had strangers doing that to us, and sometimes we’d actually come from that sort of abusive family—not all of us, but a large number of us—and we were told that we were going to a better childhood where we’d be looked after, and then we copped it. We went from the frying pan into the fire as many Homies state. Unlike those people who grow up in loving families we didn’t know what we were getting into trouble for, we didn’t know what we we’d done wrong, and we had nobody to say, “You did the wrong thing but it’s okay, I still love you and I’m sorry I lost my temper with you.”

People who were children like Bob didn’t wake up every day living with the fear that his mother was going to come in and belt into him. We woke up with that fear every day. It was the fear of doing the wrong thing, or somebody else doing the wrong thing. It was, “What do I have to do to be good here.” Or, “What do I have to do to avoid being hurt?”

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Leonie is called away to take another phone call, and while I wait, I take a trip to one of the downstairs’ toilets.
I wash my hands and make my way through this maze of a house towards the kitchen, and get lost. Somehow, I find myself in the large front room that’s been designated as a museum and I stand, unwilling, riveted in front of a collection of items salvaged from various twentieth century Children’s Homes in Australia.

These items in front of me are tangible. I could, if I wanted, reach out and touch them. I feel a shudder run through me for their presence is a little too close, their smallness and detail demand the viewer’s focus, and the whole thing is too real, too actual, for my comfort. Suddenly I’m swamped by memories and feelings that I have no wish to indulge.

Twentieth century Children’s Homes items held in the Care Leavers Australia Network headquarters in Bankstown

Photos by author: taken 23-3-2011, for use in this work.
Quickly, I turn away and return to the kitchen. I take with me new insight about myself. I now know that I would never willingly visit a museum dedicated to care leavers. For me, to do so would be self-punishment.

Leonie is sitting in her chair at the end of the kitchen table, waiting to start the tape-deck and resume our conversation.

*I suppose Leonie, it’s been made apparent in many Homies, that the trauma we care leavers went through as children did cause emotional damage. But I also suppose that the ways in which that damage may manifest itself in us as adults, and that the degree to which we may be affected, depends much on our personality and what has happened in our lives since. Of course, not all of us sustain emotional damage from childhood, some of us—as humans go—have found an even keel.*

As I speak, my mind goes to my brother.

He has dreadful nightmares. Like a First World War soldier with a severe case of shell-shock he screams and screams in his sleep.

My brother also rebuilds everything he gets his hands on. He says he wants to make things stronger so that they remain in good working order and will last.

I can see him now. There he is, lying in his driveway on his back, under his brand new car, examining the universal joints and axles. I hear the frustration in his muffled voice.

-“Look at this heap of shit. It’ll have to be put right before someone gets hurt. I’ll just pull it apart and rebuild.

Sometimes I wonder if this rebuilding urge of his is, in fact, a subconscious attempt to reach into the past and rewrite our lives. Our parents’ disintegrating marriage resulted in us children being abandoned into care.

The trouble is, though, you can’t put the past right, or right past wrongs. The past is not an actual car, one that is real and present, but one that is metaphysical. The past travels away from you whether you want it to or not, and slips into the shifting mists of time. The only way you can approximate the past is fleetingly as memories, or symbolically in writing or sketching.
I come back from my thought-gazing and look at Leonie. She appears to be thinking deeply, and takes her time before speaking.

-Jo, I went to a reunion about fifteen, twenty years ago, and this girl said to me, “Oh, I remember you Leonie, don’t you remember you used to wet your pants and no-one would sit beside you, and you’d be sitting on the seat all by yourself?”

Now I have big gaps in my memory of my childhood, and I had no memory of that, or her, and I still have no memory of that. But, oh, I was so humiliated. But I don’t think she meant me harm. It just sort of came out naturally like conversation. But I think what that woman did shows there’s a lack of real empathy amongst some of the care leavers. And I think, you know, it’s because we weren’t taught empathy, we didn’t learn the skills, and we didn’t learn the social niceties either. We had to look out for ourselves because no-one else did, you know? Like, if you showed you’d seen whatever happened to some-one else and sympathised with them, it was sort of humiliating to them and, you know, you were frightened you’d get a bit of the same yourself.

I’ve also noticed there’s a small element of jealousy amongst some of the care leavers. Some of us feel our story is the worst ever and we try to tell everyone that ours is the worst?

One day when I was in Melbourne I met a woman who had been reared in an orphanage, and she said to me, “Leonie, tell them, tell them that mine was the worst one.”

I said, “Well really, they were all bad, they were all bad for children,” but she wanted me to confirm for her that hers was the worst.

Well, that jealousy is also self-protection in a way and it’s having something no-one can take off you because our story is our story, and we own it because we lived the experience. And maybe having to convince everyone your story’s the worst is also a bit of having trouble in coming to terms with the horror of your experience, too. Like, because it almost seems to us unreal that it happened to us, we have to keep reassuring ourselves that it did happen. It’s like a bad dream. And if we have trouble believing it ourselves, well, naturally we get frightened others mightn’t believe us so we have to be insistent about it … like, “Grab your hankie because you’ll need it when you hear my story, its real, and it’s the worst thing that could happen to a child and it happened to me.”
And it’s no good saying someone else has a worse story than you, either, because you don’t really know, it’s *their story not yours*. They lived their story, you didn’t, and they didn’t live your story—and each of the stories is no worse and no less than any of the other stories. *All* those places, *all* those Homes, were horrific, and *all* our stories are *horror stories*.

All you can do is say to yourself, “It happened, and there’s nothing will change that, and now I’ve got to put it in its place and get on with life the best I can,” you know?

But I don’t know how you can get people to move on because a lot of care leavers are consumed by the horror of their experience and the after-effects of that. It fills their lives, and some get stuck in a time warp at seven or nine years of age, or whatever age they were at in their lives when their trauma was greatest. So, some care leavers just get trapped—locked inside their childhood horror.

And there are a lot of us care leavers who create ourselves. But how do you get rid of the feelings of shame and guilt and inferiority? We had it ground into us like Chinese water-torture, drip by drip by drip, and we suffered this mind-bending stuff for months and years and more years.

Christmas is another time that’s awful for most care leavers. And that’s because when we were kids Christmas was a time when we got all excited and built up these feelings and they all came to nothing. It hit home to us at Christmas that we didn’t have a family, we didn’t have visitors, we didn’t really get anything in the way of presents, and we didn’t have anyone who really cared for us or who loved us. And even though it was Christmas it was business as usual, we still had to work, and we still had the same routine, and we still got belted up for something or nothing.

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I watch Leonie’s face as she speaks. I can see the fervour in her eyes and hear the earnestness in her voice.

- *How would you describe yourself?*
- *Jo, I’m an activist, I stir the pot to get things done.*

Oh, I think I’m a valuable member of society—we are *all* valuable members of society, and many of us could’ve achieved *great* things in this country had we been given the same opportunities as our peers.

Seriously, though, I think everybody’s here for a purpose. I think I’m here because of the background I’ve had. I’ve often thought “What if I had sat back and just kept quiet about my childhood.”
I didn’t have to raise these issues that I work on now. But I was hurt and angry about my childhood so I decided I wanted to work with people who’d had the same sort of childhood as me at a time when I could have easily devoted the second half of my life—this was in 2000—to pursuing my own personal interests.

But this work has certainly taken its toll on me personally. You have reduced time with your own children, and even though they haven’t suffered because of that, in a different life I would have gone to university and pursued a degree in history. Yet this is what I do, and what I am is an advocate and an activist.

-Why do you think you got given all that horror and suffering in your childhood, Leonie?

Well, some religious people say, “Oh, you’re only given what you can cope with.” But I don’t know if I can agree with that because there are times when I haven’t coped with the cards I was dealt.

Life has been a struggle in lots of ways. But I also believe I’ve been given wonderful opportunities that other Homies didn’t get, and I met a fantastic bloke, and I had one good nun in the orphanage … no, there were a number of good nuns in the orphanage who tried their best to help children, but they were outweighed because there were too many abusive nuns and indifferent nuns in that place. That was only one such orphanage, there were hundreds of the same, and the public didn’t know or didn’t realise, and still don’t.

I’m determined not to let society get away with this—Australia’s grubbiest little secret. I’m here to rattle the cage, you know?

Really, I’m just a Homie who has found her voice and is using it, and I’m a Victorian State Ward, and I’m a person who has begun to tell my older brother that I love him. Just in the last six weeks we’ve started to finish our conversations with “I love you,” and that’s a huge achievement for me. I’m the mother of three beautiful children, and I’m the wife of a really lovely man. And I’m a reader, I love books.

I’m not a complicated person. People know what they get with me. I don’t know how to play the games that people get involved in.

People who’ve grown up in a normal family know how to play games because from a very young age they’ve learnt how to tell white lies in order to fit in, and they’ve learnt this through watching their parents. Oh, like, you know, when the mother asks the father, “Does my bum look big in this?” and the father says, “Of course not darling, you look beautiful” even though she might have the biggest bum in the world.
Where I grew up, no nun ever asked of anyone, “Does my bum look big in this habit?” That was just as well because you’d *never* be game to say, “Of course not Sister, you look beautiful,” and you’d certainly *never* be game to think it, let alone say, “Sister, you’re bum looks huge in that habit.” You’d be too frightened to say anything.

So we learnt to tell the truth out of fear, and a lot of people from our background tell the truth for that very reason. But that gets us into a lot of trouble because in our society there are more people who have grown up in ordinary homes than there are people who have grown up in Children’s Homes, and people—society—don’t always like to hear the plain, unadorned truth. With me, there’s no airs and graces, what you see is what you get. So the nuns taught me well, there … “Tell the truth and nothing but the truth and say it straight, say it plain, and say it like it is.”

- *So having been raised in a Catholic orphanage, do you go to church, or does that cause you inner conflict?*

- Jo, like you, like most Homies—oh, true, not all—I’m not a religious person and I don’t go to church, and I’m not afraid of dying and when I die I want to be buried not cremated, and I don’t think I’m spiritual at all.

You know, I struggle with the fact that the Catholic Church did an awful lot of damage to me and my family, but I also struggle with the fact that they provided me with a home, a roof over my head and food in my belly. It wasn’t the best, but I wasn’t left to wander the streets. I think there are probably a lot of care leavers, if they’ve done work on themselves and their pain, acknowledge that kind of conflict. You know, people like us will never get rid of that conflict, but perhaps the way around it is to understand why we feel that way.

And there’s also a different kind of conflict. Because we have such differing laws and ways of justice in Australia people like us will always feel angry and aggrieved and isolated and ignored and forgotten. You know, you can’t say to a NSW or a Victorian State Ward or Home child, “It doesn’t matter that you don’t get redress, but, oh, it’s okay that Tasmanian Homies and Wardies or some other State have got redress,” because it *does* matter.

I take a few minutes to contemplate the issues, and almost envy Leonie her drive as an activist who is bent on helping others, and her goodness as a woman. I don’t know if I could ever find that type of
commitment and unwavering energy. I’m too hedonistic. My passion in life is writing, and, viewed in a raw light, writing is a solitary and self-satisfying occupation. I’m happy with my lot in life, but in my dreams I would wish for many things in life for myself, for my family, and for others. I ask myself why it is that no matter what we have, we always seem to wish for more. I make eye contact with Leonie, and wonder how she sees such things.

-Leonie, if you could have one wish in life, what would that be?

-Jo, if I could have one wish in life it would’ve been that I knew my family. I wish I could’ve met my grandparents, but I couldn’t have done that because they died before I left the Home. No, wait a minute! My mother’s mother was ninety-three when she died, she was still alive when my first child was born. But I didn’t go to see her or tell her about the baby. Do I regret that?

Oh I don’t know.

No, I don’t regret it.

I also wish I could have brought more skills to our care leavers’ network than I did—I wish I knew how to handle angry people better. And I wish I had a degree because people take notice of that piece of paper, you know. Did you notice how I introduce the staff? I say, “This is Benita, and she’s got a degree in criminology. This is Natalie, and she’s got a degree in psychology. And this Julie and Leonie (me), and we have a degree in life.”

I think I’ve got a good mind, and I think if I’d had a settled existence I could’ve been anything I wanted to be. But I suppose that’s just retrospective thinking because I wouldn’t have thought like that when I was in my twenties, you know.

But all that’s a lot more than one wish isn’t it? But I think that without dreams and without hope we don’t have anything to aim for, and then we don’t have much, you know.

I nod, and say, -And I suppose that having more than one wish is probably being human more than anything.

-So what do think made you the person you are now?
Well I often used wonder, “Was I like my father, was I like my mother, or was I like an ancestor of mine?” There were thirty different nuns who raised me, and I’ve often asked, “Have I got parts of my personality from them? Or am I like the hundred and ten children I was raised with, and grew up with?” The answer is, “I don’t know.”

But I know I must be a pretty organised person and have skills because how else would I run our support network all this time, and how else would I have run the Donor Conception Support Group all those years? I must have got these skills somewhere from someone, but there are too many things to pin down. But obviously what helped make me the person I am now, I think, are my thirteen years at St. Catherine’s, and the three years of my childhood previous to that at my family home which I have no memory of. I think all these experiences have had a part in making me what am I now. But if my childhood helped to make me the person I am now, how is it that I have so many gaps in my memory of my childhood in the Home?

I think that in a way we care leavers are unique people because we had such unusual childhoods … our lives certainly weren’t normal … and I think that because of the lives we had we place huge expectations on ourselves. I know I do. But a lot of people like us fail because we can’t come up to those expectations because we don’t know how to do it, and we go round in circles trying to find a way, and we just circle around and around out childhood issues.

I’m not saying we’re not like other people altogether—I think life generally is a series of valleys and hills and everyone, every person, regardless of their childhood, faces these valleys and hills in their life. But what I’m saying is that we’ve seen too many valleys in our childhood for it not to affect we way we look at things. A lot of people like us, when they hit the valleys in adulthood, go down into depression because it gets to be all too hard.

As for me, I know I’m driven, and there’s nothing I can do about it because it’s me. But sometimes I wonder what it would be like not to know anything about all this, and have to fight this difficult fight.

Do I get scared? Oh, yes. I get scared … scared that I’m going to do the wrong thing and give us all a bad name. I try to do the right thing but you can never make people happy, you can’t solve all the pain that’s out there in care leaver land, and you never will be able to solve it.

So you asked me what sort of a person I see myself as? I think I’m intelligent. I’m caring, I’m committed, I’m passionate, I’m talkative … is that what you’re looking for? You know, everybody has got a story to tell, not just Homies, but everybody in the world.
Leonie, it’s certainly a fact that in Australia our Anglo-Celtic society traditionally followed England. And with the Children’s Homes in England, that’s a big history that involves not only the Western churches from way back, but also—as Charles Dickens shows in Oliver Twist—the workhouses and orphanages, disasters born from the inherent evil in the Benthamite philosophies behind the 1834 New Poor Laws of England, and the traditional attitudes of the upper working-classes and the middle-classes.

So we know that, and we know that the great Depression and two world wars left many Australian families unable to cope emotionally and financially. I don’t suppose Australia was the only country there, though. But given that our population figures weren’t exactly large in relation to size of our country, how did it happen that there were so many Homes out here, do you think?

Well, I think our country was built on sadness and poverty. The convicts and the first white settlers had to leave their families behind, so they had no support to help them raise their children. And like you say, later there were the land and economic Depressions, two World Wars, the Great Depression, and all that was hard on families as well. A lot of families couldn’t cope. I think, too, that the churches had a very strong hold on the morals of this country. When the government didn’t give the families support it gave the churches the opportunity to step in.

But the gold-rushes in Australia played a part in children being left in poverty, too. Like, there was a gold-rush in Geelong in 1855. Research we’ve done here in CLAN has shown that Geelong and its surrounding district had more Children’s Homes and orphanages than any other one area of its size in Australia. So far I’ve counted about 16. The first orphanage to be built in Geelong was St. Augustine’s in 1855-57, and that’s going right back to the beginnings of white settlement in Geelong and its district. This orphanage, a bluestone building that’s still in existence, was built during the gold-rush because a committee of “morally good” church-going men got together and said that they were concerned about the number of women who were letting their hordes of children run wild around Geelong. Of course, it was never the men that were at fault in any way, it was the lure of gold-fields that were responsible. A lot of the fathers left their families and fled to the gold-fields to seek their fortune, and a lot never came back, and the women were unable to support their children.

So, desertion?
Yes, that, and with the lack of health standards in those days, there was a lot of illness and death out in the goldfields, too.

So, out here in Australia, Children’s Homes were seen as a way to get these street urchins, vagabonds, off the streets and hide them away from polite society, and make them into creatures acceptable and useful to society—but not on the same level as their betters, of course. Even in our day a lot of us were considered to be the children of the no-hopers … it was, “If we take the children off their no-hoper families, we’ve got a chance to rehabilitate them” as servants and labourers for the good of the country.

Not all children of single parent families ran around the streets, though.

I’m just thinking of my own background. My Irish ancestors came to this country in the 1800s. My great-grandmother died in 1947 when she was ninety-five. Now, I found out recently that my great-grandfather died in 1903, and I only said to my husband last night, “You know, my great-grandmother lived another forty-odd years after my great-grandfather died, so she carried on all that time without a husband, and she had about nine kids,” and she didn’t put her kids in a Home.

Now my father was about fourteen when his mother died, so he was out at work, but one day I said to his sister, my Aunt, “How come you guys didn’t go into a Home when your mother died, you were only nine.”

She said, “My father wouldn’t have put us on the State.”

Oh, it was like, “Begone, and don’t you dare even suggest it. My father wouldn’t have wanted us made State Wards.”

Their father, my grandfather, was a proud Irishman, obviously, you know.

Oh, they struggled … he was sick, their father, and their mother had died, but he would never have put his kids into a Home or on the State.

Back when I was a child in Dalwood Children’s Home, I didn’t know that I was being trained as a servant. But I do know that I was constantly told that I had no brains and the only thing I was capable of ever doing in life was cleaning and dusting and following orders. Back then, I didn’t know that if I had stayed in the Home I would have been sent into service as soon as I turned fifteen years of age. Where would I have been sent?
-So what effects, do you think, has that business of children being in care in the twentieth century had on our society?

-Well, I think it created thousands of lost Australians who still to this day struggle with their identity.

I always think that if you get given a good enough childhood, it holds you in good stead as an adult. You grow up feeling that you matter to the people in your life, and that you matter in the world, that you matter to society. And all that helps you learn, all that helps you get a good job, and all that helps you in your relationships. People who’ve got a secure sense of themselves never have to spend one second thinking about where they come from. So if you grow up with a secure childhood you always have a cloak of security around you … how wonderful is that? If you don’t come with a secure background in childhood you start your life on the back foot.

We Homies and State Wards spent our childhood trying to make sense of ourselves because we didn’t have a sense if ourselves. We spent our childhood trying to find out “Who am I, where do I belong, who do I belong to, why am I here?” And we literally spend all our lives doing that in one way or another. I think that with a lot of us this shows itself in the break-up of our relationships and in our fractured families, and in our presence in the drug and alcohol programs.

A lot of Homies end up in dysfunctional relationships, and that type of dysfunction is, I think, passed down in a lot of cases. There are thousands of Australians our there with problems because of either their own time in care, or because of their parents’ time in the Homes and foster homes of that era, and these things self-perpetuate. All this sadness and sorrow and maternal deprivation and lack of social skills and education and lost opportunities accumulates and is passed on down to their children, and, you know, carries on down through the generations. If you’ve had good parenting you pass that on, and if you’ve had lousy parenting you pass that on because these are things children learn early in life.

If you come from a secure background and you’ve got a lovely mother and father you’ve got a model to work on and, oh, their mistake might be putting too much milk in the formula, or something like that. We don’t know what it’s like to have parents, so we don’t have role models to work from when we become parents. For us Homies who have a baby and take steps to form a family it’s, “How am I going to learn to be a mum when I didn’t have a mother?”

There are some Homies out there, who would tell you ad nauseam how they’ve been a wonderful mother, and they won’t say, “But I also made some mistakes.” Well, I’m sorry, but Homie or not, every
mother makes mistakes, there’s no perfect mother in the world. You’ve got to actually talk to their kids to get the truth.

Sometimes we’re too hard on our kids and have unrealistic expectations of them, so that’s another way we get into trouble with our parenting. A lot of us Homies tend to put too much pressure on our children in one way or another—like, to fill a gap in our own lives, to be the family we didn’t have, to look after us, or to do better than us and excel at something, and to succeed no matter what, to be someone because we weren’t. Of course, you know, that sometimes goes for people who were never in care, too.

I forgot to tell you that when I was having my first baby my husband heard the author of *Motherless Daughters* on the radio and bought the book. And he came home and told me, “Leonie, that book might help you to know what to do,” and I said, “Oh, that book won’t help me, it’s probably about daughters whose mothers died.” And it is! There’s just a tiny little chapter on abandonment. You know, having your mother die is far more honourable than having her walk out and abandoning you. There’s no book to tell you what to do and how to go about things.

Listening to Leonie speaking about the accumulative effect of past care leavers parenting or possible lack thereof, on their families, it seems to me to natural to ask, -What are the figures on children in care whose parents were also in care?

Leonie has been sitting quietly, looking down at her hands. Now, she brings her head up quickly, and I can see the interest sparking in her eyes.

-Jo, this is a hard one because nobody collates the figures. The KPMG\(^1\), the auditing body, had to do a paper for the government, and we went to the session because we wanted to raise questions. We weren’t concerned about the heritage of the children, but we wanted to know, “How many of those children in care today had parents or grandparents in the care system when they were kids.” We’ve said, “There needs to be some transparency on this.” And we asked that same question, “What are the figures on children in care whose parents were also in care?” That was ten and a half years ago and we still haven’t got an answer.

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Leonie says, -Jo, how are we going?
I say, -Just one more question and we’ll call it day?

-Will you be right, will you have everything you need?

-I think so, Leonie. But can I ask you this?

-You’ve always encouraged us to write our stories, and around the time of our National Apology there was quite a bit in the papers about people who had been in Homes. How can our stories help us and society, do you think?

-Well, Jo, when the journals and media write or report that someone grew up in an orphanage or in care, they never go beyond that fact … “Oh, he or she was put into a Home,” or an orphanage, or foster care. No-one ever goes behind that and sees what it was like for that person. They never say how that person felt. No-one ever says to that person, “What was it like to grow up in an orphanage.”

If people like us and members of our families could come forward and tell our stories about our experience and about what it was like and what it felt like, and what happened to them personally because of that experience, and those stories were documented through literature, we could tell our stories openly and people could learn. We could all learn from that wealth of information that is in people’s stories about their life experience, you know?
Dr Joanna Penglase

Joanna Penglase has a PhD in Sociology from Macquarie University in Sydney. Joanna grew up in a privately-run Children’s Home in NSW on Sydney’s North Shore.

As with Leonie Sheedy, I did not interview Joanna for her personal story as a Forgotten Australian rather as one of the two co-founders of Care Leavers Australia Network. Joanna is the author of the book *Orphans of the Living* which takes a sociological perspective towards children in care in the mid-twentieth century Australia.

**Joanna Penglase’s Story**

*Photo by author: taken 29-3-2011, for use in this work, with the subject’s permission.*

Wednesday the twenty-third of March 2011.

Another interview session completed. I pack my recording gear away, give Leonie Sheedy a hug and thank her for making time to talk with me, and walk down the hall. Bob is waiting in the front office. We say goodbye to the staff of the Care Leavers Australia Network, and step outside into the heat of the day.
-Let’s leave the car down the road a bit and go for walk and see if we can find somewhere to have lunch, says Bob.

To my surprise I find I’m feeling strong enough now in myself to look around at Bankstown and I welcome a walk.

Bob says, -Have you seen the Paul Keating Park?

I say, -Paul Keating was only a kid and didn’t have a park named after him when I used to come here to High School.

Bankstown has changed since I was at school. There are buildings and features that are entirely new to me. But underneath the top-dressing of the present day, I can see the skeleton of the past.

I recognise the somewhat clinical, landscaped Paul Keating Park immediately for the piece of scrubby waste-land it once was. Back when I was a teenager, winos used to lie around on scruffy grass and cuddle plonk bottles in brown paper-bags.

Suddenly I stop walking, point to a spot, and say, -Oh, look! I know that place! I had my first and only fist fight right there!

I was twelve, and I’d been challenged by another girl. One day after school, as we walked together through the park to the bus station, my friend waxed lyrical about her mother just as she always did, and I pulled hard on her pleated school-tunic. Then, even though I didn’t know her mother, I called her mother “a dirty rotten cow.”

Bob looks at me in surprise, and says, -What drove you to do that?

The reason was psychologically complex, and it’s hard to unravel.

-I was jealous, I suppose.

Back then, my life was hell. My stepmother was harsh and cruel, but I wasn’t game to call her a “dirty rotten cow.” It would’ve been more than my life was worth.

-In hindsight? Anger, frustration and, oh, simply put, this girl didn’t ever talk to me, she just kept getting in my face and spruiking on and on about her wonderful mother … and about how much they adored each other, you know?

I won the fist fight. Physically and emotionally shaken, I cried and cried. My guilt was terrible. Saying “sorry” didn’t heal the awful hurts. My friend turned her face from me, but because we were in the
same class and caught the same bus home we were stuck with each other. It was an uneasy relationship. The memory haunted me for years.

We leave the park and the long ago, and walk to the food court in the shopping mall and eat baked potatoes topped with sour cream and cheese.

We finish our lunch and Bob dumps our used plates and plastic cutlery in the bin, and says, -Last time we were here, I found something you might like to see.

We go back to the car and drive down the road, and pull into a parking lot next to the railway station. I get out of the car and step through a revolving door in life. I’m in an Eastern bazaar. The shop fronts roll or lift up, and benches and stalls spill out across the footpath. Vegetables and fruits that are strange to my eyes are piled high, and sit cheek to jowl with silks and ready-made clothing that is distinctly not western in style.

I buy a few things, and ask, -How do you wear this, use that, cook this?

The women are warm and friendly. They touch my arms and smile and try to explain, but I can’t understand what they’re saying. They speak very little English.

Bob and I go back to the car, and drive home to the Hunter Valley. I take my mind pictures of revolving doors and instant overseas travel with me, and happily live them over again.

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Tuesday the twenty-ninth of March 2011.

I’m back in Bankstown at the care leavers’ support network’s new headquarters to interview Joanna Penglase. I walk into the “White House.” and let the staff in the front office know that I’m here.

I’m early, but not by much.

Joanna hasn’t arrived as yet.

I go into the kitchen and set up my recording gear on the table as I had done a few days earlier when I interviewed Leonie Sheedy, and sit down in front of the two fans that are already whirring away.

It’s autumn, but this year the summer heat has clung to the days and the weeks.

Half an hour goes by. I worry that Joanna isn’t going to turn up.

Another fifteen minutes crawl past, and a tiny slim woman comes bursting into the room.

-The train was late, but I’ve got to go down the street and get coffee, then I’ll be back and we can talk.
I say, -There’s coffee over there, would you like me to make you a cup while you catch your breath? Joanna rounds her eyes and, laughing, says, -Jo. That’s instant. I need real coffee, I’m a Balmain girl.

She whirls out of the room and is gone.

A short time later she walks back into the kitchen carrying a large paper cup of take-away coffee, and places it on the table.

Despite the fans, it’s hot and stuffy in the room, and we open the back door of the kitchen for breeze. We start the tape-machine, and I give my spiel. Outside, in the trees, the magpies spill their fluting songs into the hot, still autumn air.

Joanna sits at one end of the table, and faces the back door. Her chair is placed diagonally opposite mine.

- Joanna, I’ve sort of got the idea that you’re a social worker. Am I right?

She sits with her hands on the table in front of her, and folds and refolds the paper napkin that came with her take-away coffee. But despite her nervous hand movements, she is a very assured and fluent speaker, and very professional in her bearing and delivery.

-My background is in television production, in film and journalism. I work in documentary television. I only got into sociology through doing my thesis. But I’ve never been a social worker. 

-So I was wondering about the history of the care leavers’ support network. Can I ask how it was that you became involved, and how you helped set it up?

-Well, it’s a long story, but, in brief, our support network came out of my PhD thesis, which was completed through Macquarie University in 1999. Leonie was potentially one of my interviewees for my thesis research, and we met up after I finished my thesis and eventually came to set up the Care Leavers Australia Network.
Joanna pauses and takes a sip of her coffee. She sits and gathers herself for a moment, and then says evenly, -I’m going to have to tell you the full story and that involves talking about things that happened when I was doing my thesis.

-I think it’s important to mention that when I started my thesis nobody was talking about this history of Anglo-Celtic children who had been in care in mid-twentieth century Australia. The people who lived it, of course, did or didn’t talk about it in whatever way they wanted to—some people had told their families, some people hadn’t—and it wasn’t a common history at all. It wasn’t even known, and I think it was very difficult finding a supervisor because it wasn’t in the public domain at all.

-Did you find that it was a problem getting believed by the supervisors?

-Oh no, that wasn’t the problem, it was more that, firstly, people aren’t interested in children’s history, which is what it tended to come under, and secondly, it was just not on the radar…”Oh, what are you talking about—children?” So people didn’t know about the Children’s Homes, about how many there were, or that they even existed.

-Would it surprise you to know that many people I’ve talked to at the university still don’t know anything much, if anything at all, about it? 6

-You know, I’m not the least surprised. I think it’s one of the most discouraging aspects of the outcome of the Forgotten Australians Report, but it’s still not on the radar.

Joanna pauses, and looks down at the paper napkin in her hands. She puts it on the table in front of her, gives it a pat, then picks it up again and refolds it into a neat square. She resumes eye-contact with me and goes on talking.

-When I finished my thesis, one of my examiners told Geraldine Doogue about it and said this is really interesting history, and Geraldine was interested in interviewing me on Life Matters. But when my book 7 was first published, the only person who wanted to interview me was Bert Newton. He flew me to Melbourne to be interviewed on Good Morning Australia because he thought it was important. He remembered as a little boy walking past an orphanage with his mother, and saying, “Mum, what happens in
there.” And she said, “I don’t know dear.” His father had died when *he* was young, so I think he must have had some inkling that he could end up in a place like that.

Apart from that, nobody wanted to interview me despite all the efforts of the Freemantle Arts Centre Press. Eventually I took it into my own hands. I rang up Margaret Throsby’s producer because I thought, “Margaret Throsby would be interested—she’s an intelligent woman, a woman interested in *everything*.” Do you know, her producer said to me, “Oh only social workers would be interested in that,” and he said it in tones of contempt.

My point is that this is typical of our society’s attitude to children’s history. That’s the sort of attitude that still prevails—it’s just not taken seriously. I think it’s fair to say that if you’re an Indigenous Australian you’re taken seriously, but if you’re not then you’re not—and this is *no* reflection on the Aboriginal history which is *profoundly* significant, and there are very significant differences, including that genocidal undertone, to that of the Anglo-Australian kids. But the fact remains that what was done to white, mostly *poor* kids, is of the *same* magnitude. It’s just different in that *no-one* takes it seriously.

§

Joanna’s voice is suddenly drowned under the loud roar of a grass mower just outside the back door. I switch the tape-recorder off and we wait for a few minutes. The intrusive sound fades slightly as the man operating the mower moves to a new patch of long grass further away.

Joanna says, -That’s one of the care-leavers; he lives in Wollongong and travels up especially to mow the lawns and do odd-jobs for us here.

The man comes back with his mower. I get up off my chair and shut the back door. It’s stuffy in the room now, but at least we can hear each other speaking.

Joanna stops fiddling with the napkin and puts it to one side.

-My thesis was called *Orphans of the Living: the Home Children NSW 1939 to 1965*. Now, I chose those dates, and that State, because I’d grown up in Sydney in a Children’s Home which was licenced under the 1939 Child Welfare Act, and 1965 was when I was about twenty-one and left there. And I thought well that’s sort of my childhood, as it were—all my childhood and early youth.
Now when I started my thesis I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to look at, except that I wanted to understand how did that Home of mine come to be licenced, because it seemed to me that like most Children’s Homes it wasn’t really designed to well, make children happy I suppose basically, or to care for children in a sense of caring as opposed to their physical needs, and I wanted to understand how it was that this had come about—what was this system? I’d done sociology and I just was interested in: what was all that about? How did that happen?

So, because I’d started off with the licensing of the Home, I thought, “Oh, the answer lies in the Child Welfare Department Archives.”

So I got permission—which I think would be very difficult to get now—to rootle through the archives out at Kingswood and down in the Rocks. That was already quite difficult to do, to actually go into the archives and rummage around for yourself. See, this is a story about doing research in an unknown history.

Some years ago now, I stood at the foot of my father’s grave and my world turned over. My sibling’s names were on his headstone. Mine was not. I turned to my aunt, my father’s sister. She couldn’t tell me anything, she said, “I’ve forgotten a lot.”

I asked my uncle, my father’s brother, about my history.

He said, “I don’t know anything, I was only a kid when your mother died.”

So I went in search of myself, and found nothing other than things change and people are soon forgotten.

I searched again in 2004 after I first met with Leonie Sheedy in the old office of the Care Leavers Australia Network. I contacted Dalwood Children’s Home and was directed to Manly Hospital Records Department. Searches were made on my behalf. There were no extant papers, no records, for the children who had been in Dalwood in the 1940s. One official, who went beyond the bounds of duty to make a personal search for my records, rang me and said, “Jo, I’m sorry. But Dalwood destroyed all the records for the 1940s—from what I’ve heard they had a lot to cover up.”

Refusing to give up, I thought I might find a lead in my school records which, I believed, were stored in the NSW Department of Education State Archives at Kingswood. The archives, I was told, did not have files on those schools, for the years I attended.
“Why?” I wanted to know.

I was told, “The schools were under no compunction to keep attendance records or student records for filing, and they didn’t have to send them to us to be archived. There was no law.”

I rang Seaforth Public School, the school I went to while I was in the Children’s Home, and I rang East Bankstown, now Greenacre, the Primary School I attended when I lived at the foster house. They said, “Sorry, all those records were destroyed a long time ago—lack of storage room.”

When I began writing my personal memoir in 2008 I checked again, but there was nothing new. Just to make certain, in late 2010 after beginning my PhD studies I rang around again. The answers were the same.

It was no use upsetting myself further. I had to accept that, as a child, I simply didn’t have a paper-trail.

- Joanna, I’ve done a bit of searching on my own account. It seems that the Home I was in destroyed the records for the years I was there. I couldn’t even get a lead through my school records because it seems that the schools themselves destroyed a lot of children’s records—lack of storage room, and not everything was sent through to the NSW Department of Education State Archives at Kingswood to be filed.

-Hmm. I think that was the sort of case when I was researching because at the Child Welfare Department Archives they said, “Well what do you want to look at” because there was a lot of material. And the Archives guide said, “This represents ten per cent of the material which once existed” because Government departments had to cull … they can’t keep everything.

Also, significantly, up until 1989 or 90 there used to be an excellent Child Welfare Department library at Parramatta. What their librarian didn’t know about the Child Welfare material in the collection wasn’t worth knowing. They had Child Welfare documents going back to the nineteenth century, they had the earliest published books on child welfare, and they had all that wonderful stuff from when people started rethinking what children needed.

Well in 1988 I think it was, there was a change of State government and the library was closed down and the material supposedly went to four different campuses of universities. The UWS campus at Milperra, I remember, was one of them. But a lot of the material from the library was filed in garbage skips and of course destroyed. It was an act of vandalism. And it was a reflection of the lack of importance and
insignificance given to children’s history and what was done to children and what happened to children at the hands of public policy; it’s not considered a *grown-up* subject for research and investigation because we have an adult’s interest and approach to history.

Despite what people say about our being a child-centred society, we are *not* a child-centred society. What adults do to children is *never* seen as a way of understanding a society … it’s seen as, “Oh, that just children.”

But when I was researching for my thesis what I found at the Child Welfare Department Archives was the realisation that I had to decide “well what I am going to look at in these archives.”

There was nothing that indicated Children’s Homes; and I thought, “Well this is a bit hard, I don’t know what I’m going to ask to look at,” and because you’ve got to look at and hunt through everything, it *was* really hard. Now all this was of course in the early days of my research.

I found all sorts of interesting documents in some of the boxes. But I could only choose so many, so in the end I opted for six little boxes that looked like small wine boxes, you know, ones that take twelve bottles? I remember one was labelled “Our Children’s Homes, Strathfield,” and I thought, “Well that’s obviously a Children’s Home,” and that’s the sort of thing I was looking for, and so I chose boxes that looked to be similar. But with Children’s Homes, all the files told me was that the Welfare had inspected the Home, Burwood, say, and found that the children weren’t adequately clothed or there’d been complaints from the school … these were *very* poor Homes, they were doing the best they could. I realized eventually what these files were. Whenever there’d been a breach of regulation they kept a few files. But I couldn’t see how this information fitted into the picture of my thesis.

There was no file on my Home—which I was very disappointed about—and there would have been because I remember the inspectors coming to inspect and I also used to fill out the forms when I was older. Whenever a new child came to the Home you had to fill out a registration book—I’ve still got some around at home somewhere—and there were forms to be filled out. You had to fill out a sheet for each child, and each child had to have a certificate to say they were free of infectious diseases, a medical certificate, and we had to send all that sort of stuff into the department. I *know* there would have been a file on my Home.

*Even those that were not Wards of State had to have these files done on them?*

*Oh yes, my word. You see, the place I was in was a Section 28A Home licenced under the Child Welfare Act 1939. Now what that section in the act says, is all about any Home that was licenced must have*
the following … whatever—X number of wash basins per head of children, X number of toilets … that sort of thing.

There were other Homes like Dalwood Children’s Home that weren’t licenced by the Department of Child Welfare so didn’t come under that Act … you want a sequel?—the Department of Health Homes like Dalwood were under the Department of Health. That was a different legislation. You won’t find anything on that now.

-Like I told you, all the Dalwood paperwork that relates to me and my era was destroyed a long time ago.

-Manly Library might have the records. No? You’ve been in touch with the Librarian-archivist and they haven’t got anything? Well I’m sure they used to. You see what happens in cases like that, is that they have a change in librarian and they don’t get a direction on everything.

Even though my previous searching proved that the relevant libraries, Manly and the NSW State library, didn’t have anything that I could recognise as directly on my era, on the time I was in Dalwood, what Joanna has just said about “a change in librarian” brings me bolt upright. Could it be that my papers were merely lost and not destroyed after all?

For a brief moment I hang suspended on the treacherous edges of rocky hope, and then my common-sense reasserts itself and I say under my breath, “Lost or destroyed, what does it matter, the results are the same.”

I turn my attention back to Joanna.

-So what did you do when you didn’t find anything that suited your research picture at the Archives?

-Well, because I’d worked in documentary television and that was the way we did things, I thought, “I’m just going to have to find people.”

So I put ads in all the suburban newspapers and I got hold of an almanac, a guide to the NSW country newspapers, and I wrote to all of them … one hundred and fifty one I think there were. In all these ads I included my phone number and address. This was 1992, before email, before call waiting, before mobile phones, so all I had was the telephone. I didn’t even have an answering machine.
I remember when I placed the ads I thought, “This is going to be hard, getting people.” Was I ever wrong! If I’d known the response I was going to get, I’d have staggered the ads. I was on the phone a month, two months, non-stop, day and night. People would talk for an hour or more, and I’d take copious notes and type them all up in a data base so I could cross-reference them. I was worn out.

Leonie was one of the people who rang, and she told me that she’d been in a Victorian Home. But I wanted NSW people, so we only had a relatively brief chat at the time because with all these phone calls coming in time was precious.

But Leonie was the one I always remembered because she was the only person I talked to who said, “How come no-one’s talking about this. How come nobody knows this history?” Now that had not even occurred to me to think that far, I just had tunnel vision—what am I going to write in my thesis.

When I finished my thesis I went through my files and I found Leonie’s telephone number and rang her, and she’ll tell you what happened from that. She has already? Oh, good.

Joanna picks up her almost empty coffee cup and takes a sip. Then, without prompting, she continues speaking.

-Now this next is a significant point. One of the things I discovered when I was researching for my thesis was that there was no blue-print of the Homes that were scattered throughout NSW. All there was were a few, very few, histories of Homes written from the top down—like the one that’s called A Simple Work: the history of St. Vincent’s Boys Home at Westmead. It was written by a Gerald Burns who was some Catholic scholar or supernumerary or something, and it was all about the wonderful work the Catholics did in setting up the Home.

The information I got from my interviewees was where the Homes were, who ran them, what other Homes they had. It was like filling in a jig-saw puzzle. And later, when Care Leavers Australia Network formed we started this list of Homes that had existed across Australia. Together with the research done by the Senate Inquiry we eventually came up with a list of about 500 Homes, and now it’s closer to 600 and it’s still growing. Leonie is still doing that research. Every so often she hears about a Home we didn’t know existed, and she adds it to the list.
When I was interviewing, even though I was focusing on NSW, I listened to people from other states as well. And that showed me that the legislation was slightly different in every State, but the general system was the same.

What I discovered was that in every State there were all these different Homes and they were run by all these various places … churches and charities and Schemes and privately, and all these Homes were slightly different to each other and different at various times, and then were these State-run Homes, and you know … and they all seemed to be different. And every State had a Child Welfare system of its own. So, as with all the other States, NSW had a Child Welfare system of its own, and they tried to foster kids, and there were all these different Homes but they still had a lot of Homes of their own, but there were definite differences.

But the thing that was the same throughout Australia, and it didn’t matter where you were in a Home or what Home you were in, was the various features of how you were treated. You were separated from your siblings, you weren’t told anything about your history and it wasn’t considered important for you to know, visiting was very restricted and it was seen as a privilege, and there were very strict routines in Homes. And over and over again people said to me it was like being in prison—we were punished for being children.

And that was what struck me because I’d grown up feeling frightened all the time living in that Home I was in because the penalties for doing anything wrong were so great, you were really treated as if you were a criminal and had done something terrible. And of course the terrible thing we’d all done was not have parents who could look after us. That was our crime—that our parents were unable to look after us, and we were punished for that. I mean that’s not always how it was presented, but that’s how we felt on the receiving end and that was how we were made to feel. And that’s how people behaved.

-And then there was the food.

Yes, well the whole thing … the food, being force-fed your own vomit, being made to sit for hours, having to eat all your food, being locked in cupboards, and then of course the dormitory business … the terrible punishments, the terrible cruelty of the punishments. I don’t call it “child abuse,” that’s a clinical term. It was sheer and utter cruelty. And the cruelest people that I came across were the deeply religious ones.

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The man has finished the lawns and has packed his mower away in the back of his truck. Now, he’s somewhere inside the house with his tool-box and is doing a few odd jobs. I get up and open the back door of the kitchen and a magpie’s clear piping tune comes flooding in and gets captured on tape.

I go back to my seat and for some reason, perhaps because I have been listening to Joanna talking about conditions in the Homes and cruelty, I recall that the only thing my brother has ever remarked to me about being in care as children, is that being in the Home was like being in a concentration camp. In fact, I have said it myself. For some reason, “concentration camp” aligns itself in my mind with those in Europe during the Second World War. Joanna sits relaxed in her chair at the end of the table. I look at her and make eye contact again.

-Joanna, do you ever see a similarity between what happened to us and what happened to the Holocaust victims?

-No. The difference between the Homes and that history is that it was the intention of the Nazi machine to murder Jews. It was not the intention of the Homes to murder children. Some children died as a result of some of the adults’ behaviour in the Homes, but it was not deliberate. I mean, I saw behaviour in my Home, and I think now, “Why didn’t any of those little children ever get Shaken Baby Syndrome.” I remember the carers talking about, “How do we explain the bruises on this child,” you know? So it was just lucky that no child died of that syndrome.

-I remember one incident in particular …

-Yes, it happened. There are definitely those histories … and that inquiry in South Australia that went on, about into abuse in State Homes—the Mullighan Inquiry⁸—where one of the terms of reference was, “children who had been sexually abused or had died,” and they did find several unexplained deaths.

And certainly I was informed in my research by that Holocaust history that we were treated like a despised and reviled section of the population. That was the kind of factor. And of course the people I was interviewing were in my vintage, sixties and a bit older, some a bit younger, and of course many of us had grown up with that knowledge of the camps, and a lot of people would compare it, and they’d say about being in the Homes, “it was like a concentration camp,” and it was like a concentration camp.
The subject has long been a pet bee in my bonnet, and now that I see an opening I’m not quite ready to let it go.

-But Joanna, do you not think that what Australia was doing was a bit hypocritical? They were crying out about how terrible it all was, what was happening in Europe, in the camps ... and of course it was awful. But what was happening to us was something like ... and the government knew, and allowed it to happen while they pointed their finger in the opposite direction.

-But Jo, there is a difference. People then would not have believed what was going on. They’d have said, “But adults don’t hurt children! Adults are always good to children.” And it would not have occurred to the authorities then that adults could be so unremittingly cruel to children.

You know, I don’t think that viewpoint will change because people still don’t want to believe that adults were so cruel. And the extreme forms of religion which are extremely punitive in their own interference and mayhem—and going from the stories I’ve heard, in particular the Salvation Army Homes, the Sisters of Mercy Homes, and the Plymouth Brethren Homes—pass that down the line. It’s a very pernicious system.

Rather than openly admit these things, I just think it’s much easier for people to say, “Oh it was a few bad apples,” or, “paedophiles do terrible things to children, ordinary people don’t do that.”

And really, that’s demonising a few when there’s such a spectrum of human behaviour. There’s abuse of a different type and it’s not even abuse, it a usage of children and which is wrong, and it isn’t just labelled paedophiles that do it. The sexual use of children, as I call it, is wide-spread. The word “abuse” implies there’s a correct use. There isn’t a “correct use” of children.

-And, too, children don’t have a voice.

-Well they’re not believed. I think that now children have a greater knowledge of their own rights. But there are a lot of pressures on children which stop them from speaking out. But I think today most perpetrators from back then would be safe from any sort of prosecution because it’s so long ago, and whoever invites witnesses while they abuse or use children? And then you always have this thing that we go back to, that the people don’t believe you—“Oh, people don’t do that to children …”

§
- Joanna, unlike the Holocaust in Europe, our history—people who were in care as children—is a thing that’s totally subjected to memory ... because of the lack or paucity of hard evidence, it relies on memory, on care leavers memories, here.

- Did you ever see that very long documentary series called *Shoah*? No? Oh it’s very interesting. It’s made by Claude Lanzmann. Look it up on Google and find out about it. As a Jew himself, Lanzmann set out to actually document *how* the Holocaust happened. He interviewed the men who actually *organised* the time-tables, who organised the cattle trucks, who *devised* the policies. And the people *talked* to him, and told him what they saw and heard, and their thoughts and feelings and experiences. It was extraordinary. So he has thoroughly documented the Holocaust, you see, and that’s the reason I’m mentioning him here.

Now we who are care leavers who have tried to write a bit about this, have done our *feeble* best to document what we know—for example, my book is one of the few that actually tries to put the history on the record, and the Senate Inquiry *puts* it on the public record. But there’s so *little* documentation of the cruelty, the *effects* of policies, the linking of people’s *later* lives with what happened to them as children, the *feelings* of the victims then and now in the same way that the, say, Holocaust history is, that it’s easy enough for people to say, “Ooh, it’s probably a bit exaggerated,” or, “Aw, *really*? Ooh … maybe, maybe not.”

- *Well I suppose that with most of us there’s no actual proof to show. Those people that did that to us, a lot of their friends wouldn’t believe it.*

- Well that’s the point, isn’t it … it’s only every so often that someone is prosecuted and ends up in gaol—like a high-up Salvation Army person, you know, and I guess his friends and family must *reel* with astonishment and disbelief! But isn’t that what the Holocaust, the Nazi history shows us—“Oh, people love dogs”? People led *ordinary* lives, and it’s what that wonderful woman Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil,” which is describing Eichmann, I think—Hannah Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil*, have you read it? Apparently good people do terrible things. So that’s all part of it, and it’s also part of why people don’t want to know about it I think, because it’s a lot to get your head around.

What do you do with children? It’s not so easy for people.

You might say, “Oh, in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, people beat up, and sodomised and raped children,” and they’d say, “Oh, we don’t think like that now, but you mean they *thought like that* in the 1940s and 50s and 60s? No, no, that *can’t* be true!”
But if you’re talking about the nineteenth century it’s easier for people because they might say, “Oh well, people didn’t treat their children then like we do now.” So, like with the Aboriginal history, people can put it in a box and say that was then, this is now—now we live in a different era.

But, really, no matter what century you might be talking about it is not at all easy for Anglo-Australians to believe that it happened in their own society. It is much easier to believe that we did terrible things to the Aboriginal people because we can say, “Oh, yes, in the past people really believed that black people were inferior to white and they saw them as less than human. But that is a belief that belongs in the past; we don’t believe that now, and we are deeply sorry for the effects of that policy, but we understand how it came to be because people really thought differently then.”

See, what happened to us Forgotten Australians as children is too close to the present and to our Anglo-Australian society, and the churches and charities and agencies that did the child welfare back then are still involved in it now—those same agencies still do the child welfare now.

You know, when I was working for our support network we used to say to the government, “You must tie reparation for the past with the money you give to past providers now, to do the child care now.”

They should have been building into their funding, in the current day, to say to the big agencies, “You must allocate some funding to make reparation to the people who were in your Homes, who suffered.”

Well of course, governments would never do any of that, because they rely now, as they did then, on those non-government agencies. Those non-government charities and churches and agencies actually supplied huge service gapping\textsuperscript{10} in child welfare in the past, and without them the Government could never ever had cope, given the number of children. In NSW, for example, at any one time there were the same number of children in non-government care—say in Children’s Homes like mine—as there were in State Care. I remember from my thesis research that in NSW in about 1956 there were 4000 children in State care and around 3900 and something in non-government care. So imagine if the government would have had to look after the lot, double the number of kids!

§

-If you were to take an educated guess, how many people—care leavers—of our era, say 1930s to 70s, would you say are still around?
-Well from what I’ve seen through my work with Care Leavers Australia Network, I think we tend to die earlier than most others in our society, but then again it’s not documented, you see.

Now, if I really stuck my neck out, I’d say that I think that if we had the figures for outcomes for people of my vintage and older who’ve grown up in care, the figures would compare with the outcomes for Aboriginal people.

You know how Aboriginal people have a much lower life expectancy, and their health isn’t as good … higher rates of everything? Well I reckon that with us care leavers, because of our terrible fucked-up excuse the French childhood, we’re very, very similar to Aboriginal people. You know, separated from your own family and identity and then used and abused, and added to that no sense of place. White people have a sense of place, identity, and kin, just like black people do … it’s just different, but it’s equally important. So we’re suffering from the same things, and on top of that, abandonment, being treated like dirt, not being cared for, our psyches murdered.

In the Homes our carers told us lies about our situation and family, and they told them so convincingly that we believed that to be our reality.

I grew up being told my mother didn’t want me. You were too, but we’re not alone. Every child, so many children in the Homes, we were all told that our people didn’t love us, didn’t want us, “Nobody ever wanted you.”

It was a classic, a throwaway line, and that even goes back to, “No wonder your mother didn’t want you, who could want you?” I believe that people didn’t even think what they were saying when they said, “No wonder your mother didn’t want you.”

It’s what people can do to a despised population.

And everything you did, and anything they said you did, was wrong—it was, “You’re going to grow up just like your mother, or your father, bad blood, poor stock, you’ll turn out just like them, you’re a no-hoper, you’re this, that, or the other.”

So we all grew up with those same things, and Aboriginal people had that extra stigma of their skin colour. But we had an extra stigma of not fitting into our own society. I think that one of the things that people do not understand is that what we missed out on in our childhood is not just about abuse and all those other things—we also missed out on that very fundamental socialising which is essential for people to grow up and feel they fit in.
In the Western society, the family is the core unit of society as we know it.

In our white society, the family is what makes you who are.

As children, we Forgotten Australians were not socialised to belong to a family.

§

Joanna stands up and takes a turn around the kitchen to stretch her legs. She walks back to her seat and resettles herself. She sits in a relaxed pose. Her lightly clasped hands rest in her lap.

I sit quietly turning the question of the socialisation of children over in my mind. My thoughts wander to one of my interviewees.

When he was two years old Geoff Steele was adopted by a couple who had lost their baby, they were desperate for a son. From the time they picked him up from the Babies’ Home his doting adoptive mother continually fed him the line that he was super “Special,” and she told that to everyone else, too. As a child, Geoff couldn’t understand it at all when his adoptive parents’ families made it clear to him that they didn’t see him as special. In fact, they were forever putting him down and telling him he was not one of them because he was “only” adopted. As a child, this put him in terrible conflict.

Wondering how she will respond to that information as a sociologist and as someone who has worked first-hand with care leavers, I tell Joanna, and I say, -I’m only telling you about this because this man is in my study, and you’ll see his story.

Joanna says, -Ahh …

- I think your subject was really handed the extra bum-steer. Telling a child they’re special is a form of abuse.

I mean, my daughter’s special to me—but that doesn’t mean she is “Special.” She’s a child like any other child who has a collection of attributes. I mean we all can admire our kids for certain things and then wish they could be different in others, but they’re just people like everybody is, like we all are.

Teachers will tell you, “Oh God I’ve got to walk on egg-shells here, you’ve got to be careful what you say to the parents about their children because they’re special to them,” and that’s fine—in the normal run of things everyone’s child is special to them.
But to pump a child up with “You are Special,” is just as bad as hitting them or putting them down all the time, it’s just the other side of the coin.

If you hit a child all the time or continually put them down, you’re saying, “You’re rubbish,” and you’re not giving them the tools they need in order to handle life. But if you say “You’re Special” all the time, you’re actually puffing up their grandiosity and their ego in a way that is unrealistic, and you’re not giving them realistic tools to handle life. You hand them mixed messages.

Talking about mixed messages, as children we older care leavers were brought up to believe that we belonged to this white society … a society that was self-nominated as superior to black society in Australia, but yet we were taken away and abused by this superior white society of ours.

This is the other aspect of our history, it’s a class issue. It’s about being poor, and usually working class or lower middle-class. Wealthy people or well-off people got house-keepers or sent their kids to boarding school.

Isn’t that another form of abuse and abandonment, one that was socially accepted?

Yes, well, sometimes … in a way. In the early days we, the care leavers support network, had people ring us, and I also had someone ring me when I was doing my thesis research, and say, “I was in a boarding school, and it was just the same as being in a Home.” But it definitely wasn’t.

If you were in a boarding school at least you knew you had a home to go back to. But it wasn’t only because you knew you had a home to go back to. Boarding schools didn’t have a stigma attached. Homes had a tremendous stigma.

Now when I was researching for my thesis, and later when I worked for our network, one of the important things that came out of literally collecting information about who ran the Homes, where they were, how many kids they took, was about the length of time we spent in care. During those times I did quite a lot of figures—simple figures—on what was the average length of stay for children and it worked out around about seven and a half years. But quite a few had been in for ten years.

You mean the upper level? Oh … a few of us had been in a Home all of our childhood and more. So this all meant that people went into Homes young and they stayed a long time because—and which tells you something about the society of the era—there were no other supports for families.

My mother, for example, put us in a Home for three weeks while she got on her feet, but how could she? It was very difficult for a woman on her own without a husband, and there was very little social or
community or government support, and it was hard to get jobs if you were a woman. And if you did get work, who was going to look after your kids?

I was in the Home for twenty-one years, and unlike the woman who went to boarding school, I wasn’t allowed to go home to my mother. I didn’t have a home to go back to—nether did you, or the hundreds of other children who were in the Homes.

Our people weren’t wealthy or well-off. We were the children of the poor and those who had fallen on troubles.

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-So now, in order to tell you more, I have to go back to the history of how our national support network came about.

Leonie’s told you all about the political struggles and the Inquiry and our network’s name? Good. Well, after our first public meeting that Leonie’s told you about, our newsletters grew and came out regularly, and our membership grew. Leonie and I worked entirely in our own spare time—we were both working, and we both had children, homes, and marriages to run—so we both had very full lives.

It must’ve been early that next year that Leonie said to me, “There’s a Senate Inquiry into child migration—British and Maltese Child Migrants. We have to go and give evidence to that Inquiry and tell them that the children who came here were in Homes with us, and we were treated the same way.”

So I wrote the submission, because that was what I did and Leonie did all the ground work, and they gave us a place at one of the hearings.

Leonie and I were both very nervous, as we were in those days—it was quite new to us, speaking out, still quite hard, as you would understand—you know that feeling you get for some obscure reason, ‘I shouldn’t be doing this, I shouldn’t be speaking out?’

-Yes, I know the feeling exactly. I felt guilty about doing my own submission, and about writing my memoir. I guess I was ashamed by my history, and scared that people might think badly of me, and scared in case I was doing something wrong. I actually used to feel sick on the stomach when I spoke out, and I’d get embarrassed and want to run and hide.
It’s getting a bit easier now, though. But I still sometimes worry that people might think I’ve got a chip on my shoulder or I’m after pity or something when, really, all I want to do is write about unusual lives, so people will get to know about others.

Just as had Leonie Sheedy when I interviewed her, Joanna talks at length on the politicians who played a significant role in the history of the Care Leavers Australia Network. She lists the names of Government Ministers, who worked hard for the cause, and names the Senators and others who appeared at the Senate Inquiry Hearing into us, the Anglo-Celtic Australians who were in institutionalised and out-of-home care as children in the twentieth century.

My head spins, I look across the table at her and wonder at her remembering all these fine details, and I say, -Joanna I so admire you your energy and drive and capacity for all this.

Joanna sighs and says, -You know, Jo, I gave my entire life to the project …

-From the start of my thesis, and then immediately following that up with our support network, I’d been doing this work continuously for nearly twenty years. I worked day and night non-stop. But I couldn’t go on like that, at that level, because it’s too intense. Standing at the coal-face and chipping away is very stressful, and you’re up against that great desire not to believe this history. It also just is stressful work, and very full on.

I’m in my sixties now, and I’m at the stage you inevitably get to, where you think, “Well, what else do I want to do with my life before I shuffle off this mortal coil.”

So in July 2009 I resigned from office because I’d been doing it for long enough. But I’m not really retired. Leonie and I are still in touch and I still take a great interest in the care leavers’ network, and the issues of course.

But now I want to do other things, and my great interest is literature. I’m on the committee of the Jane Austen Society of Australia, and I’ve just given a course on a writer at the WEA—the Adult Education programme? And I tutor sociology through Macquarie University. I’m also doing some interviewing for the oral history project that’s being run by the National Library of Australia, called Forgotten Australians, I’m one of the interviewers for that. But that’s only intermittent interviewing.
-So can I ask you ... from now, looking back, what did you think about yourself when you first started all this?

-My perception of myself has changed. But I would say that it wasn’t setting out our Network that caused that to happen. It was more what came out of doing my thesis and then working with our support network. You see, because going to books and looking for answers in books was how I survived my childhood, I thought that was the way to understand my own personal childhood and history, but in fact what I needed was good therapy. And it was that therapy that helped me integrate my own history, and this history, this whole history of care, into my history of self, I suppose.

Now, what I feel about doing this work is also about why I had to finish. Doing all this was a stage in my life. It was a necessary piece of my personal jig-saw puzzle. And I’m personally very, very pleased that Leonie and I set up the Network. It’s a significant achievement, and it’s something I would never ever have done without Leonie, and I’ll say this and I’ll say it to her—she couldn’t have done it without me. And I couldn’t have done it without her, and I certainly wouldn’t have done it without her. I wouldn’t have even attempted it.

-When you were doing phone interviews for you thesis research, and when you were working for the support network, did you find it upsetting to listen to people’s stories?

-I found that when I was researching my thesis, listening to people talking about family and what had happened to them over and over again was what got me to that stage where in 1995 I said to my interim supervisor, Anna—my original supervisor was away—“Look, I just can’t seem to write.”

I just literally felt frozen. I didn’t feel sick, I just felt, “I can’t do anything.”

Anna said, “Hardly surprising, that’s a stage that was a foregone,” and she said, “Put your thesis aside, and get some help.”

I was lucky. I found a terrific therapist. I took quite a lot of time off from my university course, and then resumed and was able to finish my thesis.

Then when I worked for the Network, I found it very stressful in those early years, listening to people, and I got to a stage where I said to Leonie, “Look I can’t do that, you have to talk to people on the phone.”
It was so harrowing listening to the stories, and it was as much as I could do to read it all. So I would compile people’s stories for the newsletter, and feel angry and upset that this could be done to children. It made me so angry, and my anger was the hardest thing.

-So how do you feel now?

-Well I find that I have to be very careful because I really value my quality of life more and more as I get older, and you know, I know I’ve got less life, obviously … and speaking rationally, much less in front of me than behind me. I can’t afford to get terribly angry because I find myself getting angry now at the fact that what happened to children in the Homes and in care is so little recognised and acknowledged.

For example, at one event I went to, I picked up an academic book written about the history of Child Protection and it had almost next to nothing about Forgotten Australians and a great deal about the Stolen Generations. I felt really angry, and I felt like ringing that person and saying, “What sort of an academic are you, where have you been, under a rock? Your book was written in 2008. Who are you, what credibility have you got? Haven’t you heard of us?”

Another time I got really angry recently was when I went to a sixtieth birthday party and I sat next to a woman at the table who worked for FACS, and she didn’t know what I was talking about. She said, “Oh, you mean the Aboriginal children? No? Oh, you mean those children who came on the boats?”

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-Joanna, you’re a sociologist and former care leaver and the co-founder of CLAN. So in relation to care leavers and children in care, can I ask what you think children need? Like, in the old days people didn’t provide what the children needed.

-Let me say that it’s quite true that when we were in the Homes people thought differently about children from the way they do now. And you can’t judge the past on that. People didn’t have any idea of children’s rights or even individuality of children …

Now I’m not an expert on child welfare. But I know from my own therapy and my thesis research and from working with older care leavers that children are grief-stricken when they lose their parents, and whatever care they then go into, they need a lot of support and they need closure. They need to be reconciled with the fact that they’ve lost their parents.
There has to be recognition, and it is complex. You have to tell children the truth. That’s the respect children need. Children need to know who their family is, and, if possible, to be in touch with their parents. I think there are families that children can’t live with, and in that case they’re better off without their parents. But they still need to know who they are and where they come from, and they need to be told why they can’t live with their parents.

Admittedly, sometimes when a kid is told the truth about what really happened, someone wears a bit of flack as that child begins to grow up. But if they’re not told the truth, there can be even worse flack later on.

I believe very strongly that when children are removed from their parents they need support from a therapist, ideally one who is informed by psychoanalytic concepts which respect the child’s integrity. I think that not to give a child that support is a failure of duty of care because, no matter how necessary it is to remove a child from their parents, they are still going to have a sense of loss and abandonment and confusion and bewilderment. It’s not enough to put them with a lovely family and say, “Oh now you’ll be fine.”

So what I’m saying is that we need to recognise the grief and the pain involved in separating a child from their parents, and I don’t think we do.

Children only get a therapist if they start acting up or behaving badly or whatever—“Oh there’s something wrong with them,” oh durr! The reasons these children play up and act out is because they are grief-stricken and feel abandoned.

Really, it all comes down to understanding loss, and saying to the child, “How do you feel that you can’t live with your parents. I know that they hit you” or whatever, “but how are you feeling? Let’s try to deal with this together.”

Whatever sort of care the child has had, you have to start with the feelings. That’s a good base to start from. But do they do that? No. Instead, they just provide the child with all the material things to try to make up to the child for not having her or his own parents. And plying the child with material things doesn’t make a child feel happy or wanted; it only makes the child confused, and can make things worse for that child as they grow up.

Really, we’re still no better than the past. The outcomes from being in care are still appallingly terrible for children. Despite the amount of work that goes into Child Welfare compared to when we were
kids, and despite any amount of money they throw into Child Welfare now, they’re still not focusing on the right things.

-Kids in care need a lot of love, don’t they.

-I think that any child who goes into care is in a very difficult position. They know that the fact is they’re not the birth child of the family, they’re there as a foster child, and they require unconditional love and it’s a very big ask.

It’s like when people say about the Homes, “Oh, there was no love.”

Well I think, “Well why would there be?”

I think that’s too much to ask, these people weren’t the kids’ parents, they were paid workers.

But there should have been care and recognition—“These are really bereft children and they need the best care possible.”

-I heard that some of the Senators have suggested reopening Children’s Homes as a solution to the numbers of children in care today.

-Well look, residential care isn’t necessarily bad you know. Not every child can fit into a foster family. If they’ve been really badly treated, if they can’t trust anyone, and if there’s nobody in that family that can give them real one-to-one unconditional care they might do better in a very well structured residential environment.

You know, when I did my research for my thesis, I had a couple of respondents—I remember one in particular, she was in a Dr Bernardo’s Home in NSW.

In her Home there were boys and girls, and Bernardo’s wanted the boys and girls—although they had to have separate dormitories—to mix together. But the Child Welfare Department insisted on there being separate buildings for the dormitories, and the children were not allowed to eat together or even mix together very much.

But this girl said they had a couple who looked after them, and she said, “Of course we had that awful feeling that we didn’t have our parents. But we had a lot of fun, and they made fun for us.” The children had Empire Night, and nobody ever hit them, and they always had their birthdays celebrated. If you were a girl, say, you were taken into the city, and you chose a hat, and you got a new dress and socks and shoes and presents. Now that was better for that girl than being with abusive or neglectful parents or being in one of those terrible orphanages.
I’m just telling you that as an example of where a residential Home could be good if there was no other alternative. Residential care should be like living in a family. Like, instead of this community showering we had in the Homes, they should have turns to use the bathroom. Just as they would if they were living in a family, when it’s their turn they should have privacy, they need to be able to go in and shut the door.

Why can’t it be done like that? And if we haven’t got enough good foster carers, we have to start looking at residential care where at least the children have each other, and they have a good couple looking after them, and it’s very well structured.

See, you asked me what children need. They need structure, and they need to know who is boss. Now we, you and I, and hundreds of others in the Homes had too many, we had rigid boundaries.

Children today suffer from a lack of boundaries, and often have none, and that’s one reason they act up.

A child without boundaries pushes because a child without boundaries feels insecure and confused and that creates problems for them when they get to be adults.

The problem is I think, these days we’ve got crash syndrome, you know, we’ve crashed as parents and carers because we’re frightened to do this, or do that, for fear of what it would look like, and it’s all a result of the terrible past, of what happened back then.

Anyway, Jo, I don’t have all the answers. All I know is that they’re not going about things in the right way.

§

-So, Joanna, what do you think made you the sort of person who went ahead and did a PhD and everything that followed?

-Oh that’s a hard one to answer. I suppose that in one way I was very, very fortunate because the type of Home I was in was not run-of-the-mill—it was an odd little business—and I got an education and I then had a basis to work from.

I think that if you don’t get an education, even if you don’t feel particularly stigmatised, you still feel on shaky ground and don’t trust yourself to do things. But if you’ve got an education you take it for granted that you can do things, and you’ve also got the background to do other things and achieve.
But of course there are people with an education who still lack any sort of self-confidence or feelings of self-esteem. So education’s not a guarantee-all, but it is a start.

I grew up in an era when there were scholarships around. So I got two scholarships. I got a teacher’s college scholarship that gave you a living allowance, but you were bonded for five years to teach, and I got a Commonwealth scholarship that paid for you to go to university and that gave me another allowance.

Because I was in the Home, and I was there until I was twenty-one, I took the teacher’s college scholarship, and from then on I paid my way. I gave the Home board, I bought my own clothes, I bought the books I needed, and I paid my bus fares, but my tuition was paid by State, and when I finished I got a job and paid back the bond, a thousand dollars, which was a lot of money back in 1966.

So from the age of seventeen I looked after myself. But, because I was so institutionalised—I suppose you could call it—I didn’t know how to leave the Home, and at university I met someone who helped me. She got a flat, and we lived together in the flat.

But I would say that my great good fortune was finding the therapist I found when I was fifty, and that’s when I was able to start doing things properly and get on with my thesis because I was following a track that was familiar. If you don’t understand something you study it, and I was good at study, I knew how to study. It was a skill I’d developed. I enjoyed study.

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-Joanna, why do you think that all this happened to these children, why do you think these things happen in life?

-I don’t think like that Jo. I don’t believe in higher powers, I’m a very devout atheist. I’m a rationalist. I’ve had enough delusion in my life.

Look, life deals you a pack of cards. What you do with it, to some degree is up to your personality—we must be born with certain traits just like we’re born with brown eyes and our height.

I look at my family background and know that my grandmother was a fighter, she had gumption. And my great-grandmother was a fighter. My mother got a very bad deal because her father died from the Asian flu when she was a little girl. But she was a survivor in her own way, and I just think well there were certain traits coming through there because I’m a fighter.
But I look at all this and think I was incredibly lucky in being born into the twentieth century and not a hundred years or so earlier when women didn’t have the opportunities that women of my day got, and can get now. And given what I started off with—the pack of cards I was dealt, which was pretty poor—I’d say I’ve been particularly lucky.

I was only eight months old when I was put in the Home. My mother could have gone to the Welfare, and I would have gone to a Babies’ Home and then a Children’s Home and been separated from my sister. My mother heard about this Home because she knew someone who lived next door to the two women who were starting the Home. We were the first customers.

I think what also makes a difference in a person’s life is in the people you meet. I wonder if you feel this—that there are people in your life who’ve made a big difference?

-Oh, yes. Indeed, very much so.

-Well, in the Home they made me into their little pet, which was horrible in some ways. They separated me out from my sister and they threatened me with abandonment if I went to my mother and gave her my love.

On the other hand they looked after me very well physically and the older woman who ran the Home with her daughter encouraged my learning. She was a reader herself, and she bought me books.

And I had a lovely teacher at school, a Mrs Chapman, who now I realise knew I was a kid from the Home. She encouraged me. I responded, and I did well in her classes.

But I also think I was sort of shell-shocked, my feelings were pretty frozen. But, still, I put my head down and I studied and if you read my history you’d say, “Oh here’s a kid who made the most of what she got.”

You know, you see people who’ve had things offered and they haven’t taken them? Or they haven’t had opportunities? Well I was the opposite. I think I was very good at making the most of what I got, and who knows why that is. Is that what you call the survivor?

And then there have been others who’ve made a difference in my life. One was the supervisor I had when I was fifty, and who said to me, “Get some help.” She was very interested in psychoanalysis, so I found a psychoanalyst and that was top of the range help, a five star restaurant compared to the MacDonald’s help I’d had until then, and that was a real turning point for me.
So I think that what you make of your life is a combination of the people you meet, and what you make of what they offer you … all those factors. But even before all that it’s what you start off with, your gene pool.

It’s a bit like women who are born beautiful. You’re given something special, being born beautiful. But some women go off the rails because of that, and some women use it to their advantage, and other women use it to use other people, but there’s no doubt it opens doors.

§

-What do you think about these care leavers who have their list of opportunities, or can do something but don’t do it, and who feel sorry for themselves, and are so steeped in self-pity they just want to keep grovelling in it?

-Well I have a lot of empathy and sympathy for people like that.

I’ve felt very much like a victim at times, but I still kept going and did things even though it was very hard to let those negative feelings go.

But I think there are some victims who never get over the resentment of having been handed a raw deal and keep waiting for life to be handed to them on a plate.

Some people—now this is just my theory, because I’ve seen it, and I’ve seen it in people I know who aren’t necessarily care leavers—hang onto the victim mode because at some level they tell themselves, “I’m basically worthless, so the only way I’ll get anything in life is by being a victim and people will feel sorry for me, and then they’ll give me things … but once I let go of it I won’t get anything from anybody.”

They refuse to allow the thought, “I’m worth something, and people actually relate to me in life because they like me and because they enjoy me.”

It’s a real dead-end because victims are very awful to be around. And eventually they wear you out, and you just don’t want to see them, and you find yourself saying, “I can only take him or her in small doses” because it’s an ugly picture.

But I think the bottom line with the victim-mode is, “If I don’t play this role maybe I’ll be abandoned.” So it’s a very primitive child, and it is baby stuff.
-And I suppose that trying to console the victim, trying to make their childhood up to them by plying them with material things or attention enables that person to continue playing the victim. So, Joanna, how can a victim not be a victim anymore?

-Often victims won’t let go of the victim mode unless, or until, they get really good therapy and they can listen to what the therapist says. But it’s very hard to get through that. Some victims are very resistant.

-So how do you get victims to seek help and stop playing the victim?

-Jo, you can’t. They have to decide. It all goes back to being responsible for your own life, doesn’t it? They have first to be able to see, “I’m stuffing up my life and the lives of others close to me by doing this, and I’ll seek help.”

I suppose that’s something that I’ve always done. I have always looked for help, and I was lucky that I got a very good therapist. But she had to be very strong to help me because it’s very hard and painful to let go of the techniques that you’ve used all your life to survive in very emotionally dangerous circumstances.

-So can I ask, Joanna, who are you?

-What does that mean Jo? Who am I—in terms of what? How do you answer when someone asks you that?

Well, I am me, but having said that, to say “I am me” is really a very big statement.

As children in Homes, because we were cut from our moorings, our birth family, and to a greater or lesser degree knew who they were—some people didn’t have a clue, others had tenuous connections, for example, I had a relationship with my mother but I didn’t have a relationship with my father, I had no idea of him—and we all had our different combinations.

To be able to say as an older person who is a care leaver “I am me,” is a big statement. See, you lose yourself when you lose your family and your kin and your family home, and what you’re embedded in.

So for people like us, to make sense of yourself as an “I,” to make sense of yourself as a “Me,” is a much harder task than it is for children who grow up in a standard, what that British paediatrician and child psychiatrist Donald Woods Winnicott calls a “good enough” parents family—a “good enough” parented family. I think that means you mustn’t idealise the sort of family that you need in order to grow up feeling as a whole person, you just need a “good enough” parenting like Winnicott said—parents who have a decent and reasonable idea of what kids need. Sure they’re going to make mistakes, but not devastating mistakes
like our parents made, well, not mistakes so much as the actions our parents were forced into, and which had such devastating effects on our lives.

So I think that to create a Self, children create their “Self” from babyhood upwards and maybe even before, in the womb, and create who they are. And what they’re given adds to that … you know, with their environment obviously.

With us care leavers, we were cut off from our moorings and given an environment that is very un-nurturing to a sense of Self. For example, I got very good physical care which some children in some Homes didn’t get, but my Self was not nurtured at all.

Therefore, to say “I am me” now, is contrary.

So that’s mine, and I think Jo you’re probably in the similar …you know what I mean.

- Joanna I’ve noticed, and you would have noticed, that when people have been in care as children it comes back to haunt them when they’re in their fifties and sixties and older, and hits them right in the belly-button. Why is that?

- It’s an interesting question, I’ve thought about that quite a lot. Well there’s a sort of biological answer that’s just a superficial, that when you age, like your body, your mind and your psyche aren’t as resilient as when you’re young. And I think you have fewer defences perhaps, and things start coming in. You have less energy and less strength, and you look old, and you realise the doors are closing.

But I also think that for a lot of care leavers it does affect them very much when they’re young—like the ones that have done terrible things and ended up in gaol or died young because they’ve been alcoholics or done drugs. But generally speaking when you’re young you get on with things more and if you don’t have many resources you manage and a lot of things aren’t as catastrophic or feel as catastrophic as they do when you get older.

Not everyone gets wiser as they get older. A lot of people never get wise. They just get older and don’t cope as well because they haven’t resolved things. I think that’s what was happening to me when I did the thesis, nothing had been resolved. You can’t do like I said, “Oh, I’ll do a thesis and that’ll explain everything,” because it doesn’t address anything. And that’s part of the answer to your question—when you’re middle-aged, if you haven’t addressed all this pain, things can happen.
You see things happening in care leavers where they’re bodies start cracking it and they get sick. There’s the fact that some people didn’t get good physical care in their childhood and it comes back against them as they get older. And I suppose we all have things and there are the genetic or inherited factors. But with some older care leavers getting sick can be directly related to not resolving issues from their childhood. If you carry all that emotionally upsetting stuff, and if you won’t address it and release it from yourself it gets stored somewhere and things gets distorted in your mind and you develop … not mental illnesses as such, but the sorts of things like obsessions and difficulties and paranoid feelings.

I think that a lot of care leavers—I hate using clinical terminology, but sometimes it’s the only way to really convey what you’re trying to say—have personality disorders, narcissistic personality disorder or border-line personality disorder, and all that’s saying is (again, I hate this jargon) that they have a collection of symptoms which don’t aid their functioning in real life. Understandably they have disorders like this; it’s just a way of saying this person’s been stuffed up by their childhood. But once you put it into a cluster of symptoms you can say, “Oh well, these symptoms hang together, and the way we try to treat them is this.”

Mind you, I think a lot of the ways of treating these things just gives you a whole other set of rituals—like relying on pills for depression or whatever—and doesn’t get to the underneath. So I think that, with some care leavers, as they get to middle-age and older, any mental disorders they have actually get worse because the underlying issues haven’t been treated.

Then there’s the other thing you see with a lot with care leavers, and it’s really sad: because you’ve had a rotten childhood you don’t make good relationships, and you then end up alone. And you are alone if your kids don’t talk to you or you had a husband who beat you up, or a wife who was abusive to you. See you haven’t had those nourishing experiences that help people resign or come to terms with getting older, and there’s a whole collection of things that have gone wrong. It’s just really like you haven’t built a solid house, a “Self” house—you haven’t built yourself. So no wonder by the time you’re middle-aged or older you’ve just got this ramshackle house. Of course, it does happen with other people, too. But it’s more likely to happen to care leavers, and it’s the same with the Aboriginal people and Child Migrants and people who’ve had those deep traumas in their life.

Of course, people are all different. Some people have had opportunities and some have taken them and have something in their lives, but some haven’t done anything with or in their lives. And we’re talking here about someone who’s not had much help or opportunity or education.
I think the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is the theorist who talks about social capital. It’s a good concept … you know, poor people have less in social capital, rich people have more?

And we’re not just talking about material goods.

We’re talking about if you grow up in a household where learning is valued you’re more likely to want to be educated. If you grow up in a household where nobody ever reads a book and doesn’t value education you’re more likely to go down that path. But you might be very bright, and then if you’re living in an area where the schools are over-crowded and the teachers are fed up and there’s too many social problems you don’t get good schooling.

See what I mean? You’re served with a scholarship or a wild-card. That’s social capital.

Older care leavers would have a minus in social capital. So if you think of it in those terms, older care leavers who haven’t had much help or opportunity or education would start off with an actual burden, with bags that weigh them down, which actually is an opposite to social capital. So they have to deal with that, and then try to collect from social capital, from a very poor foundation.

- Joanna, you’ve opened my eyes here, in talking about social capital. Perhaps that could explain why I moved on and achieved. I didn’t go into the Home until I was three and I came from a home that was enriching for a child. I also had a natural curiosity.

In my pre-Dalwood life, when I lived at home with my parents, my mother had taught me to read, write, sing songs, and recite poetry. I had many books.

My father taught me a love of words and Shakespeare, and how to draw, and how to name and pinpoint the constellations in the starry night sky. Sometimes he took me with him when he was the St. John’s Ambulance officer on duty at the Bankstown swimming pool. There, he showed me how to remove wood-splinters from my own fingers and roll bandages, skills that seemed to stick in my head and surface in my adult life when I went nursing.

I write the words “social capital” in my notebook, put my pen down, and look at Joanna and say, -I guess I turned my life around because I had, and had always had, a love of learning despite everything, and quite early on I saw an education as a way out, as my ticket to freedom. Like you were, I was an opportunist.

-So okay Joanna, what are you?
-What am I? What do you mean, Jo, what am I.

Well, I’m my parents’ child—although I wasn’t brought up like that, I wasn’t allowed to be that growing up. I’m my siblings’ sister, and I’m a survivor.

-And you’re clever.

-Oh what is clever, what does clever mean, what does that mean? I think I’m smart at thinking this is a good opportunity, “Oh, I’ll take it, or how do I use this.” When I left the Home the way I got on was by observing people and thinking, “Oh is that how you do that.” So I was a quick learner. I think rather than saying clever, I’m good at learning things. You know, I think that what I really treasure most is my toughness, I don’t mean something unyielding. I say “tough as old boots”—they’re tough, they’ll tramp, and they’ll go the mile.

-Resilient.

-Yes. I’m resilient. But where does resilience come from? It’s a really interesting question. I wonder if resilience is incremental, like getting fit and staying fit. Or if you’re born naturally resilient, and I wonder if with some people you might start off resilient, but if you have too many terrible things happen to you that resilience diminishes. Is resilience something that you have to build on? What do you think?

-Oh, like you, I don’t know. It’s a vexed question, isn’t it? Things happen along the way in life, but surely personality, and the gene pool, has to come into it somewhere.

-Yes, I suppose that’s another component, isn’t it. Whereas some people might go under, or say, “Oh this terrible—this is too hard,” there are others who say, “What doesn’t kill me will make me stronger.”

You know, I’ve certainly often thought that, “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”

That doesn’t mean to say that the thing that doesn’t kill you doesn’t affect you because it does affect you. Or is there a limit to that?

-You mean, like the old cliché, “It’s always the last straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

-That one, yes. But now I’m thinking about Anne Shirley out of Anne of Green Gables. She was an orphan, and, well, she always found something lovely to hang onto, and not in that Pollyanna way.

-Anne’s lovely, she had the ability to dream.

-That’s true, and she is lovely. She did have that ability to dream. Maybe that’s the difference between people who are resilient and those who are not, those that are resilient have the ability to dream, or are prepared to hang on in the hope of something brighter. Remember imagination was the thing Anne
treasured so much? Maybe that’s why some people love her because she made the most of what she was
given.

*And Frank McCourt who wrote* Angela’s Ashes, *what was it he said in one of his documentary*
*comments?—*“the less you have the more you dream, because when you have nothing, dreams and hope are*
*all that you’ve got to hang onto”... or something along those lines anyway.*

-But some people don’t know how. I mean you meet people in everyday life who just have no imagination and no humour and no ability to dream. But we’re looking at care leavers here. It’s so interesting, isn’t it, why some people survive and others not.

If you’re thrown something bad, why do some go under? Of course there are lots of things, like the age of going into care. I think the older you were when you went into care, the more likelihood you had of having developed some sense of Self because kids progressively do that. But if you were very young, you wouldn’t have had much time to develop any sense of Self. And then of course, you were thrown into a very hostile environment and separated from siblings and parents and, well, I mean, what are you then going to work on?

And of course I think kids who went into a Home, and who already came from a totally chaotic and abusive home environment, were *certainly* way behind. But in our era, the Home was just what people did, not like now—kids go into care when there’s no other way, when it’s the very, very end of the line.

But back then, when families had a temporary crisis or a large scale crisis kids went into a Home just the same; because, back then, unlike now, there was no social support.

You know, some kids hadn’t had a bad time at all before they went into the Home— they were just ordinary kids from wherever. One care leaver, I remember, had a family who had a sheep station. And her family just had a terrible run of luck and lost all their money and she was put into a Home. It was a terrible shock to her. Of course, it would never have happened today. A child from that sort of background would never go into care. So it was a different era.

Yes. I think the parents of our generation were, would have been, traumatised by so many terrible events before-hand—you know, the Wars and the Depression, and of course, social attitudes.

You know that first CLAN survey that we did, the one which showed that at least forty-four per cent of people who went into care in that post-war era had had fathers who were in the War? Well what that means is that all those children’s fathers had come home after the war with absolutely no support to adjust to
normal life. See if your father had died in the War, Legacy helped you, but if your father hadn’t died, nobody helped you. I mean, he could come home and be violent or alcoholic or desert because he couldn’t cope, and then the kids would be stuck into a Home because the mother couldn’t cope. There was no social support.

-Or I suppose some fathers may have been physically or emotionally ill and put a lot of strain on the family ... and I also wonder just how much help Legacy was able to give.

I remember a woman I once knew telling me that she had been a Legacy child. She had lived with her mother but was often sent to stay with her grandmother while her mother worked shifts at the Manly Hospital. She told me her mother had to work in order to eke out the Legacy support and make ends meet.

Joanna gets up and goes over to kitchen bin. She flips the lid open, and posts her paper napkin and empty take-away coffee cup. -But Jo, her mother obviously had some family support, and even without that, your friend would never have gone into a Home. Legacy would have seen to that.

Our conversation idles along and becomes private chat. I make a note in my book to research a little into Legacy.

I turn the tape-recorder off, and immediately turn it back on again.

- Joanna I want to say it’s been a great honour and a privilege to be able to talk to you. I admire you greatly and feel that your voice will be a valuable addition to my work ... thank you so much.

-Oh heavens Jo, you’re welcome.

We talk a little more while I pack up my recording gear, and I say, -Joanna, would you give me permission to take a photo of you to use in my docu-memoir?

We walk down the kitchen stairs to the tiny back yard. Along the back wall of the house, frangipani trees are dropping the last of their flowers on the newly mown lawn. The sweet sharp scent of fresh-cut grass hangs heavy in the hot air. I angle the camera and take a photo of Joanna.

We go back inside to collect our things, say goodbye to the office staff, and walk out the front door.

There’s no sign of Bob or the car.

We stand at the front gate in the glare of the sun, and Joanna says, -Jo, I promised my daughter I’d meet her in town and if I don’t make the next train I’ll miss her.
I say goodbye, and watch Joanna as she hurries away down the long street until she disappears from my view. In my imagination I picture her boarding the train that will take her on her forward journey into Sydney and her meeting later in the afternoon. I see her happy smile as she hugs her daughter, and I think of my own loving and loved children.

It’s baking hot in the sun. I leave the front gate, and walk back up the path to stand in the shade of the verandah.

Twenty minutes later, Bob pulls up at the kerb and puts my gear in the boot of the car.

He says, -Come on, let’s go and eat. Last time we were here, I found something you might like to see.

§

Bob and I stand together in the strange tropical jungle that’s the centre court of Bankstown Sports Club. A waterfall cascades down one rocky wall. Large Koi carp swim in lazy circles in the man-made lake below. I look up, and come eye to eye with a tree snake set to strike, and jump backwards. But the thing isn’t interested in me. It’s only a very clever model. I put out my hand and touch the leaves of the vine. It’s a living plant. So are the flowering orchids, so are the palms—but wait, are they? Some are living plants, and some are artificial. I ask myself, “Is this is what you might call art, and if not, what is it exactly?”

The centre court opens out into a grand Japanese courtyard restaurant on one side, an even grander Chinese pagoda restaurant on the other, and a Mexican bar restaurant just beyond. Further along, there’s a railway entrance.

We order our dinners, and sit at our table on the station platform and wait. Alongside us, the train is in. I peer through the carriage windows and catch glimpses of white linen tablecloths and fine glassware and silver cutlery and candlesticks, and creamy-white bows tied to the backs of chairs.

Bob nods his head towards the opposite wall where two old-fashioned timbered carriages sit on a rail-siding. We climb the steps at the back of a carriage, and stand on the balcony. We walk through the carriage doorway into a Hollywood film-set of velvet curtains, Victorian glass chandeliers, and tables set for fine dining. But just like the train in the station, it’s a ghost train. There are no diners, and no passengers, and no food or drink on the tables.
Our number is called, and we go back to our railway station booth. Bob grins, and says, "Isn’t this great?"

I hear the shrill screech of the station-master’s whistle. Up ahead on the line, the signals change. But the train doesn’t move, it goes nowhere, and by the looks of it, never will again. It rests, permanently fixed to the rail line, and makes up one side wall of the restaurant.

I chew thoughtfully on a mouthful of roast pumpkin and stare at the waiting train and I say, "That stupid train has already arrived at a dead-end. Anyone who boards it will never experience the excitement of a journey, or the thrill of making various stops along the way to their destination. Their on-board lives will be held in a state of limbo. And they’ll starve to death because there’s no food or drink on board."

My mind flies to the morning’s conversations with Joanna. Is being on this train something of what it’s like for those older care-leavers who have a double minus in, or even the opposite of, social capital?

We finish eating and stand up to go. I glance over my shoulder at the train as I walk away, and shudder. I suppose some people might find the train that goes nowhere appealing, but it is not, and never was for me. I leave it behind as we walk through the air-conditioned coolness of the club and out through the fancy glass doors and into the stifling heat.

The sun no longer glares down on our bare heads. Suddenly, we stop and stare up at the sky. While we’ve been playing at make-believe inside the club, outside in the real world, the sky has filled with massive blue-black thunderheads.

The storm breaks as we drive out of Bankstown and head north towards the Hunter Valley and home. Two hours later, we stop for fuel at the service station on the freeway. The storm has been widespread, but it’s passed through now, leaving the remains of the day feeling fresh, and pleasantly cool.

Worn out after the last two months of intensive interviewing, I sit back in the passenger seat and drift into a half-sleep. I dream about the train and come suddenly awake to ask myself exactly why it is that I survived being in care when so many other care leavers didn’t. I can’t find an answer that satisfies, and I tell myself, “There are too many variables in the mix, and I could drive myself crazy trying to unravel it all.” I let it go.

It feels good to have completed the interviews that I will use as the resource material for my documenario. I know there are many hours and weeks of work ahead of me, transcribing and writing.
But I’m looking forward to that because I find that looking back to the past in order to write something for the future is a rather exciting prospect. And I know that without the past, there can be no future.

As we continue our journey homewards along the freeway, the late-afternoon sun throws its eerie after-storm light across the thick bush on either side of the road. Now, the world looks golden and new, and full with autumn promise.
NOTES

Introduction

The Community Affairs References Committee of the Australian Senate Inquiry into children in institutionalised and out-of-home care in the 1900s, coined the term Forgotten Australians. Their findings are published in the following reports:


Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited: Report on the progress with the implementation of the recommendations of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australian Reports. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009.


PART I

Jo Parnell’s Story


PART II

Geoff Steele’s Story

Albury and Wodonga are twin border-towns. They are separated by the Murray River which comes under the jurisdiction of the NSW Roads and Maritime Services. Albury is on the NSW border, and Wodonga is on the Victorian
border. The twin towns are linked by the Hume Highway—the Federal highway which is commonly known as the Wagga Road—part of which is the Spirit of Progress Bridge which spans the Murray River. The border point is on the northern edge of Wodonga.

2 “Floozy” is an informal word. A “floozy” is a loose woman, rather immoral.

3 “MacDonald’s”; food from MacDonald’s take-away food outlet, and which is considered by many to be of inferior quality.

4 Geoff explained that the game “allies-and-enemies” was somewhat similar to “cowboys-and-Indians,” but was inspired by the war years.

5 “Nut house”; a colloquial slang term for “mental institution.”

6 Meeting under the clocks in the grand Edwardian Baroque building of the iconic Flinders Street Railway station is a time-honoured tradition in Melbourne.

7 “Took the plate in the church to the cleaners”; Geoff explained that during this time, to make up what he felt he should have been getting in wages, he would frequently “knock off,” steal, the money from the church collection plate.

8 In Australian colloquial slang, if someone is said to be a “nutter,” it is meant that they are mentally ill.

9 “Two plates and a glass”; Geoff explained that when he relocated to Howlong with just his cat and his dog, he had almost nothing other than his car, a very few personal items, and the clothes he stood up in. His good friend gave him a deck chair, a camp stretcher, a knife a fork and a spoon, and two plates and a glass to get him by until he could find a way to “stand on his own two feet.” He uses the expression as a metaphor for being “dirt poor.”

10 I asked Geoff what he meant by “the cane-fields in between”. He explained to me that in the sugar-cane growing areas in Queensland, a great many cane-farms, each consisting of a couple of hundred acres or more, circled each of the various towns where the processing plants were situated, and this created business for those towns. The cane farms actually separated each of the towns one from the other, and each of the towns jealously guarded their business. This factor, along with the fact that “the sugar-cane grew so tall you couldn’t see beyond it,” created each of the towns as isolated and insular “pockets.” So, according to Geoff, if you lived and worked in a particular town you belonged to that area and you were recognised, and you got business from within the area—you were “in town and still in business.” But if you moved to another area you were no longer recognised by that town or by its people because “the cane-fields in between (places) was enough to say” that you’d “left town” and were no longer in business.

11 Howlong is a peaceful hamlet on the Murray River. It is situated over a hundred kims west of Albury, approximately mid-way between Albury and Corowa, and lends its name to the surrounding area which consists only of farming properties.
The Brownie was a low-priced, point-and-shoot, hand-held camera simple enough for even children to operate it with ease.

Geoff explained his words as meaning that his existence, the life he lived, lacked a feeling of certainty, solidity and permanence, that the situation in which he lived at any one time was fragile, and easily broken.

**Bev Osborne’s Story**

1. Shepparton in Victoria is famous for its orchards of stone fruit and apples and pears. The country town has its own canneries, and many people travel from hundreds of miles away to stock up on tinned fruit bought at reduced prices straight from the canneries.

2. The Albury Railway Station was built in 1881 at what was then the end of the main south line, 642 km from Sydney. The railway precinct at Albury is of state significance. The colonial grandeur of the rail station reflects the major role it played in the transportation of agriculture and goods in Australia in earlier days.

3. Bev’s colloquial slang which roughly translates as, “I thought you might find that information rather amusing.”

**Barbara Walters-Smith’s Story**

1. Simply called “Wagga” by the locals and many other Australians, the city of Wagga Wagga is situated in NSW on the Murrumbidgee River, halfway between Sydney and Melbourne.

2. “Git”; mispronunciation for “get,” as actually used by Barbara in her interviews (and so in her transcripts), and which she sometimes uses interchangeably with the word “get.” The same applies to Barbara’s use of “me” when referring to herself, or her parents, or her ownership of, say, objects, and which she sometimes uses interchangeably with the word “my” in the same sense. Barbara says she is uneducated.

3. T.B.; this is how many people in Australia refer to the disease “tuberculosis.”

4. “Run like buggery” is an Australian colloquially slang term, not intended to reflect its original meaning, rather to indicate that one is running very quickly indeed as in “run like the wind,” for instance.

5. At this stage I’m not to know that later I will learn that in some countries, such as Costa Rico, it’s an old tradition to give all the girls in the family the same Christian name which is then followed by a second given name so that the girls can be distinguished one from the other—like, Maria Louisa, Maria Carla, Maria Eliza, and so on.

6. “Whapped”; this is Barbara’s colloquial slang word for either “whipped” or “whacked.”

7. “Barrer”; this is the way Barbara pronounces “barrow.”

8. “Stumped”; this is Barbara’s colloquial slang word for the death of any hope of realising her dreams.
CLAN is the acronym for Care Leavers Australia Network which is a support and advocacy network for people who
grew up in orphanages, Children's Homes, foster care, missions and other institutions in Australia in the twentieth
century.

Mick Riley’s Story

1 “Maccas”; this is an Australian slang term for MacDonald’s take-away food.
2 When you put goods on “tick,” you take the goods but owe the shop or business the money, and pay for it later.
3 “I was starting to get me oats”; Mick means that, at that stage, he was starting to grow up and was trying to assert his
independence.
4 To “get into it boots and all” is colloquial slang that uses the word “boots” informally; it means putting your whole
self into whatever you’re doing. In Mick’s case, this was involvement in a physical fight.
5 “Wide boys” are petty criminals. These men and boys operated in gangs that roamed the streets of London and
terrorised people.

PART III

Leonie Sheedy’s Story

1 The 1997 Wood Royal Commission into the paedophile section of the NSW Police Force in the twentieth century.
2 The Donor Conception Support Group is a self-funding organisation run by volunteers offering a support system to
meet the needs of families with donor children.
3 “Get on the blower and ear-bash people”; this is Leonie’s use of colloquial slang. What Leonie means is that she
called people on the phone and talked at them, rather than to them, about her project.
4 AFA, or Alliance for Forgotten Australians, is not a support service or a general membership body. It is an advocacy
body, a place where existing support groups come together to speak with one voice.
5 For information about the national Apology speech made by the leader of the Federal Opposition Government, the
Hon. Malcolm Turnbull M.P., see the APPENDIX to this work.
6 Following Australia’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s National Apology, the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown
offered a formal Apology to the British and Maltese people, the former Child Migrants, who, as children, were sent not
only to Australia, but also to other countries such as Canada for instance.
7 In January 2012, almost a year after I interviewed Leonie Sheedy, ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and
Reporting Authority) amended and updated the school curriculum to include: for Year 6 students, investigative study
segments on “the experiences of democracy and citizenship of children who were placed” in care; and for Year 10 students, investigative study segments on the legacy of children’s experiences” in care. These new elaborations on the existing curriculum apply “to include all the various groups of children who were in orphanages, Children’s Homes, foster care and other forms of out-of-home care” in Australia in the past.

A shadow box is a display box and is usually wall-mounted. It is an enclosed glass-front case or glass-fronted box-frame with depth, and is used to contain a work of art, or a piece with personal significance or historical interest (sometimes a newspaper clipping, or a letter, or a photo,) or object or objects presented in a thematic grouping with artistic or personal significance. The grouping of the objects and the depth effect created by their relative heights from the backing creates a dramatic visual result. Shadow boxes are frequently used to contain objects created purely for artistic goals.

“I don’t give a rat’s fig,” is the same as saying “I don’t give a rat’s arse.” This is an Australian colloquial slang term for saying you don’t care about something because, for you, it is simply not a consideration.

“Hankie”; an Australian colloquialism for “handkerchief.”

KPMG is the acronym for the audit and advisory firm who work for national and international institutions and bodies to provide answers to questions about national and international accounting.

Joanna Penglase’s Story


Paul John Keating (born 18 January 1944) is a former Australian politician who served as the 24th Prime Minister of Australia from 1991 to 1996.

“Winos”; alcoholics whose preference is wine.

“Plonk”; a colloquial slang word meaning “cheap wine.”

Balmain is an inner-city suburb in Sydney.

I conducted these interviews with Joanna in March 2011. Now, as I write this, it is May 2013. This year, the required text for first year history undergraduate students at the University of Newcastle is Gare and Ritter (Deborah Gare and David Ritter, eds. *Making Australia History: Perspectives on the Past Since 1788*. Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia, 2008). This text takes into account the history of the Stolen Generations and the Asians and other immigrants, but does not mention the Forgotten Australians or the former Child Migrants, the so-called British Boat Children, in any way at all.

“Service gapping”; there were so many unwanted or neglected children that the Government had inadequate funds to fully supply services to child welfare for children in Homes and orphanages and out-of-home care. Consequently, there was a “gap” in services. The charities and churches stepped in to help fill that gap.

Joanna is saying that the quality of therapy she had received previous to finding her good therapist is analogous to a Macdonald’s take-away meal compared to fine dining at a top-hat restaurant.
APPENDIX

Apologies Offered, and Monument Memorials, to the Forgotten Australians
1999-present
Queensland Government Apology (25 August 1999)

On the 25th of August 1999 the Queensland government, together with representatives of churches and religious bodies, issued a formal apology for past abuse and neglect in Queensland institutions. The apology was given in response to the findings of the Forde Inquiry, the State's Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, which reported on the 31st of May 1999, and reads as follows:

“We the government and churches together welcome the report of the Forde Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions. We acknowledge that there have been failures with respect to the children entrusted to our care, despite all the good the Institutions did in the light of their day. The result has been a system in which some children have suffered maltreatment, and their social, emotional, and physical needs have been neglected. We sincerely apologise to all those people who suffered in any way while resident in our facilities, and express deep sorrow and regret at the hurt and distress suffered by those who were victims of abuse. We accept the finding of the Forde Inquiry that government under-funding and consequent under-resourcing was a significant factor in the failure to provide adequate services to children in care.

We are committed to establishing and continuing dialogue with victims of abuse in institutions to discuss the basis for providing appropriate responses. We acknowledge that discussions are well advanced between some parties.

We are committed to working together with victims of abuse in institutions to ensure the provision of appropriately coordinated services through the establishment of a 'one stop shop', as recommended by the Forde Inquiry.

This initiative will be integrated with church and government run services and processes for bringing about reconciliation with victims of abuse in institutions. The focus will be on providing victims with the most effective path to healing. We are committed to continuing to provide such services as long as they are needed.

We recognise the value of formal reconciliation experiences in healing the hurt some have suffered, and undertake to plan these in consultation with former residents.
We are committed to doing all we reasonably can to ensure that children in our care are not subject to abuse and neglect. Further, we are committed to ongoing review and improvement of our services to children and families.”

Permission given by CLAN on 28 May 2013 to copy this material from their website:

Victorian Government Apology (9 August 2006)

The Victorian Apology was delivered in the Victorian parliament on the 9th of August 2006 by the then Premier Steve Bracks and reads as follows:

“The government of Victoria welcomes the report of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Forgotten Australians, which was tabled in the Senate on 30 August 2004, as it offers an opportunity to offer a public statement of apology about some of the past practices in the provision of out-of-home care services in Victoria.

The report provides a detailed picture of the life experiences of many people who as children spent all or part of their childhood in institutional care across Australia. The experiences of many of these children were distressing and have had an enduring detrimental effect on their lives. The Victorian government believes it is important that these histories are known, are heard and are acknowledged.

The government is working hard to ensure that those unacceptable past practices are never ever again experienced by any Victorian child.

We acknowledge that there have been failures with respect to many children entrusted to care.

As a result of being placed in care, many of these children lost contact with their families.

The state, the churches and community agencies cared for thousands of children over the years. For those who were abused and neglected, the message we wish to give to them is that we acknowledge their pain and their hurt.

We are also committed to working together with survivors of abuse and neglect in care to promote the healing process.

We take the opportunity provided by the release of this report to express our deep regret and apologise sincerely to all of those who as children suffered abuse and neglect whilst in care and to those who did not receive the consistent loving care that every child needs and deserves.”

**NSW Government Apology (23 June 2005)**

On the 23rd of June 2005, regarding the Senate Inquiry, this Apology was issued by Reba Meagher MP Minister for Community Services, Minister for Youth, from the NSW Government.

“The Government of New South Wales apologises for any physical, psychological and social harm caused to the children, and hurt and distress experienced by them while in the care of the State. We make this apology in the hope that it may help the process of healing.

The New South Wales Government is strongly committed to supporting families to reduce the need for children to be in care. Where children and young people are placed in care, the Government will assist with the services available to them.

We hope that this apology will be accepted in the spirit in which it is made and that the New South Wales Government, our community partners and the community at large can continue to work together to build a better and safer place in which our children can live, grow and flourish. We know we need to listen to these people and work with them to make this a reality.

I thank the House for the opportunity to make this important and much overdue statement. I hope this apology, along with other measures that I have outlined today, will help bring healing and help to those young Australians who, at a vulnerable time in their lives, were let down by the system.”

**NSW Government Apology (19 September 2009)**

On Saturday the 19th of September 2009, on behalf of the NSW Government, the then NSW Premier Nathan Rees made a formal Apology to the former care leavers of NSW who had spent part or all their childhood in orphanages, Children’s Homes, institutions, and other out-of-home care in the twentieth century. Premier Nathan Rees made his Apology during the Healing Service for NSW Care Leavers. After he had delivered his Apology the premier unveiled the Memorial to the Forgotten Australians of NSW.

Permission given by CLAN on 28 May 2013 to copy this material from their website:

Western Australian Government Apology (7 April 2005)

On the 7th of April 2005, Western Australia issued an apology, in the form of a parliamentary statement, to “people who were harmed in institutional care” as children during the twentieth century.

“The recent report of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care highlights the experiences of many Western Australians who were in institutional care from the early 20th Century until the 1970s.

The Western Australian Government welcomes the report and acknowledges its findings that many children in the institutions suffered neglect or abuse at the hands of some of the adults entrusted with their care. Many of these children were placed in the institutions by past Government agencies.

The report calls upon State Governments to issue formal statements acknowledging their role in the administration of institutional care arrangements and apologising for physical, psychological and social harm caused to the children in the institutions.

Accordingly this Government apologises to all those people who were harmed as children while in institutional care and expresses deep regret at the hurt and distress this caused. We recognise that the effects of the physical, psychological or sexual abuse did not end when these children became adults and that for some of these people the experiences are still as deeply felt today.

We are committed to support victims of abuse in institutions through the provision of counselling and information. Since 1985 the Department for Community Development has had a dedicated information officer to provide personal information to former Wards. The Department has produced Looking West – a Guide to Aboriginal Records in Western Australia to assist in the location of records for this significant group.

Another publication, Signposts to be launched next month, will guide people who were children in residential care from 1920 onwards to agencies where their records might be located. Counselling is also provided on request through the Department to any person who experienced abuse in an institution or out-of-home care. It is important to learn from the past.

This Government is committed to the improvement and enhancement of services to children in out-of-home care to ensure they are not subjected to abuse or neglect.
Quality assurance processes have been strengthened and additional resources have been provided to the Department for Community Development for better management, supervision and support of children in care.”

Permission given by CLAN on 28 May 2013 to copy this material from their website:

Shared South Australian Government and Church Apology (2008)

In 2008, the then Premier of South Australia, the Hon Mike Rann MP, issued this Shared Government and Church Apology to those harmed in State Care in South Australia during their Childhood

“We, the Government of South Australia and the Churches recognize that some children and young people who were placed in our care suffered abuse that has impacted on their lives. This should never have happened.

We are sorry and we express deep regret for the pain and hurt that they experienced through no fault of their own.

We acknowledge that in the past some carers and others who have worked in the area have abused the trust what was placed in them.

We acknowledge that the policies and practices in the last century did have a detrimental effect on some who grew up in State care.

To all those who experienced abuse in State care, we are sorry.

To those who witnessed these abuses, we say sorry.

To those who were not believed, when trying to report these abuses, we say sorry.

We are sorry for the pain shared by loved ones, husbands and wives, partners, brothers and sisters, parents, and importantly, their children.

Our apology is given in a spirit of reconciliation and healing and with our commitment to contribute toward a child safe environment in our Government, our churches and the broader community.

We commit to do all that we reasonably can to ensure that children in our care are not subject to abuse and that those who have abused are brought to justice.”

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Tasmanian Government Apology (17 May 2005)

The Apology was delivered on the 17th of May 2005 in the form of a motion moved by the then Premier Mr Paul Lennon in the Tasmanian Legislative Assembly. The CLAN summary is as follows:

“Premier Lennon's speech on the apology motion contained statements acknowledging the abuse suffered by children in State care and expressing deep regret. The Premier also expressed the Tasmanian government's commitment to providing appropriate services for care leavers and to further funding of the Tasmanian redress scheme.”

The Apology is as follows:

“I move that this House:

(1) acknowledges and accepts that many children in the care of the State were abused by those who were meant to care for them and provide a safe and secure home life;

(2) apologises to the victims and expresses our deep regret at the hurt and distress that this has caused; and

(3) acknowledges the courage and strength it has taken for people to talk about events that were clearly traumatic and which continue to have a profound impact on their lives.”

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Federal Opposition Government Apology to the Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants (16 November 2009)

On the 16th of November 2009, the then Federal Opposition Government leader, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull M.P., made his National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants (adults now, these British and Maltese people were also known as the British Boat-children). Malcolm Turnbull delivered his Apology on the same day that the then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivered his National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants on behalf of the Federal Government.

Too long to be included here, the full transcript of Malcolm Turnbull’s Apology can be viewed on page 17 on the following website:


Permission given by CLAN on 28 May 2013 to copy this material from their website:

Other Apologies Received

This page is an extract from the CLAN website:

“The following apologies were received following the Senate Inquiries into care leavers.

The Anglican Church of Australia (1st April 2010)

“The Anglican Church of Australia sincerely apologises to the children whose experiences in institutional and out-of-home care provided by the Anglican Church caused them hurt, distress, and harm.”

The Canadian Prime Minister (11th June 2008)

The Canadian Prime Minister offered a full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system.

The Benevolent Society (January 2007)

“The Benevolent Society has a strong commitment to working with children and their families in need of support. It is because of this commitment that we wish to make a public statement of apology about past practices in our provision of residential care. The Board and staff feel strongly that we should acknowledge our history and the role that we played in providing any inadequate care for children placed with us.”

The Irish Prime Minister (11th May 1999)

The Irish Government apologised to victims of child abuse and the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, announced the establishment of a commission of inquiry and other measures.”

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CLAN - Care Leavers Australia Network - Apologies Received

Monuments and Memorials in Australia to Care Leavers

The creation of suitable memorials commemorating care leavers was a joint initiative between the Australian Government and the State Governments following a Senate Report detailing accounts of historic abuse and neglect of children in care in twentieth century Australia.

The Queensland Memorial

The inscription on the memorial reads:

“In memory of all the children who suffered and of those who did not survive abuse in the Church and State Children’s Institutions and homes in Queensland. ‘For there is nothing hidden, except that it should be made known, neither was anything made secret but that it should come to light.’ ”

This bronze, life-size statue of a barefoot boy in tattered clothes, carrying a battered suitcase in his right hand, is known as the Historic Abuse Network Memorial, or the Child Abuse memorial. It was unveiled in Brisbane, Queensland in 2004 and in 2006 was relocated to Cathedral Square.

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Alliance for Forgotten Australians AFA - Monuments

The South Australian Memorial

The inscription on the memorial plaque reads:

“Memorial to all the Forgotten Australians & Wards of the State. In honour of children who suffered abuse in institutional and out-of-home care. We have grown through awareness and unity. We celebrate our courage, strength and resilience. We are no longer forgotten. Dedicated to the future protection and nurturing of all children. 17 June 2010.”

The memorial consists of four huge stainless steel daisies, each in a different stage of opening, as a symbol of hope and healing for the children who suffered harm in out-of-home care in twentieth century Australia. The tallest daisy in the memorial stands over 6 metres tall.

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Alliance for Forgotten Australians AFA - Monuments

The Western Australia Memorial

The words on this memorial read:

“This memorial is jointly funded by the Western Australian and Commonwealth Governments and is dedicated to all Western Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children.

This memorial brings the ‘Forgotten Australians’ out of the shadows and into the light. Their most enduring legacy will be that the people now and in the future will know their stories and build upon them as a platform for better care.

There is a strong thread that links the way a child is raised with the person they become in adulthood. This memorial stands as a reminder of that thread to all who create policies that affect children.”

This memorial was unveiled on 10 December 2010. It stands on the grassed area in front of the Western Australian Museum’s Jubilee Building, Perth Cultural Centre, in James Street, Perth. Modelled on a children’s fortune-telling game made of a folded paper square, the corners and flaps bear the words of Forgotten Australians themselves about their past experiences and present situations.

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Alliance for Forgotten Australians AFA - Monuments

The NSW Memorial

“For Forgotten Australians. In this place, we remember the many thousands of NSW children who grew up in care in the decades leading up to the 1990s—in orphanages, in Children’s Homes and foster homes, in institutions.

We remember the lonely, the frightened, the lost, the abused—those who never knew the joy of a loving family, who suffered too often at the hands of a system meant to provide for their safety and wellbeing. We rejoice in their courage and strength. This corner of the Gardens is dedicated to their memory.

Erected by the Australian and NSW Governments 19 September 2009.”

The memorial is a stone plinth which stands at the Twin Ponds site in Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens.

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Alliance for Forgotten Australians AFA - Monuments

The Victorian Memorial

The memorial inscription reads:

“‘World within, world without,’ (2010) Helen Bodycomb. This artwork reflects the constellations above Victoria at 11 a.m. on 16 November 2009, when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made his national apology to the ‘Forgotten Australians’. Wattle blossoms represent the one thousand most visible stars and planets, one for every one hundred children who were in Victorian state care. Here we remember those thousands of children whom were separated from their families and grew up or spent time in Victorian orphanages, children’s homes and foster homes last century. Many were frightened, abused and neglected. We acknowledge the many shattered lives and the courage and strength of those who survived. Unveiled the 25th October 2010 and developed with the support of the Australian and Victorian Governments and the City of Melbourne.”

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Alliance for Forgotten Australians AFA - Monuments

The Tasmanian Memorial

To date, I have been unable to find a transcript of the inscription on the Tasmanian memorial.

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Canberra has its own initiative as a memorial to care leavers who spent part of all of their childhood in Homes, institutions, and out-of-home care in Australia in the twentieth century. The Canberra memorial is housed in the National Museum of Australia, and is posted in the form of articles and lectures, and documents and film, and the written and also the spoken memories of Forgotten Australians, and their photographs, letters, and drawings and songs.

The Northern Territory also has its own memorial to past care leavers, and is entitled “No more tears for Forgotten Australians.” This memorial is in the form of a large panel of handkerchiefs sewn together. Each of the handkerchiefs has been decorated by people who spent part or all of their childhood in Children’s Homes or institutions. The handkerchief memorial is on loan to the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, and forms a part of their exhibition which is titled “Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions.”