

THE FASHIONABLE MUSLIM

WRITTEN BY

DALLAS GOPI

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF CREATIVE WRITING**

20TH APRIL 2010

SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

PRIMARY SUPERVISOR: JOHN CRANNA

Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship	iii
Abstract	iv
Note by authour	v
Exegesis – Don’t fight it Marsha, it’s bigger than both of us. (4008 words).	vi
Exegesis – References	xviii
Novel – The Fashionable Muslim (53,600 words).	1 -180

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Name: Dallas Gopi

Date: 20th April 2010

Abstract.

The Fashionable Muslim is a story about pragmatism, but not obviously so. It's also a story about how too much is choice as opposed to too little choice can be a major cause of scepticism.

(Note by author).

It is my intention that the following exegesis shows how I have attempted to incorporate my argument(s) as the main storyline for my novel *The Fashionable Muslim* and how rapidly changing urban multiculturalism will eventually affect a historically bi-cultural society like Auckland city. I won't however be attempting to draw conclusions between my evidence-based exegesis and my novel within this document because I believe that the purpose of this document is demonstrate how multiculturalism is happening and going to continue to happen whether people like it or not. I would hope that this evidence-based document speaks for itself and the accompanying fictional novel creates a similar conclusion through its narrative and story structure.

You can't fight it Marsha, it's bigger than both of us.

It seems highly likely that when Phillip K Dick was writing Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?¹ the dystopic post-apocalyptic Los Angeles year 2019 was a relatively faithful reproduction of what Los Angeles was envisioned by many of that era to look like. It was seventy years away and The United States of America was on the verge of sending men into space.² All number of comic book superheroes lined the shelves of newstands promising readers exiting futuristic crime-busting tales while programs such as Lost in Space³ and Star Trek⁴ hit America's television screens.

The future was going to an exciting place and before the end of the century it was commonly believed that people would be travelling to work in flying saucers instead of cars and buses. Now with only fourteen years to go it seems unlikely that the City of Angels will become the dystopic city that Dick's novel portrays. Neither is it likely to evolve into the heavily Asian styled homogenised remix of New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo's Ginza district that is plainly evident in Ridley Scott's Blade-Runner⁵, the film adaptation of Dick's novel.

In actuality, The Los Angeles of the future probably won't be much different to the Los Angeles that currently exists bar a few more buildings and some more freeways. With less than two-decades to go it seems more that L.A. will likely be a heterotopic city – neither dystopic urban sprawl⁶ or the utopic garden of eden but more something in-between. Giant television screens advertising geisha girls and infomercials promising a better life in the colonies as they do in Blade Runner will not be on the side of every building and the street level won't be crammed with sushi bars and shady-looking shopkeepers who offer bio-genetic operations in back rooms of their seedy

businesses. The Sci-fi city is certainly exciting to read about and exciting to watch but I'm sure if given the choice most of us would not want to live in such a corrupt and polluted environment amongst the yellowskins⁷ speaking cityspeak.⁸

I will attempt to argue that the basis for the mise-en-scene for the dystopic city we admire in books such as Do androids dream of electric sheep, Neuromancer and films like Blade Runner and The Fifth Element,⁹ finds its impetus from the deeply rooted scepticism and xenophobia of the western world populous. I will attempt to show how the west is fearful of an eventual takeover by Asian nations and that novelists and film-makers have drawn upon this fear of difference, either wittingly or unwittingly, and amplified it considerably in order to create a fictional environment that fits and often complements the protagonists struggle to escape to a safer and cleaner, less populated environment.

Respected Italian economist Loretta Napoleoni author of Rogue Economics: Capitalism's New Reality¹⁰ suggests that the world's economy is undergoing a major redistribution of monetary power that will create a very different world over the next several decades. Napoleoni calls this financial swing 'a rewriting of the social contract'¹¹ and suggests that it is already taking place in the larger Western cities. She projects that the current financial powerbrokers, Europe and the United States, will eventually forfeit control to an invisible axis of new world order that stretches from Beijing to Cape Town, incorporating the Middle East and much of Africa¹². Napoleoni even suggests that the gold dinar¹³ will be the new standard for international currency exchange and will replace the US dollar as the benchmark for trade. With the dinar as the new standard international importers and exporters will save many hundreds of billions of dollars per year hedging against currency losses in global trade, thus making the holders of the dinar the real power brokers.¹⁴

Napoleoni's reasoning behind such a dramatic shift in financial power appears to be born from her analysis of rapidly changing ideology amongst the governments and the populous of (what were) third world countries. She uses the 1997 Asian financial crisis as an example. In response to crash the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mohammed Mahathir refused help from the International Monetary Fund in favour of a bail out by other Muslim nations. The IMF were shocked. Mahathir, upon receiving an award from the Islamic Financial Company LARIBA told his audience that he wanted his people to enjoy their fair share of the economic pie rather than the interest gather coffer of the IMF¹⁵. Mahathir was talking about Sharia law where it is illegal for one to charge interest on loans but instead to seek revenues in the form of rent, royalties, a share of profits or commodity trading. A mortgage for example is viewed as a 'rent to buy' arrangement where if eventually sold for a profit then the lender may require a share of those profits. Mahathir may have also been wary of accepting an IMF bailout because of what happened when Russia accepted rescue packages from IMF during the 1990s. The Oligarchs got rich and the people remained poor while the IMF collected interest on those loans¹⁶.

Mahathir's response to the Asian financial crisis may have given Islamist financiers the proof and courage required to mount a successful alternative to western usury based lending. If the dramatic increase in the living standards of middle-class families in China, the Islamic nations and India are also taken into account then it is extremely likely that alternative methods of banking that better suit this growing populous means the days of the West calling the shots on how the East will live are severely numbered. A recent article in the Australian media suggests that Islamic businesses that adhere to the religious proscriptions in business 'have a market potential of US five trillion dollars and the industry is continuing to expand globally.'¹⁷ Islamic

financiers are becoming more able to provide the required non-usury service for Muslim customers that completely fits the requirements of Sharia law. A Canadian financial institution recently introduced Canada's, and possibly the western world's, first halal-approved credit card. The iFreedom Plus Mastercard is a prepaid credit card and therefore it is interest free. It is expected that the card will also be available to US Muslims by the end of the year.¹⁸ The move by financial institutions to cater for customers with specific beliefs that are non-western, i.e. non-christian, suggests an understanding that the Muslim community is part of a growing population that are destined to integrate with the West whether the West likes it or not.

If historic reaction to foreign ownership or foreign control of specific markets is anything to go by then news of a Muslim controlled financial institution that looks as though it could reasonably be a major player in future world finance will be greeted with suspicion and scepticism. One only need look at public reaction to the attempted buyout of the largest dairy farm in New Zealand to have it confirmed that xenophobia is alive and well in this country. A farmer whose 81-hectare property neighbours the farm for sale said that the potential for the Chinese to be involved in the New Zealand dairy industry was 'very worrying.' The unnamed farmer said '[he is] not prejudiced or anything like that but I don't really trust the Chinese. I've certainly got my doubts about them and I think they can't be trusted to a certain degree.'¹⁹

An interesting example of the purported fear of foreign ownership may have been best outlined in the 2006 sale of Jaguar and Land Rover, two of Britain's premiere motoring brands, to the Indian corporation Tata industries for what was suggested to be a two billion dollar sale.²⁰ The flagship brand of British motoring with its long history of serving the country during wartime and upheaval was to be purchased by a person from the colonies. Up until 1948 Indians were the servants of the British and now the

British will be working for them. I'm sure the irony of the deal would not be lost on Ratan Tata, the 72 year old chairman of the Tata group of companies.

The threat of change certainly has the ability to create a sense of fear amongst the incumbant populous. In 2007 an application by the Muslim community to broadcast the call to prayer from the minarets of their newly completed mosque in central Oxford was met with outrage by the local community.²¹ In the more right-wing newspaper The Sun comments included concern that children would be woken up from their afternoon naps and that the Muslim minority had no right to ram their message down the throats of those who weren't interested.²² A recent petition by Swiss citizens opposed to the construction of a six metre high minaret on the roof of a Muslim community centre in northern Switzerland collected 115,000 signatures.²³ The debate appears to have engulfed the entire nation and as a result the Swiss government passed a law that prohibited the construction of minarets throughout Switzerland. 57.5% of Swiss voted in favour of opposing the construction of minarets. It appears that the fear of an eventual Muslim takeover of Europe is the impetus behind such opposition.²⁴

A spokesman for President Nicolas Sarkozy's centre-right union for a Popular Majority said the Swiss debate reflected widespread alarm in Europe over radical Islam, while in Germany, a senior MP from Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrat Party said the fear of growing Islamisation 'must be taken seriously'.²⁵ Conservative Christian groups even went so far as to author a video with professional graphics and an authoritative voiceover to warn their audience of the impending Muslim invasion. The video claims the Muslim communities in Europe have a fertility rate more than four times higher than those of non-Muslims which will eventually result in the Muslim population doubling to 104 million in twenty years. It is also suggested that the number of children born to every Muslim family averages 8.1 compared with 1.8 for non-

Muslims. The video warns that in the Netherlands half of the newborn infants are Muslim and that France will be an Islamic republic in a mere 39 years.²⁶ Since being posted on You Tube on March 30th 2009 the video has been viewed 11,731,631 times. It has however been shown to be completely inaccurate in its statistical assumptions but nonetheless it has obviously proved extremely popular.

The instances of xenophobia I have outlined may well be a result of a fear of being converted to Islam or to be ‘Asianafied, [sic]’²⁷ against ones will. It could also be due to one’s inability or desire not to incorporate a new set of rules or customs into one’s daily routine. The fear of having to accommodate or learn something new can often cause scepticism amongst those who either feel threatened by change or are fanatical about any suggestion that cultural difference should be incorporated into their conservative and stringent mechanism of belief. Such a dogmatic approach to multicultural integration may well be clouding the ability of the xenophobic populous because it is arguable that multicultural integration is already well underway. However, those opposed to immigration may be inadvertently accommodating and encouraging multiculturalism without actually realising that they are doing it – whether this is through the purchase of fake designer labels or bootleg DVD films, or even the food they eat. China currently controls a majority of the worlds counterfeiting industry and the products that are found coming out of China are in some cases almost indistinguishable from the real thing. Whether it’s at the weekend market stall, on internet or while on holiday in Bali, counterfeit goods are purchased by westerners because it saves them money. The cheap price paid for the Rolex watch or the Prada clutch purse still allows for a healthy profit to be made by the manufacturers who are more often than not Mafia controlled.

The Chinese and South East Asian Mafia-controlled human trafficking business is

also part of this subversive industry. Delivery to the west is often risky and many don't make it due to the cramped and unhygienic conditions of the voyage. If they do make it they are almost always forced to work as sex slaves or in sweatshops in order to pay off their debt with the traffickers. Those that are so opposed to immigration may well find that their frozen fish and potatoes are processed and farmed by immigrants and they have unwittingly helped line the pockets of the Mafia just by doing their grocery shopping. They also may be shocked to discover that their daughters' new purse that cost a fraction of what the real thing cost would be the end product of a multi-billion dollar industry that has boosted what was a once a downtrodden and poor third-world country. Loretta Napoleoni says that the most dangerous breeding ground for rogue economics is the global economy. She tells us that almost every product we consume has a hidden, dark history, from slave labour to piracy, from fakes to fraud, from theft to money laundering.²⁸

Even the most patriotic of the patriotic, the French, appear not to be immune from the rapidly advancing tide of multiculturalism. In 2009 the French Prime Minister Nicholas Sarkozy launched a national debate on immigration known as the 'great debate on national identity'. The debate created a hostile stream of anti-immigrant rhetoric and was subsequently quietly shelved by the Elysee Palace. It was claimed during the debate that immigration threatened to destroy French identity and the French way of life. Sarkozy was quoted during the debate as saying 'that he considered himself to be completely French, as French as my own bread.' But it seems that Sarkozy's vehement patriotism appears to have caused him some embarrassment. The 2010 winner of the best baguette de tradition (traditional baguette) was won by an immigrant from Senegal. Djibril Badian moved to France when he was six years old and he beat 162 rivals for the coveted prize and in addition to pocketing 4000 Euros he will also supply bread to

the Sarkozy official residence for 12 months.

Our western cities are becoming more culturally homogenised by the day. We are beginning to enjoy having the choices that come with multiculturalism and we are less likely to condone racism amongst our peers. It's no longer acceptable for people to criticise Asian drivers and then pick up Chinese or Thai for dinner on the way home. The tourist who visits New York and returns home to tell what an amazing city it is can no longer oppose their country taking in a boat load of Afghan refugees.

We are living in a state of flux that requires an ability to learn in order to be able to guarantee day-to-day functioning. As I have outlined this is due to a dramatic shift in the wealth of the citizens of countries considered by many only a few decades ago to be poor and third world. Although it is suggested that India has around one million millionaires, Forbes magazine puts the actual total of people who have at least one million dollars in financial assets at 123,000.²⁹ This takes into account a 22.7% jump since 2007. China's millionaire population grew 20.3% to 415,000 and Russia's millionaires now number 136,000, a 14.4% jump from the previous year (2007). America still has the largest amount of millionaires at around 3 million but the population of the elite group grew by only 3.7%. The title of the Forbes article is 'A Millionaire Boom In The East' and it appears to be exactly what is happening. It is safe to say that along with wealth come options and it appears that one of the options taken by the wealthy is education. Students whose middle class parents can now afford to send them to study are swamping universities in India with applications. It's become a cutthroat competition reports the New York Times³⁰. Kapil Sibal, the government minister overseeing education says India may not be able to cope with future demand for tertiary education. India's premiere science institution, the Indian Institutes of Technology, I.I.T. allowed 320,000 students to take the entrance exam for its available

8000 vacancies.³¹ Around twenty million students are enrolled in higher education in India and it appears that the numbers are similar for China where students are also struggling to be accepted into universities.

An obvious solution to the problem of not getting into a university in one's own country is to apply to attend a university in another country. New Zealand and Australia have seen enrolments from foreign students, especially those from India and Saudi Arabia rise significantly during the past several years. In 2008 India had just over 6000 students studying in New Zealand and Saudi Arabia sent just 4000. China's student population declined to around 22,000 from 56,000 in 2003, while South Korea remained relative stable at around 18,000. The total international student population in 2008 was just under 90,000 and it added an extra 2.3 billion dollars to the New Zealand economy and created 32,000 jobs.³² An obvious consequence of moving to another country to study is the possibility of making that country one's home. Should that happen then the likelihood of other family members travelling to either live or visit brings money and cultural diversity into that country. Should the students return to the homeland then multiculturalism will continue on with a new batch of students and immigrants but it must be realised that the idea the world is accessible by a specific group of people for whom for it was until recently not accessible will have resounding consequences. Access to a world outside their own country has told them that it is not necessary to remain in one place for the rest of one's life. Living in a different country amongst a foreign culture where a different language is spoken is not difficult. The barriers that once defined East and West have been broken down as the world has become more accessible.

A generational shift in how we live our lives may have something to do with this negation of fear of immersing oneself in a different country's culture. Those born from

1945 to 1958 – the infamous baby-boomer generation tended to stay in one job for the 45 years of their working careers. For their children, Generation X, it is not uncommon to have an average of ten different jobs during that time as well as numerous holidays abroad. Unlike their parents Gen X wait longer to have children, possibly due to the high amount of broken homes they were brought up in or were witness to. In the eyes of the baby boomers, Generation Y takes the anti-authority attitude, the scepticism and the indifference about their careers of Gen X to a new level. Generation Y appear to be directionless and cynical and without allegiance to any axiom of worth. But these are the students that are travelling abroad to undertake their university degrees in foreign countries. Generally they are street smart and intuitive and set out to enjoy as much of their adopted country as possible. They are aware that education is what is going to get them ahead in life, not an allegiance to a company that they know will offer them no security should trouble loom on the financial horizon.

Even though they are from the East they actually see themselves as being Westerners. If renowned Palestinian-American literary theorist and political activist Edward Said were still alive he would no doubt condone the self-rebranding of citizens from the East. In his widely acclaimed book Orientalism³³ Said claims that the term ‘Orient’ is and has been wrongly used by the West as a blanket term to refer to the East. He argues that use of the word Orient suggests a predetermined idea of romanticism and at the same time suspicion. One Thousand and One Nights³⁴ and Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express³⁵ suggests a place of mysticism and intrigue while the imperialist political structure of the past Persian and Ottoman empires created a blanket suspicion of the entire region. Said argues that the vastly differing cultures that reside in that region warrant recognition of difference instead of being blanketed under a titular heading. His argument suggests that the misunderstanding of the West of what

happens in the East is because of an ignorance that finds its impetus in the ‘us and them’ syndrome. The complex and often tumultuous political structure of the East is a complete contrast to the mostly Christian Anglo-Saxon culture of the West. Said attempts to redirect a train of thought that has for centuries mis-labelled and misunderstood an entire region of the world, quite possibly at the expense of many lives.

9-11 may indeed be an example of where the misrepresentation and the misunderstanding of cultures can have catastrophic consequences. Conspiracy theories aside, it seems that America may have overestimated its ability to protect itself from those who intention it was to cause harm. Was it because the United States still viewed their foes in the East as soldiers who fought with ‘sticks and stones’ and thus completely unable to plan and execute an attack of such complexity? Since 9-11, and as suggested in my novel, *The Fashionable Muslim*, Muslims may be enjoying a newfound understanding and respect because the world has been unwittingly educated about Islam. It cannot be denied that initial reaction to Islam and Muslims was fear-based and was centred upon what Muslim fundamentalists were capable of, but I would argue however, that since 9-11 the initial suspicion and fear has been diluted into a global recognition that not all Muslims are terrorists.

I think Edward Said would agree that as tragic as it was, 9-11 will be looked upon by many in the future as a landmark point of history where the East and the West began to understand the complexities of each others existence with mutual respect. It may however be a little while away yet as a recent article titled ‘The date all US Muslims dread’ suggests that even 8 years later many American Muslims still struggle through the anniversary of the attacks.³⁶ Feelings for Muslims range from a sick feeling in the stomach to wearing a red white and blue flag pin. ‘There’s a kind of anxiety... [and] I force myself to go out.’ says Sarah Sayeed who came to the US from India when she

was eight years old. However, a recent poll attests to the possibility that suspicion of Muslims as terrorists may indeed be a foregone conclusion. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 38% of Americans believe Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence. This number is down from 45% two years earlier.³⁷

It must be concluded then from the examples that I have provided that our world is undergoing a massive and dramatic shift within its cultural and financial axioms. But we should remain optimistic. We are probably not going to descend into the dystopic city of the science fiction film and we are probably not going to be all forced to convert to a religion or a culture against our will. We are more likely to incorporate and grow with change and barely notice that we are doing so. Loretta Napoleoni suggests that the populations of India and China will soon begin to consume the goods produced by their own countries and they will no longer be reliant on the West as their main export market. This will spur a revival of smaller manufacturing companies in the West and in turn create a market force whereby local industry is the main beneficiary.³⁸ Western economies will once again blossom and the global market will enjoy a more founded and equal structure. Napoleoni calls herself an optimist and I think that she has good reason to be. The homogenisation of cultures is an exciting possibility and one that will create a more harmonious and better understood multicultural environment.

References

¹ Dick, Philip K. (1968). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.

² In earlier copies of, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The year the story was set was 1992. In later editions the year was 2019.

³ Allen, Irwin. 1965. *Lost in Space*. Los Angeles. 20th Century Fox Television.

⁴ Roddenberry, Gene. 1966. *Star Trek*. Los Angeles. Paramount Television.

⁵ Deeley, Michael, prod. Scott, Ridley, dir. 1982. *Blade Runner*. Los Angeles. Warner Bros.

⁶ Gibson, William. (1984). *Neuromancer*. London: Voyager, 2000. *Urban Sprawl*. A word first penned by William Gibson in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, and often used in literary and postmodern analysis to describe the modern urban environment of the future.

⁷ Gibson, William. (1984). *Neuromancer*. London: Voyager, 2000. *Cyberpunk*. Asian defined, olive-skinned and resembling a cross-mixing Lou Reed in his *Velvet Underground* days and Suzie Sue from *Suzie and the Banshees* commonly known amongst Sci-fi enthusiasts as the cyberpunk, another term first penned by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.

⁸ *Cityspeak*. A dialect created by the forcing together of different cultures into a confined urban environment in the film *Blade-Runner*.

⁹ Ledoux, Patrice, prod. Besson, Luc, dir. 1997. *The Fifth Element*. Gaumont. Bruce Willis' character Corban Dallas is served Thai takeaways right to his apartment window by a Chinese man in a flying junk.

¹⁰ Napoleoni, Loretta. 2008. *Rogue Economics: Capitalism's New Reality*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

¹¹ *ibid*: *The New Social Contract*, pp 263

¹² *ibid*: 267

¹³ *ibid*: *Economic Tribalism*, pp 250. The modern Islamic gold dinar, sometimes referred as Islamic dinar or Gold dinar, is a bullion gold coin made from 4.25 grams of 22-carat gold. It is a recent revival of the historical gold dinar which was the standard of currency exchange for 13 centuries until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. The US dollar has been the international standard for currency exchange since 1971.

¹⁴ *ibid*: *Economic Tribalism*, pp 253

¹⁵ *ibid*: 245 - 246

¹⁶ *ibid* 246

¹⁷ Islamic finance bodies have trillion-dollar potential - Moody's. April 07, 2010. <http://www.news.com.au/business/breaking-news/islamic-finance-bodies-have-trillion-dollar-potential-moodys/story-e6frfkur-1225850813715>

-
- ¹⁸ April 13, 2010. North America's first Muslim MasterCard due to launch soon. Asia One Business. Retrieved from:
<http://www.asiaone.com/Business/News/My+Money/Story/A1Story20100414-210157.html>
- ¹⁹ Ihaka, James. Friday Mar 26, 2010. Neighbour fears worst. The New Zealand Herald.
<http://www.nzherald.co.nz/news/print.cfm?objectid=10634418>
- ²⁰ Milner, Mark. 26 March 2008. Indian firm buys Jaguar and Land Rover. The Guardian UK.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/mar/26/automotive.mergersandacquisitions>
- ²¹ Insensitive and Unduly Provocative? 24 January 2008. A mosque's call to prayer amid Oxford's spires. The Mail Online. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/columnists/article-510059/Insensitive-unduly-provocative-A-mosques-prayer-amid-Oxfords-spires.html#>
- ²² Kay, John. Peake, Alex. Haywood, Lynsey. 27 Dec 2007. Mosque Call Outrages Oxford. The Sun. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article622919.ece#ixzz0IUo1sa27>
- ²³ Neighbour, Sally. December 05, 2009. Fears of Eurabian future unfounded. The Australian.
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/fears-of-aurabian-future-unfounded/story-e6frg6so-1225807133633>
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ *ibid.*
- ²⁶ *ibid.*
- ²⁷ Asianafied. The title of a video posted on You Tube where a young American girl puts on an Asian accent. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvLQjy-3IEA>
- ²⁸ Napoleoni, Loretta. 2008. Rogue Economics: Capitalism's New Reality. Introduction, pp 4. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- ²⁹ Farrell, Andrew. 26/6/08. A Millionaire Boom In The East. Forbes.com.
http://www.forbes.com/2008/06/26/wealth-india-china-biz-billies-cx_af_0626wealthreport.html?partner=whiteglove_google
- ³⁰ Yardley, Jim. 24/03/2010. Indian Students Wield Tests for College Spots. The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/world/asia/24test.html>
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² The International Education Site. Winning Back International Students. Retrieved from:
<http://www.intstudy.com/articles/nzint.html>
- ³³ Said, Edward. 1978. Orientalism. UK: Penguin. 1995.
- ³⁴ One Thousand and One Nights, Modern Library, USA, 2001.
- ³⁵ Agatha Christie, Murder on the Orient Express, New York: Pocket Books, 1978.

³⁶ (Article Now Offline) The date all US Muslims dread. September 12th 2009. The New Zealand Herald. http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/print.cfm?c_id=2&objecti...

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Napoleoni, Loretta. 2008. *Rogue Economics: Capitalism's New Reality*. The New Social Contract, pp 265. New York: Seven Stories Press.

THE FASHIONABLE MUSLIM

53,840 WORDS

WRITTEN BY

DALLAS GOPI

© DALLAS GOPI. 2010

**DALLAS GOPI
1 PURIRI ROAD
ONEROA, WAIHEKE ISLAND
AUCKLAND 1081**

**021899391
DALLAS.GOPI@MAC.COM**

Sometimes things were okay.

I think the last time she was truly caring and loving toward me was when I was ten-years old. I had just discovered how mean some people really are.

I had been invited to Donna Lewis' birthday party. D.L. was what she preferred to be called. I had always been and would always remain to be on the periphery of the 'in crowd' so naturally I was quite excited to have got an invitation to join the inner fold of a group that were well-known to be very cool.

I remember thinking to myself, 'how can one girl be the recipient of so many presents?' Boxes and packages of all sizes were stacked on top of a table in the middle of the room. I think I hid my small gift, something Mum had bought for me, at the bottom of the pile underneath one of the larger boxes. Halfway through the party D.L. sent one of her minions to bring me to her bedroom. I made my way upstairs and discovered the coolest of the cool were all gathered in D.L.'s. room with D.L. herself holding court.

The room looked like something out of a fairytale. White lace curtains hung down over the windows and the pale blue wallpaper had pictures of prince's, princess' and unicorns printed on it. The dresser complete with a large mirror in the middle and two movable side mirrors was gleaming white, as were the two small cabinets either side of her double bed. Her wardrobe spanned the entire width of the room and was accessed through a bank of white louvered sliding doors. The handles on the furniture and the wardrobe doors were shiny and gold.

D.L. closed the bedroom door before giving me the sweetest of smiles. She then asked me what I thought of Amy Gault. Before I could answer she told me that she didn't like her very much thought she was a bitch. D.L went on to tell me that Amy Gault was a thief and she had bad taste in clothes and she also smelled funny and had fleas. I may have

defamed Amy Gault's character myself. I really can't remember exactly what it was I said but for reasons that seem completely absurd to me now I would've bent over backwards to please this girl and very pleased she appeared to be when I agreed with her debasing Amy Gault.

My long-term friendship with the coolest girl in school was pending. D.L. however had other ideas. One of the gleaming white louvered wardrobe doors slid back and out popped Amy Gault. I was called a bitch and a cow and much more. I remember looking to Donna Lewis for help. She just stood there and smiled. Amy Gault glared at me, bunched fists on hips. The rest of D.L's. entourage either scowled or shook their heads in disgust.

I ran the two kilometres home without stopping and cried into my pillow for an hour before Mum could shoehorn out of me what had happened. She hugged me tight and told me that those girls were not worth worrying about. She told me I was much better than they were and that time would prove that to me. She was right. Twenty years later at a school reunion I almost didn't go to I bumped into Donna Lewis. She'd obviously undergone a fair amount of cosmetic surgery and upon speaking to her I realised that she was as dumb as a box of hammers. It didn't surprise me to discover that she was recently divorced for the second time.

Why in the name of all that is holy was it so important to be accepted by this silly bitch? I remember asking myself as I stood there listening to her prattle on about herself. She'd just finished telling me that she was thinking about opening up an interior design business because she was relatively well connected these days when I summoned up the courage to ask her how much I should expect a set of tits like hers to set me back.

'You always were a bitch Kerri Smith,' she said.

'You were always a cunt and will always remain one Donna Lewis,' I replied.

She left with a magnificent hair-flick and rejoined the very same group of girls who were with her in her bedroom that day two decades earlier. I hung out with Lucy Burgess and Seb Greengrass for the rest of the night while D.L. and her botox and restylane addicted entourage did their best to scowl at us from across the room.

I didn't get around to telling Mum what had happened. At that stage things were hardly going well between us. We often argued and we didn't see much of each other. It seemed that since each year had passed she seemed to grow more and more critical of things. Especially when it came to something she didn't understand or something that scared her. I think what exacerbated the problem was that I was doing the exact opposite. I had long finished my Master of Philosophy degree and wanted to learn more whereas she seemed content with getting by with what she already knew. Little by little her ability to love and care slowly dissipated. It seemed that Mum chose not to learn any more than she had to and because of that she remained in some sort of static place where isolation meant safety.

Her dogmatism drove a wedge between us. Our conversations were perfunctory and predictable. She 'knew what she knew,' as she liked to say and Dad, rather than cause an argument went along with it all and did what he was told.

I realised about that time I hit my early thirties that I must have used her as some sort of point of reference to guide myself away from what it was I didn't want to become. By then Mum was well versed in living her life as a scared and angry person. I think she honestly believed that the older she got the easier life would become and then when she discovered that she'd got it all wrong she shut down and settled for mediocrity. I think she just stopped trying. That was her choice. I remember her saying, 'if you make your bed then you've damn well got to lie in it.' It seemed that she was already resigned to the fact that things were not going to be easy in life. By the time I worked out that things were not

supposed to be easy it was too late to try and convince her otherwise. ‘Well that’s just your opinion.’ She would often retort if pushed to think beyond her comfort zone.

Yes Mum I know it’s my opinion and that’s exactly why I’m fucking well arguing it.

The more bitter she got the less obliged I felt to be as a daughter should be to their mother. James, my brother, felt much the same way. The way she behaved suggested she wanted to be on her own so she could deal with the least amount of life’s difficulties as possible.

When I think about that last time I remember her showing me genuine love and concern I try my best not to use her face because it lets me believe that she wasn’t always the way she turned out to be.

Like I said. She just stopped trying because it was easier that way.

There's always a beginning.

I'll begin by telling you about her.

Just over seven months ago she had a heart attack and dropped dead on the kitchen floor when I told her I was pregnant to a Muslim man.

Dad called the ambulance and I performed CPR on her until they arrived.

It was one of those heart attacks where a valve or a muscle ruptures and the heart starts pumping the blood the wrong way around the body.

Things were just beginning to fall into place too, or so I thought.

Apparently she was dead before she hit the floor. And she did hit the floor with an almighty thump. She dragged the *George Foreman* bread-maker and two litres of milk off the bench on her way down. The corner of bread-maker clocked her fair and square between the eyes. If she wasn't already dead then ten-kilos of kitchen appliance was ample enough to finish the job.

So there I was skidding around in a lake of milk trying to get her heart going all the while wondering if the large dent in her forehead was going to make her a vegetable.

I needn't have bothered worrying about it.

The paramedics tried to boost her heart into life with the electric jump-start machine. I forget what it's called. No luck.

After what seemed like an hour of trying they stopped. Both of them stood up. The one with the nametag that said Angela, she was the one working on Mum's heart, knocked a bag of wholemeal bread mixture off the bench into the lake of milk.

'Whoops. Sorry about that,' she said.

Hey no problem. Mum's dead already. A bit more of a mess on the floor's not going to matter that much.

Blouse ripped open, bra cut off, eyes half open on a kitchen floor covered in milk and bread mix.

The other paramedic called the Coroner.

Angela took us out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Then the police arrived.

I called James.

Angela made us all a cup of tea – black because there was no milk.

Mum got wheeled through the living room on a stretcher. The three of us sipped from our cups while Mr and Mrs Holman from across the street came over and cleaned up the kitchen.

As I've already mentioned I was at the point of believing that things were beginning to get better but instead everything fell apart.

The ironic oddities that contributed to and surrounded her death still continue to haunt me. It's the kind of thing that you laugh about when it happens to someone else – something that you read about on the Internet or in a tabloid newspaper.

A killer blow to the head by the once world heavyweight boxing champ and she was brown bread.

But that was just the beginning. There was more craziness to come.

I'll tell you what happened.

You'll just have to excuse my subjective opinion.

Ten years spent working in the ribald and male orientated newsroom of a large print newspaper has made me cynical, suspicious and angry. I consider myself a feminist. The type who likes to bake cakes but doesn't like being told she should be baking cakes.

I've been told before that when I get going down the pub after work on Friday night after a few drinks it's enough to make sailors run from the building. But I don't think I'm

that bad.

I won't be telling you some over-embellished story bogged down by verbose prose. You'll get the important parts, the guts of it, and I'll tell it to you the way *I* think it needs to be told.

I've got plenty of time because I've got another month left before I finish out my six months of home detention. My baby's due about the time someone from the corrections department is going to turn up and take the bracelet off my ankle.

Lena, the officer assigned to accompany me when I've needed to visit the doctor or the midwife has been great. She's got a mouth on her worse than I have. I feel safe when I'm around her.

At the sentencing I was twelve weeks pregnant and barely showing. I was charged with using a motor vehicle as a weapon.

Dad said I could stay with him – back here, in the place she died, in the place that I spent a reasonable amount of my teenage years trying to escape from.

I do have to admit that he's been good to me though. He has actually been a father.

He went a little nutty for a bit but then he got himself back on track. He's trying – I can tell that. He's away on his cruise right but he'll be back for the birth.

He said he's going to start on the renovations when he gets back.

'Make this house a home,' was what he said.

I'm not comfortable with calling it a home just yet. Maybe when he's done all the changes I might be able to do it. I'll have to see how it turns out. For the moment I'm stuck having to think about it for what it is and has been.

It never really got the chance to be a home because it was devoid of the things that makes houses a home.

Even still I can't deny that having this roof over my head is better than being stuck in

a ten by six cell somewhere in South Auckland.

I guess I should be thankful for that.

I should also be thankful for the confrontation but I'm not quite thankful yet. I'm working on it though.

Forgetting the past took a lot of time and effort and if I did want to dredge it all up and work through I would rather be allowed the choice to do so instead of being forced to it.

The choice wasn't mine to make and now I can't do anything *but* think about it and work out how to use it to make things better.

It all spins around in my head like a Catherine wheel and when it's spinning it feels just the same as it looks – like everything is connected. One thing reminds me of another thing, and that reminds me of another thing and then I'm reminded of other things, and so on...

I can't switch off.

I'm all over the place as I try to find places for these bits of information and these pieces of realisation.

Even if I could switch off I don't think I would want to.

Switching off means that nothing would ever get resolved and that's not an option.

I've decided to start by making some simple repairs. It's an attempt to fix things.

Not that fixing things is what I actually want to do. What I'm talking about is fixing them up so that they work better than what they did before. Fixing them up so they can be used again instead of just tossing them aside on the heap, kind of like Dad wanting to fix up the house so it can be a home.

Thinking about things means that I must also suffer the consequences of thinking. The unavoidable by-product of thoughts that get involuntarily dredged up as I think are

like a bulging tuna net complete with dolphins, small whales, and still-feeding sharks being hauled up the ramp of the trawler. Spill the lot out on the deck and sort through it all.

Process what can be processed and mince the rest up as by-product. Nothing gets wasted – it all gets reassigned and I’m kind of hoping that by thinking I will eventually get better at thinking.

I’m getting bigger and I sleep a lot. I’ve got a craving for anchovies and cheese on crackers. I spend a lot of time on the sofa jotting down notes and drawing arrows between things that I think could be connected. I look at the carpet on the floor and I can remember lying on it, on my stomach, chin propped on hands watching *Battlestar Galactica* and *The Six Million Dollar Man* – I wonder what inflation would make him worth now? Can’t forget about *The Dukes of Hazzard* and Daisy Duke’s legs.

I can place these memories amongst all of this other thought, these desultory situations and my hope is it will make things appear less banal, less wrong and more right, less subjective and more useful – an attempt, albeit possibly futile, to remember what happy memories are. This will be for my benefit and not so much yours – the voyeur of this odd pursuit of mine.

It’s because of this relation between things that I have to try hard not to let the carpet with its dated geometric designs that I still attempt to match together like I did thirty years ago, get to me – the wallpaper too. Who could I ever tell that interior coverings are adequate motifs for years of suppressed anger – except you? The stains on the living-room ceiling from some long ago storm are adequate enough analogies of the stains inside my mind. The once acceptably cosmetic faux timber-veneer display case with nothing of any real consequence on display anymore is the perfect example of how I managed to give the impression that everything was okay. The threadbare armrests on Dad’s chair can be the naked flesh of a body stripped of dignity because no-one talked about things that mattered

– they just existed because that was all they thought was required of them.

How many hours of television did Dad watch as his feet scuffed the carpet thread into dust? How much beer did he drink? How many cigarettes did he smoke? What did he think about as he looked across at his wife?

The smell of the place – like that earthy scent of a dog’s paw.

The native bush at the edge of our section that smells like sex when it rains. During my mid-teens, post summer when the smell was particularly overpowering and no one was at home I would sneak down there and masturbate amongst the ferns. I don’t feel inclined to do that these days and it’s difficult to remember why exactly I felt inclined to do it back then.

Now I feel oddly taller when I’m standing at the bathroom sink brushing my teeth. The hallway doesn’t seem as long as it once did. The cupboard at the end is no longer a good place to hide. Caravans have small cupboards too. Like the one we used to go on holiday in, a *Zephyr*, white with orange and brown stripes and tyres that looked far too skinny to carry that house on wheels. Nothing of consequence ever seems to fit inside those little cupboards. The tiny kitchen sink and the pump-tap beside it that is meant to make the useless vessel useful. The closet sized toilet-slash-shower, never used because of the inconvenience of cleaning out the septic tank system.

At my very first school we had a septic tank and when the truck came to pump it out we all complained about the stink and made loud *Pooooh* noises.

Mr. Marshbanks would make us girls stand up, lift our dresses and pull our knickers down so he could spank our bare bottoms when we misspelled words during English class. It took me years to recover the courage to read aloud. I still hold my breath when I’m stressed because back then if I held my breath and closed my eyes Mr. Marshbanks would leave me alone. I can’t help but wonder if he has realised his full paedophile potential yet,

or if he is dead, disallowing retribution from any of his victims.

Kind of like Mum – sneaking away the way she did. Shirking her accountability.

Connections. Things that would normally exist apart are suddenly forced to exist side by side – even if it *is* for the shortest time, even if they continue to repel each other like south hates south on a magnet.

May I keep what I want and toss the rest aside? I could try but there is no denying that the original point of connection still exists – back in time somewhere. *The Latent Effect* effect – that keeps on effecting even if you did shout stop a long time back.

As much as I'd like to keep what I want – I can't, because I've already been there and if I do go back it means that I go back differently. That's just how it works. That's how things get changed.

Dad

She's been dead for six months now and last week Dad left to go on a month long cruise. (He's settled down now. Back to normal you could say, but or a while there I thought I was going to have to get him committed.)

The week before he was due to leave he started saying, 'I'm off through the Orient, Kerri Smith,' in a posh accent.

I thought he was going wonky again.

The day before he *upped-anchor* he said it three times.

Once while he was making his mid-morning cup of tea and again whilst standing on a chair changing a lightbulb. He told me he was getting the place *ship-shape* for me before he *hit the briny*.

At first I thought he had adopted the highfalutin accent in order to appear more risqué.

I was almost tempted to point this observation of mine out to him. I also wanted to point out to him that people with a desire to act like they are something they are not but are unable to carry it off convincingly will never know what exactly their shortcomings are.

After thirty-five years of marriage he was probably going to make a fool out of himself a few more times before he got around to discovering who it was he was really meant to be – the gangster routine was only the beginning. But it did serve its purpose, no doubt about that.

He wanted sirloin steak and potato gratin for dinner – some sort of last supper.

I offered to cook.

'Don't go shy on the garlic and cream love.'

There was no way Mum would've let him have such luxuries.

‘And don’t forget the peppercorns.’

She said it was bad for his heart but I suspect that she just didn’t want to cook it for him.

‘I’m off through the Orient, Kerri Smith,’ he announced for the third time while bringing the empty wheelie-bin back up the driveway. He half-yelled it to me as he passed the kitchen window while I was at the sink peeling potatoes. And then he disappeared from view and the hollow rumbling of the wheelie-bin on the concrete added some bass to his whistling. I caught my reflection in the window after he’d passed by. My face looked drawn. I noticed for the first time the bits of flesh either side of my mouth hung lower than they normally did. Gills, I’ve heard people call them. Hair tied back – severe forehead. Standing at the sink doing for him what she had done for years. Did I look like she did at my age? She was good looking when she was younger. Her green eyes, her dark-brown hair, her olive complexion – ‘it’s the Black Irish coming through,’ I remember her once telling me.

In the past I’ve been told that I look a little bit like Kate Winslet – a compliment I once pretended to find amusing. My pseudo-lookalike celebrity status is now pending. Since being confined to this house I’ve barely had a need for eyeliner and lip-gloss and I can’t remember the last time I painted my nails. I use the same shampoo and conditioner as Dad does for his meagre crop. Some supermarket brand that smells like deodorant. I keep it tied back because when it’s out it’s dull and limp.

I remember thinking that the words ‘Through the Orient’ must’ve sounded romantic to him and that he liked to hear them more than say them. I surmised that they reminded him of how things once were before the slow decay set in and everything became mediocre. Without possibly knowing he was doing so he was doing his best to revive a near-dead quality that had lain dormant within him for years on end. The astounding

ability of human resilience. It sounded like it could be the name of a band, or even a movie. Anyway, I liked the idea of this innate thing. I liked it because it meant that things *could* change. Not just for him, but for me also. It meant that all may not be lost.

But let's get back to the flash speak. And you will have to get used to this desultory style of mine because I do have a tendency to be erratic. I was okay with being his sounding board. He wanted to get the tone right and get his confidence up – before he left the house with it, before he took it on board the boat and got it working with the ladies. Out on those *high-seas* he could be anything he wanted, anything other than the sales manager for a heavy machinery supplier. He might just be able to pull it off as well.

When he started talking like Prince Charles I had to work hard not to burst his bubble because deep down I did want him to sweep another pensioner of her feet. I know that was a greater part of the reason why he wanted to go on a cruise in the first place. I'm quite sure the old War Office shut off any future access to her nether regions around the time the movie *Star Wars* opened at our local Odeon theatre.

Mum and Dad had a fight about who was going to take us. I remember it well. Dad left home for three days and Mum talked about sending James and I to boarding school. I remember asking myself, how could she not want us? It only became clear to me recently that she, like Dad, wanted to escape. Dad moved into some motel and got drunk. Mum was stuck with us kids. I think she often wondered when *her* life was going to begin.

He booked the cruise tickets six weeks after she died.

The cheque from the life insurance company had been sitting unopened on the kitchen bench for a month already. She still had three years to go before the cut-off date of sixty-five and that meant dad ended up with almost quarter of a million dollars. He tore open the envelope, took a look at the amount and said, 'you know what Kerri? I might take a trip through the Orient.'

There was still six months to go before the ship left port and Dad said that meant he could stay and look after me.

I had often wondered whom it was I'd inherited my pragmatism from. I initially thought it must have skipped a generation or two. I wouldn't have guessed it was from him. There was never any sign of its existence prior to her dying. Up until then he just did what he was told.

He was either pragmatic or he just didn't want to miss out – or could this be the same thing? Maybe he was just getting on with it – maybe it was because now he had no reason not to get on with it.

The time that I've been forced to spend with him, in this house, it has become obvious just how much she had affected him. Now she was gone her effect was lessening. We talked about her less and less. I think he just wanted to let it all go. Well, as much of it as he could let go. But it was going to be different for me, which may have something to do with being related to another person by blood. Couples can leave each other, stop loving each other, but she will always be my mother because I can't get a new one of those.

So now Dad was free to cram all of those lost years into what time he had left. It didn't matter that he is close to seventy. He still has most of his hair and he isn't overweight. A recent wardrobe rethink and a red sports car seems to have helped him overcome a lack of confidence, or is it the other way around?

I'm not sure.

He even joked about being able to empathise with long-serving prisoners.

I had another six months before I would be finished serving my sentence.

Maybe I *was* jealous of him.

A psychiatrist once suggested to me that Mum's inability to show love didn't mean

she didn't love us. I found it interesting that it was suddenly *my* problem, *my* misunderstanding – it was as if I had been manipulated once more. I didn't feel like forgiving her. I still don't. I wanted to suggest to the wise doctor that it might have worked out better between us if she had substituted the two didn'ts with may nots. Instead I just didn't go back.

James isn't able to talk about it the way I will attempt to talk about it. Now he won't even go outside after dark. He paid over ten thousand dollars for a security company to install state-of-the-art fingerprint activated locks on his doors, retractable shutters on his windows and an alarm system with twenty-four-hour monitoring.

It looks as though Dad is the only one who is benefiting from this, and that's okay. I do want him to be happy. But I want to be happy too. I've often thought that a party would be fun.¹

Speaking of pictures. For over six months now, a picture of the boat, the Princess something or other, has been stuck on the fridge door. It wouldn't have stayed there for two minutes if Mum were still around. Well actually it wouldn't be there at all if Mum were still around but that's not the point I'm trying to make. The house had gone through something of a change since her death. It smelled different for one thing. Dad didn't clean as often as Mum did and I'm quite comfortable with that 'lived in' look as opposed to her neatness and structure. Her perfume was missing for one thing – something flowery and overpowering. Her hairspray no longer lingers in the hallway till lunchtime.

Dad's been talking about getting some things done – when he gets back from

¹ Champagne cocktails upon entry. I would welcome people in the front door and hand out darts to throw at a 10 by 8 headshot of Mum mounted above the fireplace. We'd have a BBQ outside, prawns, steak and scallops and loads of booze on ice in one of those big plastic drums. We could hire a guy in a bowtie to mix margaritas. We could hang a huge rag doll from the Magnolia tree in the backyard – a photo, the same as the one above the fireplace, as the dolls face. After dinner we could all take turns to beat seven different types of shit out it with bats and broomsticks. After dessert we could set the fucking thing on fire. Down some tequila shooters and then take turns to piss on it to put it out.

holiday. Maybe some carpet and curtains and some paint, possibly some new furniture. I saw him looking over a mailout leaflet before he left. He circled some pictures of lounge suites. He mentioned something about the faux timber veneer sideboard going to the Red Cross. He asked for my opinion on curtains. He suggested a vanilla colour – or an eggshell. A big step from the shiny burnt-orange fabric that's been hanging in the windows for fifteen years already – grubby marks where hands have pulled them closed. He's talking about stripping wallpaper. A new kitchen with gas – he's not much of a cook but he did buy a second hand copy of *Jamie Oliver* online a few weeks back. He's also talking about a new refrigerator to replace the old one behind the picture of the boat – one with an iced-water dispenser.

Some people go backwards when their partner dies. I don't think Dad could go forward any faster even if he wanted to. The times I did catch him staring into nothingness and I knew then that he was thinking about her I resisted asking what exactly it was he was remembering about her. But mostly, if he was to be caught standing and staring at something it was usually at the picture on the fridge door – a sublime monstrosity of steel and glass.

I referred to it as 'Las Vegas on water,' which I think Dad interpreted as jealousy – he may actually be right. In addition to the obvious reasons for such a name, I surmised it likely that this inordinate magnet in the water had the propensity to draw to it people with similar inconsistencies.

'God she's beautiful,' Dad sometimes said to the picture – telling the boat something it probably already knew about itself.

I couldn't help but think that it was beautiful to him the same way linoleum is beautiful to some people.

I'm sure if I were feeling less confused about a lot of things I wouldn't be so critical.

Incidentally, I've always thought it to be a dangerous thing when more than one thousand people gather together due to a common interest. Certain rock concerts, certain protest marches and refugee camps excluded.

The cabarets and theme parties, the on-deck games organised by the ever-helpful, smiling cruise staff. Several thousand people all gathered together so they can be told what to do, yet to suggest to any of them that they were the type of people who *needed* to be told what to do in order to have fun would result in a vehement protest.

'Another banana Daquiri love?'

'Oh yes please darling.'

'I wonder what the poor people are doing today?'

Maybe it would be more accurate to suggest that it was their consistencies that drew them together as a group?

Dad proudly told me that, 'she drew a little over ten metres and is twice the length of a rugby field and that black funnel with a red top was as high as a ten-story building.' I resisted with any comment that this taller-than-it-is-wide phallic structure was fittingly symbolic of the reason the mostly fifty-plus and single passengers were on the boat in the first place.

There's no aphrodisiac like loneliness. Is a song lyric I know from somewhere.

'Do they sell *Viagra* on board?' I didn't ask but absolutely wanted to.

'It's a real big bastard and it's got three swimming pools. Two of them are right below that bloody great funnel.' He said as he sucked air in through his teeth.

The cruise line operated a chat room so that prospective travellers could get to know each other prior to boarding. It was Dad's second favourite thing to do when not doing anything else. I helped him post his picture on the website and apparently he had quite a few 'friends,' or so he told me. If he wasn't online then he was free to partake in his

favourite pastime, providing of course there was nothing else that needed immediate attention. He could often be found standing in front of the fridge, and depending on the time of the day he would usually be holding a beer or a cup of tea. He would just stand there, sometimes for almost half-an-hour, and stare at the picture of the cruise ship.

I wanted to know what he was looking forward to the most. I voluntarily remained curious. It wasn't really the sort of conversation fathers and daughters indulged in and he didn't need my permission anyway. Instead, upon his departure, I gave him a packet of twenty-four condoms. I ordered them online. Presenting them to him wasn't as awkward as I'd imagined. He sort of half-nodded and shrugged and then stuffed them in his suitcase. I think I said something about safe sex not being restricted to the under forties.

In his last email he told me that he misses me. I can't remember the last time he told me that. I've taken to enjoying afternoon naps. My old room is much the same but Dad and I cleared out James' room before he went on the cruise. James didn't mind it wasn't like it was any sort of sanctuary of happy reminiscence for him. I just finished painting it a few days ago. A lemony yellow colour called something that reminded me of cake – who thinks up colour chart names anyway? I wonder what sort of money they get paid?

James' old room will be Lauren's – yes I know her sex and I've already chosen her name – she'll be here in a little over three months, that's the reason I got sentenced with home detention and not an eight by four in a different part of the country.

I talked Dad into getting rid of the old single bed I had as a kid. It was embarrassing enough that I was forced to move back into that old room of mine. It was enough that the wallpaper was the same, that the wardrobe door still opened by itself and still had to be held closed by the same wicker laundry basket that held it closed when I was thirty years younger.

A new queen-sized bed with a foam rubber mattress covered with the same stuff used

in the space shuttle (exactly where in the space shuttle I'm not sure) made it bearable, or so I convinced myself. But the curtains were the same. They still let in too much light. The dirty smudge of overuse that surrounds the light-switch. The wallpaper, now beginning to chalk from old age, still emits a faint oniony tang when you get close enough to it.

Now I've got a bedside lamp. So I don't have to get out of bed to turn off the light.

And yes, the same window I used to sneak out of almost twenty-five years ago is still there too.

Getting pregnant.

In hindsight, I think I just got tired of waiting. I call it the three-year risk. Meet the guy. Spend the next six months trying to work out if he's the right guy. Presuming he is the right guy and we're compatible as a couple and it looks as though we could have a future together, we begin to talk about the long-term. Twelve to eighteen months have gone by already and then it's safe to begin talking about the possibility of children. We begin trying to get pregnant. I'll allow a year for that because at thirty-nine my fertility is not to be matched to that of a nubile twenty-five year old. Get pregnant and then *voila* nine months later we've got a baby. Three years gone. I just didn't have three years to spare, and I was way behind the eight ball already because there were no compatible males in nearby proximity to my single existence.

A letter to remind me that I was due for a smear test arrived about eight months before I killed Mum with my good news.

(Eight months to go until the bombings).

The cold duck-bill-spreader-thingy removed, knickers back on, sitting opposite her with the words, HEALTHY VAGINA AND APPROPRIATELY PINK CERVIX floating around in my mind, she asks me how things are.

'Fine,' I tell her.

'Good,' she replies, as she types something into her computer, her eyes looking over the top of her thin rectangular spectacles.

'Have you thought about children?' she asks.

Whoa. I wasn't expecting that little beauty to come ripping across the court just beyond my line of vision.

'Time's running out,' she says before I can answer.

‘Well, I’m sort of missing one vital ingredient.’

She nods, still typing, and then swivels in her chair and looks at me over the top of her glasses.

She begins to recite a list of age-related pregnancy statistics. I can tell she has advised others of the same possible dangers because she adopts a faraway look that suggests for the slightest of moments she’s not actually thinking about what she’s saying. She counts them off by crossing the index finger of her right hand with the fingers of her left hand.

‘There’s difficulty with conception, a higher possibility of a mentally handicapped baby, attention deficit disorders.’ By the time she has finished I’m all-but convinced celibacy is the only real option left to me.

I must have looked shocked – or at least a little ill.

‘But there are other ways you know,’ she adds.

Please don’t say Immaculate Conception.

‘*In vitro* fertilisation,’ she says.

I remember looking at my watch and feigning some excuse about being late for a meeting.

She tells me that if my smear-test results show any abnormalities the nurse will be in touch.

That night I was too distracted to sleep. I tossed and turned until about four in the morning, trying to forget that it wasn’t that long ago I was reasonably content with how my life was progressing.

The suggestion of not being able to have something because it was no longer my choice had more of an effect on me than I could of anticipated.

Morning arrives and still the dilemma looms.

I make a pot of coffee and phone James.

‘I know a couple of guys who would probably be willing donors.’

My first thought is whether homosexuality is genetic. My second thought is to *Google* that very question when I’m at the computer next. My third thought is to scold myself over the ridiculousness of my first thought.

I tell James to make some polite enquiries.

He laughs, not realising that I’m actually serious.

He tells me that he loves me and that he’ll call later.

I stand naked in front of the mirror and push my belly out and I’m pleasantly surprised with my reflection.

The Smith family dilemma.

At a premature age I took on the role of protector. It must have been something akin to absolute altruism. James was twenty-three months younger than me and something within me must've wanted to show him that love still existed. I was trying my best to comfort him from Mum's constant threats of abandonment. James was eight years old and I was about to turn ten.

I was trying my best to make it okay, even if it wasn't. Okay on the outside but not at all okay on the inside – I was doing exactly what she was doing in order to protect the both of us from her.

I think sisterly rivalry was the axiom for a majority of her frustration. Her life hadn't turned out as well as she hoped it would and she was angry because she was once again forced to accept second place by happily married, reasonably successful twin sister.

I remember coming home one night from being out with some friends, I must have been around seventeen or eighteen and finding my mother sitting in her chair, crying. Dad was either in the garage or at the pub. I can't remember which. I asked her what was wrong but she desisted with any explanation. I left her in the living room and went to bed. I never found out what it was exactly she was upset about but there were other times when I caught her either crying or looking like she had been crying.

Mum had long ago neglected to learn how to empathise with others over their problems and misfortunes and she had suddenly found herself in a position whereby she was unable to understand her own difficulties. Almost twenty years of wondering where it had all gone wrong and what it was she had done to deserve such a shit hand in life eventually culminated in a type of agoraphobia. Beyond going to work, and attending

church she rarely wanted to leave the house.²

Even a two-hour trip north to see one of her oldest friends was inconceivable. A twenty-minute trip south to visit family was spent looking in the rear-vision mirror to make sure nothing had dropped off the car and then she had to be home before dark. The difficulty involved in hiding her fear grew into something that required further justification. Unfortunately for her, justification was akin to an admission. It was easier to remain frustrated. She created for herself a void with which to wallow amongst her own phobias. Frustration became anger and then slowly morphed into sadness.

She chose to be a prisoner in her own house. Now, I too have become an inmate at the same institution.

(The irony of which, should you be at all curious, is not lost on me).

She bought *Lotto* tickets in the hope that money would solve all of her problems. She even said out loud how she would give each of her brothers and sisters a cash hand out – making deals with the same God she no-doubt heaped scorn onto when she didn't win. She was still looking for something that was going to make her popular overnight. Popular like Aunty Janice was.

When something scared her, she offered criticism instead of comfort. She went through friends at an embarrassing rate. One of her colleagues once confided in me that it was a brave person who stood up to her at work.

Her inability to empathise with basic human difference would have been well honed by the time she sensed something was different about James. Dad chose to ignore it all by either going to the pub after work or staying out in the garage where he tinkered with his old valve radios. Mum made sure we were fed and bathed and in bed at a reasonable hour

² It made perfect sense that Dad would want to get out of the place as soon as he could – meet new people and see some of the world before it was too late. Now I feel mean for saying what I did about his cruise.

– the bare minimum.

James and I talked about whom we would rather live with if Mum and Dad separated. We talked about sex, or at least what we thought we knew about sex. He didn't believe my ideas about human procreation. I remember how he twisted his face in disgust when I attempted to convince him that the combination of certain parts of the male and female anatomy was required in order to produce a baby.

James was small for his age and for fun Lucy Burgess and I would dress him up in our clothes, doll him up with lipstick, eye shadow and mascara and wheel him around the neighbourhood in an old pushchair. It was highly unlikely that he was even aware of his sexual preference at such a young age. He enjoyed being the subject of so much fuss and it all seemed worth it when one of our neighbours would congratulate us on the beautiful little girl we had in the pushchair. We called him Amelia.

Once I stole a *Playgirl* magazine from a bookshop. I didn't think it at all odd that James was just as interested in the pictures as I was. He was barely thirteen and I thought, like me, he was just curious. He was seventeen when he told me. I don't remember being shocked. I remember giving him a hug and telling him that I still loved him. Immediately after that he told me he was moving out. I was devastated. Two months later I moved out and left them both to it.

James began dating guys. Mum joined the bridge club and started going to church twice a week. Dad took up darts and revived an interest in rugby – he still had his old radios that he often drank with out in the garage. We didn't see much of them because, quite simply, there wasn't that much to see.

If either of them had kept diaries like Khalid did I might have been able to plot out the point in their lives when they actually did love another.

'Look here you two, this bloody graph proves that you loved him five times in 72 and

then eight times in 73. What the hell went wrong?’

I doubt they ever imagined it would happen to them. That slow infestation of mediocrity whereby they learned to live in-sync and unwittingly guaranteed their own existence through perfunctory living. She did the dishes and cooked and he looked after the car. The light bulb blows. His department. She does the groceries. I doubt they ever gave much thought to the possibility that they had no real use for themselves anymore. It was merely the unfortunate outcome of a situation that would have just turned out that way – often as things unobserved do.

They gave up – and I often wondered if they ever thought about that, realised it or even accepted it, as they both lay awake at night, in their separate beds, in their separate rooms, any long-ago advances for sex knocked back with the same type of excuse used to fob off Telemarketers and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

They were not going to become one of those old married couples that make us go all gooey inside because they still walk arm in arm down the street. I’m not going to bump into them at the supermarket – my kids in the back, one of each, perfect – and watch as he parks in the handicapped zone and then with his walking stick beats away the young guys who rush to offer him wads of cash for a thirty-five year old car that looks like it just came off the showroom floor. I’m not going to melt inside as he opens the door for Mum then gently guides her toward the entrance of the supermarket, his hand hovering over the small of her back. I’m not going to have to tell the kids to be gentle as they run to greet them. They’re not going to be genuinely happy to see us all and we won’t want to make any plans to meet up over the weekend, after the kids soccer game, because it’s never going to happen. I’m not going to have that foundation to build on.

IVF.

‘Are you sure?’ she says, looking over the top of her glasses.

‘I’m sure.’

‘It’s not that easy being a single mother these days.’

‘It’s not easy to do much these days,’ I reply.

I’m about to remind her that it was her suggestion that got me back here in the first place.

She swivels in her chair and reaches for a book that could easily suffice as a doorstop or a murder weapon from the bookshelf behind her. I don’t catch the title but I see the words IVF on the page at which she opens.

‘We’ll have to do a full medical.’

I nod.

‘It’s not cheap.’

I nod.

‘Then the clinic, providing...’

Over the top of the glasses again.

‘... they accept you as a patient, will want to do a rigorous set of tests.

I nod – and watch her.

Her thick grey-streaked black hair that is loosely tied back in a truss, her earrings look like they come from somewhere in the Middle-East. There are pictures of children near the left hand side of her computer. I begin to wonder what her husband is like. Is he a writer or a documentary film producer? Does each of her children already have a bank account that will help put them through university? Is her house decorated with an eclectic mix of treasures gathered from holidays to South America and Botswana? Will her

husband make *Beef Rendang* for dinner tonight and have a glass of wine ready for her when she walks in the door. She's telling me something about hormones that stimulate egg production but I'm lost somewhere in the fantasy that I am her and what she already has is also mine.

'Are you okay with all of that so far?'

I nod.

She types me up a letter of referral to a fertility specialist and goes over some things like ovulation and diet and I get the distinct impression she's making it up as she goes along because I'm probably the first person in her medical career who has laboured her with such an unusual request.

And then she says to me, 'it's not that unusual you know.'

'It isn't?'

'There are quite a few girls your age who are seriously considering IVF as a way to have a child.'

I begin to feel less unique.

Ten days later my hormone levels were tested, my ovulation cycle was mapped and my general health was analysed. This involved the collection of numerous vials of blood and one or two of urine as well as several swabs and smears. The nurse told me that it was all to do with checking the health of my eggs.

My legs were in stirrups, a position I was informed by the nurse that I would do well to get used to, when the sudden realisation that I had eggs inside me really hit home.

Eggs?

My *eggs?*

I've got *eggs* inside me.

Eggs!

Why has it taken me this long to properly consider this miraculous capability I have, to appreciate these little things that grow like seeds inside me and eventually turn into a smaller version of me?

All of a sudden I get the overwhelming feeling that what I'm doing is right. I haven't had that feeling for a long, long time, so I know I'm not mistaken as it runs like a little ball of tingling fire up my spine, between my shoulder blades and into my brain where it explodes like fireworks.

I had three weeks to go until it was projected that I would next ovulate. An MRI scan confirmed I had nothing untoward growing or deformed within me and the nurse suggested that we should begin straight away.

My next appointment was with a doctor.

Her name was Clodagh and she was from southern Ireland and she didn't look to be that much older than me.

'For some people this can take months,' she said with a thick accent as she handed me a plain manila folder.

'But for you I think it will be rather speedy – considering that there are no obvious reasons your body is not functioning as it should.'

I thought for moment about the people who could have children naturally and felt a pang of guilt.

'I think more and more women may choose to get pregnant through IVF over the next decade,' she said.

I wanted to ask her if she had children of her own.

'I think you're very brave,' she said as she handed me a bottle of folic acid capsules.

She placed her hand on my arm as she stood up.

'I think you might want to make a decision as quickly as possible,' she said,

indicating to the manila folder she had given me when I first sat down in her office.

‘Just pop me through an email when you decide and I’ll get everything ready for the big day.’

As simple as that – who would’ve thought?

I tossed the folder with the list of prospective fathers on the front seat of the car and drove home. I’d already told work that I had a doctor’s appointment, yes another one, and I would be taking the afternoon off.

If my boss was curious as to what was happening with me, he didn’t show it. I suspect that it was because he was too scared to ask.

‘Women’s things,’ was what I told him, when for the third time in as many weeks, I took time off to visit the doctor.

He never mentioned it again.

I drove home and called James as soon as I got in the door.

‘Want to help me choose the father of my baby over a takeaway curry?’

‘Seeya bout six-ish,’ was all he said.

He was at my front door, food in bags with two bottles of cranberry juice – my new choice of drink – at a quarter to six.

We ate and chatted and didn’t talk about the manila folder on the end of the coffee table until after we had finished eating and everything was cleared away.

James reached for it – I was glad he did. I probably would’ve handed it too him anyway. I watched him as he read the profile of the first donor. He finished and turned the page face down on the coffee table and began reading the next page. I waited until he had completed three profiles before I reached for the upturned pile and began to read. I was surprised at how little information there was. Age, ethnicity, weight, general health, career, colour of eyes and a very short blurb on the donor’s general well-being which I

presume was written by the nurse who had interviewed them.

Number one was a chemical engineer from Scotland who had moved to New Zealand five years earlier. I pictured a bespectacled geek with a comb-over and a penchant for model train sets. As I read on I discovered that his hair was black and his eyes were green. The image of model train sets was replaced by ornithology and I pictured him showing friends photos of the avian life on the Galapagos Islands.

I remember thinking that if I took down the painting that I had bought last year and stuck each profile up on the wall with blu-tac I could close my eyes, turn around ten times and throw a knife in the general direction of all of the potential fathers.

James was still reading. There were two piles now. Which one was which? I wanted to know but I also didn't. How the hell *does* one choose a father? I have always been a rather big fan of window-shopping but this was bloody ridiculous. I kept reading. A builder, a fitness instructor, a teacher, all healthy and all prepared to donate their sperm so that people who are either unable to get pregnant by conventional means or like me, are too socially retarded to find a bloke to impregnate me, can get pregnant. James finished reading. He pushed the pile of possibilities across the table toward me. I began to read, adding the ones I liked to my pile of 'maybes'. I sifted through James' pile of rejects and was surprised to find that the ones he thought unsuitable were whom I would have also picked. I went through my pile and rejected a few more. The reject pile was now bigger than the possibility pile. I suddenly felt the need for something stronger than cranberry juice – but pushed the thought out of my mind. James must've read my mind.

'Christ. I could murder a glass of red,' he said.

I looked at him but remained silent. I did have a few bottles in the pantry but I wasn't supposed to be drinking.

'Tough work,' he said without looking at me.

Body no longer completely cleansed for artificial insemination, result, I give birth to Sideshow Bob.

Don't think about the red wine in the pantry.

Luckily I still have the presence of mind to slap myself (figuratively speaking), light but firm, across the back of the head.

Good Christ girl. Choosing the father for your potential child should be an occasion to celebrate.

Fuck it.

'I've got some in the pantry.'

'Bloody hold out,' James says as he springs from the chair.

Medicinal – I tell myself.

'Medicinal,' James says as he fills two glasses.

It was much easier to think once I'd got through that first glass.

St Marys.

St Mary's, Star of the Sea. Decades of land reclamation, much of now which serves as the foundation for the central business district and the port, significantly changed the tidal currents of the harbour, enough for it to become an estuary instead. What would've been once a blue-green expanse was now more of a tan silted pond. At low tide the mudflats came up for air. Mangroves grew in the more secluded corners of the waterway and a bridge linked the north of the city to the more historical south.

St Mary's still overlooked the water but it was far from being the beacon it once was for visiting sailors and voyagers. Only a few stumps of the original wharf remained, imported hardwood from Australia, probably Jarrah or Blue-gum, visible only when the tide was at its lowest.

Some still called it the first church. Which was exactly what it was. Almost two hundred and fifty years old and built from the remains of several decommissioned sailing ships. The smell of camphor still lingered heavily – especially in the summer when the heat seemed to entice the smell out of timber pews that were once sea chests for immigrant passengers from The United Kingdom and Ireland.

Both James and I had our first taste of that odd little piece of unleavened bread in that church. I remember thinking that it tasted like ice cream cones without the ice cream. It stuck to the roof of my mouth and I had to work it off with my tongue. We both carved our names on the back of one of the church pews too. Father McKay arrived on our doorstep that evening with two strips of sandpaper. As soon as he left Mum went straight to the kitchen and took the wooden spoon out of the second drawer down.

Even now, if someone gave me a kick-start with the right words, I'm sure I could rattle off the Nicene Creed beginning to end – some things you never forget.

Father McKay had long since retired. He spent his last years in the rectory adjacent to the first church and shared the house with his replacement, Father Mike Campion. It still smelled the same when I walked in through those front doors. As I had done so many times before, I looked over to the seat that once bore my name. James was behind me so I don't know if he felt compelled to look as I had done. The teak barrel-vault ceiling still felt like it was pressing down upon me, threatening and menacing in its structure, once the deck of a ship that limped into port after barely surviving a storm. Thirty-five years earlier I convinced myself that the deep scratches on the timber planks were caused by dozens of fingernails that clung on for dear life before being washed overboard.

Dad stayed at home. He mumbled something about being there for the cakes and the phonecalls and reminded us that any flowers left on the doorstep would need to be put in water. James and I made an appointment to meet with Father Campion.

I had heard it mentioned before that the organisation of a funeral could be as equally draining as the trauma of the death suffered – something which only experience can validate.

‘Are there any particular verses your mother would like read?’

He spoke like she was in the room with us.

I looked at James. He shrugged with his mouth.

‘Ummm. I'm not sure. I know she liked the *Our Father*.’

A solemn nod from Father Mike.

‘Well if you don't mind I'll select a few appropriate readings which I think she may like.’

She's dead Father Mike. She's not standing behind us you know.

Maybe I should just turn around and check anyway.

Jesus Christ, maybe she is standing behind us.

I really want to turn around and look now.

Shit. I just blasphemed – in a church.

‘She definitely likes Psalm 24.’

He’s bloody well gone and convinced me that she’s here in the church with us.

Shit. I just swore inside my head – in a church.

‘We’ll advertise the funeral on the sign.’

Breathe. Just breathe. She’s not here. She’s not going to tap me on the shoulder

Yes the sign. I smiled. I turned to James. He smiled too. Father Mike took this as appreciation. He may have heard stories of the sign – most likely from the parishioners, possibly from Father McKay³. I had to bite my bottom lip. I knew if I turned to look at James I would burst out laughing. I stared at the floor instead – feigning sadness as Father Mike said something about the organisation and design of the pamphlet to accompany the funeral service.

³ The church signboard was situated just off the footpath, placed at exactly the right angle to the road for maximum viewing. A new message was put on the signboard every Sunday. When I was young the letters making up the message were cut out of black card and fixed in place using *Blu-tac* or some other similar adhesive. Occasionally some of the letters would fall down. Much to the delight of passing motorists, *International Poor Week* became *International Poo Week*, and someone who must have had a ladder handy whilst on the way home from a late night out re-worded, *Jesus Lives In Our Hearts*, to read *Jesus Lives In Our Farts*, Supplying his own F obviously. The H and E were never recovered.

The notice board was due for an upgrade.

The initial idea of lifting it up a few feet to deter future vandalism worked okay in the short term – until Father MacKay fell off the ladder and broke his leg and both wrists.

He failed to complete the intended message and what should have read *Jesus Is Coming. Are You Ready?* Instead it said, *Jesus Is Coming. Are You*

The double-entendre went unnoticed by the church for several days, much to the delight of the non-Christian or maybe even the non-Catholic passers-by. The church was alerted and the message was removed.

Not to be beaten – and for what it would have cost to drill a dozen fresh-water wells in central Africa, the Parish went electronic.

Larger messages could now be displayed with ease. The words making up the messages could be made to flash onto the LED-illuminated screen one word at a time. Slide from side to side, one word at a time, or ascend from the bottom of the signboard to the top. The options appeared limitless.

At first, Father MacKay was a little too verbose.

The Police advised him to keep the messages short, preferably less than three seconds, because public interest in what he had to say was slowing down traffic flow and in rush hour that caused a backlog.

This meant that any fancy sliding or pop-up messages were no longer allowed.

Not one to upset the authorities, Father Mackay duly complied. The restrictions allowed for messages fifteen words or less to be displayed, and of course, images.

‘Aunty Janice is looking after that,’ I said to the floor.

I hoped this would stop me thinking about the sign.

‘She said she’s got a nice photo of mum. Taken last year when they were in Australia.’

One of the few times Mum mustered up the courage to leave the country – the last holiday to Australia, much to Mum’s relief, was cancelled due to 9-11. Aunty Janice had to almost drag Mum onto the plane and she told me the entire time they were away Mum just didn’t seem willing to relax.

‘It was as if she was looking forward to getting home again,’ she told me.

‘Back to where everything is safe and dependable,’ I replied.

‘Maybe it’s me?’ Janice said.

I remember that she had a look on her face that made me think that for the first time she was prepared to give serious thought to the possibility that she may actually have had a less than positive influence on her older-by-four-minutes twin sister.

For a reasonable chunk of Mum’s formative years she lived in the shadow of her more attractive and more outgoing twin sister Janice. From what I understand, and have been able to ascertain via snippets of comments during years of family gatherings, is that Janice, Mum’s sister, was the more popular of the two. Mum’s frustration at being commonly referred to as Janice’s sister would’ve begun to wear annoyingly thin by the time Janice won a regional beauty contest. This was in the early 1960s when such events were extremely popular, especially in rural New Zealand.

Janice went on to become an airline stewardess with the national airline – one step down from being a supermodel in today’s world. The numerous photographs and newspaper cut-outs of the newly crowned beauty queen catalogued amongst Mum’s old scrapbooks show a glamorous twenty one year old Janice Shaw getting crowned, choosing

a new wardrobe from the local department store – the *only* place to shop in those days – meeting with the mayor, opening the new town swimming pool. Then, standing in the background, or sometimes if she were lucky enough, beside her sister, was Mum. The accompanying caption said it all. It was a description able to hold its own in statement context and it stuck. Mum was introduced as Janice’s sister. I guess after hearing it so many times she simply began to believe it. And now Janice had outlived her.

If Janice did suspect something similar, she didn’t let on. They continued with their fortnightly chats via telephone and remained civil to each other whilst several thousand kilometres separated them.

Father Mike nodded and smiled an approving smile. I knew he knew Aunty Janice – they were both a similar age and both went to the local Catholic schools, Saint Catherine’s for the girls and Marist College for the boys. Maybe he liked her better than he did Mum as well.

‘I’m sure Janice will prepare something very special,’ Father Mike said. ‘And will it just be the family at the burial?’

I looked at James. He shrugged with both his mouth and his shoulders. I turned back to Father Mike and stared at him long enough to warrant a response.

‘I’ll just say that those who wish to attend the burial are more than welcome to accompany the family.’

Both James and I nodded quickly. We both look at each other and I can tell from his look that he, like me, is hoping that this will be all over with as quickly as possible. It wasn’t until later did I consider that such a feeling may have been spurred by the fact that we were doing more for her now than she had done for both of us since we left home.

The catalyst.

Debates happened on footpaths, in cafes and in the workplace. It didn't matter how the conversation began. It always came back to the same thing. Politicians squabbled – the liberals wrung their hands and the conservatives wanted action. The general consensus was that the court case had dragged on far too long when really it should have been a cut-and-dry conviction. The entire New Zealand populous were irritated.

The extreme rightwing and self-proclaimed political party, the National Democratic Front, were on trial as a political organisation charged with the plotting, the promotion and the carrying out of terrorism. The NDF responded to government and public attack by announcing that they were the self-appointed police force of a country that had lost the ability to control its own borders. The NDF were anti-immigration and pro-nationalist. The now shadowy organisation initially found its roots in the early 1980s when several South Island motorcycle gangs joined forces in order to fend off threats from growing opposition gangs. In addition to the bringing together of several hundred American and British manufactured motorbikes, enough people to consume several thousand dollars worth of alcohol during an average Friday night get together and the creation of a sophisticated and large scale drug operation, the newly co-joined gangs also shared the common thought that white skin was far superior to black or brown.

Throughout the early nineties, when New Zealand opened up its borders to Asian immigrants, the gang who were then known as *Satan's Crawl* began to recruit like-minded anti-immigration members to its fold. The larger than expected influx of pro-nationalist sympathisers into the ranks of *Satan's Crawl* initiated a rethink of position and agenda for the gang. Very soon they began to offer political comment, which to the surprise of some unsuspecting New Zealand citizens, was received with gratitude and cheers from an

alarming high proportion of the country.

The type of political comment offered by Wayne Gilchrist, the president of *Satan's Crawl*, was ideal fodder for the sensationalist journalism of several tabloid newspapers. The broadsheets were quick to find merit in the debate of such a controversial topic. Declining sales needed a boost and a measured dose of some right-wing idealism was the perfect cure for shrinking revenue. One broadsheet even employed a Christian journalist to head their national opinion column, with the clear intention of provoking fundamentalist opinion amongst the hibernating nationalist populous.

Gilchrist eventually broke away from *Satan's Crawl* sometime around the late 1990s (apparently the gang still exists somewhere in the suburbs of Christchurch) and set up the NDF, installing himself as leader and about that time New Zealand was very quickly being recognised by immigrants from countries that many New Zealanders had never heard of as the ideal country to live in.

Then 9-11 happened and the suspicion of Muslims in general provided Gilchrist with several thousand more donation-giving constituents and a quite a large pot of money with which to further his campaign against immigration.⁴

Under Gilchrist's leadership the NDF gained popularity through promotion of fear. Post 9-11, there were several dozen instances where bricks and bibles were tossed through the windows of houses in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. The media feigned horror at the attacks but enjoyed the associated popularity it brought the industry. Several influential politicians raised concerns in parliament about Muslim immigration and the public were left wondering who in the halls of power were really far-right sympathisers posing as centre right MPs.

The beheadings of western hostages in occupied Iraq resulted in a spate of Muslim

⁴ At the time of the court case it was suggested that the NDF coffers were brimming with close to ten million dollars.

beatings and several Muslims being run off the road by groups of NDF members. Then things quietened down for a few years. Some suspected it was because Gilchrist was fending off an uprising amongst NDF hierarchy. It was suggested that some members were unhappy with how Gilchrist was spending the party's money – first-class flights to America and expensive hotels in Las Vegas, where apparently he had meetings with the neo-Nazi *National Alliance* leader Erich Gliebe. There was also talk of expensive soirees in honour of visiting far right and neo-Nazi organisations from Europe.

Evidence suggested it was a culmination of things that spurred the NDF back into action. It was suggested in the newspapers that the election of Barak Obama as president of the United States did something to help reignite Gilchrist's hate for non-Europeans. The rape of a white teenage girl by several Somali males put the city on edge. But I think it was something else that riled Gilchrist. The preservation of identity was what mattered to him the most. Change was what he didn't want and couldn't condone. His constituents would have alerted him to the news that an application for resource consent by a suburban Auckland mosque to allow muezzin to announce the call to prayer on Fridays, was currently pending approval by the city council authorities.

The NDF alerted the media and soon the mosque in question was at the centre of a national debate.

The NDF revived their earlier campaign and began once more tossing bricks and bibles through the windows of Muslim occupied homes. There were reports of bullets being fired through the front windows of Muslim owned businesses as well as reports of Muslim men being set upon and beaten by gangs of NDF members. Burqa clad Muslim women were harassed and spat on.

In anticipation of some sort of attack on their place of worship, local Muslims patrolled the perimeter of the building both night and day preventing the NDF from getting

anywhere near the mosque they so dearly wanted to destroy. Their second choice, a smaller and lesser-known mosque in South Auckland was relatively unguarded, except for the occasional drive-bys from roaming security vehicles or the odd police patrol.

What the NDF didn't and couldn't have known was that their chosen target was being used that night by Rosemary Habib and her three children, Zakir, Mumtaz and Fatima to escape their violently abusive husband and father.

They had snuck in through an open window at the rear of the building. It was Rosemary's plan to wait inside the mosque until morning and then she would be able to talk to Habir Mohammed Rashid, a wise and empathetic man and a respected community leader. She wanted to leave her husband and she needed advice from Habir Mohammed.

Rosemary and her frightened children hid themselves in one of the small antechambers inside the building. They were probably too frightened to move as the place was doused in petrol sometime around two o'clock in the morning.

Gilchrist refused to hand over those responsible for the deaths of Rosemary Habib and her three children and he did nothing to distance himself from the abhorrent actions of the NDF members under his command. He suggested that the crimes committed by, as he put it, 'the constituents of his political party, were in retribution for the succession of crimes committed against the Western world by Muslim extremists in foreign countries abroad.'

Gilchrist recited a list of attacks purported to have been carried out by al Qaeda, or extremist splinter groups associated with al Qaeda. He began with the 1993 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the bombing of the USS Cole in Aden, 9-11, the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings and he paid homage to the numerous soldiers killed whilst at war with 'the soldiers of the devil,' Gilchrist's words again.

In an unprecedented step the police arrested and charged Gilchrist with murder of Rosemary Habib and her three children. Gilchrist remained tight-lipped as to who amongst his followers was actually responsible for the murders – a ploy to incite a more virulent campaign from NDF members.

After a brief hearing, Gilchrist was remanded in custody without bail while outside the courthouse police in full riot gear kept NDF supporters and Muslim protestors apart. Soon after Gilchrist's appearance in court, swift action from the government using recently passed laws designed to curb the threat of terrorism made it illegal for the National Democratic Front party to continue as a political or social group. It was also made illegal for anyone to be a member of the NDF party.

It was suggested by some that it was all part of Gilchrist's plan.

His high-profile arrest and denial of bail was reported by the now titular NDF to have boosted membership to their cause. It was soon announced by the former NDF deputy, Peter Carmody that a march was to take place in seven days time at which ex-NDF members would protest at what they determined to be an infraction of their civil right to gather together as a group.

I killed Mum about the same time as the NDF supporters began to arrive in the city from all over the country. Obviously I had other things on my mind so I didn't notice the obvious change in the mood of the city. I've since talked to people about what it was like and it was suggested to me that for the three days leading up to the march the entire city felt like it was about to be descended upon by a huge thunder storm.

Mum's funeral was the same day as the planned NDF protest.

It was also the day where a group of Muslim extremists planned to seek retribution for the murder of Rosemary Habib and her children, the result of which we witnessed from across town at the cemetery.

Her funeral.

Dad's hair looks greyer than normal. His face is a ruddy red, like the colour of old bricks. His eyes, normally bright hazel orbs with a tinge of orange around the outsides of the pupils, now look lifeless and empty. Spidery scarlet blood vessels on his cheeks look like the contour lines on a map. He has a paunch that suggests spindly arms and shoulders and a lack of physical ability.

Maybe he looks like shit because he's dressed like shit?

Maybe that's it?

Who would've thought? Clothes apparently do maketh the man.

I notice that the sun glistening off the chrome-plated coffin handles forces him to blink a couple of times. I also notice that he looks like a badly dressed villain, like someone selling something they don't believe in but need the money badly. Even if he'd *hired* a suit it would have looked ten times better. I bet he paid less than two hundred dollars for it, and they probably threw in a shirt and tie. He's squinting now and he looks as though he's scheming something. Maybe he's wondering what it is he can do with his life now he's liberated and suddenly awash with options, now that the trouble and strife, the old war office, the ball and chain, has up and popped her clogs. Bring on the man-food – steak, eggs, chips and beer on the couch. Let the dishes pile up for a week. He loves satay chicken and has been known to use a jar of peanut butter to coat some drumsticks before baking them in the oven.

Peanut butter. Smooth. The same colour as the chiselled clay walls of Mum's grave.

I think if I saw him walk up my driveway wearing a suit like that I'd hide behind the sofa and pretend nobody was home. He can knock on the door until the cows come home. But she's not coming home, is she? That woman who turned off her love like a light

switch.

I didn't bring any tissues and all I want to do right now is reach across and grab that ridiculous looking excuse for a handkerchief poking out from the top of Dad's breast pocket and fill it with snot.

I hope he's still got the receipt somewhere. He's always been meticulous about saving things like that. Just in case. He's got warranty cards from tools he bought in the seventies. I'm sure chain stores usually have an agreeable refund policy. Swap it for black polo-neck jumper, some jeans and some socks.

James on the other hand looks good. He's had a haircut. The salt and pepper look is still a few years away for him yet. His face is tanned – he's always liked the sun – and from side on I can see that his nose is perfect. I wonder why I have never really noticed that before? It boasts the slightest of inward curves from the brow to the tip. He's got Mum's blue eyes as well, except on James they are warm. I've never seen *his* eyes turn grey like her eyes did when she got in one of her moods. James' eyes suggest compassion and empathy and the ability not to hold a grudge. Mum's showed fear. He looks strong – which I find amazing when I consider what he's been through. But underneath it all he's probably feeling similar to how I'm feeling. Which is interesting because as I watch him stand there, pillar-like, dependable and project upon him how he *should* be, it's really only for my benefit and not his.

Occasionally his elbow brushes against mine and I find it pleasantly reassuring. As if he's aware of my thoughts, he turns and gives me a smile. I smile back. I wonder what *he* thinks of Dad's suit. Maybe it doesn't bother him because it's Dad that's wearing it. Maybe due to the situation, he's prepared to overlook it.

James lifts his elbow so my hand can rest in the crook of his arm. I feel for the slightest of moments that everything is going to be okay. And then it's gone. I think I'm

going to need him later on when *I* decide to get upset. *All about me again.* Then again for years it was me to who an emotionally battered and confused James looked for support when Mum and Dad all but disowned him.

Maybe he's let it all go? Done with it.

It's me that matters now. It's my life. I like who I am and it's not my fault that she never really loved me.

I wonder if he's said those words, or something similar, too himself this week. It's entirely possible that he has forgiven her. If he has done then I've lost a partner in crime, a wingman, someone to back me up when it comes time for me to revisit the past.

'Remember when she said...'⁵

Oh yeah. I remember all right.

If he has forgiven her then I'd have to be jealous. Not angry, just jealous.

'As we forgive those who trespass against us...'⁵ intones Father Mike.

I hear parts of what he is saying and then when my mind wanders all I hear is a muted kind of wah-wah-wah. It's not because I'm not interested. It's because across the estuary, downtown there's a political protest happening and I'm more interested in trying to decipher the chants of the protesters that are being carried across the harbour by the warm northerly.

Along with the chants the breeze brings with it the smell of salt. Something similar to what lingers in the air moments before it's going to rain, when the grass looks way too green and everything seems to go quiet. I try to add some rhythm to the chants but my choice of words don't make any sense and I become distracted by a young girl tugging at her mother's sleeve. She notices me watching her and she smiles. I can tell that she

⁵ 'All I have to do is make one phone-call and you kids are off to boarding school, so don't make me pick up that bloody phone, I *beg* you not to.'

doesn't really understand the concept of death and like me, probably doesn't want to be here. I wish to be like her, even if it were just for the rest of today. Even though I already know that the things she's got to look forward too are the things that I've already done.

I want to ask if her summers seem to go on forever and ever. Or whether she plays under the garden sprinkler and if she does, does she get told not to squat directly over the jet of water.

But it feels nice Mum.

Who brings a child to a funeral anyway? I look at the little girl's mother – she's crying. A handkerchief scrunched in her left hand, her daughter's hand in her right. I immediately feel guilty because I'm not crying, (how dare someone I don't know cry more tears than me – her daughter. *The one that should be crying but can't*). The little girl is tugging at her mother's sleeve. Maybe the babysitter cancelled. I want to walk over to the little girl, crouch down, take her little freckled face in my hands and tell her that the mean cool girls at school always end up divorced, overweight and undereducated, that teachers and parents aren't always right, that you're bound to shoplift something in your life but that doesn't mean it's okay to make a habit of it.

'Who killed Mrs Smith Mummy?' the young girl asks, looking up at her mother with all the seriousness such a question deserves.

The mother quickly crouches down and I want to know what she's saying to the little girl.

Probably something like – *'Mrs Smith got sick and had to go up to heaven with angels to get better again.'*

I feel like marching over and telling her that Mrs Smith stirred up a world of misery and then snuck away before she could be held accountable.

The mother looks over at me and gives me an apologetic smile, to which I smile

back.

Who is she? A second or third cousin? One of Mum's old work-mates?

I feel like I should know her, but at the same time I have no interest in knowing her.

I stand closer to James and rest my head on his shoulder. *I want to be sad right now but I only feel tired and annoyed – and ripped off.*

Aunty Janice looks as though she's a million miles away. She dabs the sides of her nose with a pearl coloured handkerchief and continues to stare straight ahead. I haven't told her that it was me that killed Mum – yet. I'm waiting for the right time to give her that news. I can't say that they were close like twins should be, I don't even think they shared any of those odd extra-sensory powers that twins are known to sometimes have. I think the only thing they shared was the inability to spend more than forty-eight hours in close proximity to each other. I remember hearing stories about Janice dating the officers off the visiting ships but I don't remember hearing any stories about Mum dating anyone.

The freshly dug spoils from the gravesite are covered over with astroturf, cosmetically integrating the surrounding lawn with the hole in the ground. I close my eyes and involuntarily I think about sports like hockey and cricket and tennis, even mini-golf and wonder what other sports are played on fake grass. I feel like I need an answer immediately and I turn to ask James. I think better of it and exhale my question away.

I look back to the hole in the ground, where she's going to stay. It's as if it deserves a giant flag to be protruding from it. Dump the old boiler in it and it's a hole in one.

The black pants and shirt that Uncle Graham is wearing succeed in giving the impression that this time he's actually made an effort for Mum. He's got black sunglasses on so I can't see his eyes. He shows no signs of middle-aged spread and his close cut silver hair and olive skin suggests that he's put the past two decades behind him. He lives

in Australia near the ocean on the east coast and from what I understand has done reasonably well in the transport industry. His third wife, I can't remember her name, sounds like a country though... Red wine... Cheese... Chocolate, got it, Francine – she's about my age and she is overdressed in a formal black dress, a black Pashmina scarf, black designer sunglasses that are as big as teacups and a black parasol. She's fluttering a black fan in front of her face and she looks as though she wants to scream at the top of lungs, *this is about as boring as looking at bat shit*. Graham would have no doubt filled her in on his tumultuous past with Mum and I'm sure she has about as much interest in being here as she would in attending the Annual West Auckland Hydrangea Growing Championships.

No one in the family has seen or heard much of Graham over the past ten years and the opportunity to show us all, including the dead one in the overpriced wooden box, that the black sheep of the family has done okay for himself would have been both cathartic and pleasurable.

The thing is, I've always liked Graham. I think I made an effort to get on with him because Mum chose not to. Dad just wasn't allowed to make contact with him. Graham always treated both James and I well. He used to take us fishing off the wharf – before the argument. He even took me rabbit hunting once. I remember the rabbit stayed in the fridge until Mum threw it out. I don't think she knew how to cook it. I kept its little fluffy tail for several years. I remember thinking to myself as I was standing there among all of those people who were supposed to be mourning the passing of a dearly beloved wife, mother, sister, cousin and colleague, that James and I would need to make an effort to catch up with Graham for a drink – maybe some *fuck you* tequila shots in remembrance of Mum.

Soon enough a tonne of dirt is going to cover her up. I wonder who the first person to come and visit her will be? Her mother's buried around here somewhere. I remember

crying at that funeral. Nana told me once that she didn't think Mum was very well. She left it at that but I knew that she was talking about mental wellness as opposed to physical wellness. I didn't want Nana's coffin to go into the hole. I cried when it was lowered down and wanted to jump on top of it. The memories of school holidays, home baking, whitebait fritters for breakfast, fishing off the wharf, learning how to sew, and how she used to make me put my feet in the oven of the coal range when I came in from the cold, made me cry, not what was happening before me.

Dad's brothers, Uncle Roland the old pervert who tried to lift up my top while I was doing the dishes when I was only fifteen and Uncle Ian with his whiskey nose that looks like a scarlet coloured golf ball.

I counted twenty people at the burial service that day. Take away direct family and that left thirteen including Father Mike – four of those were neighbours, the rest were either work colleagues or friends – I'm not sure which were which and at a rough guess I'd say sixty people attended the church service. She didn't break a hundred and I think she may have been disappointed with that. I think she secretly hoped that the past could be left as something forgotten maybe even forgiven, and those she had offended, alienated or just not tried to understand would overlook her inabilities and come to say goodbye. Uncle Ian just wiped his big crater pocked nose and if I'm not mistaken Uncle Roland is staring at my tits. *What a bunch of fuck ups were all are, aren't we?* I remember wanting to scream out, *well it just doesn't work that way you selfish fucking bitch*, but instead I clenched my teeth and let Father Mike continue with the *ashes to ashes* bit.⁶

'Just get the friggin dirt on top of her so we can get to the pub.'

James puts his hand on top of mine as it rests on the crook of his arm and I realise that I actually said those words out loud. He pats my fingers with his. He's got a smirk

⁶ *Funk to Funky, We know Uncle Iaaaaan's a drunk, and Uncle Roly's a perve, and he's cheeeking oooout my tiiiiits again.*

beginning to grow from the corner of his mouth. I begin to giggle – James lowers his head and does one of those little snorts that happen when you try to suppress a laugh. I cover my face with both my hands and sink my teeth into the base of my palm, the meaty bit between my thumb and my wrist, but that’s not enough. James is beginning to do the convulsing thing as he tries to choke back the laughter. I turn away from her and take a few steps backwards. Father Mike continues reading from the Common Prayer Book and without me standing beside him James stops laughing. Dad looks over at me and mistakes my fit of the giggles for sadness and I watch with confusion as tears begin to slide down his face.

I turn and continue walking. New and shiny granite and marble slowly gives way to rows of faded and moss covered stone with weathered indecipherable writing. People just don't stop dying do they? Mum's headstone will be ready in a few weeks. Aunty Janice is taking care of that. Apparently she asked Dad if he wanted to leave half of the headstone blank for him. She was always quite good at being up front. I think Dad told her not to worry about it or so James said. Father Mike's prayers are become just a muffle of words and from back here near the parked cars the drone from the distant protest march wafts in on the northerly breeze. It rises and drops with the pressure of the wind that carries it and as I close my eyes and listen I swear that they're yelling.

“Give us back Kerri’s mum, give her back to have some fun.”

On the news that evening I discover that what they were actually chanting was.

‘Give us back the rights we’ve won, give us back our right to run.’

Dad has his arm locked around James’ arm. James’ head is tilted slightly toward Dad. They’re roughly the same height and I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen them stand this close together – if ever they have.

James. The pillar. James. The reliable.

Maybe Dad does miss her. Maybe I do too. Maybe we all do and we just don't know it yet. One thing I am certain of is that Dad is definitely going to have to take that suit back for a refund. James will help me convince him of that because clothes do maketh the man – just look at Uncle Graham.

And then it happened.

As if her death wasn't enough to satisfy Death – he definitely had to put in some overtime that day.

It sounded like fireworks. Except it was the middle of the day.

The distant chanting stopped.

Father Mike stopped.

Whispers became chatter.

Eyes moved from the coffin over the estuary to the city.

Father Mike started reading again but stopped when he realised no one was listening.

A hand retrieves a vibrating cellphone from a pocket.

At least it was turned to silent. She hated cellphones going off at inappropriate times. In fact, she refused to own one. I suspected that it was because she was scared of learning how to operate it.

Chatter becomes disbelief.

Just before disbelief became panic I felt my cellphone vibrating in my purse.

Rattling against my lipstick or my compact.

The text read, *bmb's let off. blood n ded pepel evrywre. Crzy.*

Those whose view was partially obstructed by a large Pohutukawa tree left the grave in order to get a better view. Even Father Mike closed his prayer book and opted for a better view of the large cloud of smoke rising up into the air from the central city.

I made my way back through the headstones and joined Dad and James.

James looked at me when I grabbed his hand.

‘Oh fuck,’ was what he said.

Uncle Graham and Francine were the first to leave. Uncle Roland was a few seconds behind him. Uncle Ian looked as though he was tossing up whether to stick around so he didn’t miss out on the after-drinks before remembering that he had a flask of scotch in his glovebox.

She really only got two thirds of a funeral because less than three minutes after the explosions happened, Dad, James and I were the only ones left at her grave. Even a wide-eyed Father Mike left, muttering sorry and making the sign of the cross repeatedly as he scampered across the cemetery to his car.

The three of us looked at each other and then we collectively looked over at Mum.

Dad said he reckoned he knew how to operate the electric winch and that he could get the coffin down into the hole.

James pointed out that behind the Pohutukawa tree there were two shovels and a rake. I briefly thought about reminding them that I was pregnant. Instead I hiked up my dress and stuck it in my knickers, kicked off my shoes and began to peel pulled back the astroturf.

By this time the sirens from downtown were plainly audible and the helicopters were beginning to circle the area.

Dad took off his jacket and worked out how to use the machine while James got the tools and in a little over an hour we had the hole filled in and I was putting the final touches to the mound of topsoil with the rake.

‘Dirt increases in volume by one third when it is returned to the hole it was taken out of,’ Dad said as he dusted himself off.

‘Well that’s the suit finished with,’ I thought to myself as I watched him wiped his

sweating hands on his thighs. He had tied the atrocious looking tie around his head to stop the sweat from dripping into his eyes and he looked like a cross between a homeless bum and a Grateful Dead fan.

‘We should ask them for a discount,’ James said as undid his shirt and stripped down to his white singlet.

‘We’ve done the hardest part of the job for them,’ he continued before he used his shirt as a face cloth and then a handkerchief.

Neither Dad nor I answered and the three of us, covered in dust and sweat, stood before the grave of our mother and wife and looked at the pile of dirt before us. Without words, Dad reached into his back pocket and took out a silver hip flask. He unscrewed the top and took a swig, then passed it to James. James took a mouthful and then handed it to me. Pregnant!

I put my arm around James and took a large mouthful before I returned the flask to Dad and put my arms around them both.

The bombings.

We already knew what had happened downtown, although none of us said anything about it. She needed to be buried. The severity of the situation across the estuary must have prompted within each of us the recognition that if we didn't fill in the hole then the chances of it getting done in the very near future were slim.

It was at least an hour before the three of us covered in a mixture of dust and sweat left the cemetery. By that time the streets were empty. I tuned the stereo into National Radio and the severity of the situation became apparent. James drove faster. Like the rest of the city he was responding to an innate need to get somewhere safe. There were barely any vehicles on the road and James quickly gave up obeying the red lights. Dad sat in the back and said nothing. I don't think any of us were thinking about her. The reports on the radio made our collective desire to mourn seem trivial and self-indulgent.

Eight males, all with homemade bombs attached to their bodies had converged on the NDF protestors in ambush fashion. Four bombers on each side of the street simultaneously entered the NDF protest march at what appeared to be pre-designated one hundred metre intervals. They pushed through the chanting crowd until they were eight or ten deep and immediately after yelling 'Alu Akbar' they simultaneously detonated their devices.⁷

We got inside the house and locked the door behind us and for the next several hours, we sat glued to the television watching news report after news report. We remained dressed in the clothes we buried her in. Dad and James drank several bottles of beer each

⁷ On a pre-recorded video tape later found at the home of one of the suicide bombers, Salim Mohammed Rashid, later identified as the leader of the group of eight, told a worldwide audience that it was the intention of the bombers to penetrate at least ten deep into the crowd of *NDF* protestors so that as few onlookers as possible were injured or killed. It was hard to believe that the words, ethics and war, could ever exist in the same sentence but the Honourable Bertrand Russell has some interesting things to say on the matter.

while I allowed myself one.

The situation on the television was going from bad to worse. Hospitals around the city were at maximum capacity. A makeshift morgue had been set up in a nearby underground carpark. The army were still scouring the area for bombs but had so far found nothing and a visibly shaken prime minister addressed the country on television and appealed for calm, but reprisals against Muslims around the city were already taking place. The army were patrolling Muslim populated parts of the city and both police and the army escorted dozens of buses filled with Muslim passengers out of the central city to the relative safety of their homes.

The initial death toll from the blasts was 148. 115 had died instantly. The remaining 33 died either on their way to hospital or while in hospital and another 230 people were injured, 43 of them seriously. Included in the death toll were the eight suicide bombers.

What made the bombs so vicious and so deadly was their design. The explosive device itself, which due to its obvious destructive ability was suggested by bomb experts to be military grade plastic explosive, was attached to a steel plate inside a large backpack. Then attached to the steel-plate, (it was suggested by the experts that duct-tape was probably used), were several plastic canisters each filled with several hundred hardened steel ball bearings, each about the size of a garden pea. The thick steel plate ensured the ball bearings were directed outwards and away from the suicide bomber when the device was exploded. It was suggested by one of the many analysts brought in by the media to comment on the attack that all the suicide bomber need do to ensure his own demise was to tilt his head back so it was directly above the top of the backpack. Oddly enough it made perfect sense. Each of the suicide bombers announced 'God is Great' to the sky before they detonated their bombs.

The NDF went on an immediate rampage. Dozens of Muslim shops and houses were

firebombed. Some of those unlucky enough not to have made it the safety of their homes were beaten to death in the streets. Skin colour appeared to be the defining reason for attack as some of the victims were not even Muslim.

As each day passed the number of dead continued to climb. Some of the dead were those already seriously injured by the bombs. The rest were victims of the ongoing reprisals.

Introducing Khalid Khan.

If the entire situation took a break from itself and all of the characters, the pedestrians, the people in the car, the Muslim family, broke from the act and took five minutes off the set for a cup of tea or an orange juice and Khalid was asked what it was he hoped to achieve he would've said he hoped to be able to reason with the group in the dark-green car and tell them that what they were doing just wasn't acceptable.

I worked this and much more out from his diary entries, that it was his father Hamum who was to blame. Khalid had been raised on a diet of idealism and romanticism and the impressed belief that discussion is often the best remedy for conflict and difference. I can then, with relative confidence, piece together how he may have felt when he first saw the Muslim family walking down Queen Street, dressed in traditional garb. Having only been in the country a few weeks, he would've still been in exploration mode and drinking in the modern surroundings of a western city that was nothing like his home town of Jodhpur.

There was no six hundred year old Fort towering above and protecting this city. Just a tall skinny building that was barely two decades old and looked curiously like a giant hypodermic needle. There were no palaces either. Just lots of tall glass buildings. No cow dung or dust but plenty of odd little street-sweeping machines that men drove alongside pedestrians. The contrast would have been difficult to digest. It was his first voyage abroad and he was homesick. For six weeks each of his diary entries began with that word and in some cases it was underlined, sometimes underlined twice.

I think that's why I chose to share this particular diary entry with you. Both because of its latent connection with what happened to Khalid almost four years later and also because it was representative of his first introduction to hate on western soil. When I first read it, the obvious foreshadowing was painfully acute but unfortunately, as is often the

case, we are only able to draw conclusions through hindsight.

So when he said that he felt the corners of his mouth lift he must have for one of the first times since arriving in this foreign city begun to feel like he could actually learn to be part of it.

He noticed them long before he got to the intersection. They were strolling at a leisurely pace – some Friday afternoon shopping, perhaps. The father wore a plain white kurta with salwar pants. The mother wore a decoratively printed salwar kameez. The two girls both wore brightly coloured salwar kameez. Khalid guessed the daughters ages to be around eight or ten.

It reminded him of Sundays back home. A family visit to the Sadar Markets. The aniseed smell of fennel and lemony bite of fresh ground coriander washing over them even before they exited the old city gates. Past the famous omelette man who boasts that he uses 1000 eggs per day – even I remember him from when I was there last. The thick smell of cooking oil and spice from deep-fried samosa's as they enter the markets. A treat of dhal-fry and roti and then his favourite, lassi made from rose water and saffron. Sip it slow and watch the bustling canvas of colour mix and shimmer, silk saris of crimson, orange and gold and turbans of pink, red and saffron. Finely boned faces with gold earrings, necklaces and nose rings and he and his family would be dressed similarly.

Hamum was like the father and his mother Lela not unlike the woman. His sisters would be wearing similar *salwar kameez*, Iman in her favourite pink and mauve and Nasiha in blue and turquoise, happy and smiling and pestering their father for money to buy something – usually cheap jewellery or milk sweets.

Khalid approached the kerb. He pushed the button of the pole and took a step back. The family were to his right. He took a moment to admire them. He was just about to strike up conversation with them but was beaten to it.

‘Fucking camel rooters.’

The abuse came from within a car that was waiting at the lights a mere ten feet from where Khalid stood.

‘Sand-niggers.’

The father shifted uncomfortably on his feet. He let go his daughters’ hand and placed it on her shoulder. The mother, standing closest to Khalid, placed her hand over her daughters’ ear and gently pulled the girl closer to her side.

Khalid looked around to see who else had heard.

The people standing around him all had their eyes focused elsewhere – they didn’t want trouble from this lot.

Khalid couldn’t help *but* look.

The windows of the car were tinted making it difficult to see inside the vehicle.

‘Fucking towel-heads.’

A middle-aged lady, black trousers, white blouse and black leather jacket, sunglasses, business like and standing to Khalid’s right, behind the family gave the impression that she was focusing on something on the other side of the intersection. The tenseness in her jaw, the slight but repetitive movement of the muscles between her cheeks and her ears confirmed to Khalid she had indeed heard the abuse.

A student, female, petite with shoulder length brown hair and porcelain skin, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with an alien face on it stood to his left. The words underneath the face of the alien said, Take Me to Your Dealer.

Like the businesswoman, her gaze was purposefully directed across the road, safely away from the source of the abuse.

A man in a suit, mid-thirties Khalid guessed, close cropped fair hair, a little over six-foot tall with extremely shiny black shoes, furiously worked the keypad of his cellphone

with the thumb of his right hand. His left hand was tucked in his pants pocket.

‘Fuck-ing nappy-headed murderers.’

Every few seconds another person arrived at the intersection. A slow, *bleep, bleep, bleep* came from inside the traffic light post reminding the those near to it that it wasn’t time to cross yet. The middle-aged businesswoman reached in front of Khalid and pressed the button. Her taut jaw muscles rippling as she ground her teeth.

Surely they wouldn’t *do* anything to her if *she* said something to them, Khalid thought.

‘Piss off back to Iraq why don’t ya.’

She reached across and pushed the button again.

At least a dozen people were waiting to cross.

A bus roars through the lights.

‘Arseholes.’

Khalid heard the word muttered somewhere behind him. He wanted to turn and see who had said it but he was unable to take his eyes off the car and the darkened shapes inside.

He wanted to say something to the family. But he was new in this country as well.

‘Why don’t you piss off home you fuckin terrorists.’

Laughter erupts from inside the car.

A bottle of beer brandished from the window. A shaved head shows itself, tattoo on the neck, drinks from the bottle. A jet of booze spurts from the open window and hits the asphalt. The Muslim couple step back, both parents move so that they are standing in front of their children. The businesswoman takes a step closer to Khalid.

Khalid’s cheeks begin to burn. His mouth is dry.

More pedestrians arrive at the intersection.

‘Made any donations to al Qaeda lately?’

A sticker on the rear passenger window of the dark metallic-green car says, *New Zealand for New Zealanders.*

More laughter. The malted smell of beer from the mouthful spat from the car rises from the asphalt.

‘Yeah I’m talking to you, you fuckin camel-shaggin terrorists.’

Shaved head, tattoo on his neck leans out of the front passenger window. Swastika tattoo. Earrings in his ear, one of them a silver cross.

‘First the Gooks and now the fuckin Sand-niggers.’

Something was being passed from the rear of the car over to the front seat.

‘Come-ooon.’ He heard someone plead.

Come on what? For the lights to turn green? To escape this? Is it uncomfortable for you?

The father turned to look at Khalid. The fear was obvious.

‘For Christ sakes,’ Khalid said loudly.

He half-looked over his shoulder before stepping forward. *An, if you’re not going to do anything I will,* type gesture. The businesswoman grabbed his arm.

‘What the hell do you think your doing?’ She hissed through clenched teeth.

Khalid stopped. The woman lifted her sunglasses and perched them atop her head. Her eyes were wide, her pupils dark.

‘They *will* bash you up.’

Khalid shrugged off her grip. He stepped around the Muslim family and stood between them and the dark green car.

The shaved head showed itself at the window.

‘Jesus fuckin Christ. Another one. Fuck-in town’s gettin infested.’

Traffic lights turn amber. Khalid stands his ground.

‘Fuck-in terrorists everywhere.’

Which was something he had never in his life been called.

‘What the fuck are you *lookin* at shithead?’

Traffic begins to slow.

The pedestrians rearrange themselves. The smaller people and the some of the females move away from the kerb. The larger males move forward. Khalid notices that the businesswoman stays where she is.

Traffic lights turn red.

Car door opens. Bottle in one hand, grasped by the neck.

The sudden realisation that any attempt to reason his way out of this situation would not succeed but knowing that to stand by and do nothing would haunt him forever.

A gasp from somewhere behind him. The mother and her two daughters are guided back from the kerb by a female in a grey skirt, black stockings and a black denim jacket. The father stays where he is.

A foot on the asphalt.

‘Fuckin knock you and those other cunts into next week.’

Two feet on the asphalt now. Door open wider.

‘Fucking niggers.’

And that was the comment that confirmed to a select few of the pedestrians that the abuse directed at the young Muslim family might as well have been directed at anyone who wasn’t white.

He was out of the car now. He was at least six feet tall and broad across the shoulders. The silver cross dangles from his ear.

‘Gonna spill some nigger blood.’ He said before he emptied the remaining dregs

onto the road and smashed the bottle against the edge of the open car door. Brown glass hit the asphalt and the jagged remains were pointed toward Khalid.

A feeling of resignation burned in the pit of his stomach. He swallowed back the bile rising in his throat. He had no intention of being a hero – never had.

This is the right thing to do – it's that simple people.

'Call the police,' someone said.

And an ambulance.

'Open the cunt up,' from the backseat.

The skinhead grinned as he waved the bottle in front of Khalid's face. There were nicotine stains on his front teeth.

If he swallowed what he thought was going to be his last breath he couldn't remember. He felt his body get pulled backwards. The same thing was happening to the Muslim father.

Three large Pacific Island lads similar in age to the skinhead with the bottle moved in to take Khalid's place.

Walk, Walk, Walk, and the accompanying shrill beeping sound.

Most of the pedestrians took the chance to leave. Six remained.

The skinhead sneered then cocked his head and scoffed before he spat on the road.

One of the remaining pedestrians, a male signalled for the family to cross. The father took his wife and his children and hurried across the street and Khalid heard a quiet thank you uttered as they passed him.

The skinhead continued to stare at the three Samoans.

Khalid felt himself get pulled onto the road by the elbow. He was halfway across before he realised that it was the businesswoman who was leading him across the street.

On the other side of the street he paused to look back. The Samoans had their arms

folded across their chests. The remaining pedestrians, some of who wore suits stood behind them. In front of him he saw the Muslim family duck into the entrance of a department store.

‘What the hell were you thinking?’ the businesswoman asked.

She still held him by the elbow and for a moment Khalid felt like a naughty child being forced along the street by his mother.

‘He would’ve killed you – you don’t know those type of people.’

‘Should I have let him keep on picking on them?’

The businesswoman didn’t answer.

‘What the hell did that family ever do to him?’

Khalid shrugged his elbow from businesswoman’s grip.

She exhaled a sigh through her nose.

‘You need to be careful,’ was all she said before she continued on down the street.

Khalid watched her go until the sound of car horns made him turn back around to the intersection. The dark-green car was holding up traffic. The Samoans remained, their arms folded and staring down the skinhead. Several more pedestrians, some as big as the Samoans had begun to gather – more brown-skinned males to join the group of three saviours.

The skinhead retreated to his car. The driver revved the engine and the wheels spun as the vehicle accelerated across the intersection. The pedestrians watching impassively as the car sped away. As if they either expected it or were used to it, they showed no reaction to the volley of abuse hurled at them from the departing vehicle.

One of the three Samoans looked across at Khalid. Khalid lifted his hand. No reply was offered. The three males turned and sauntered up the street – they looked as if they were in no apparent hurry.

The remainder of the group dispersed and less than a few minutes after it had all begun it was finished, and one-by-one a new group of pedestrians began to assemble at the intersection.

Khalid in India.

As I worked my way back through Khalid's diaries I was shocked to find out that he and I had already met, albeit very briefly, almost ten years earlier in his hometown of Jodhpur. I had just turned thirty and was backpacking through India. As a result of that meeting he knew me a lot more intimately than I knew him.

When I told Hamum Khan of this earlier meeting he was as equally shocked as I was.

He had long since returned to Jodhpur, with the body of his son, and upon his return as promised, he sent me his son's diaries which provided me an erudite account of Khalid's life in Jodhpur from the age nine through to eighteen – which was when he left India to study in New Zealand.

The first time we met was also the first time Khalid had got himself into serious trouble.

At first I was surprised. A, huh – that's fucking weird, sort of surprised when I discovered that I was an unwitting but integral part of the situation that happened many years before.

Surprise quickly turned to discomfort as I considered the ramifications of that first meeting and its similarities to the second time Khalid and I came into contact with each other.

'Jesus. What are the odds?' I remember thinking.

Similar to getting walloped between the eyes with a George Foreman bread maker while making a loaf of wholemeal brown bread.

It's how it works out.

And I guess I have to be satisfied with that – which, by the way, I'm okay with.

Partly due to my inability to come up with a more fitting explanation and also because it's the connections between the past and the present that are the essence of this story. Partly because epiphanies *can* provide catharsis – even if it's not always clearly evident until much later why things have worked out the way they have.

Khalid's brief friendship with Loknath Gupta can be categorised as one of those situations that appear to have far-reaching and sometimes cryptic consequences.

From Khalid's account, Loki Gupta was the toughest boy in the class. He was also considered to be coolest by his peers because he was a very good cricketer and an agile football player – he was the captain of both teams. His position amongst his schoolmates commanded the type of respect usually reserved for gang-leaders dictators.

From what I could ascertain from Khalid's diaries, it seems that Loki may have inherited his penchant for bullying and stand-over tactics from his father.

Sergeant Sanjay Gupta was a senior figure in the Jodhpur police force.

Loki would often recite stories to eager and impressionable ears out on the playground, no doubt embellishing whatever parts he could, of what he had overheard his father talking to his equally crooked friends about while drinking scotch up on the roof terrace.

Loki was twelve years old and his natural sporting ability found him a reasonable amount of favour with a cricket-mad, Headmaster Singh. A natural ability to be a general nuisance often meant that any praise he did receive for his sporting achievements was quickly nullified by several decent belts on each hand from headmaster Singh's sidekick, blackjack.

A set of sore hands only deterred Loki from seeking out trouble for a short time.

The frequent bruises on his legs and arms suggested that Loki wasn't only punished at school for his misbehaviour. Sergeant Gupta's position in the police force and the fact

that it was Loki's last year at intermediate school before attending secondary school was probably his saving grace for not being expelled.

'It was better that he become someone else's problem,' Hamum told me.

And become someone else's problem he did.

Loki Gupta grew up to be a fine cricketer. At twenty-one he was amongst the youngest to ever play for the Rajasthan provincial cricket team. He would've easily made it through to the national team if his addiction to trouble didn't land him in serious debt with one of Mumbai's mafia dons. Speculation suggests that he was forced to 'fix' cricket matches in order to reduce his debt. An investigation by a local sports journalist pointed to Loki as a likely reason for the recent spate of losses by the local team. The cricket mad public, well aware of the propensity for match fixing amongst its representative players, began to circulate rumours. Loki was investigated by the BCCI (Board for Control of Cricket India), and it appears that rather than risk implication his mafia benefactors ordered that he be abducted and silenced.

Loki Gupta disappeared not long before his twenty-second birthday. The collection of newspaper clippings that Hamum sent to me tell the story of a promising young sportsman from the country who was preyed upon by the criminal underworld.

One boy who couldn't stay out of trouble and another who did his best to avoid trouble, both end up dead within twelve months of each other making yet another connection, the seeds of which were planted many years earlier.⁸

Needless to say, Khalid was both surprised and flattered when Loki approached him in the schoolyard and made an obvious attempt to befriend him.

Loki asked Khalid what he was reading. Khalid held up the book for Loki to read

⁸ How do I use this information for *my* future? How do I reformulate *this* into a contingency plan? I don't know, but I'm hoping that by the time I get to where I'm destined to be I'll have used all of this to make where I end up a more comfortable place to be.

the cover, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, and Loki quickly informed him that he'd rather look at pictures than read books. It probably should have been ample enough warning for Khalid that any social interaction with Loki was going to end up as trouble, but he was caught – the possibility that some of Loki's popularity could rub off on him was too much a temptation.

Out of the blue Loki asked Khalid if he'd ever seen a girl naked.

'You know – for real – in the flesh.'

Khalid thought about answering, 'Of course,' but he wasn't much of a liar and instead he just lowered his head.

'I have,' Loki said proudly as he tossed a worn cricket ball from hand to hand.

Khalid tried his best to play it cool but he feared that it would his eyes that gave him away.

Loki's status suddenly rocketed from just popular to superstar.

'Really.'

'Yeah, sure,' Loki said casually. 'Plenty of times.' His gaze remained focused on the ball.

Khalid did his best to play it cool, while on the inside his stomach was doing somersaults.

His diary said of that day: *Loki asked me if I'd seen a naked girl before. I didn't exactly answer no, but I didn't say yes either, and then he said that he has – lots of times. He's seen it lots of times. I think he's going to show it to me.*

'Where?' Khalid asked.

Loki caught the ball and tapped the tip of his nose with the fore-finger of his free hand

'What does it look like?' Khalid couldn't help himself and as soon as the words had

left his mouth he wanted to suck them back in.

It?

Too late.

He'd wanted to sound more mature.

'*It.*'

It occurred to me that Khalid's use of words were quite appropriate for a boy of his age to use when describing the exact part of the female anatomy that he was most interested in.

They, sounded too obvious and perfunctory.

What do *they* look like? As in, what does a naked woman look like? Well – she looks naked.

It, was more direct. *It* was what twelve-year old boys were interested in. Not arms, not legs, not hands or feet or shoulders.

'Just like the pictures in the magazines.'

'Oh yeah?' Khalid replied. He'd never seen the magazines he'd heard so much about. The ones that got bought back from overseas, the price stickers on the cover with odd names like *The Bradford Price Cutter Superette* or *Buffalo 24hr Drugs* or *Barstow Books and Magazines*.⁹

Loki went back to tossing the worn cricket ball, a scuffed pink instead of shiny apple red.

Loki caught the ball and leaned in closer to Khalid.

'I can show you if you want.'

Khalid swallowed. He wanted to make sure his voice didn't croak as he answered.

⁹ It was Hamum who told me that the price stickers on pornographic magazines also often had the name of the shop where they were purchased printed on them. Magazines like, *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy* were flown in from all around the globe, secreted in the luggage of returning migrants and holiday makers, and distributed among India's male fraternity.

‘But you can’t tell anyone,’ Loki said. His face only inches from Khalid.

All Khalid could do was nod. He realised that he was nodding when he probably should have been shaking his head – confirming that he would not in fact tell anyone of the magazines.

Loki took a step back.

‘I’ll get back to you.’

Loki smiled at Khalid before he turned and jogged back out onto the cricket pitch.

He watched Loki amble out and rejoin the game. His book was still lying face down across his lap. The tingling feeling in the pit of his stomach was accompanied by a similar sensation in his groin area. Khalid was thankful that he had *Harry Potter* to lie across himself when the pulse of involuntary muscle spasms arrived soon afterwards.

For the rest of the school day Khalid found it extremely difficult to concentrate. He had no control over the pins-and-needles like bursts that that shot up his spine whenever he thought about *It*.

Headmaster Singh asked him a simple question but in his current condition, standing up to answer was not an option. All Khalid could do was look blankly at Headmaster Singh and shake his head.

Headmaster Singh enquired to whether he was feeling okay to which Khalid nodded a silent yes. He suggested that Khalid report to the school nurse if he wasn’t feeling well before he offered the question to another student.

Khalid nodded and lowered his head. As he did so he caught a glimpse of Loki Gupta. Loki gave Khalid the quickest of winks. Khalid told his diary that it was the type of wink used by professional shysters and mobsters like in the *Bollywood* films. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

It was the type of wink that said, ‘*you and me bro. This is our gig. So don’t forget*

it.'

At school the following day Loki barely even acknowledged Khalid.

The end of the school day arrived and as Khalid was packing his things together to leave he couldn't help but wonder if Loki's promise was just another one of his mischievous ploys to lead-on one of the less popular students for no other reason than just because he could.

As much as he wanted to see *It*, Khalid was somewhat relieved that Loki hadn't lived up to his promise. Now, at least, he wouldn't have to worry about getting in trouble – of which the possibility was relatively high simply because Loki Gupta was involved.

So when Loki tapped him on the shoulder as he was leaving the school grounds and asked if he was ready, Khalid wanted to say no. He wanted not to have to worry. He wanted to be able to look Headmaster Singh in the eye when he asked him a question. He wanted not to have to think about the possibility of seeing naked females.

It.

Khalid was twelve.

I think that adequately sums up why he couldn't say no.¹⁰

'When?' He asked.

'Tomorrow. 9 o'clock in the morning. Meet me outside Rabin's. Don't be late.'

Loki broke into a skip which soon became a run and let loose an over arm ball that bounced off the sealed road and struck Nayan Dev right between the shoulder blades.

Loki retrieved his scruffy faded pink ball and carried on down the road.

¹⁰ Hamum quite rightly pointed out that it wasn't only boys of similar age to Khalid that were unable to say no to the possibility of viewing naked females. 'That's just where it begins,' he said, 'Even grown men often find themselves unable to decline the opportunity to view a naked female, especially in a country like India where access to females is very limited by western standards.'

He suggested to me that what happened at Rabin's could be attributed to a mixture of human desire and conservative Indian culture and Khalid's want to see the parts of a woman that were not normally on display to boys of his age was a desire, a want that would normally remain a want if not supplied with an opportunity to become reality. 'It's the impetus for human existence,' he told me.

Khalid helped a crying and bruised Nayan to his feet. He dusted the bruised and embarrassed boy off and walked him home.

‘In less than twenty-four hours I’m going to see *It*,’ he wrote in his diary that night.

Immediately after that he wrote, ‘How do I get out of working at the shop tomorrow morning?’

He told his mother that he needed to go to the library in order to study.

He may have been expecting to supply a more convincing explanation but neither Lela nor Hamum had any reason to doubt that what Khalid was telling them was the truth. Some research for an up and coming school project, he added when called into the shop to say hi to his father.

At 8.45 AM he was waiting outside of Rabin’s. The popular tourist guesthouse was only a few minutes walk from his fathers shop and situated on the edge of the old city near the Sadar gate. He was ready for the possibility of being noticed by someone who knew him. He had an explanation ready. He was waiting for a friend and then they were off to do some study – which was not entirely a lie.

At 9 AM sharp Loki Gupta sauntered up the street. As usual, he gave the impression that he was in no apparent hurry. He was like lightning on the sports field but mostly everywhere else he appeared slow and disinterested.

Loki gave Khalid a raised eyebrow hello and then signalled with his finger for him to follow. Khalid followed Loki up an alleyway to the rear of the guesthouse.

Rabin’s Guesthouse was listed in the *Lonely Planet* guide-book as one of the Jodhpur’s better tourist establishments. *Clean rooms, hot water and a good food served at a rooftop restaurant that provided a magnificent view of the towering Meherangh Fort,* was what the book said. Many similar guesthouses were scattered throughout the old city but for the purpose of Loki Gupta’s lesson in the perusal of the female anatomy Rabin’s

was the ideal. The ground floor of the three-storey building was where the owners lived. The Rabin family, all eight of them, including three surviving grandparents, lived in two cramped rooms at the rear of the building.

At the front facing the street was a shop that sold carpets and trinkets. The shop was purposely situated near to the entrance of the guesthouse in order to catch the eye of the traveller as they entered or exited the building. On the first floor was where the accommodation was situated and on the second floor-cum first floor roof terrace was the restaurant where the travellers ate. It was the first floor that Loki was interested in. He told Khalid that he had overheard his father bragging to his friends about a place in town where he could see as much western pussy as he liked.

The alleyway curled around the rear of the building and led to a set of timber stairs that led up to a door in the side of the stone block wall. Loki produced a key. He'd had it cut after removing it from his fathers key-chain, post a session of drinking that all-but emptied a bottle of *Johnnie Walker* black label.

'He's got cases of the stuff,' Loki told Khalid. People just turn up to the house and give it to him.

Khalid followed Loki up the stairs. Loki slid the key into the lock and opened the door. He signalled for Khalid to get inside. Khalid ducked under Loki's arm as he kept watch and held the door open. Loki followed him and pulled the door closed behind them both.

Rabin's guesthouse had been designed in a rather odd way. It was much newer than any of the surrounding buildings and this was because it had been rebuilt after a gas explosion and fire levelled the building almost two decades prior.

All nine members of the Gavde family died.

Hamum told me the story and as tragic as it was, I couldn't help but think about what

the consequences of the destruction of the Gavde family home and the Gavde family meant for Khalid and I.¹¹

Due to one of the gas rings in the kitchen having been left unlit and running for the entire night almost forty kilograms of gas had been emptied into the room. The contents from one of the two large red canisters under the bench settled low against the floor. Grandmother Gavde, always the first up in the household did what she did every morning and filled a large pot with water to boil. It was the middle of winter and all the exterior windows and doors were closed. The heavy smell of gas would've gone virtually unnoticed by Grandmother Gavde because that week she had a cold. She would've closed the kitchen door so as not to wake the rest of the house, placed the pot on the one of the three gas rings and lit a match.

The concentration of gas in the room created a directional explosion that forced its way through the length of the building knocking out the weaker internal walls and causing the internal floors to collapse. The force of the explosion ruptured the valve of the second gas bottle and the entire building was engulfed in flames in less than five minutes.

The solid stone construction of the party walls between the Gavde home and the neighbouring buildings meant that the damage was mostly localised. The explosion and the fire left a vacant lot, which due to its favourable location was quickly cleared and built upon.

The Rabin family already owned one guesthouse in Jodhpur. The Fort View guesthouse, a stones throw from Rabins was well known and popular amongst travellers and had long enjoyed a reputation for clean and comfortable rooms and good food. The

¹¹ It's the connections that I'm interested in. The things that happen in the past that *affect* the way we think and act in the present, even if it is several decades later. A desire to make our lives easier to live causes us to transport the sum of these consequences into the future. I've decided to name this pseudo-type of pragmatism, social contingentism.

Rabin family, eager to continue to provide to the constant stream of western tourists willing to pay that little bit extra for something less antiquated bought the vacant lot and set about designing and building their second guesthouse and it was that subsequent design that provided Loki and Khalid with their unique viewing platform.

Due to its design, all of the rooms at Rabin's enjoyed views of the Meherangh fort from their average sized balconies. The adjoining bathrooms, at the rear of the bedrooms, all backed onto a central service duct. The service duct was about six-feet wide and the entire height of the building. Two narrow metal grate catwalks ran along each wall, allowing access to pipes and cables that serviced each room and the height of each catwalk allowed for a perfect view through the ceramic air vents into each of the bathrooms below.

The door closed with a solid thump and it took a few moments for Khalid's eyes to adjust to the darkness. He blinked several times and at the same time felt around for something solid with which to steady himself.

He accidentally grabbed hold of Loki's hand.

'Get off you homo,' Loki hissed.

Khalid whipped his hand away and kept blinking until slowly his vision was restored.

He smelled dampness. But at the same time it was a clean smell – similar to freshly hung-out washing. A few more blinks and he could make out a long tunnel. Along the walls of the tunnel and at equal intervals there were two levels of dull and lighted squares that prevented it from being completely dark. Some of the dull and lighted squares had steam coming from them and he could hear the sound of running water.

It was then that he noticed how hot it was inside the tunnel.

He told his diary that the tunnel reminded him of a prison block from a science fiction film.

‘Follow me,’ Loki said as he moved slowly along the catwalk.

As they approached the first square of light Khalid could hear singing.

His eyes had adjust sufficiently enough to walk confidently along the catwalk and Khalid did what he was told and followed Loki toward the first dull light.

Loki peered through the vent then signalled for Khalid to take a look.

Khalid felt cobwebs against his hair but resisted the temptation to wipe them away. Beads of sweat began to run down and across his temples. An image of rats flashed into his mind. The rows of pipes and the cables that ran along the walls just above their heads would be perfect for them to scuttle along. The dank wet tunnel was beginning to close in on him.

Loki grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the vent and Khalid snapped out of his anxiety. The light from the vent allowed Khalid to see Loki had a finger pressed up to his lips. Khalid waited for Loki to look through the vent before he held his breath and peered through the gaps in the ceramic vent.

His knees went suddenly weak.

Below him, and in a white-tiled room about eight-foot square with a toilet in one corner, a foreign girl who looked to be in her early twenties was taking a shower.

He couldn't believe what he seeing.

It.

It now had an image to attach itself to. *It* was no longer lolling about without visual association and *It* was not what he imagined *It* to look like.

It had just a small strip of hair instead of a large triangle and *It* also ceased to exist just by itself. *It* had become part of a larger form that also had other admirable attributes.

Both boys watched as the girl washed her body down with a bar of soap. Loki stifled a giggle when she washed her bottom and turned away from them to wash the soap from

her body. Khalid was transfixed. He watched as the girl crouched down and clipped her toenails, then stood back up and clipped her fingernails. Before she finished and turned off the water the girl gave her body one last rinse. The girl towelled herself off and Khalid was acutely aware that his erection was beginning to ache.

Loki didn't even wait for the girl to finish drying herself. He signalled for Khalid to follow him and they tiptoed along the catwalk to the next vent that had the sound of running water coming from behind it.

A middle-aged man with the pot stomach, the hairy shoulders and what Khalid described as an acorn like penis was singing as he showered.

The next vent gave them a view of a thirty-something female using the toilet. A tinkling sound echoed into the service duct. The naked girl wiped herself, stood up, stepped over to the shower and turned on the water. Khalid told his diary that this girl's breasts were smaller than the first girls breasts and that she was slim and had less curves. He also told his diary the hair on her vagina was almost non-existent.

The girl waited for the shower to warm up then she stepped under the water, closing her eyes as she ducked her head under. Beside him in the service duct Khalid noticed that Loki was making slight grunting noises and that his hand was moving inside his pants.

A volcanic amount of pressure was beginning to build inside Khalid's own pants. Loki's hand began to move faster and his grunts began to quicken. Khalid soon overcame any initial discomfort and unzipped his fly. He began to rub himself as the girl below bent over to wash her legs.

The hiss and splatter of the water on the bathroom tiles disguised the grunts and groans from within the service duct and the girl, oblivious to her audience, stepped out from under the running water and took a disposable razor from her toilet bag.

She bent over and soaped her legs and began to shave. Her bottom was facing her

audience.

Khalid and Loki masturbated in unison.

The girl rinsed her legs, gave her face a quick wash and then turned off the water.

And that's when I guess I must have caught them unaware.

I was just about to reach for my towel and at first I thought I was imagining things.

I had heard stories from other travellers about being spied upon while showering or changing but had never experienced it myself.

I grabbed my towel and then bent over in order to dry my hair.

Grunting sounds were coming from behind the tile grate up near the ceiling of the shower.

'Dirty bastards,' I think I said to myself as I wrapped the towel around myself and as casually as I could, stepped out of the bathroom into the bedroom. I made sure to leave the bathroom door open as I dropped the towel and slipped on a T-shirt.

I think I wanted to be more annoyed than I actually was but being ogled at or touched or groped by males whilst travelling through India was one thing that I'd learned to accept – to a certain extent at least.

I stepped out of the view of the vent near the ceiling before I quickly tore on a pair of cotton pants and raced out the door.

I took the steps down to the shop on the ground floor two at a time. My hair was still dripping at the ends when I rounded the corner and ran into Laxmi Rabin.

'Someone was watching me while I was having a shower – through the vent in the wall near the ceiling,' I yelled, pointing upwards, somewhere toward my room.

Laxmi Rabin seemed she knew exactly what I was talking about and just as I was about to repeat myself she reached under her sari, retrieved a set of keys and marched out of the building.

I followed her out into the street and down the alleyway that ran along the side of the guesthouse leading to the rear of the building. There was a strong smell of urine and sewerage and we had to step over two sleeping dogs sheltering from the heat of the morning sun. Laxmi Rabin's ample bottom was wobbling beneath her sari as she strode ahead of me. Her short sleeves allowed the tops of her arms above the elbows visible and I could see how thick they were. She was a short round woman, barely five-feet tall and she was firmly in charge of the Rabin family.

The Rabin children did what they were told to do – without hesitation. Kesan Rabin, Laxmi's husband took his orders from his wife just like his children did and any tourists who didn't follow the rules of the guesthouse would find their belongings out on the street. She definitely wasn't the type to put up with anything that annoyed her and the possibility that the reputation of Rabins guesthouse could be severely tarnished was something that annoyed her greatly.

I followed her up the stairs to the doorway. The jowls below her cheeks were wobbling due to her heavy breathing. She muttered something in Hindi as she searched through the dozen-or-so keys on the key ring. She selected a key and slid it into the lock.

I was just about to warn her that it could be dangerous – that whomever was behind the door might be bigger than us and that we should ring the police.

Laxmi pulled open the door and peered inside. A waft of damp and warm, soapy air escaped from within the dark tunnel.

Laxmi stood in the doorway and yelled into the darkness.

I could hear shuffling noises coming from inside.

She yelled again.

She spoke in a high-pitched voice. Her ultimatum was a jumble of words that sounded just as threatening in Hindi as they would if translated into English.

My eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness and I remember being able to make out shafts of light shining back into the tunnel from what was obviously from the bathrooms on the other side of the wall.

‘How long do you think this been going on?’ I remember asking.

Laxmi, willing to protect the reputation of the business at any cost quickly whipped around to face me.

‘This is the first time *anything* like this has happened.’

She turned and yelled again.

We both waited.

Whispering came from within the tunnel and then more shuffling.

Laxmi yelled again – this time much louder.

She slapped the palm of her hand on the door with such force it made me jump.

More shuffling and more whispering.

The stand-off continued for another few minutes and then like two bank robbers who decided that giving themselves up to awaiting police was a better bet than postponing the inevitable, two young boys shuffled out from within the darkness.

I was strangely relieved to discover that they were just boys who looked to be about eleven or twelve, although one was slightly bigger than the other.

Both of them had their heads down, refusing to look up at Laxmi.

She grabbed two handfuls of hair and lifted their faces for inspection.

Both boys blinked as the light hit their eyes.

Both boys looked as if they already knew they were in a reasonable amount of trouble.

Khalid vowed to his mother and father that he would never get into trouble again.

Loki took the blame and confessed to Laxmi Rabin that it was all his idea, that he picked

the lock and had taken Khalid along to show him what a naked female looked like. Being in trouble was certainly nothing new to Loki Gupta and Khalid wondered if he was in some way addicted to how he felt when he was in trouble.

Khalid's first viewing of a naked female was destined to be a memory that was going to scar him for the rest of his life. Hamum could not believe it when I emailed him and told him. I think he was, probably for the first time ever, relatively okay with what Khalid did that day – even though it was wrong.

I got the feeling he was thinking the same way I was thinking. Thinking about the connections, about the way things work out and what to do with the after-effects of those connections.

He had lost his son but he had gained a grandchild and in an odd kind of a way, a daughter also.

The Fashionable Muslim.

The more I learned about him, the more I began to find truth in the saying, ‘only the good die young.’

But it was now going to be up to someone else to pick up where Khalid left off – if ever someone else chooses to do so. His honours thesis certainly had merit. On the strength of Khalid’s argument, his supervisor, Dr. Samuel Rosenthal, the head of the Department of International Studies at Auckland University had encouraged him to apply to several highly regarded American universities for postgraduate study. Dr. Rosenthal, a tall and lanky man with an unruly mop of silver hair who reminded me of Einstein told me that Khalid was the type of student capable of original and progressive thought.

‘Not a common quality amongst undergraduate students,’ was what he told me.

Khalid’s honours thesis created what Dr. Rosenthal described as a segue for a more harmonious integration between Muslims and the West.

It seemed to be a purposely-vague answer and I sensed that Dr. Rosenthal didn’t expect me to understand the dynamics and ramifications of such a statement. I hadn’t told him of my odd connection to Khalid and I also hadn’t told him that I earned a Master of Philosophy from the very university he taught at. When I did tell him he sat back in his chair and smiled.

‘He often talked about altruism and pragmatism and said he was trying to find something that connected them both, something they shared in common,’ Rosenthal said before sipping from a takeaway cup of hot chocolate. ‘It seems as though he was practicing that very thing and maybe even without knowing it.’

Connections again.

Between things that often appear to be unconnected.

I nodded as I watched Dr. Rosenthal. He sipped from his takeaway cup and watched me watching him. I felt as though he was testing me. Should I know the answer just because I have a background in philosophy?

Doing something without talking about it and doing something without the want of reward of recognition.

‘Silence my dear,’ Rosenthal said.

‘Even if he didn’t know that’s what he was doing?’ I replied.

‘Maybe he did know what he was doing but he just hadn’t given it a name yet,’ Rosenthal added.

One hundred dollars per ejaculation at the sperm donor clinic to help people who couldn’t get pregnant could hardly be classified as a reward. It helped him to survive better and it arguably helped to create a basis for the argument that was the axiom of his thesis. He was doing instead of talking.

‘Metaphorically speaking, he was providing the seed for difference whilst simultaneously nurturing the seed of an idea in something that he hoped would transcend the present struggle between a misunderstood Muslim society and the west,’ Rosenthal said.

There was sadness in the old mans eyes. Not the severity of sadness I had seen in Hamum Khan’s eyes, but the type of sadness at losing something that was already very good and had the potential to be better than great.

‘He wanted to explain why the Muslim culture was destined to become more accessible and better understood, and how it could possibly even become fashionable,’ Rosenthal said. ‘He got his impetus from Richard Reid.’

‘The shoe-bomber?’

Rosenthal nodded.

‘Born to British parents, a convert to Islam, nothing outrageous with that, Khalid even told me that he had *Trouble* by Cat Stevens on his iPod,’ Rosenthal said as he took a pipe out of his worn tweed blazer and packed it with tobacco.

He lit the battered wooden pipe and with several animated puffs the thing ignited and a cloud of sweet smelling smoke filled the room.

‘I’m not supposed to smoke in here,’ Rosenthal said. ‘But what are they going to do – sack me?’

Both sides of his office were lined floor to ceiling with books and the professor sat behind an ordinary university issue desk. Behind him were several smallish filing cabinets and above them was a window that looked out over the grounds of the university.

Rosenthal stood up and opened one of the windows. Some of the smoke was sucked outside.

‘People convert to Islam everyday,’ Rosenthal said as he sat back down in his chair.

‘Muslims, Jews and Hindus convert to Christianity every other day. It’s what people do when they find something that suits them better than what they are currently suited to. What Khalid wanted to know more about was whether a person would be more likely to convert to Islam due to the media saturation of 9-11. He theorised that a combination of fear at being a minority group and a desire for respect and understanding amongst the Muslim’s who lived in the western world had created a vacuum that was easily filled by hate from suspicious and racist westerners. Hate and racism of such a calibre has led to a large amount of dissatisfaction among Muslims who don’t see why they should have to justify their faith to the west when Christians don’t have to justify theirs.’

‘Don’t we already know that?’ I suggested to Rosenthal.

If he was annoyed he didn’t let on. He just smiled and relit his pipe. A large cloud of smoke surrounded him. I was beginning to find the atmosphere of the place extremely

comforting.

‘It’s not a new hypothesis by any means and he wasn’t attempting to tell the world something it already knew. What interested him was the idea that the western view of Muslims as a potentially dangerous group of people was being used by Muslims living in the west to strengthen their identity among western culture. What was ultimately in the early stages of creation was a newfound fashionableness at being Muslim.’

Now this was interesting. I leaned forward in my chair.

‘Post 9-11, western Muslims were becoming less inclined to feel that they had to hide their beliefs and customs from the world. Whether it was voluntary or involuntary westerners were now better informed about the Muslim culture than they were prior to 2001. The west grew quickly fearful of Muslims and history shows that when part of a sociological group of people become fearful of another the feared group usually gets stronger.

Khalid suggested that the Middle East was undergoing something of a cultural change, mostly due to the media coverage, both positive and negative. The west was suddenly forced to think about and take into consideration a host of new ideals and beliefs, most of which they had never been required to give much thought toward.

He drew parallels between Muslim fundamentalists and Christians fundamentalists. He pointed out that a Muslim family that loses a child in war grieves no differently than a western family grieves. He argued that a new and arguably involuntary awareness of the Muslim by westerners delivered the Muslim culture into mainstream acceptance and suggested that the Middle East had after centuries of repression and suspicion broken free from western interference and was now beginning to understand the power of its own being. Muslims were no longer required to feel like they were second-class citizens in a western civilisation dominated by a religious ideology that wasn’t much different to what

Muslims already believed in. Khalid wanted the phrase, *us and them*, to become defunct.’

I sat back in my chair.

Rosenthal smoked his pipe and watched me.

‘So what happens with it now?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Rosenthal said before he let out a long sigh.

Jazzy Goldwater

One thing Hamum Khan didn't know about his son was his close friendship with Jazzy Goldwater. Anything Khalid had written about Jazzy would have been in the missing diary. I first met her at Khalid's remembrance service, which due to the nature surrounding his death was a small and private gathering of people in a house near Mt Roskill. It was also where I first met Khalid's father. Mahir and Naasira Khan, Hamum Khan's cousins and with whom Khalid's was living had invited Jazzy because they knew Khalid and her had been seeing each other.

I don't know much about the intimacies of their relationship but I do know that he loved her and after meeting with Jazzy and gaining her trust I think I can safely assume that she loved him too.

We met for coffee a few days after Khalid's funeral service. She greeted me with a hug this time. She'd had time to think about what I had so unceremoniously dumped on her, Hamum and the rest of the mourners several days earlier.

She told me that their first official date was to the movies, a Bollywood film playing at a downtown cinema, she couldn't remember the name of the film. She told me that they held hands while they watched the film. Her courage in surrendering such intimate information to a virtual stranger wasn't lost on me. I was beginning to understand how the smallest of things shared between two people all of a sudden become very important and worth remembering when one of those people is permanently taken away.

They met while attending the same class at university. Jazzy was close to completing a double major in English literature and Philosophy. They were assigned to the same study group for a class on Muslim History in India, an interest paper that Jazzy enrolled in to make up points for her degree.

At first Jazzy didn't really notice Khalid, not in a romantic way at least. She remembered him from those first group discussions as a humble and pleasant guy, the type of person she would probably enjoy talking to. Her thoughts didn't really go much beyond that until she met Khalid at a bar downtown.

The band playing that night were called The Motorcyclespeedcops. They had taken their name from the lyrics of an old Lloyd Cole song and Jazzy was surprised that Khalid knew that. Her voiced surprise quickly turned to embarrassment when Khalid pointed out to her that just because he was from a country that was considered to be quite conservative by western standards it didn't mean that he was conservative by nature.

Jazzy didn't get a chance to apologise. Khalid immediately asked her if she would like a drink. She was almost finished her beer and Khalid didn't wait for an answer before he headed to the bar.

So he *was* quick. I remember thinking.

Jazzy was required to stay until he returned, which he did with two glasses of beer, and a list of other bands that he also liked. Many of which Jazzy already had on her iPod. After the gig finished Khalid took her to an Indian restaurant at the top of Khyber Pass Road, aptly named the Khyber Tandoori. They talked music, religion and philosophy. Jazzy told me that it was one of those nights that she could have easily stayed awake until morning. I could tell that she was a romantic, just like Khalid.

Afterwards, Khalid made sure she got a taxi. He spoke to the driver in Punjabi before closing the car door for her. On the ride home Jazzy asked the driver what Khalid had said.

'Please make sure you get this beautiful girl home safely and wait outside until she has closed the door of her house.'

Their romance continued to grow. It was slow but steady. Jazzy suggested that it

was quite possibly because she was used to a different type of approach.

It took her almost three weeks to understand that she was being courted. Khalid took her to the movies, walked her through the Parnell Rose Gardens and convinced her to accompany him on a Bungy Jump from the Sky Tower.

She felt his hand on the small of her back as he guided her through doorways. She smelled his cologne long after he had got on the bus to go home.

(She told me that she bought a bottle of it and when she was alone in her room she would spray it and then walk through the mist).

She listened to his poetry.¹²

She watched him when he spoke with confidence in class and wondered what it would be like to be naked with him.

The severity of what was happening around them took second place to their burgeoning relationship. Jazzy suggested to me that she missed the clues. I tried to reassure her that she didn't miss a thing. I didn't press the point because I was well aware that I often looked back to see what I could have changed in my own past. Her reflective attempts to avoid what had already happened were part of being human. She would probably battle with a whole lot more hypothetical scenarios before she eventually stopped blaming herself and others for Khalid's death and what they could have had.

She was a smart girl. I could tell that by the way she so quickly understood Khalid's ideals and methodology.

It seemed to me that she *got it* in the way Khalid intended. He had told her about his thesis and she had read what he had written so far. They had discussed his ideas and the reasonings behind his presumptions and analogies. She said it felt good to be around a mind like his – to think of the future with such optimism.

¹² Dear Mohammed. Please forgive me. Please forgive everyone, everywhere. Even that cunt down the road who still owes me money and that turnip-face bitch who gave me gonorrhoea last week. Dhanyavad.

I liked that she wasn't scared. That she understood things were changing, moving forwards and not backwards, and in one hundred years time we *were* all going to be yellowskins.

I wondered then and still do now, if it was generational; accepted by Generation Y and rejected by the Baby Boomers? Leaving Generation X lolling in the middle somewhere lumbered with the problem of trying to find a usable connection between dogmatism and pragmatism.

She knew he was leaving at the end of the semester. He hadn't hidden that from her. They didn't have a plan for what to do after that. I don't think they really knew themselves. Khalid was excited about the possibility of studying at Stanford and Jazzy told me she was excited about going travelling through Europe.

I guess they believed it would somehow work itself out.

As it so happened, Jazzy ended up going to India.

I got a post card from Thailand a few days ago.

It's on the fridge beside Dad's picture of the cruise boat. She's going to stay with Khalid's family when she gets to Jodhpur.

I know she'll love the place just like I did.

Khalid and Jazzy.

It was almost ten days after the bombing, after Mum's funeral, before Khalid and Jazzy Goldwater were able to make a plan to meet. Their burgeoning romance was in its second month and the longer they spent apart from each other the more difficult the feeling of longing and emptiness was to suppress.

For at least a week after the bombing Jazzy's parents wouldn't let her leave the house unaccompanied. At Hamum's insistence Mahir and Naasira were as equally as protective of Khalid so their only contact with each other was via text messaging or email.

Eventually the public summoned the courage to leave the safety of their homes and the city did its best to return to normal, or as close to what was considered normal as possible. Each post-bombing day that passed saw more shops reopen for trade, as owners and employees alike realised that regardless of the recent tragedy bills still required paying and people still needed to eat. Buses and trains began to run again and as the tension within ethnic immigrant pockets of the western central city began to subside the mostly immigrant driven taxis also began to return to service.

The area where the blast took place was still closed off. Razor wire topped barricades and in some cases, shipping containers were used to block public access as police and forensic experts, including intelligence agencies and the army continued their investigation and 'clean down' of the area. This included the unfortunate task of making absolutely sure there were no human remains left undiscovered amongst the wreckage of the explosion and the surrounding area. Parts of bodies had already been found up to two hundred metres away from the epicentre of the blast. A female hand complete with a wedding and engagement ring attached was discovered sitting on the bottom of a rooftop swimming pool ten floors above the street where the bombs went off.

After each truckload of glass and aluminum was loaded, cadaver dogs with specially made protective footwear were sent through the waste to make sure nothing had been missed. It was a painfully slow process that became more gruesome as each warm and humid day passed.

The newspaper was closed for five days after the bombing. The public need for information was sated by television. Images of dead and mangled bodies and the blood-soaked severely injured being stretchered into waiting ambulances and helicopters were repeatedly played to a willing-to-watch audience. And I must admit that I was one of them because when the News came on I found that I couldn't not watch it – and oddly enough, the more gruesome the less likely I was to turn away from the screen even though I was physically repulsed at what I was watching.

One thing the bombings did do was completely overshadow Mum's death so by the time I got back to work all but one of my colleagues had forgotten that she had even died. I didn't bother reminding any of them. She was dead because her heart stopped beating when she discovered I was going to have a bastard child with dark skin. At that early stage I didn't *feel* like I'd been robbed of any sympathy by the bombings and therefore didn't think it necessary to impose on others something I didn't think that I was deserving of. I was quite happy to remain pissed off with her.

Neither my boss nor any of my co-workers knew I was pregnant. I was barely showing anyway. It was something I was planning to hold onto as long as I could because I knew the necessary explanations were going to be difficult if not tedious. Luckily for me I suffered very little morning sickness and therefore my situation wasn't given away by any mad dashes to the bathroom with a hand covering my mouth. My office waste paper bin, which thankfully I had the presence of mind to line with plastic bin-liners did come in handy a couple of times when my breakfast absolutely refused to stay in my stomach.

I think that part of me was still of the opinion that she got what she deserved because she hadn't done a very good job of being a mother. Another part of me was probably frustrated at being robbed of the chance to sit her down and tell her that she *was* responsible for the past and that she *did* need to get over her stubbornness and step up to the plate to say sorry for being such a bad mother to James and I.

As the newspaper kicked back into gear I was temporarily moved from my weekly column to write up articles that dealt mostly with the racist reprisals because of the bombings and a lot of what came in was not printed. The public never knew that the police were severely understaffed and only the most vicious of the attacks were investigated. The NDF knew this and they used it to their benefit and it wasn't only Muslims the NDF or their unofficial sympathisers targeted during the attacks that followed the bombing. It seemed that anyone who had brown or black skin or anyone who looked remotely different from what NDF sympathisers considered to be normal was a potential victim. There were reports of Sikh males having their turbans ripped from their heads and one case of a Buddhist monk in his orange robe being accosted and beaten by a group of white males.

It took several days to come out but the public interpreted it as a victory when it was reported that two of the suicide bombers wives and one girlfriend killed themselves immediately after they discovered what their partners had done. A smug look across the top of a newspaper to a fellow commuter. A quick nod across to an unknown fellow driver while waiting at the traffic lights. People smiling at each other while walking to work, the newspaper headlines already on display. Solidarity cemented without words. Revenge achieved.

Even in my office the looks of satisfaction were obvious when the report came in across the wire. Justice served through sacrifice, was the slant my editor gave to the story when he overrode my decision not to include the gruesome details of each suicide in the

story, an increasingly common decision among a host of editors and heads of the country's television newsrooms as more and more explicit information and graphic pictures were published or aired for public consumption.

For the media it was purely about circulation and viewer numbers. For a large majority of the public it was schadenfreude. For NDF sympathisers and their associates it was the catalyst for revenge.

It was a revenge attack that Khalid got caught up in while on his way to visit Jazzy.

Retribution.

When news of a firebombing of a Muslim owned shop in the suburb of Mt Roskill came across my desk I readied myself to put together another story that would satisfy the public bloodlust – yet another story that would no-doubt be edited to sound like yet another altercation between the white supremacists and the terrorists.

My boss told me the protagonists were a group of NDF males, two of which were dead and the antagonists were four Muslims, all of whom were dead and that I needed to get out there as quick as I could to interview those who had witnessed the attack. I briefly considered telling him I was pregnant and I shouldn't really be putting myself in any potentially dangerous situations, but instead I kept quiet.

I was told I would be getting an ex-military escort to the scene. Five minutes later an average looking male turned up at my desk and introduced himself as Andrew. He wore black wrap-around shades, a black puffer-vest overtop of a black T-shirt, light brown-pocketed cargo-pants and thick-soled hiking boots. He shook my hand and suggested we get going.

My boss had already told me he was a veteran of the second Gulf War and by the time we were halfway to our destination I was reasonably sure that Andrew wasn't the average ex-defense force employee.

From the moment we left the building he was constantly in check of his surroundings. He studied each pedestrian while we waited at traffic lights. He checked the rear-vision mirror at every possible opportunity, he drove with both hands tightly gripping the wheel and when he spoke he never looked at me. He gave the distinct impression that he was completely in his element as he whisked me along New North Road and onto Dominion Road at no less than eighty kilometres per hour.

‘I suppose you’ve seen this sort of thing before?’ I said to Andrew as he gunned the four-wheel drive through an orange light.

‘You could say that.’

‘So what’s your take on it?’

‘I think I’m probably quite biased in that regard.’

‘How so?’

‘Because this is what I’m trained for.’

And that’s when it first hit me that for some people this was a relatively normal existence. Living in a country where destruction, hate and violence and the constant threat of death were all things to be incorporated into normal daily existence created among the affected population a contingency the West was just not familiar with.

‘Look at that place over there,’ Andrew said with a quick nod as we passed a burned out weatherboard ex-state house.

‘A lot of the people who live around here have grown up with war. They’ve succeeded in escaping it but with that sort of ingrained background they can’t help but think differently to people like you.’

‘Me?’ I said a little too quickly.¹³

‘How many family members have you had vaporised by a laser guided cruise missile?’

I said nothing.

‘That house back there was a decoy house,’ he said with a quick backwards nod.

Before I asked him what a decoy house was I asked him if he would mind if I taped his answer.

¹³ And he was quite right. (I just had an aversion with being so easily categorised). It’s only now as I sit here in my prison and tell this story to you that I seem to have obtained the ability to view myself in a reflective manner. You could say that now, I’m more aware. I prefer to think of the difference as objective opinion and not subjective opinion.

‘Sure,’ he said with a shrug.

And his story made complete sense.

Immediately after the terrorist bombing the mainly ethnic suburbs of the city went into damage control. Those unfamiliar with how to prepare or what to prepare for, took their lead from those who knew what was likely to happen in response to the terrorist bombings.

Andrew suggested a pre-determined ability among the lower socio-economic type of immigrant was what kicked in. The Pacific Island community and a majority of the South East Asian community were more likely to be familiar with natural disasters than war. Those from the Middle East, Pakistan, India or parts of Africa were more likely to be familiar with war than earthquakes, tidal waves or the effects of tropical cyclones. Nonetheless, preparing for the fallout of any disaster, whether it is manmade or natural, meant for a very similar response from those who were likely to be directly affected.

Shops were boarded up and food, water, gas for cooking and candles were stockpiled. Houses were fortified, mainly from the inside so it wasn't that obvious. Families moved into together, enacting the age-old understanding there was safety in numbers, and if someone had to leave the house they went as a group.

The decoy house that Andrew had indicated was exactly the pragmatic type of response one would expect from those who knew how to pacify the enemy. The marauding groups of NDF members who began their assault on the ethnic parts of the city immediately after the bombing were looking for exactly what had already been provided for them.

Some houses and some shops were left exactly as they were. The windows were left un-shuttered, lights were left on and the television was left going, purposely tuned to a Muslim channel. Mail was left in the mailbox, identifying the inhabitants of the house as

Muslims and car was left in the driveway with certain objects left purposely in view. The shops with an obvious stock of ethnic foodstuffs and other non-western items were easy pickings for the NDF but it was the houses in the predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods with their lights left on that proved to be the real lure.

Andrew told me that first they checked the mailbox. Then they would listen for the sound of foreign voices. Then they would throw Molotov Cocktails through the windows, watch the flames ignite and then take off in search of another target.

The sacrificed houses or businesses were always insured and the families who owned them had already removed any necessary valuables. It was a very astute and successful method of ensuring those who wanted retribution achieved the required feeling of success. Andrew said that over fifty decoy houses and shops had already been torched by the NDF.

‘And what about this one?’ I said indicating to the firebombed shop that we were heading to.

Andrew shrugged and made a clicking sound with his mouth.

‘Something went wrong here.’ He said.

He turned the corner into a relatively normal suburban street.

Up ahead I could see the white tape with the red words ‘Police Emergency, Do Not Enter’ written upon it. Two police cars and what I discovered on a closer inspection was a Ministry of Defence four-wheel-drive were parked in front of the remains of what was apparently a Somali-owned grocery store.

Piecing it together.

Andrew told me the young guy who had been shot was a Muslim student from India. That's all the information I had. It wasn't near enough with which to formulate such a far-fetched theory. But that's exactly what I did. As soon as I heard the words, Muslim student from India, my stomach sank. She was already growing inside me. It could have been her, recognising him, her father, her own flesh and blood. Or it could have been my propensity to look for unobvious connections between things. I surveyed the burned out shop from the bloodstained footpath. The bile began to rise from my stomach and I quickly dashed behind a nearby car police car and vomited up my breakfast.

Andrew mistook my morning sickness for shock and revulsion. I returned from behind the car and popped a piece of chewing gum in my mouth.

'You okay?' Andrew asked.

I nodded without looking at him.

'You do what you need to do then,' he half ordered, half suggested to me.

'There's people over there you can probably interview,' he said, pointing over to a group of teenage bystanders waiting behind the police emergency tape.

Andrew walked away and began talking to his ex-colleagues, two civilian clothed men standing by the military owned black four-wheel drive.

I began making notes. I then approached the group of teenagers. Andrew kept an eye on me. The parents of one of the teenagers arrived and I took my tape recorder from my handbag. A young couple gingerly approached the group. They remained standing behind the excited teenagers who told me about the helicopters and guns, while the adult interjected to remind that what they were telling me was not what happened.

I asked the couple if they knew the Hassan family. Both of them nodded. I asked

them if they would be able to tell me about them, to which they both nodded. The husband suggested that we have tea. I signalled to Andrew that I was going to accompany them to their house.

Jabir and Ayan Abdi had arrived in New Zealand around the same time as the Hassan family. The inside of their state owned house was sparsely decorated and smelled of spices. Ayan prepared tea and Jabir invited Andrew and I to sit.

‘This is for the newspaper – yes?’ Jabir asked.

‘It is,’ I replied, ‘I’m trying to piece together what happened.’

Jabir nodded thoughtfully before speaking.

‘This is terrible business,’ he said.

‘This is why we left Somalia.’

Ayan delivered two cups of steaming black tea to Andrew and myself. Her hand touched mine as I accepted the cup and I felt her course skin. She smiled and nodded as she retreated to sit behind her husband.

‘Mahad sanid,’ Andrew said as he received his cup.

Jabir nodded his appreciation at the gesture. Ayan smiled, showing her perfect white teeth.

‘This is why Ahmad and his family left too.’ Jabir told us, ‘but it follows us.’

Jabir looked at the floor and pretended to move something with his foot. I wondered if was remembering something horrific that had happened in his past. I noticed that Andrew was also looking down and it became clear that both of these men had experienced violence and slaughter on a scale that most could never comprehend.

‘You have been to our country – yes?’ Jabir asked Andrew.

Andrew answered with a single nod.

‘Then why is it following us?’

Andrew swallowed. He kept his eyes fixed on Jabir, giving him the courtesy of not looking away.

‘I don’t know,’ Andrew replied before lowering his eyes.

Jabir sipped his tea and looked across at me.

‘You need to tell this story so that it is right.’

I could see that his bottom lip was quivering as he spoke.

‘The Hassan family were good people. They came to this country to be far away from this type of thing. And that boy who tried to help them is also a good person – he was brave. He is not a terrorist like the television says. I saw him try to help them.’

Tears began to roll down Jabir’s cheeks.

‘I am not ashamed to cry for them.’ He said.

Ayan stepped forward and put her hand on her husband’s shoulder. Her other hand automatically rested itself across her belly. I recognised the gesture because I had taken to doing it myself lately. She was uniting the family. Subconsciously protecting it even though there was no immediate danger, just talk of it.

‘He was my friend. Even though we didn’t know each other before coming here.’

Ayan handed her husband a tissue. He pushed her hand away and used his own hand to wipe his face.

‘We talked about one day going home to visit.’

For a moment Jabir appeared to be lost in some sort of dreamworld.

The yell of a child playing outside brought him back.

‘To take our children back and show them their homeland.’

Jabir looked back at his wife and signalled for her to come and sit beside him.

Ayan sat down beside her husband and took hold of his hand. She looked at me and spoke for the first time since we entered the house.

‘You need to tell this story right because if you don’t then people will think that we brought the fighting with us from Somalia.’

Khalid's death.

In the eyes of the media he was something completely different to what he was in reality. He was called a militant, a fundamentalist and an extremist, a devout Muslim who wanted to die in the name of Allah and was actively looking for a situation where he could achieve martyrdom. One talkback radio host proffered the idea to his listeners that he was raised as a terrorist from a young age and had been 'sleeping' in New Zealand waiting for the order to attack. The reality was that Khalid was in the wrong place at the wrong time and his generosity cost him his life.

Khalid died and I became part of the equation. He is the agitator for this paradoxical tale of mine. If he hadn't died I don't think I would be telling you this story. Things would've turned out differently, I'm not sure how different, but different. Mum would still be dead and Dad would've still gone crazy and a couple of other things that I will get around to telling you about would still have happened, but it just wouldn't have had the same impact.

If I say that his death was like the rug that held the room together would you forgive me for stealing a line from the *Big Lebowski* and also forgive me for trivialising who he was?

Right now it's the best description I can come up with. It was Khalid that was the axis for everything I've told you and am still to tell you. I don't know if that sort of thing happens often. Maybe it does. If connections get missed then those involved are none the wiser.

If my boss hadn't given me the story I probably would have missed the connection entirely.

As fucked up as it all is.

I'll still cry for him at night for a long time yet. What usually brings the tears is the thought of him standing there knowing that he was going to die when all he was doing was trying to help. I can't help but think of him feeling alone and scared and wanting to hold his girlfriend Jazzy – for someone to tell him everything is going to be all right, for someone to bandage his wounds and stop the blood from leaking out of him and then tuck him up safely in bed.

Jazzy told me that he was on his way to Parnell to meet her for some fish and chips in the park. It was the first time they would have seen each other since the bombings. Jazzy's parents told her to stay close to home. Khalid told her he would catch a bus across town to Parnell Rise and meet her at the top of the hill. It was Sunday afternoon and the city was relatively quiet as people chose to stay indoors instead of venturing outside for their weekend off.

Jazzy told me that she blamed herself for his death.

I did my best to convince her that she wasn't.

I remembered later the two young lovers dubbed by the western media as the Romeo and Juliet of the 1990s Bosnian war. The image of them in an embrace and dead on the bridge stayed with me for the rest of the day and even now I still often think of them.¹⁴

I guess it had something to do with the difference of culture and how love succeeded in cancelling out that difference while at the same time others were prepared to kill over it. An irrepressible desire to be together regardless of cultural difference, regardless of what others would think.

¹⁴ Admira Ismić and Boško Brkić both born in 1968 were of different religious backgrounds. She was a Bosnian Muslim and he a Bosnian Serb. They were killed on May 19, 1993 on the Vrbanja Bridge while attempting to flee the besieged city. Both bodies remained on the bridge, in no man's land, for eight days because no one dared enter the area known as Sniper Alley. It was initially said their bodies were eventually recovered by Serbian forces in the middle of the night, however it was later revealed that Bosnian prisoners of war were forced by the Serbian army to recover the couple. They are now buried together, side by side, in Lion Cemetery along with the thousands of other victims of the Siege of Sarajevo.

Have others made connections similar to what I have made with Khalid because Admira Ismić and Boško Brkić died on that bridge? Does the outcome of something take precedence over the inciting incident, however tragic it may be, because the subsequent connections made bring together something remarkable and beneficial?

Jazzy suggested that maybe he wasn't thinking straight because of her.

I told her she had to stop trying to apportion blame. I remember the words sounding odd and almost bitter as they left my mouth. I wanted to lean forward and swallow them back down before they became fact but it was too late.

I had the luxury of thinking objectively and she didn't. Her world would not have collapsed if Khalid didn't die whereas my connection to her, Hamum Kahn and my unborn child was reliant on his death.

I guess in a way she was actually right because Khalid probably wasn't thinking straight. He was barely twenty-one years old and in love and he may have been a little too cavalier in his assessment of the situation that ultimately cost him his life.

She told me they had swapped several text messages that morning. Khalid had been working on his dissertation and after lunch he left home and walked to the bus stop.

I've had images of him walking down the street feeling like he was on top of the world, a tingling feeling in the pit of his stomach that dripped down inside the tops of his legs, a shiver up his spine into the back of his neck when he thought about Jazzy. Each step would've felt like a giant stride. He would've felt taller and somehow superior, invincible and untouchable even and the weatherboard and concrete tile ex-state houses he had passed on his way to the bus stop hundreds of times before would this time appear less stark and more lived in. The graffiti that covered the electrical transformer boxes and the timber palings of the fences would appear decorative instead of imposing. He would have been bouncing along the footpath to the beat of the music on his iPod. He'd told Jazzy that

on his way to meet her he was going to listen to the mix of songs she'd recorded for him. Jazzy told me that he was always smiling and so I can't help but picture him smiling at whomever he passed along the way.

The witnesses I interviewed said the first thing they heard was the screaming and then the gunshots. Khalid may have heard them too but he may have also had music up loud enough to drown it out, but from what I can piece together it seems that he walked right into the middle of it all.

The NDF worked on the law of averages. A dozen or so vehicles each transporting four or five people searched the streets for potential victims. Inevitably some cars would get stopped by the police, searched and then escorted from the area but one or two would make it through undetected to the more heavily immigrant populated suburbs. Scanner radios and cellphones kept them in contact with their associates. The group that Khalid happened across had made it through to Mt Roskill undetected and they had driven around until they found their victims.

The police warned the immigrant populace to exercise extreme caution when outdoors because their safety and welfare could not be guaranteed. Mosques and temples suggested that worshippers remain indoors rather than risk attending prayer services. The usually bustling pockets of immigrant-owned and operated shops were quiet. A lack of fresh produce from the markets and the abattoirs meant that many had nothing to sell. Some left their businesses barricaded up. Others opened for daylight hours only while some chose to open for just a few hours around lunchtime.

I retraced the route Khalid took that day. I wasn't experiencing the same heightened elation that he was but I tried my best to see what he saw. As I approached the corner that led to the group of shops I was enveloped in the sweet smell of spices and incense that wafted from the open doorway of Patel's dairy. Graffiti covered galvanised steel roller

shutters covered the front of the shop when Khalid passed it. The entrance way and the windows to the Chinese takeaway beside Patel's dairy was covered over with concrete reinforcing mesh, the heavy duty kind with smaller than normal squares. The bottle store, owned and managed by a family from New Delhi had improvised by serving customers through a small service area that faced out onto the footpath. The doors to the shop were chained closed and sheets of plywood were fixed over the plate glass windows. The only shop open among the group of four was Hassan's Emporium.

The Hassan family had been in New Zealand for almost eight years. They had escaped a volatile Somalia not long after the American forces had swallowed their pride and retreated back home. Ahmad Hassan had already lost one son. Omar Ahmad had joined the Somali militia when he was sixteen. He died during the first battle for Mogadishu in 1993, a few weeks before his eighteenth birthday. The vacuum caused by the retreating American and United Nations forces meant that the victorious Mohamed Farrah Aidid would soon be looking to boost his army with new and young recruits. Ahmad took what money he had, a reasonable sum saved from teaching at the local high school and escaped to Kenya. The refugee camp in Dadaab, one hundred kilometres from the Kenyan, Somali border was beginning to fill quickly. Ahmad bribed his way out of the camp and took his wife Sufia and his son Ali to Mombasa and from there they used the last of their money to pay for passage to Aden, Yemen. The perilous two-day journey spent on a cramped and leaking boat not much bigger than a bus killed fourteen of the fifty-five refugees. To reduce weight, the bodies were thrown overboard. Yemeni authorities placed the refugees in a purpose-built camp just outside of Aden and Ahmad immediately applied to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for acceptance into Australia. Australia had already fulfilled its refugee intake for that year and it was suggested to Ahmad that he and his family choose New Zealand as their adopted country. After several

weeks spent at a refugee camp in South Auckland Ahmad found employment as a Trade Assistant with an air-conditioning company. Five years later he had saved enough money for a deposit on a shop. Three years later he had built a sustainable business importing North African products, mainly foodstuffs and spices, to satisfy the steadily growing Arabic and Muslim diaspora.

If Khalid's paramour had indeed prevented him from remaining indoors, then it was highly likely that his lustful swirling head was also infected with optimistic idealism. When he turned the corner all that his father had taught him and all that he had worked so hard to understand and put into practice as a method of existence was smashed. Khalid was forced to make a decision that would see him labelled as one of the people he vowed never to become.

Lying on the pavement in front of Hassan's Emporium with blood pooling around the upper part of his body lay a young man who had been shot. Ali Ahmad Hassan, halfway through a double major in graphic design and media studies at Auckland University of Technology, had been murdered as he attempted to stop a group of NDF militants from ransacking his parents shop. It was later revealed that he was dragged outside onto the footpath and made to kneel before being shot execution style in the back of the head.

Witnesses told me they saw Khalid turn the corner a few moments before one of the NDF militants picked up a metal rubbish bin from the sidewalk and tossed it through the plate-glass window of the shop. A Molotov cocktail was then tossed through the opening. A loud Warrumph followed as the petrol and soap powder mixture ignited. Almost instantly flames were licking out from the shattered opening. Smoke and soot blackened the underside of the veranda that overhung the footpath.

Sufia screamed as the flames engulfed the shop. She tried desperately to extinguish

the fire with a broom, the same broom she had tried unsuccessfully to fend off the NDF attackers when they barged into the shop and helped themselves to the food on the shelves. The flames burned her bare arms and soon the thin silk of her headscarf and her blouse caught alight. Sufia ran out of the shop and onto the footpath. The group of four males laughed as she screamed in pain and tried to put out the flames that engulfed her upper torso. Sufia dropped to her knees and then silently sat back on her heels. There was no oxygen to breathe. The flames took it all.

The apparent leader of the group, Jake Stansfield, twenty-seven, a computer programmer for a large multi-national company and a long time Nationalist sympathiser took an automatic pistol from the waistband of his jeans, lifted the weapon and fired three bullets into her burning body. Sufia slumped forward onto the pavement, still burning, landing not far from her dead son. The murderer then stepped closer and fired another shot into the charred remains of Sufia's head. He then spat on her body, tucked the gun back into the rear waistband of his jeans, unzipped his fly and proceeded to urinate on Sufia's corpse. The group of four had their backs to Khalid. They were too captivated by their murderous spree to see him round the corner less than thirty feet from where they stood. They also missed the people gathering behind the relative safety of fences, trees and parked cars, most of who were immigrants and most of who had seen similar violence before.

I can only presume that he briefly considered disappearing back around the corner. If he did then he must've changed his mind when he saw Ahmad Hassan run screaming through the flames waving a two-foot long machete.

Jake Stansfield, in the process of zipping up his jeans, gun tucked in the waistband of his jeans, had his right arm severed just below the shoulder. He would have barely had time to register the fact that he was no longer in direct possession of his limb when Ahmad

delivered a second blow. Stansfield's head was all-but severed from his body. He dropped to the ground, landing on his back preventing his associates from retrieving his gun.

I was told that it seemed like Khalid knew what to do at that point. Ahmad was swinging the machete wildly and the three remaining skinheads backed away. Khalid slid to a stop beside the body of Jake Stansfield, grabbed two handfuls of black leather jacket and rolled the body over onto its front.

Sirens were wailing in the distance and an army Iroquois helicopter, the tips of its twin rotors breaking the sound barrier, thumped its way across the sky. Brett Thomas, apprentice plumber and second generation NDF supporter saw what Khalid was trying to do and made a move to stop him. Ahmad turned and saw Khalid, saw his dark skin, his non-western eyes and swung at Thomas, catching the nineteen year old just above the knee on his right leg. Thomas dropped to the ground screaming. Ahmad hacked again. A hand hit the pavement. The remaining two made a run for it. Khalid grabbed the gun and fired a shot over their heads. Both of them stopped.

'Turn around.' He ordered.

Ahmad was standing over Thomas who was pleading for his life. The machete in his right hand dripped blood onto the pavement.

'Get on stomachs.' Khalid said.

They did as they were told.

The sirens were getting closer. The Iroquois hovered nearby. The witnesses watched as the ropes unfurled and the black-clad Special Air Service commandos rode them down. I'm not sure if Khalid saw it as well but if he did he would've thought they were coming to save him.

He kept the gun trained on the two on the road. His back was to Ahmad. Brett Thomas' scream had slowed to a whimper as he tried desperately to stem the flow of blood

from his leg and his wrist.

Ahmad turned to look at what remained of his shop. His gaze dropped to look at his dead wife. The machete hung low at his side, blood still dripped from its blade.

Ahmad turned to look at his dead son. He let out a wail. He turned back to look at Brett Thomas whimpering on the pavement before raising the blood-soaked machete.

Thomas whimpered and tried to wriggle away from Ahmad. Ahmad took a step forward so that he was standing directly over a whimpering Thomas. He stared down at the boy before aiming the blade so it pointed directly in front of himself, and over Thomas' wounded body. The skinhead screamed as Ahmad Hassan dragged the razor-sharp blade across the left side of his own neck. A geyser of blood shot out and sprayed across the pavement. Ahmad dropped to the ground. His body landed directly across the still screaming body of Brett Thomas.

Khalid turned to see Ahmad dead and he probably wondered what had just happened. The two skinheads on the road, Jason Sturgess, insurance company employee and Gary McLean, panelbeater both twenty-two made a run for it.

Brett Thomas was desperately trying to wriggle out from under Ahmad's body. Khalid turned back around to see Sturgess and McClean escaping and he yelled at them to stop. He fired another shot over their heads but they kept running. By the time he turned back around Thomas had managed to work free from underneath Ahmad Hassan and drag himself up and onto one knee.

He picked up Ahmad's machete and pointed it at Khalid. Khalid pointed the gun at Thomas but Thomas seemed oblivious to the fact that he would come off second best. He began to swing the blade backwards and forwards.

Police squad cars and two black four-wheel drives pulled into the top end of the street. The police and Armed Offenders Squad accessed the situation from a safe enough

distance. The black-clad SAS commandos were already skirting the shopping area and the properties of the houses nearby. They had detained Sturgess and McClean and had left them hand and foot-cuffed with plastic zip-ties in a property two hundred metres away from Ahmad's store.

The commando's moved forward. When they had gone several of the younger members of the growing crowd crept forward and dragged Sturgess and McClean by their feet to the rear of property.

Khalid held the gun steady, but Thomas had managed to get to his feet. He swung the machete and took a step toward Khalid. Khalid took a step back. The heat from the fire was intense. He could smell Sufia's burning hair. Smoke and soot were making it difficult to see. Thomas swung again. This time he almost lost his balance when he attempted to use his wounded leg for balance. Khalid fired. The bullet hit Thomas in the right shoulder. He spun around and dropped the machete but somehow managed to stay on his feet. Khalid kept the gun trained on him. I think he was probably waiting for him to drop to the ground before he lowered the weapon. Khalid probably wondered what was going on when Thomas' body pulsed three times in quick succession. Maybe he thought they were convulsions. Thomas' body dropped to the ground. Khalid lowered the gun but kept it in his right hand.

The three thumps that hit him in the chest soon after he lowered the gun would have felt like three sharp punches, or so I'm told. Apparently he had a surprised look on his face. The gun dropped from his hand onto the sidewalk and Khalid crumpled to his knees. He lolled for several moments and looked around. I was told that he seemed to be looking off into the distance with a squinted type of look as if he was waiting for someone he knew to appear. I don't know if it's true or not but it's something I've often liked to think about when I think of how he died because it means he wasn't in pain. Maybe he saw Jazzy, or

maybe his father, his mother and his sisters. Maybe he saw his unborn child. His body fell forward and he landed with his face down across the body of Jake Stansfield.

Jazzy didn't find out Khalid was dead until the following day. She waited for two hours, watching each bus pull up and craning her neck to see if Khalid was inside, to see his smile. First of all she was angry. She told me she'd even gone over in her head what she was going to say to him for keeping him waiting so long. There was no answer on his cell-phone. She knew he wouldn't stand her up. Not after what they'd already told each other. She went home. The television was on when she got inside and her father was watching footage shot from one of the helicopters that had been circling above Hassan's Emporium. She told me that as soon as she saw the burning shop and the bodies on the ground she knew one of them was Khalid.

The connection.

I would like to be able to tell you that it happened with a little more investigation on my part but the truth is the pieces fell into place relatively quickly. I've read about and heard of instances where people have experienced the paranormal when someone close to them dies. This is not what happened to me. There were no apparitions, no cold breezes passing over me and no messages from the other side scrawled on a steamy bathroom mirror. There was however one little snippet of information that I just couldn't let go of.

A Muslim Student from India is what Andrew told me as we arrived at the burned out shop then the morning sickness happened and the possible connection was forgotten.

After talking to Jabir and Ayan Abdi the words once again began to circulate in my mind.

'Poor bastard,' Andrew said, 'in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

Poor, Muslim student from India.

Age. 22.

Occupation. Student.

Country of Origin. India.

Religion (if applicable). Muslim.

I just couldn't get it out of my mind.

James told me I was hormonal.

I wrote the story and filed it. The heavily edited version that made it to print had no mention of Khalid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a battle, a war, with casualties told in such a way that whoever was reading it would be devoid of sympathy.

'Well, the whole bloody lot of them got what they deserved.' The hands on hips summing up of the entire situation while talking to the neighbour over the fence of

suburban middle-class New Zealand.

‘Bloody immigrants. Bloody Nazis. Put the whole lot of them in a football stadium and let them go to town on each other. Sell the tickets and you’d make a bloody fortune mate.’

I marched into my boss’ office and told him I was taking a non-negotiable week of sick leave. He told me there was a likely possibility that my job would be under review. I told him to go and fuck himself and then left the building.

It didn’t feel as liberating as I’d imagined. It wasn’t something I had worked up to or planned. I hadn’t turned it over and over in my head so as to give myself the courage to quit when I finally couldn’t take it anymore. I liked my job. I certainly didn’t hate it. I considered myself good at what I did. So it came as something of a surprise to me when I heard myself say those words to my boss of almost ten years. I drove to see James. He was at work. We met for coffee and he suggested that my hormones had once again got the better of me. I told him to go and fuck himself as well and then drove home.

I flopped down on the sofa and checked my cellphone for messages. Two were from James, both apologising for his comment. The other was from my boss, telling me that he understood I had been under a lot of pressure lately and to give him a call as soon as I could.

I still had a copy of the file from the IVF clinic. I had taken it to work and had copied it. I had it filed under F in the filing cabinet. I already knew I would tell her as soon as she was old enough to understand and keeping a copy of the file was something she could have later on if she wanted it; some sort of keepsake or attachment device that she may require in her yet uncertain future.

I got off the sofa and pulled the file from the cabinet in my small office cum third bedroom and made my way back to the sofa. I dropped the file on the coffee table in front

of me and stared at it.

Several years earlier I had won almost ten thousand dollars in Lotto. It was Sunday evening and I was just about to watch a movie. While I was waiting for the trailers of up and coming films to play through I quickly checked my ticket. After circling four numbers I forgot what was playing on the television screen. After five numbers I began to get a ringing in my ears and my stomach sank. I circled the bonus number and then calmly placed the ticket on the coffee table. Television screen, Lotto ticket, television screen, Lotto ticket, backwards and forwards for twenty minutes with my stomach doing somersaults and my body tingling from head to toe before I got the courage to pick up the yellow ticket and re-check it.

Full body tingling and a nervous stomach was what I was feeling as I stared at the pale brown manila folder on the coffee table but this time it wasn't fuelled by thoughts of a new clothes, a new car and wiping my credit card.

I leaned forward and opened the folder.

Signed disclaimer.

Other legal stuff.

Donor history:

Donor number. 0118345621

Age. 22.

Occupation. Student.

Country of Origin. India.

Religion (if applicable). Muslim. (Non-practicing).

I forgot that last bit.

I closed the folder and put it back on the coffee table.

I knew the clinic wouldn't give me his name – regardless of what I told them. I had contacts in the police but I didn't think they would be willing to override the ethical boundaries that protected sperm donors. Breaking into the place was an option I considered for all of three seconds and then Andrew's face popped into my mind. An image of him chatting to two of his ex-colleagues quickly followed.

I knew enough about the covert operations of the New Zealand Special Air Service Regiment to be relatively sure that their technique in gathering information was not subject to the same restrictive restraints as the nations police force.

I had Andrew's cell phone number because it was the first thing he gave to me when we left the office on our way out to Mt Roskill.

'Just in case something happens and we get separated,' he said as he dialled my number into his phone and called me, 'I've got to be able to contact you.'

I thought about calling him for almost an hour before I got the courage up to call.

At first he said no.

I reminded Andrew that if it were actually him then it wouldn't really matter because he was dead.

'What about his family?'

'What am I going to do – fly to India and confront them?'

'I'll see what I can do.' Was what he said before hanging up.

I sent him a text message after that telling him that I had quit my job over the way the paper had handled the story. Good. Was what he sent back.

Salat al-janaza.

Khalid's body was in the Auckland Hospital morgue for three days before it was released. The police and military investigations and the coroners report into his accidental death were wrapped up relatively quickly and he was removed from the morgue to the home of his cousins Mahir and Naasira Kahn in Mt Roskill.

Hamum Kahn had already arrived from India. The tears streamed down my cheeks when Andrew told me that he had already visited his son in the hospital morgue. Military intelligence were receptive to Andrew's suggestion that Khalid may have been a sperm donor while living in Auckland and the requisition of the clinic files was deemed necessary in the interests of national security. Andrew was thanked for his tip off which made it a whole lot easier for him to confirm my suspicions.

When I met Andrew at a cafe not far from my apartment he slid a piece of paper across the table toward me. Written on it was Khalid's client number from the donor clinic. I checked it against the number on his donor file and then put the folder back in my bag.

I wondered as I watched Andrew watching me if he was doing this out of sympathy for me or whether he had been instructed by military intelligence to keep me under surveillance.

Having my suspicions confirmed was something quite different from just being suspicious. All of the thoughts that had been previously floating around in my mind looking for some sort of axiom with which to anchor themselves suddenly became fact. Satisfaction had nothing to do with it. It was the piece of a puzzle that fit into place to complete a picture. Time to move on to the next incomplete puzzle and work out what pieces were missing in order to complete that picture.

Andrew told me that Khalid's father and his cousin Mahir had already undertaken the Muslim ritual of washing the body at the hospital morgue and they were preparing for the funeral service at the house where Khalid lived.

I knew I had to be there. Andrew immediately picked up on my thoughts. He looked at me for several moments and then with pursed lips he inhaled through his nose and turned away to look across the street.

He kept his attention focused elsewhere as I called directory assistance and asked for the telephone number of Mahir and Naasira Khan. When she answered I told a softly spoken Naasira I was one of Khalid's university lecturers. I offered my condolences to her and Mahir and told her that Khalid had talked to me of them both many times during our meetings to discuss his honours thesis. I asked her if it would be acceptable for me to attend the funeral service in order to say goodbye to Khalid properly.

The phone went quiet and a male voice came on the line. It was Hamum Khan, Khalid's father. I re-introduced myself and again offered my condolences. Hamum Khan thanked me for taking the time to call and said that I would be more than welcome to attend.

I hung up the phone and looked across at Andrew. He said nothing but the look from his hazel eyes told me what I already knew about myself. I was a good liar when I needed to be. I presumed he probably had some sort of admiration for such an ability considering his past job.

I stood and he looked me up and down. The flowery print skirt, white T-shirt and the red cardigan I was wearing at the cafe got stuffed into a shopping bag when I swapped it for black pants, (one size bigger than normal for my expanding stomach), a black jacket and a black silk headscarf at a nearby shop. My black opened toed shoes were made less conspicuous with a pair of black stockings.

Neither of us spoke during the drive to Mahir and Naasira's house. I said thanks to him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as I got out of the car. He remained passive and looked straight ahead. I didn't want him to think I was using him but at that particular moment I didn't have time for an explanation and I think if I were pushed to explain why I felt it so pertinent to meet with Khalid's father I wouldn't have been able to give a definitive enough answer.

Andrew did have his opinion but he didn't voice it till later. (We've been keeping in contact with each other quite regularly – nothing romantic, as yet). He told me that the reason he took me to the funeral was because of what Ayan Abdi had said when I interviewed her several days earlier.

He suggested to me that Ayan and her husband Jabir were part of a burgeoning immigrant diaspora considered to be proponents of violence because they were from countries that had long histories of violence and the unfortunate reality of their homogenisation into western culture meant they would eventually be confronted with their adopted country's unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners. They were then presented with a choice. Do they stand up for themselves when harassed or discriminated against or do they act subservient because they are a minority culture? To oppose discrimination risks being labelled a radical or a fundamentalist by xenophobic people. To act subservient suggests that a person should be embarrassed for who they are. It comes down to the fact that people don't want change because they're scared of change and 9-11 will be looked back upon as a point in time when cultures began to mix and integrate because barriers were broken down by the necessity for different cultures to live in close proximity to each other. 'Change is going to happen whether we like it or not and that child your carrying will want to know her father and her fathers father will want to know he has a grandchild. It's how the world will begin to operate as opposed to how it did operate.'

My take on it is something quite different, although I do agree entirely with what Andrew said. His witness to violence and cultures that wanted to slaughter each other because of opposing beliefs was similar in many ways to the axiom with which Khalid had based his thesis on. I think I was acting on some sort of instinct to provide this child within me with options. Even though she was spawned because of my desire to procreate she was never meant to be someone who would exist just for my benefit. I had already decided that she would have a rich and varied life full of possibilities. Her existence depended on her being known about and not hidden away and protected from what I thought she should be protected from.¹⁵

I knocked on the door and was greeted by Mahir. I offered my sympathies and then lied to him just as I had lied to Hamum. Mahir nodded and gave a quiet smile. I added my shoes to the twenty or so pairs already lined up on the front porch and followed Mahir down the hallway and into the living room. All of the furniture had been removed from the room and the faded wallpaper showed where pictures normally hung. The dark brown carpet felt soft and spongy under my stocking feet and the fawn coloured curtains were partly drawn so that just enough light was let through to illuminate the room. The room smelled of incense and the rich aroma of camphor. I learned later that camphor oil was used to cover Khalid's body once he had been washed and cleansed by his father and Mahir at the morgue.

The men were dressed in shirts and trousers and the women wore long dresses and

¹⁵ I remember watching a BBC documentary where a group of scientists were in the midst of investigating a previously undiscovered environmental habitat inside the long extinct crater of a volcano in Papua New Guinea. Hundreds of new species were documented and catalogued including a giant woolly rat the size of a large household cat and a frog with fangs. I found the scientist's excitement as they talked about these never before seen creatures on camera to be quite infectious. They couldn't wait to tell the world about what they'd found so that the world could enjoy these new discoveries as well. It wasn't just about discovering something new and having your name attached to it. It was about making sure that what had been discovered was protected and cared for and the more people who knew about the new creatures in the crater rainforest, the better chance they would have of having their environment protected so they could continue to flourish and be treasured.

scarves that covered their hair and not their faces. (I said thank you to Andrew under my breath.) A handsome man with thin facial features and a thick crop of black hair was standing near the side of the coffin. He was wearing black trousers and a black shirt and when he looked over to me I nodded to him to which he nodded in reply. Next to him, dressed in a white kurta and with a white turban was the Imam who would lead the funeral prayers. The Imam looked across at me also nodded.

The usual air of foreboding weight that often accompanies death seemed not to be present. There was sadness, but there was no crying or sobbing. The acknowledgement between the people in the room was perfunctory but not quite formal. It seemed peaceful to me, almost as if it were a time of transcendence, maybe even an expectation and not a time for existentialism.

The coffin was plain timber, unvarnished and without the chrome handles that Mum had on hers. There was no shiny satin and cushioned linings either. It was a just a box that was completely shaped and suited for its one and only use.

From where I stood I could see the tip of Khalid's nose and his forehead. I resisted lifting myself up on tiptoes to get a better glimpse of what the father of my child looked like.

Jazzy looked over at me. She was wearing a long black dress with a black shawl covering her shoulders. Her long dark-brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. She turned away before I could acknowledge her.

Someone else entered the room behind me and I took a couple of steps forward to make room for them. I could now see Khalid's face from where I stood. It was the face of a boy, the face of someone far too young to be the father of the baby inside me. He had smooth olive skin and thick black hair just like his father. He had a strong chin and I couldn't help but wonder what our daughter was going to look like. Light-brown skin and

dark hair with features like her father and not much of her mothers Irish ancestry? Did I just break the cycle? Upset the Smith family genealogy?

Oh yeah, things took a turn in the bloodline back around 2009 when Kerri, that's Gerald's and his wife, ummmmm, can't remember her name, had a bloody heart attack on the kitchen floor, yeah, bit of an angry women, yeah well, their daughter. What? Yeah that's right, almost went to jail for something or other, yeah, that's another bloody story isn't it, yeah well she got pregnant to a Muslim bloke and then he died, he had something to do with those bombings in Auckland, terrorist I think, yeah well she had girl, a darkie, good looking girl though, you wouldn't know she had Muslim blood in her if someone didn't tell you, looks like a bloody Maori or a Polynesian or something like that. Doing all right for herself though I think. Writes books. Yeah, spose you could say that she didn't get that from the Smith side of the family.

The Imam spoke in Hamum's ear and then approached the coffin. He stood near the side of the casket. The people in the room moved about behind the Imam so that they formed five rows. Hamum Kahn was in the first row and nearest to his sons face. Standing next to him was Jazzy Goldwater. From where I stood in the fifth row I could see that her eyes were wet with tears. She had her arm looped through Hamum Kahn's arm in a similar way to how I had my arm looped through James' a few weeks earlier.

'Allahu Akbar,' the Imam called out. His hands lifted so they were level with his head.

'God is Great'

‘Allahu Akbar,’ the congregation said silently.¹⁶

Both the Imam and the congregation silently recite both the Thana and the Surah Fatiha.

‘Subhaanaka allaahumma wa bihamdika wa tabaaraka ismuka wa ta'aala jadduka wa jalla thannaa-uka wa laal ilaaha ghayruka.’

Glory be to you Oh Allah, and praise be to You and blessed is your name and exalted is Your Majesty and there is none to be served besides.

The Imam lowered his hands and placed them across his body just below his stomach and the congregation did the same, keeping them there for the rest of the service.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ said the Imam.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ repeated the congregation and then the Imam and the congregation prayed together.

‘Allaahumma salli alaa muhammadin wa alaa muhammadin kama sallowta alaa ibraaheema wa alaa aali ibraaheema innaka hameedun majeed. Allahumma baarik alaa muhammadin wa alaa aali muhammadin kamaa baarakta alaa ibraheema wa alaa aali ibraheema innaka hameedun majeedun.’

¹⁶ I have included the silently spoken prayers in order to give a complete account of the funeral service.

Oh Allah. Shower Your mercy upon Muhammad and the followers of Muhammad as You showered Your mercy upon Ibrahim and the followers of Ibrahim. Behold You are Praise worthy, Glorious. Oh Allah. Shower Your blessing upon Muhammad as you showered Your blessings upon Ibrahim and the followers of Ibrahim. Behold You are Praise worthy, Glorious.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ the Imam said once more.

This time the congregation remained silent as the Imam recited the third *Dua* for Khalid.

‘Allaahumma ighfir lihayyinaa, wa mayyitinaa, wa shaahidinaa, wa ghaa-ibinaa, wa sagheerinaa, wa kabeerinaa, wa dhakarinaa wa unthaanaa. Allaahumma man ahyaytahoo minnaa fa ahyihee alal islaam wa man tawaffaytahoo minnaa fatawaffahoo alal iemaan.’

Oh Allah. Forgive those of us that are alive and those of us that are dead, those of us that are present and those of us who are absent, those of that are young and those of us that are adults, both males and females. Oh Allah. Whomsoever of us You keep alive, let him live as a follower of Islam, and whomsoever You cause to die, let him die as a Believer.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ the Imam said once more before twice saying, ‘Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah.’

May the peace and mercy of Allah be with you.

The Imam turned his head first to the right and then to the left after each verse.

‘Allahu Akbar,’ the congregation said silently.

‘Assalamu alaikum wa Rahmatullah,’ they said aloud before turning their heads only once to the right and then to the left.

May the peace and mercy of Allah be with you.

Each person beginning with Hamum approached Khalid and kissed him on the forehead. I was one of the last to do so. I closed my eyes and felt his cold flesh against my lips. It was like touching a smooth piece of wood weathered by the ocean as it lived as a piece of flotsam floating from country to country.

It was difficult not to believe that he wasn't my lover because I *was* pregnant to him and there he was right in front of me and there I was feeling like I was saying goodbye to an old and close friend.

The kiss goodbye was our second physical connection. It was the third time we had been brought together and it was the last time I would ever see him.

(Assalamu alaikum wa Rahmatullah, Khalid Khan. All our love, Kerri and Lauren.)

Khalid's casket was closed and most of the congregation left the house.

I was offered tea by Naasira and when she delivered it to me in a small mug with no handle I sipped from it nervously and waited for the opportunity to approach Hamum Kahn.

I could sense that Jazzy was trying to place me among the academic staff from the university. Her curiosity must have eventually got the better of her because after refilling her cup from one of the several teapots on the kitchen table she approached me and asked my name. I told her my name and then suggested that her, Hamum and I needed to talk, preferably someplace a little more private.

Jazzy immediately walked over to Hamum and informed him of my request. Both of them looked at me. All I could do was stand there and look back at them. I was under immediate suspicion. An intruder. Had I infected this sacrosanct ceremony and somehow nullified the family's request for Khalid's absolution?

Hamum nodded and indicated for me to follow him. Jazzy followed me and we walked down the hallway and stood near the front door.

It was one of those situations where the words that come out of your mouth sound as though another person is speaking them.

'He's the father of my baby.' My right hand automatically dropped and pressed itself against my stomach.

Hamum's nostrils flared and his cheeks bulged as he exhaled through clenched teeth. Jazzy began to shake her head and cry. Her sadness quickly turned to anger and she looked as though she were about to hit me.

Mahir entered the hallway. The look of anger on his cousins face immediately told him that something was wrong and that was all Mahir needed to march forward, grab me by the shoulder open the front door and push me out on to the porch.

'Please. Let me explain,' I pleaded.

Andrew was already out of the car and walking toward me.

‘Please. It’s not like that,’ I heard myself say.

‘Get the hell away from us.’ Mahir growled.

Tears had welled up in Hamum’s eyes.

‘Please. You have to listen,’ I begged.

Jazzy was standing behind Hamum and Mahir. She probably sensed that she needed protecting from this madwoman. Tears were streaming down her face. Her bottom lip protruded as she sobbed.

‘Leave now or we will call the police.’ Mahir barked.

Andrew was near the front gate. He didn’t enter the property. I looked at him and all he did was give me a quick nod.

‘He was a sperm donor and I got pregnant with his sperm.

Tears were beginning to roll down my cheeks as I stood in my stocking feet on the cold concrete.

‘I’m so sorry but I thought you should know.’

Mahir and Hamum looked past me at Andrew.

‘Allah yarhamu,’ Andrew said. *God rest his soul.*

He turned and walked back to the car.

‘Please,’ I begged again. ‘I just wanted you to know.’

Hamum’s face softened.

He stood aside and opened the door.

Hamum Khan.

Back in Jodhpur, it was Mr. Mahibir Sharma, who first told Hamum Khan about the bombing. He'd seen it on the television in his barber shop. He left a customer on the chair – half shaved and rushed down the street. When he arrived at the Khan's clothing store he still had the cut-throat razor in his hand. Hamum Khan switched on the television and watched with horror as pictures of what looked like a war-zone filled the screen. At street level the cameras showed images of blood on the pavement. From above, helicopters showed images of several decent sized craters. From the epicentre of each blast debris was scattered outward like the fronds of a palm tree.

Hamum Khan immediately felt ill.

He called Lela and told her to come to the shop immediately.

Then he called Auckland.

'I told him to come home,' Hamum said.

He was wearing a charcoal grey suit that looked as though it had been tailored just for him. The lapels and cuffs of a crisp white shirt were visible from beneath the jacket.

It was the day after I had gate crashed his son's funeral service.

I carried a pot of tea to the kitchen table and motioned for him to sit. He removed his jacket and hung it from the back of the dining room chair.

'But he told me that he wanted to stay – that he would be okay, that he would be safe.'

'We've had similar bombings in India. Even in Rajasthan. But I couldn't protect him in New Zealand like I thought I could if he was safe at home with us.'

'We argued about it for almost an hour. But he wouldn't budge on it. He said that it would quieten down just as quickly as it started, he would finish his degree and then he

would come home and wait for the decision from Stanford.’

Hamum closed his eyes and let out a small laugh cum snort. A tear ran down his cheek. I looked at him and saw from his thin and aquiline nose, his high cheek-bones and his jet black hair what Khalid would have looked like when he reached his mid-forties.

‘It was just something that was beyond my control.’

Hamum sipped his tea.

I noticed how his dark eyes turned down slightly as they reached the sides of his face. Under normal circumstances they would make him appear, gentle and thoughtful and in an odd way, gracious. Now he looked worn and broken and disillusioned.

A picture of his family began to piece itself together in my mind. This loving father before me, and back in Jodhpur, an equally loving mother who both wanted the best for their children. So much so that they were prepared to send them across the world to a different country. Ignoring the risk of never seeing them again if something should go wrong.

Making sure they received the best opportunities, simply because it was the right thing to do.

The obvious disparities between the Khalid family and the Smith family are what made me so angry – at her, at Dad, at their inability to think of no one else but themselves.

Sure, they weren’t part of a burgeoning middle to upper class populous and they didn’t own several large clothing stores and they weren’t enjoying the associated options of the wealth their business provided them.

I couldn’t stop wondering how things would be different if I got to study philosophy at UCLA or NYU instead of here. What about James? How different could it all have been if Gerald and his dead wife knew what the word altruism meant?

He wasn’t at all shocked when I told him his son earned close to one hundred dollars

each time he donated sperm at the clinic.

‘He was always a resourceful boy,’ he said as he shook his head and smiled. ‘I guess his monthly allowance wasn’t quite enough.’

I reached across the table and placed my hand on his and I felt closer to this man I had just met than what I did to my own father.

I reminded him that his son had produced a grandchild for him whom I would be more than happy to share with him and his wife and his daughters.

He brought his hands to his face and cried into them. At first I watched from the other side of the table – not really sure what to do.

The desire to want to comfort this stranger, this relation of mine took over and I knelt beside him as he sat and I held him tight. He cried into my shoulder and I cried into his crisp white shirt-sleeve. We stayed that way for several minutes. His cologne was subtle and spicy and comforting.

After several deep breaths he pulled away and sat back in his chair and he told me that we would always be a part of his family.

At the funeral home.

One of the few benefits of working for a newspaper was a free subscription delivered to my doorstep.¹⁷

She'd been dead two days. The day after she died was a blur and I don't really remember much of what happened. I think it involved sitting around with Dad and James and wondering what the hell to do next. James called Aunty Janice the night she died so the news had made it's way around the family already. So I guess it must have been her that wrote it. She was always quite organised in that regard. Christmas and birthday cards always arrived on time and well before the actual date of celebration and for the past several years she had taken to writing poetry and sending it to Mum. I read a few of them and upon satisfying myself that Ashbury or Walcott were under no direct or foreseeable threat I didn't read any more.

Home-made muesli and yogurt with a dash of prune juice and a decaffeinated coffee and start at page one. I didn't have to be anywhere for the next few days so I took the time to read the things I wouldn't normally bother with. In my effort not to have to think about how everything had suddenly and inconveniently just turned to shit even the sports section got a reasonable amount of attention.

So by the time I got to the obituaries I was halfway through her death notice before I realised it was her that I was reading about. Words like *dearly missed*, *much loved*, and *remembered fondly* linking the two of us together.

I read it several times and then ripped her death notice from the page. I don't really

¹⁷ I gave the papergirl, a pretty young thing who told me she was saving for a plane ticket to Los Angeles where she planned to take Hollywood by storm, one hundred dollars a year to throw the paper the extra twenty feet from the mailbox to my apartment door. Reason being was, dressing gowns and robes annoyed me and I preferred to eat breakfast and read the paper in my knickers and if necessary, a T-shirt. Alarm goes off, get up, go to the loo, get the coffee going and then open the front door just enough so that I can feel around outside for the paper.

know why. It wasn't like I could ever show it to her – hey look, this is *you* they're talking about. I got you a copy to post to someone. I think I stuck it on the fridge, back at my apartment, where it will no doubt still be when I eventually return.

Not far from the obituaries were the advertisements for sensual massage, escorts and the situations vacant. I read those too and distinctly remember thinking, spurred on by the description of a busty redhead who offered cut-price lunchtime sex for businessmen whether the undertaker would have the ability to perm the hair of a dead woman. Maybe they just did the top and the sides and forgot about the back – who the hell's going to check?

Maybe they needed a photo of her to make sure they got her looking just right. Eyeliner – the one with a blue tinge. Mascara – *not too much or you'll look like a tart*. Coral lipstick. Blusher – two shades too bright. A few swipes of foundation under the chin and over the neck just to tidy things up. A nice teal satin scarf to take the emphasis of that turkey gobbler that's beginning to hang and voila – she doesn't look a day over sixty.

Or maybe they just shoved the old boiler in the box all pale and pasty, mouth contorted and half open with a swollen tongue sticking out to the side just like in a Hitchcock film.

What'dya mean? She's always looked like that.

And then I couldn't stop thinking about what she actually did look like, over the other side of town, in a temperature-controlled room, inside a box.

I finished my breakfast, showered, got dressed and got in the car. On the way to the funeral home I stopped at a bookshop and bought a Sidney Sheldon novel – I don't remember exactly which one.

The undertaker, I forget his name, a very thin but tall, silver-haired gentleman who had an affliction of some sort with his left leg that caused him to limp, polio I guessed,

greeted me not long after I walked through the door that had *office* printed on it.

I introduced myself and immediately apologised for not calling and scheduling an appointment.

His reply was a slow single nod with both eyes closed – the type of nod one would expect from someone whose job it was to work with death and grieving families.

He called me Ms. Smith and told me that it wasn't at all a problem and with an open arm he indicated that I follow him.

A small hallway separated the office from the chapel and I found myself standing in a room lost somewhere in the early 1970s

I paused momentarily in an attempt to digest my surroundings and I remember thinking Mum would probably have quite liked the decor.

Several rows of chairs with an aisle up the middle were all upholstered in a dark blue faux-velvet fabric. Indigo blue curtains hung, cottage-style, (tied back at the sides and partly drawn at the top), across several net-curtained windows down the left hand side of the room. Lush grey shag-pile carpet covered the floor and a mural of the ocean complete with seagulls and waves and a setting sun covered the entire right hand wall. Tying it all together was a sloping ceiling, purposely designed so the coloured glass skylight at its apex allowed a beam of light to fall directly over where I presumed the coffin was meant to be parked.

The thin smile on the undertaker's face and yet another eyes-closed-nod, suggests to me that he has interpreted my quick respite as a chance to admire what is quite obviously the centrepiece of his mortuary.

I offer him a thin smile of my own and follow him past a large white plaster statue of the eternally mournful Virgin Mary who has a dozen or so shiny silk roses scattered at her feet. On the wall above her hangs a large metal crucifix.

Through another door and I'm inside a small and plain antechamber that has a dozen or so chairs seated against its four white walls.

'Sit down my dear and I'll get your mother for you,' he said as he disappeared through yet another door, this one swung both ways and when it swung open I could see down a short hallway that led to yet another swinging door.

The linoleum on the floor gave it away. The business part of the funeral home, where they bleed them and fill them up with chemicals so they don't rot too quick. Flush their insides out and plug them up so they don't swell up and let go of a big fart halfway through the funeral service.

Apparently hair and fingernails keep growing when you're dead – for a short while at least.

A few minutes later the swinging door opened and the undertaker wheeled in a coffin atop of a chrome gurney. He centred her in the middle of the room, asked me if I wanted the coffin opened or closed, to which I replied, 'open'.

Another slow nod before he lifted the casket lid.

'If you'd be so kind as to press the bell when you've finished,' he said before he left the room.

This time I nodded slowly.

I watched the door swing to an eventual close.

The last time I saw her she was on the kitchen floor surrounded by milk and flour with a bloody great dent in her forehead.

That image of her was burned into my mind so I was kind of hoping that seeing her in the coffin might change that.

I stayed sitting down.

The white satin lining on the underside of the open lid reminded me of the dress I

wore when I was confirmed – all shiny and ruffled and like the lining of the coffin lid, used only once. The light coloured timber reminded me of an old car that Granddad used to own that had timber on the dashboard and on the doors – the inside of that car smelled old and wise. The gurney reminded me of a supermarket trolley, and I had to stifle a giggle when I thought about the time that James and I, after sharing a several bottles of wine and as many joints with some friends, hoisted one such shopping trolley up the flagpole outside our local RSA, an absolutely fantastic idea at the time, but not so much of a good idea as far as the police or the veterans of the Avondale Returned Services Association were concerned. A five hundred dollar fine, a conviction for disorderly behaviour and intentional damage as well as a night of free accommodation in the station cells helped convince us of the ills of our ways.

I took a deep breath and stood up.

Her nose, forehead and chin were visible above the edge of the coffin.

A step closer.

She was dressed in a deep red skirt and jacket with an ivory coloured blouse underneath.

Another step.

A set of pearls, doubled over, lay perfectly between the lapels of the jacket.

The soft and shiny surface of each round ball influenced just the right amount by the red jacket so as not to look too white against her blouse.

I didn't even know she bloody well owned pearls.

Some stockings that I had to double check were actually there and she hadn't been fake-tanned and a pair of red shoes that I was actually a little envious of.

'Jesus Mum,' I said to her, as I checked her make-up and hair, which had been styled very elegantly and in such a way that it covered perfectly the filled in dent in her forehead.

‘You don’t look too bad, do you?’

Her fingernails had been manicured and painted, nothing outlandish, just a very pale pink with a coat of gloss over top.

‘Who dressed you?’

No coral lipstick. A soft and unobtrusive pinky-light brown colour instead.

‘It can’t have been Dad – this stuff’s new.’

Just the right amount of foundation and a touch of blusher.

‘Was it Janice? Not here yet. Flying in tomorrow.’

Hair slight darker with ash highlights.

‘James.’ Not a big fan of red. *He once told me he thinks it’s tarty.*

‘The undertaker?’

‘Huh!’

I actually took two steps toward the bell on the wall before I stopped myself.

Another deep breath.

I turned and stepped back to look at her. I leaned on the side of the coffin so that my fingers were inside the casket.

I looked down her for what seemed like an eternity as memories both voluntary and involuntary flooded my mind. My grip on the sides of the coffin tightened and relaxed – tightened and then relaxed.

I wanted to be angry with her. Angry at her.

I had entertained visions of standing over her to tell her what I had for so long wanted her to hear.

Again I breathed in, but no words came out.

I couldn’t get it out of my head how beautiful she looked.

Red was definitely her colour – something else that she never knew about herself –

and she did look as though she knew more than I knew she actually did know.¹⁸

I blinked a couple of times and that's when I first felt the dampness around the edges of my eyes – and I had already promised myself that I wouldn't cry for her.

She was wearing perfume – something modern and subtle that complemented her new outfit perfectly.

She looked too young to be dead.

Dad is going to lose it when he sees her like this.

I took the book from my purse and tucked it beneath the white ruffled pillow that supported her head.

'Here's something for you to read,' I think I said.

I leaned on the casket, fingers inside again and felt my fingertips brush against the skin on the back of her hand. I didn't recoil like I thought I would – it was the first dead body I'd touched, (she was still warm on the kitchen floor).

I kept looking at her face while I let my fingers touch hers.

She was neither warm nor cold and her skin felt like that of an orange.

I let my fingers slip inside hers and I held her hand for what must have been the first time in over a decade. I wanted to tell her that this little thing that was growing inside me could have been so good for the two of us – that it could have brought us together.

Instead I leaned over the casket, lifted her hand and pressed the back of it against my bare belly.

Her touch didn't feel as odd as I thought it might.

¹⁸ Anyone who didn't know her and saw her looking like she did right then and there could've easily mistaken this sophisticated looking woman to be the type of mother who read Dostoyevsky and George Elliot and not Sidney Sheldon or Jodi Picoult. The type of mother who surprises their daughter with a brand new dress she happened to spot whilst downtown – size and style perfect. Sunday lunch, a new recipe, *but first won't you try this new Riesling, are you getting that hint of kerosine darling? Spin it around in the glass a little – there you go.* Copies of the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* on the living room coffee table and a recommendation for a foreign film she saw last week at the Rialto.

I closed my eyes and with both of my hands I held her hand against me. I kept my eyes closed until I felt like I was beginning to sway. I braced myself against the casket with one hand and squeezed my eyes tight. I tried and tried. I said *please* over and over again in my head. But nothing came. No images of her smiling. No memories of her laughing. Nothing. Just that image of her lying on the kitchen floor – finished.

I put her hand back beside her and pulled down my t-shirt.

I kissed her on the cheek and pushed the button on the wall.

I didn't wait for the undertaker.

James in Hospital.

It'd been almost a month since the bombings. Khalid was safely back in Jodhpur, buried beside his relatives and without Mum telling Dad what he could and couldn't do he was beginning to live a life of choice, (cruise tickets booked and the possibility of a new car, something smaller and sportier, he said).

And me?

Well, after feeling like I had been holding my breath for the past several weeks I was beginning to feel like I could once again breathe.

My first ultrasound scan helped get me better acquainted with the idea of becoming a mother.

Because none of my colleagues knew I was pregnant I kept the picture of her in my wallet and not, as I had seen other expectant mothers do, pinned to my office workstation.

To the untrained eye it really wasn't much of a picture. Just a blur of white and black shadows on a piece of paper not much bigger than a drinks coaster. Nonetheless, I was duly convinced by the nurse, whose job it is to analyse and determine possible abnormalities, that what I was looking at on the computer screen was indeed a living foetus that was without a doubt inside me.

What I had only previously been able to talk about now had a picture, an image, proof that it existed.

The nurse used words like head and feet and beating heart and I understood then, as I looked at her on the computer screen, that *this* was no longer just about me.

It was my job to protect this – *her*. It was going to be my job to give her the best of everything, to keep her healthy, to educate her, to love her, to care for her how a mother should care for her child.

I opened the front door of the surgery and stepped outside. My first few steps were a little shaky. I leaned against the metal handrail for several moments and inhaled deeply. I took a few more steps and then all of a sudden I felt as though my footsteps were getting bigger and bigger. Not only did I feel as though I was covering eight-feet with each stride but I also felt like I was ten-foot tall.

I purposely took the long way back to my car in order to hold on to the bizarre but comforting feeling as long as I could. As cheesy as it sounds, I actually felt like I was part of everything that surrounded me and everything that surrounded me was also part of me. It felt like it lasted for ten or twenty minutes. It probably lasted for about a minute.

I'd experienced something similar in dreams before, the flying thing, the ability to jump really high and that looking-down-upon-other-people sensation, but never while I was conscious.

I didn't really know what to do with it once it went away. How to label it, what it meant or if it would ever return. I think now, that I've had time to think about it, that it was a feeling of joy. Not just happiness, but true and pure joy.

I drove home and lay on my bed and imagined myself as a mother. I remember being well aware that I had a smile on my face and a tingling sensation in my stomach.

I imagined James, the doting uncle and Dad the cool grandfather. The two of us in India, the moment when I looked down at her, with her snotty nose as she emptied one of my pot plants on the carpet and knew that it wasn't possible to love her anymore than I already did love her.

The thought of losing her brought with it an insurmountable feeling of fear.

I understood what Hamum Khalid must have felt.

I realised also, having heard the phrase so many times before, that the actuality of unconditional love was wholly dependant on having something to love unconditionally.

A feeling of warmth and safety, quite possibly some sort of residual spill over from the earlier feeling of inter-connectedness, embraced me as I lay on the bed.

The feeling was back.

The feeling I had before she dropped dead and before the bombs went off.

Telling me that nothing can or will go wrong.

And everything is going to okay from now on in.

I closed my eyes and let myself doze and found comfort in the feeling that I was turning head over heels backwards into an endless void of space.

One hand on my stomach – protecting her, the other hand above my head, somewhere on the pillow.

I remember breathing deeply and slowly and feeling like I was sinking into the mattress.

I remember thinking that I had it in me to forgive her...

Then my cellphone rang and everything that felt so appropriate, so liberating and so beneficial got sucked out of my mind.

The caller identification tells me it's James but when I answer it's not James on the other end.

The voice on the other end tells me that he is Eddie, a good friend of James'.

'James is okay,' he tells me.

'He's okay?'

*What was the matter with him in the first place and by the way who the fuck are you?
Don't you dare hurt him or I'll fucking kill you.*

My heart begins to pound. My stomach drops and I immediately feel sick. My ears begin to ring.

'Don't worry, he's okay,' Eddie says.

This time he sounds as if he's attempting to reassure me. His voice sounds kind.
He's not demanding anything from me.

'But I think you need to come down here and see him.'

Down here? Where the fuck is down here? Hell? Down south somewhere. A secret underground bunker?

Down here!

You'd better come *down here*.

It was unlikely that I realised it at the time but now that I am able to think about it reflectively, hearing those two words used to ambiguously describe a place that I was required to be at automatically told me that something was wrong.

Down here, to the place where you will be greeted with bad news upon your arrival.

Two words often used to describe a police station or a hospital without having to refer to the institution or the building by name.

Do you want to come *down here* for a BBQ and a few glasses of bubbles?

Or, do you want to come on *over here* for a BBQ and a few glasses of bubbles?

'Where's down here?' I remember squeezing my eyes shut as I asked.

'At the hospital.'

Bingo – give a prize to the lucky lady.

'Ward 15.'

I rip on some jeans and a top, jump in the car and go.

Things that could have caused him to be taken to hospital run through my mind.

I begin to cry. Then I begin to really cry. The tears make it difficult to see the road. I can't find anything to wipe my nose so I use the back of my hand. I forget where I'm going and almost miss the off-ramp. I hit the indicator lever and swerve at the same time. My snot and tear covered hand snaps off the indicator lever. I make the off-ramp amidst a

barrage of car horns.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ I remember saying as I slid past the crash barrier with only inches to spare and sped down the off-ramp.

I’m still balling my eyes out when I pull into the hospital carpark and I don’t even know what it is I’m crying over. Maybe he’s got appendicitis or kidney stones. A heart murmur brought on by the recent stress.

The inside of the hospital smells like hospitals always do. The fluorescent lights reflect off the blue linoleum floor and it shines like a mirror.

My running shoes make squelching noises as I walk.

Jesus, why are hospitals always so friggin hot?

The receptionist tells me what floor he’s on.

I take the elevator up and share the ride with two doctors talking about a recent operation. They talk softly, almost in whispers, but I hear the words, extremely fortunate and unusually viscous and I can’t help but wonder if it’s James they’re talking about. I want to ask but decide not to.

I exit the elevator before they do and follow the room numbers.

There are three people in the room that James is supposed to be in. Only one of the three patients has another person sitting with them. I’m not immediately convinced that the person in the bed is James because I don’t seem to be able to recognise him.

I begin to think that I must have the wrong room.

The guy who is sitting down stood up.

He smiles at me. It’s one of those smiles that says hello, but is severely suppressed due to seriousness of the situation.

I look at the person in the bed.

Bandaged head, tubes and cables running from their body to a host of machines and

other specialist devices.

I could've sworn that I didn't know him.

I wanted to walk away and go and find James. Sitting on the edge of a bed somewhere. A few stitches, some plaster maybe, a bottle of pills in one hand and cracking jokes with a handsome doctor.

The stranger comes closer.

Maybe he's coming over to see who I am or to check who it is I'm here to visit?

The bruised and battered person in the bed is facing me.

'Kerri.' The stranger knows my name.

'I'm Eddie.' Hand outstretched.

'Oh Jesus it is him, oh Christ what happened? Is he dying? Was it a car crash?

My legs went weak and I covered my nose and face with my hands.

The tears ran down my face and if it wasn't for Eddie, whose outstretched hand quickly became a support, I'm sure I would've collapsed onto the floor.

Eddie guides me toward a chair.

I still don't recognise the person in the bed.

He is looking at me as Eddie sits me down.

He can't speak because wires are holding his mouth shut.

All I can do is stare.

Eddie sits down beside me and holds the hand of the person in the bed.

'James?' I ask, quietly, meekly, holding on to the possibility that I still might have the wrong person.

The person in the bed looks back at me.

I watch as tears begin to roll from the eye that is not swollen shut.

I feel Eddie's hand on my shoulder and I turn to face him.

‘He’s been in here since last night.’

‘What?’

‘He was robbed and beaten and pretty much left for dead after leaving a bar downtown.’

‘What?’

‘The police suspect it was a hate crime.’

I turn back and look at James. All he can do is look back at me with his half open eye. My hand reaches out for his. His grip is weak but I feel him squeeze my fingers.

‘He was in the operating room for six hours. He’s been unconscious for most of the morning.’

Tears are streaming down my face. Eddie hands me a bunch of tissues.

I just didn’t want to believe that it was *my* brother.

I had protected and reassured him, promised him that he wasn’t different. I had helped him to confront and dispel his fears. Loved him and supported him.

There had been a few times when he had been made to feel uncomfortable because he was gay, but nothing like this.

I felt safe when I was with him because he was a big guy.

He was over six feet tall and most days he was either running or at the gym. He told me once that he could give most of the heterosexual guys in the city a good hiding.

‘Have the police caught them?’

‘The inspector said that they are following leads.’

‘What’d they do to him?’ I ask without looking away from James.

James looks back at me. I mouth the words, ‘I’m sorry’.

He squeezes my fingers.

‘A broken jaw, three broken ribs, a broken nose, badly bruised kidneys, concussion

and severe bruising to most of his body.’

I turn to look at Eddie.

‘I’m a doctor, sorry for being so graphic.’

‘Why?’

I look at James as Eddie answers.

‘The police think it was probably because he’s gay,’

‘How would they know?’

‘We were drinking at Howards.’¹⁹

‘It was random then?’

Eddie shrugs before answering.

‘James left early and I stayed on. He said he needed to finish a few things off at work before he went home. He was found by some passers by down an alleyway and taken straight to hospital.’

‘The police called me because I had just had some new business cards printed off and I had given one to James at the bar. I remember him putting it in his top pocket.’

‘Who else have you called?’

‘No one,’ Eddie replies.

That means I’ve got to call Dad.

Eddie reminds me that the afternoon visiting hours are almost over so it’s probably not much point telling him right now because he won’t be able to see him till later on in the evening.

James can’t speak and he is too weak to communicate by writing so all I can do is sit with him.

Eddie and I begin to talk. James falls in and out of sleep. I get the sense that all he

¹⁹ Howards Bar. A popular place for gay men and women to socialise.

wants right now is for the two of us to be there with him.

I tell Eddie about James when he was a little boy and Eddie tells me about their chance meeting while both of them were browsing for earplugs at a chemist. I already know about James' inability to sleep without an eye-mask holding his eyelids closed and earplugs jammed in his ears as well as a collection of backups stored safely under his pillow just in case one falls out and disappears down the back of the bed. Eddie informs me that sometimes he does shift work and earplugs allow him to get some sleep during the day.

Eddie tells me how James suggested he try the foam plugs instead of the silicon plugs. His eyes wander and the corners of his mouth turn upwards ever so slightly as he recalls that moment and I can tell that he cares deeply for my brother.

We keep vigil for another hour and then the nurse tells us that we have to leave. I kiss James on the forehead. It seems like the only piece of his body that isn't bruised and battered. I tell him that I'll be back to see him later on that evening.

He looks terrified, as if he doesn't believe me.

'I promise,' I say as I hold his hand in both of mine.

I kiss his hand and leave Eddie to say goodbye to James and wait out in the corridor.

Outside in the car park I thank Eddie and we give each other a long hug before I get in the car and drive home. I can tell that the comfort of the embrace is as beneficial to him as it is to me.

My inability to indicate puts me in the firing line of several motorists who either honk their horns, give me the finger, abuse me or sometimes all three. I'm too tired to care. I feel as though I want to shut down and all I can do is wave in reply.

I parked in the driveway and opened the front door. I made it to the sofa and let myself flop down. All I can do is stare up at the ceiling.

James' bruised and battered face remains fixed in my mind. Khalid in the morgue is a close second and Mum lying dead on the kitchen floor is in third place.

I try to imagine the people who did this to my brother. What did they look like? Do they hate with such intensity that it requires them to want to kill other people? Do they really believe they are right and everyone else is wrong? Are they mentally challenged? Do they have a low IQ? What do they talk about when they gather together in groups of similar thinking people? Why are *they* so opposed to difference?²⁰

The skinheads Khalid came across during his first weeks in his new city; the Nationalists, the extremists who want to kill difference with explosives and firebombs. The fear of change, the fear of having to adopt a different set of rules in addition to those already in use.

There were those who would always embrace change and there were those who were always looking backwards in order to compare the idealism of the past with the actuality of the present.

Their quick fix answers that usually begin with, 'If I were Prime Minister I would...'

Dad was one of them.

²⁰ *They*. The fundamentalist. Fundamentalism; the strict adherence to a basic set of ideals and principles. The thinking person's nemesis. Generally, unable to be reasoned with. But how does the fundamentalist know what it is they are protecting their beliefs from? It seems logical to suggest in order to know what they so vehemently oppose, the fundamentalist must at least be aware of, or already know of, alternative options. Let's try a little experiment. Have you ever walked into the food hall at a shopping-mall somewhere and been lost for choice? Mexican or Indian, Thai or Turkish, a burger and chips or maybe a kebab? If that same food hall had only KFC or McDonalds then the problem of what to eat is lessened considerably. It can be argued then that too many options are the foundation for scepticism. If then, fundamentalism is about choosing one option from a list of already known options and adhering oneself strictly to the specific ideals of that one chosen option, could it be that the fundamentalist is a sceptic? Someone whose ability to choose is limited because they have actively chosen to ignore other possible options. Therefore the thinking person is not the sceptic, as the fundamentalist would so like to believe, because the thinking person is willing to incorporate all options into the equation before making a choice. Fundamentalism is about not thinking, not investigating and not asking questions. A fundamentalist is trained *not* to ask questions. *They* do what *they* are told and they are told that all other options (the acknowledgement of other choices) are wrong or evil or unclean or whatever. The fundamentalist is the true sceptic.

The Honourable Bertrand Russell sums it up nicely by suggesting that, '“the whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people are so full of doubts.”'

Mum too.

I remember him talking about the glory days of the late sixties when Norman Kirk, our great socialist leader, knew every unemployed person in the country by their first name because there were only twelve.

A few years before that they bought their first home. Back then mortgage payments were around one third of the annual wage.

We gave the mother country lamb and mutton and they sent back boat loads of immigrants and we gave them money when they stepped ashore.

Those same immigrants are now telling other immigrants that they can't come and live here.

George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright and founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science said that, ‘ “Reasonable men adapt to the world. Unreasonable men adapt the world to themselves. That's why all progress depends on unreasonable men.” ’

Learn to adapt or risk being left behind.

I didn't know it then, lying on the sofa wondering if he was going to have a heart attack when I told him about James, that Dad was learning to adapt.

I hadn't seen him for a week, Mum had been dead for just over a month by this stage, and because I hadn't heard from him I presumed that he was doing okay. James had popped in once or twice to drop off some dinner and he'd told me that the old man had taken to eating in front of the television in his Y-fronts and singlet. I didn't want to risk turning up after work and having to see him dressed like that so I chose to give him a while to grow out of it.

He'd already booked the ticket for the cruise but that was months away. That was the first step – his first taste of freedom. With no one to tell him off it was safe to move on

to the next thing. Order the groceries over the internet. Delivered right to the door. Beer too. A forty-two inch flat-screen television and a surround sound speaker system. (Since being under home detention I've subscribed to one of those DVD mail-out services and I'm catching up on all of the films I've always wanted to see, all of the old Film Noir classics with Stewart, Bogart, Grant and Bacall.)

Dad enjoyed watching them too. Before he left to go on the cruise. I was surprised that he knew all of the actors. He rattled off their names without hesitation. Lauren Bacall was his favourite. As the two of us watched *The Big Sleep* he kept remarking how beautiful she was. I had to agree. She was beautiful and I liked it how he felt comfortable enough to tell me that.

That's her name by the way. My little girl. Still inside me but to be introduced to this world very soon. I like the way it sounds. I also like it that Dad likes it. That it has the propensity to remind him of her, a movie star, someone whom he'll never meet, but enjoys being in the company of.

I might even start watching *The Soprano's*. Dad bought the entire series on DVD and during those first four weeks of supposed mourning he watched up to five episodes each day. When he wasn't learning how to be a real gangster he was brushing up on pseudo-gangster skills courtesy of *Pimp my Ride* and *American Chopper*. MTV allowed him to bring the whole lot together into one act.

He was adapting. Evolving, (and I'd often wondered where I got my pragmatic streak from), into what he determined necessary to survive. The streets were a dangerous place to be and if he was going to have to eventually leave the safety of the house then he wanted to be sure that he was not going to be a victim.

I'm not sure what stage of his personal reinvention he was at when I called him to tell him about James. I suspect it was limited to the inside of the house. Talking to his

reflection in the mirror just like Travis Bickle does in *Taxi Driver*.

‘You talkin to me?’

‘You *talkin* to me?’

‘You talking to *me*?’

‘Then who the hell else are ya talkin to?’

‘Well I’m the only one here.

‘Who the *fuck* do ya think you’re talkin to?’

‘Oh yeah.’

Dad busts out a toy gun and stands off against his reflection.

Then I call and tip him over the edge. He’s got to protect what he’s got left. His son, his daughter and his grandchild. He’s practiced enough already. He knows what to do because Tony Soprano has shown him how to look after his own. Xzibit has shown him how to speak and Snoop Dog how to dress. He’s now got a reason to take his alter-ego out on the mean streets.

Dad takes it to the streets.

He is silent for an uncomfortably long amount of time. I begin to entertain the vision of him out cold on the kitchen floor – heart attack like Mum.

‘Dad. Dad, are you there. Are you okay?’

When he speaks I immediately detect an oddness.

‘When did this happen?’

‘Last night.’

‘Did they...’

(Pause).

Dad clears his throat.

I can hear muttering on the other end of the line.

‘Is someone there with you Dad?’

Silence and more muttering.

‘Dad!’

‘Did they catch the goddamn bastards?’

He says bastards the way the Americans say it with the bas in bastard pronounced the same as one would say the word gas.

Did I just hear him right?

‘No, not yet.’ I don’t tell him that the police just haven’t got time for assaults and robberies.

‘How is he doin?’ There’s no g on the end of doing.

‘Not that good.’

Dad sighs loudly.

‘Well that’s the motherfuckin second thing isn’t it.’

‘What?’

‘Bad news comes in threes don’t it. My bitch and now my boy.’

I’m unable to speak.

‘Jesus F Christ girl. When’s this shit gonna quit me?’

My bitch? My boy? He’s never called me girl – ever. Especially not sounding as though it’s got more than one r in it.

‘What the hell’s the matter with you Dad. Why are speaking like this? James has just had the shit beaten out of him and you’re...

He cuts me off.

‘Ain’t nothing wrong with me girrrl – sounds to me like youse the one who’s gettin your gusset in a twist.’

‘Dad listen to me. Just get in the car and go and see him. Just this once you need to be a decent friggin father.’

‘I’ll tell you what. You settle the fuck down before I come over there and take my foot out of your ass. I’m on this – alright.’

By this stage I’m up off the couch and pacing the room. I hang up the phone and slam the receiver down on the counter top.

I take several deep breaths and walk around in a circle and attempt to work out what the hell just happened. Is he taking the piss? Has he actually gone doolally? Should I ring a doctor and get a psychiatrist to visit him? The second person in one month stretchered out of that house. Her dead underneath a sheet and him in a straightjacket, kicking and screaming.

I pick up the phone and push the redial button.

‘It’s me again.’

‘Sup.’

‘Look, I’m sorry but it’s hardly the time to behave like a wanker.’

‘Ain’t nothin wrong wit me.’

‘I’m going to see James in a couple of hours so I can swing by and pick you up if you like.’

‘Sweet.’

‘I’ll see you just before seven.’

‘Copy that.’

I fix myself something to eat. Something smallish, a sandwich I think, probably with peanut butter because I couldn’t get enough of it inside me to satisfy my craving for it.

I hoped that by the time I arrived to pick him up he has returned to normal old Dad.

No such luck.

I pull up the driveway and toot the horn.

Dad doesn’t even look like Dad when he opens the front door and steps outside.

I stare as he ambles toward the car.

He’s wearing baggy jeans and sand-coloured leather boots. He’s got a New York Yankees baseball cap on and it’s pulled over to one side and he’s wearing a pair of Rayban Aviators.

Instead of his normal V-necked sweater with a collared shirt underneath he’s wearing an oversized white t-shirt with a print of Tupac Shakur with the letters R.I.P written underneath. He’s not walking either. He’s shuffling. With each step that he takes his right shoulder drops slightly. His right foot appears to be scuffing the concrete. He opens the door of the car and falls into the front seat. I get a whiff of cologne that I’m sure is Tommy Hilfiger. He leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. He hasn’t done that for over thirty-five years.

If he can see that I’m shocked then he gives me absolutely no indication.

My stereo is tuned to the local university station and he tells me the name of the band currently playing.

‘Love this shit,’ he says.

‘Got the album off iTunes the other day.’

I put the car in gear and drive.

He winds down his window and rests his elbow on the open sill. He taps his fingers to the song on the radio.

I turn left without indicating because my broken indicator lever is still on the floor by my feet and the car behind me honks as it slows beside me.

‘What the fuck’s ya problem?’ Dad yells across me and out of my partially open window.

He has both of his hands held up in gesture to accompany his question.

‘Motherfucker!’ He says to the teenager who looks barely old enough to be allowed to drive.

The teenager gives Dad the finger.

‘Come on then you piece of shit,’ Dad yells.

He makes his hand into what is meant to be a gun and aims it at the young boy before pretending his thumb is the weapons firing pin.

I press myself back into the drivers seat so I’m not caught in the cross fire and consider whether I should tell Dad to settle the fuck down.

The possibility of having the gun turned on me makes me think better of intervening.

The teenager continues on with his index finger held in the air above his shoulder so it’s clearly visible to Dad through the rear-window of his modified Japanese car.

‘Asshole,’ said they way an American would.

Without speaking I reach down and pick up the broken indicator lever off the floor and

hold it out for Dad to see.

‘Ahhhh, what the fuck,’ he says with a shrug, ‘little fucker thinks he’s a tough guy.’

And what would you call what it is that you have suddenly turned into?

As quickly as it happens Dad resumes his semi-slouch, left foot up on the dashboard position.

‘Just tell me when you gonna go right then would ya an I’ll stick my arm out the window. You do the same on your side. Then we don’t get no grief from Porky the Pig and little shits like him.’

He purposely shows me his left hand, which now boasts two large silver rings on his index finger and his thumb; a large greenstone orb set in heavy silver and a thick band encircled with a Maori kowhaiwhai design.

Mum in the funeral home looking like a mother I could have had and now Dad the sexagenarian gangster who all of a sudden wants to protect his family and stands up for himself.

You should be careful what you wish for Kerri Smith.

‘Got a refund on those duds,’ he tells me before he sniffs loudly and puts both of his feet up on the dashboard.

He leans toward me so that his elbow is resting on the console between the two front seats so that when I look at him I have to look down upon him.

‘Okay – good, what’d you get?’

‘Damn. I’m wearing it. Open your eyes girl.’ He clicks his fingers and smacks the back of his hand across the top of his knee.

‘Got that old shit dry-cleaned and picked up this fly-gig for an extra one-spot.’

What the shit is a one-spot?

I’m glad I’ve got sunglasses on because my eyes are bulging. Should I burst out

laughing? Maybe I should cry? Although I'm a little scared, I'm also greatly intrigued. I decide it's safer to carry on as if this is all just normal behaviour.

'Turning left,' I say to him.

Dad puts his arm out the window and shakes his hand in a pointing like movement to show whomever is following that we are about to turn.

We pull into the hospital carpark and Dad half rolls, half steps out of the car. He closes the car door without looking and adjusts his cap. By the time I've got my handbag and locked the car he is leaning on the boot and giving me the distinct impression he has been kept waiting.

Dad leads the way to the hospital entrance. His shuffle-like walk draws the attention of two white-coated doctors who exit the building as the two of us enter. Dad catches them staring. He stops and gives them both a 'what are you looking at?' gesture, his arms open and his palms facing up.

'What! Did'ya get eyes for Christmas?' Dad asks them.

The two doctors quickly look away and continue out to the carpark.

While waiting for the elevator he tells me that he is thinking about buying an Ipod – black.

The elevator door opens and a male nurse who looks to be of Central American decent exits. My dad gives him a quick raise of the eyebrows too which the nurse, as quick as a flash, replies with a quick upward movement of his own eyebrows.

'Sup?' The nurse says.

'Dog,' Dad replies.

Both of us enter the elevator and the door closes.

Dad leans against the wall of the elevator wall as if he's preventing it from falling in. The door opens and without lifting his head he exits by sliding his shoulder along the wall

of the car and purposely it seems, knocking his shoulder against the edge of the elevator door. He shuffles along the corridor. I follow a few steps behind. An attractive nurse approaches. She passes Dad. He turns, looks around and checks the young girls backside out.

He purses his lips, frowns slightly and makes a face like he's whistling. He flicks his right hand like it's just been burned by something hot.

'That's what I'm talkin bout,' he says to himself before continuing on.

'Damn,' he adds.

He starts to make drum-like noises. He punctuates them now and then with a hiss that I presume is meant to be the symbol of a drum kit.

I follow him down the corridor at a safe distance because I'm not quite sure I want people to know that I'm related to this man.

'James,' Dad suddenly yells, 'JAMES. Where you at dog?'

Dad stops and stands in the middle of the corridor.

'YO. JAMES.'

'Sssssshhhhhhhhh. A nurse says angrily as she skips up the corridor toward Dad

'Excuse me sir! Please keep it down. This is a hospital.'

'I know it's a Goddamn hospital woman because that's why I'm the fuck here.'

'Who are you here to...'

'It's okay,' I say. Cutting her off. 'He's with me.'

'Motherfuckers put a hit out on my boy and I'm here to see him,' Dad adds.

'Sir, you'll have to control yourself if you want to...'

'Come on Dad.' I take him by the arm and lead him toward James room.

I lead him away from the nurse. I mouth 'sorry' to her over my shoulder. She shakes her head in disgust before turning away.

An extra person has been added to the existing three in James' room.

Dad stands in the doorway and looks at all four patients before he turns to me.

'Which one is he?'

I indicate with a nod to the beaten and bruised face of his son.

'Muthaaa-fuckaaa,' he says.

I wonder if I should have called Eddie and warned him.

Dad's turned into a gangster and right now I like him better than the father I had before Snoop Dog brainwashed him – James will probably like him too cause he's kinda cool. Just giving you the heads-up so you can warn James in case he freaks out.

James' injuries make it almost impossible for him to display any emotion. The tears he shed earlier were about all he was capable of. But I can tell by the way he looks at me and then back at Dad and then back at me that he is genuinely shocked.

All I can do is shrug.

Eddie stands and introduces himself.

'Eddie Mulholland. Pleased to meet you Mr Smith.'

Eddie offers Dad his hand.

Dad offers Eddie a quick upward lift of his head.

'Sup bra?'

Dad grabs Eddie's hand so that their thumbs lock together in a street type greeting.

Eddie looks across at James and then over at me. He sits back down and takes hold of James' hand.

It seems now that it is James who is comforting Eddie.

For several silent moments Dad stands and stares at James. Finally he shakes his head and makes a *tsk tsk* sound with his tongue.

'Nasty. Damn nasty,' Dad says.

He pronounces *nasty* with the same emphasis on the letter *a* as he used in pronouncing *damn*.

I can tell that James is thinking exactly the same thing as me.

Dad has completely fucking lost it but I'm kind of interested to see where this goes.

As for poor Eddie. It is the first time he has met Dad so he is completely devoid of any ability to compare the Mr. Smith he is meeting right now to the Mr. Smith he presumes this Mr Smith once was or once used to be. Similarly, he can really only arrive at one conclusion and that would be, *if this is Mr. Smith then he has really fucking lost it, but I'm kind of interested to see where this goes.*

'Has the law got any ideas who put this hit out on you?'

James looks at me then at Eddie. He shakes his head as he looks back at Dad.

Eddie begins to giggle.

'Mo-fo's need teach'n a lesson that's what I say.'

Eddie's giggle turns into a suppressed laugh.

James looks at Eddie who turns away so that he is not facing Dad.

Dad stands at the end of the bed and looks down at James.

'Bitches might need some knee-cappin.'

Eddie covers his face and folds over in two. His laugh begins to grow.

'I'll put the word out,' Dad says.

Eddie is unable to hold it in. He begins to cough and gasp for air.

He is hunched over, half in hysterics and half trying to get oxygen back into his system as he leaves the hospital room. A hunnnnnghhh, hunnnnnghhh, hunnnnnghhh sound follows him down the corridor.

'Sup with that nigga?' Dad asks.

I shake my head.

Dad moves around to the side of the bed. James watches him carefully.

Dad stares down at his son for several moments before he places his hand on top of James' hand.

'You're gonna be okay son.' It sounded more like an order than a comforting message.

'We'll find these motherfuckers and they'll get what's comin to them – I promise you that.' And he did sound as though he meant it.

Dad leaned over and kissed James on the forehead. Something else he'd never in his life done before.

'Okay let's blow this fuckin popsicle stand.'

'Stay cool dog. Back later,' he said as he made for the door, a gang-type hand gesture emphasising his newly bejewelled hand was meant to say goodbye to his son.

Eddie was waiting outside the door.

Dad stopped and stood in front of him.

Eddie backed up to wall.

'You got a problem with me?'

Eddie shook his head.

'You with my boy?'

Eddie nodded.

Dad nodded and pursed his lips in a satisfied manner.

'Best you get in there and look after him then.'

That was all Eddie needed to escape from the lunatic father of his boyfriend.

We made it to the car without any more altercations.

'Need to get me a drink – calm me the fuck down,' he says as he opens the car door.

I find a bottle shop close to the hospital.

‘Looks like you could do wit a bottle of bitch diesel yo’self,’ Dad says as he opens the car door and steps out onto the footpath.²¹

I watch him saunter into the bottle shop, right shoulder purposely lowered, hand in his front pocket and in no particular hurry and I want to cry. I really do want to cry.

But nothing comes out.

²¹ Bitch Diesel, I later discover is street slang for either red or white wine.

My Revenge. (I think).

It was three weeks before James got out of hospital. Not having a job to go to meant that I could visit him everyday. Most days Dad came with me. He kept with his gangster persona for all of those three weeks and another day after before he snapped out of it just as quick as he appeared to have snapped into it. It was a little weird for the first day – to not have him sitting beside me in the car, or in his chair at home, or in the hospital room either leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees or slouching back, arms folded, baseball capped head tilted left onto a dropped shoulder, tapping a foot or a bejewelled finger to The Beastie Boys or Kanye West, or whatever he was into that day.

He'd already become a bit of a celebrity among the hospital staff. Doctors and nurses from all over the hospital came to check on James' progress, as well as to catch a glimpse of the sideshow sitting in the chair near the window, punching the air with pointed fingers and a thumb in compliment of whatever he was listening to on his iPod. Dad appeared to be none the wiser that he was the main attraction in the room and not James' broken and bruised body. If he did know he did an excellent job of maintaining a seamless and believable act. Sometimes he wore sunglasses forcing whoever was visiting to take quick glimpses in fear of being caught staring at him.

The favoured method of carrying out these clandestine visits was to remove the clipboard at the end of James bed and angle it toward the window in order to make out the light from outside made it easier to then while pretending to inspect the chart they steal a glimpse of him.

When he wasn't wearing sunglasses, which wasn't very often, he would look away from his audience and protrude his bottom jaw so it looked as if he had an over-bite. To make himself look more imposing he sometimes lowered his eyelids and adopted a

brooding look. His half-closed eyes and his protruding jaw made him look more like Gomer Pyle than a pissed off Tony Soprano but I wasn't about to tell him that and neither were any of hospital staff that came to view him.

He was what he was and he would be left alone to be whatever that was. The past month had been an absolute clusterfuck for him, James, Khalid, me as well as the rest of the city. An old man who thought he was a gangster was nothing out of the ordinary now. If anything, he was the type of entertainment that was needed for some of these people to rid their minds of the images that were seared into them after dealing with the victims of the bombings. He was in part an antidote for any possible post-traumatic stress disorder as well as being a victim of it. Whether his audience recognised this possibility or not was probably not that important. If it worked away in their minds and subconsciously resolved some sort of unrecognised conflict before it had a chance to be recognised then he was helping – albeit in some weird small way. Helping them and also helping himself even if he didn't know that's what he was actually doing.

I was getting used to who he had become and I think James was too. Even though he looked like a complete idiot in baggy jeans and Converse basketball boots and his head covered in a blue bandana, it seemed the arrival of his persona had brought with it a set of ideals and opinions that were quite different to the Dad we used to have.

Eddie's outburst of uncontrollable hysterics upon first meeting his boyfriend's father happened only that once. The next time they met Dad shook his hand street style and then when he left he gave Eddie a hug. The next time they met he and Dad talked; a fragmented conversation about music, films and the fragile state of the city. Then they discovered their mutual love of *The Sopranos*. The next time they met Dad handed Eddie a copy of *Double Indemnity*, A Billy Wilder classic with Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck and told him to, 'watch this shit bro because this will blow your fuckin mind.'

He even suggested when James got better that they all get together for a few, 'brewski's' and to watch some Bogart on the new forty-two inch flatscreen. Dad began to welcome Eddie with a hug instead of a handshake. He also started to kiss James hello and goodbye on the forehead when he entered and left the room. He began doing the crossword in the newspaper while he sat between James and the window that overlooked the hospital grounds.

The first time he did it he simply folded the newspaper up and handed to across James' bed for me to read. He'd folded the paper in such a way that it had been reduced to half the size of a magazine making the article he wanted me to read immediately evident.

I read it and then looked over at him.

He shook his head and then looked out the window.

'Cocksuckers,' was what he said.

The article suggested that a harsh new set of immigration laws were to be reviewed by the government in order to prevent a repeat of the recent bombings.

'Even a dumb fuck like me knows that was never the problem to begin with.'

James looked at me. We both had so many questions that needed answering right then and there but he couldn't speak because his jaw was still wired shut and I had a feeling that if I asked Dad why he opined that further restrictions on immigration were not necessary he would do to me what he had already suggested he would do to the hospital parking warden who ticketed me because I was over my limit a couple of days before.

'I'm gonna bitch-slap that motha fucka, then I'm a gonna take my fuckin size eleven out of his ass.'

He made me drive around the carpark three times before he would let me leave. He was leaning half out the car window and muttering, 'com'on, where you at you chickenshit bitch?'

For whom it was lucky the two of them never met I'll never be sure.

Dad did look a little imposing, especially when he decided to add black paint to the underneath of his eyes like a baseball player but I would have to admit that if his opposition were to back off it would not necessarily be from the fear of a good hiding, but more likely the fear of doing the aged and obviously mentally disturbed person an injury.

I had got used to looking after him. At least that's the way I looked at it. He believed he was looking after me – and James, as well as protecting himself.

By the time the wires were taken out of James' jaw his disfigured and swollen face had almost returned to normal. There were a few scars and some yellowish bruising below his eyes and near to his ears where the bones had been reset but he once again was able to talk. Speaking obviously was still difficult and a little painful for him but he was able to provide a more definite account of what had happened the night he was beaten up. As he spoke to the detective, a serious looking man in his mid fifties with a handlebar moustache and close-cropped gray hair, he wiped his mouth every few moments so as to catch the dribbles of saliva that escaped from the corners of his mouth.

He'd left the pub and was followed to his car. He was dragged into a nearby alleyway and beaten and kicked until he was unconscious. He was called a faggot, a homo, an arsefucker as well as being spat on and urinated on. He thought he was going to die. A kitchen hand who was taking out rubbish to a dumpster at the back of the restaurant where he worked interrupted the assault and probably saved James' life. He yelled at the two attackers and held up his cellphone to indicate he was calling the police. The young male told the detective that the attackers were skinheads. All James could tell the detective about them was one of them had a silver cross dangling from his left ear.

I wasn't in possession of any of his diaries back then so I couldn't have known about his first introduction to racism outside his own country and it's only now since I've put all

of the pieces together have I begun to wonder if James' attackers were the same people who Khalid witnessed abusing the Pakistani family several years earlier. It was a long shot but his erudite description of those several minutes of racial abuse and the skinheads in the large green car is a connection I'm prepared to make.

I think that's why I did what I did. The hate of a combined group of likeminded people had created within me a hate of any singular member of that clan. I was in many ways no better than they were. They hated people with dark skin, people who dressed differently and people who acted differently from them. Anyone with a short close-cropped haircut or a shaved head and tattoos was an instant recipient of my anger and suspicion.

James didn't want to be alone when he left the hospital. His attackers had stolen his wallet and he was convinced they had discovered where he lived and were planning on coming back to finish the job. We decided he would come and stay with me. Dad said there was plenty of room at his crib but like me James didn't have a lot of love for that house he had worked so hard to escape from. Eddie had already called several security companies and among the piles of book and magazines James had been reading there were a dozen or so glossy pamphlets on residential security systems. Eddie was supervising the installation of electric roll-down shutters that would cover the windows from the outside and also an alarm system that included five closed-circuit video cameras to monitor the exterior of the house and a fingerprint activated lock for the front and rear doors. He did consider converting one of the spare bedrooms into a panic room but the prohibitive cost and Eddie's wise and persuasive reasoning against the idea convinced James that a monitored patrol, guaranteed to arrive within eight minutes of activation of the system was sufficient.

It was getting on to late afternoon by the time we wheeled him out of the ward and

into the elevator. Eddie pushed James while I followed and we made our way down the corridor amidst a chorus of goodbyes and wishes of good luck. Dad was doing the Jersey shuffle ten or so feet behind me. He was muttering words like, sweet, dog, baby and peace as he used his left hand to tap the hands of those he passed like an Olympic runner might do on their victory lap.

Outside in the carpark we manoeuvred James into the front seat of the car and Dad returned the wheelchair to the ward.

Eddie leaned inside the car kissed James goodbye, promising to call in later on that night when he was settled in.

I remember giving James a smile – a gesture of appreciation, of recognition and understanding. Their love for each other was effecting me in a way that didn't make me jealous. I remember enjoying that moment. It was topped off when in the rear-vision mirror I saw Dad, now returning with a pair of crutches, stopped and gave Eddie a hug. It was a real hug. The type of hug where the embrace is reinforced with several solid slaps on the back.

'Stay cool bro.' I heard him shout and saw him lift one of the crutches into the air.

James let his head fall back and hit the headrest before sighing loudly. I guessed that like me he wasn't sure about what to do with Dad at that moment so the best thing was to just let it go.

'Result,' Dad said as he slid the crutches into the seat and got in beside them. Both James and I looked around at him to which he responded by holding up a bit of paper.

'Got that chick's number. The Matron. She's been checkin this fly nigga out for the past ten days.' Past was said like gassed.

James looked at me and I looked at him and then I started the car.

'Home James and I promise I won't spare the horses,' I muttered under my breath as

I put the car in reverse. I noticed the smirk on my brother's face as I turned to look out the rear window. Dad was smiling at the bit of paper in his hand. He looked at me and gave me a wink before snapping his fingers.

'Your old man's still got it.'

I didn't answer. I drove from the hospital car park for what I hoped would be the last time in a very long time.

We were almost halfway home when James suggested that we pick up some wine.

'Gettin some bitch diesel.' Was what came from the back seat.

James raised his eyebrows and now it was my turn to smirk.

I pulled up outside a group of shops that had among them a small but relatively well-stocked wine shop.

'Red or white,' I said as I reached for my purse.

'One of...'

'Each?' I said before looking up.

James' face had gone a ghostly white and the tendons in his neck were sticking out as he constantly swallowed what was trying so hard to force its way out.

'That's...,' he said before he put his hand up to his face and covered his eyes.

'That's what James? What's happening? Do you need to get back to hospital?'

'You alright son?' Need some air? Open the window for him Kerri.'

'No! No. Leave it shut. Leave it.' His hand was still covering his face. 'Just wait till they're gone.'

'Who? Wait till who's gone?'

I looked up and out of the windscreen and saw them.

'What the fuck you on about boy?'

'Dad. Shut the fuck up,' I growled.

I indicated to where he should be looking.

He pulled himself forward and looked over James shoulder.

He appeared to be studying them.

The silver cross dangling from the left ear of the bigger of the two skinheads was plainly visible as he stopped in the middle of the footpath not ten feet from the front of the car to light a cigarette. The shorter of the two pulled a wad of cash from his leather jacket pocket and began to count it. He split the bundle and handed half to his friend.

‘Yeah. That’s them,’ James said. He was looking through the fingers that were covering the upper half of his face. His body was shaking.

Dad opened the car door.

‘Dad. Don’t even fucking think about it.’

He glared at me via the rear-vision mirror before pulling the door shut and muttering something under his breath.

The skinheads laughed at something between themselves and one of them spat on the ground.²²

Then they began to walk toward us.

James began to hyperventilate. They stepped off the kerb and walked between the front of my car and the rear of the four-wheel drive parked in front of us. They were still laughing and joking as they stood not six feet from us.

I started the car. The larger of the two glanced at me and then glanced away. James had turned away to face the footpath. His hand still shielded his face.

‘Are you sure?’ Dad asked him.

The traffic was reasonably heavy as commuters headed home for the evening and the

²² It was discovered later on that the two of them had been running an extortion racket. Threatening the mostly immigrant storeowners in the area to pay protection money to ensure their shops were not burned to the ground and they were not beaten up. They had just collected some of that money when we happened upon them.

two skinheads stayed standing in front of the car as they waited for a gap to form to allow them to cross the road.

James took a peek.

‘Just go,’ James pleaded, ‘Just get me the hell out of here.’

James had answered Dad’s question.

He grabbed one of the aluminium crutches and got out of the vehicle.

‘Dad get the fuck back inside the car,’ I yelled.

He slammed the door shut and as he walked past James he spun the crutch around in one hand so it was upside down. He grabbed the leg of the crutch like a baseball bat and said, ‘Yo nigga,’ before he swung it like a man half his age would. Both the skinheads turned around. The shorter of the two was closest to the curb and it was the side of his head that bore the full brunt of Dad’s swing. He dropped instantly, sprawled backwards over the footpath.

It took the larger skinhead a second to work out what had just happened. His friend had just been knocked to the ground out by an old man who was dressed like a rapper and that obviously wasn’t an everyday occurrence as far as he was concerned.

This was something he had to try and take in. He looked at me and then at James. James had let his hand drop from his face and the moment of recognition between the two of them caused him to delay for another second. On the footpath Dad was already lining up for his second swing.

First the old man, then the faggot and then the girl.

I had already pieced his plan of action together for him before he had, but not by much.

The motor was already running and the couple of seconds he took to digest what had just happened and what he needed to do in order to retaliate was enough time for me to put

the car in drive and floor the accelerator.

The crunching grind of metal and plastic and his screams of pain drowned out the sound of his knees splintering between the bumper of my car and the even more solid bumper of the four wheel drive in front of us.

Even though he was facing us he still fell forward and onto the bonnet of the car. I could see the cross dangling from his left ear.

Dad's second swing became an overhead chop. He brought the handle-end of the crutch down across the back and shoulders of the screaming skinhead four times before his mutilated body gave into the pain and he passed out.

I put the car in reverse and slowly edged backwards. The skinhead slid off the bonnet and disappeared from view.

Dad dragged his unconscious body off the road and onto the footpath so it lay beside his unconscious friend. By this time the owners of the shops and several customers had gathered to see what all the commotion was about.

Dad had already flipped the crutch around to its normal position and had it tucked under his armpit as if he was actually in need of its support.

I got out of the car and stood watching as more people arrived and began to circle around the unconscious men.

It didn't seem important to them that I had severely injured one man and the other, bleeding profusely from the side of the head, had either been attacked or caught somehow in between the cars like his friend had.

What seemed more important to them was that they now had the upper hand on two thugs who had been threatening them and stealing their money.

First of all they were dragged further away from the kerb. Their pockets were emptied and then their feet and legs were bound.

I considered pointing out that it probably wasn't worth binding the legs of the larger one because the odd angle at which his legs were splayed suggested that he wouldn't be going anywhere even if he were awake.

They were spat on and cursed as well as given a few kicks in the ribs each. I went back to the car and got my cellphone out of my purse to call Andrew. James was sitting and staring at the two bodies on the footpath. He was still shaking and he said to me again that we should go. I told him everything was okay and I closed the car door and dialled Andrew's number.

The skinhead that Dad had knocked unconscious had began to wake up and it wasn't long before he was threatening those standing around him.

Dad stepped forward and jammed the foot of the crutch into the incapacitated skinhead's mouth. He held it there with one hand and bent down on one of his knees. The skinhead attempted to writhe free and spit the rubber end out of his mouth. Dad jammed it in further forcing the man to choke.

'Next time I see you I *will* fuckin kill you.'

The skinhead stopped writhing and his eyes bulged as he fought for air. Dad pulled the end of the crutch from his mouth and leaned on it as he stood watching over his victim. The skinhead gasped. He took several deep breaths before he swallowed. He took a look around at the people standing over him and remained still.

Andrew turned up at the same time the military investigators did. The police arrived several minutes later. The paramedics arrived ten or so minutes after the police and loaded their patients into the ambulance. The one whose legs I had crushed had began regain consciousness and his cries of pain seemed to juxtapose the person he was.

Dad replaced the crutch in the car and sat with James.

Andrew talked to the military investigators who were still co-ordinating with the

Special Air Service counter terrorism unit over the spates of racial abuse still happening around the city.

He told me any crime that involved a specific group deemed by the government to be a possible threat to national security came under the jurisdiction of the military investigations unit. Their investigation happened alongside the police investigation but it was up to the police to determine if any charges for offences committed were to be laid.

I was interviewed by the military investigators and then by the police. The sergeant informed me that I would be charged over the incident and that I should probably consider getting myself a good lawyer. Dad was also interviewed. He freely admitted to attacking the skinheads with the crutch. I could sense Andrew looking at me as I stood beside Dad. I caught his stare briefly, but it was long enough for me to understand that he was as much amused by my father's adopted persona as the police were.

'Motha fuckas put my boy in hospital for tree (three) weeks. Just gettin my own back – don't fuckin tell me you wooden be doin the same.'

The sergeant inspected the disfigured crutch. He talked to James for a few minutes before he returned to speak to Dad. Dad had by this stage bummed a cigarette off a bystander. The butt of the cigarette was jammed tight in the crook between his forefinger and his index finger so that when he inhaled his hand covered the bottom half of his face.

Whether or not the sergeant decided that due to this mans disillusioned belief that he was a gangster he would prove far to difficult to be put in front of a judge or whether or not he decided like the paramedics that the skinheads required some sort of comeuppance for their actions I will never know. Nothing more was mentioned of Dad's involvement that evening. Nor was it talked about during any of the later interviews that took place at the police station.

My lawyer got me through the court system as quick as possible and I was convicted

and sentenced less than two weeks later. My sentence began that afternoon, back here, at this place and this is where I'm telling you this story from.

The three of us at home.

Instead of James coming to stay with me that night we all stayed at Dad's place. Eddie arrived later on. I had a glass of wine while James, Eddie and Dad went through a bottle each. By the end of the night they were making jokes about it all.

'Didya see they way that bitch went down?' Dad said for a second time.

'Faster than Paris Hilton's panties at an Academy Awards after party,' James replied.

As surreal as it all was it was actually enjoyable.

Father, son and son's boyfriend all sharing a drink and laughing about the day's adventures. I was there too of course but I felt like I was a spectator to the whole thing. I watched them for a little while longer and then I took myself and my daughter to bed. The three of them carried on drinking and I remember falling asleep to the sound of their laughter filtering down the hallway and through the door of the bedroom I hadn't slept in for over two decades.

I thought when I got up the next morning I would be the first but Dad was already in the kitchen washing up the wine glasses from the night before. It took a few moments to work out what was different about him as he stood at the sink. The National program was playing on the radio. His iPod was on the bench. He was wearing a pair of non-baggy jeans and a pale green long-sleeved shirt, his usual clothes before the gangster/rapper hijack. No baseball cap turned sideways, no dropped shoulder and no brooding tough guy look. He had slippers on and not a pair of white basketball boots.

'Morning darling,' he said to me as I entered the kitchen.

If I did turn around to see who it was he was referring to as darling I would have been quite within my rights to do so. He had never called me darling for as long as I could remember.

‘Tea in the pot. Just brewed,’ he said as he rinsed the last of the wine glasses and placed them in the dish-rack.

I got myself a mug and filled it.

‘Just about to take the boys in a cuppa.’ He said as he dried his hands with a dishtowel – indicating with a backwards nod to what I presumed to be the spare room, James’ old room.

He knocked on the door, said good morning, delivered their tea as if he had done it a dozen times before and then left the room.

He returned to the kitchen and we both sat at the kitchen table. I tried not to stare at him as he sipped from his mug and glanced at the cover of yesterday’s newspaper.

‘Oh well. I guess that’s that then,’ he said before he folded the paper in half and tossed it on to the table.

It landed facing me and was elevated slightly because part of it had landed on the empty fruit basket that sat in middle of the table.

He sat back in his chair, let out a loud sigh, before giving me a wide-eyed look and a pursed lip smile.

I looked down at the newspaper because I didn’t really know where else to look. On the bottom right hand corner of the front page was an advertisement that showed a cruise boat amongst a montage of idyllic and mysterious looking settings.

Istanbul’s Blue Mosque, The ancient city of Alexandria and the Giza pyramids, the city of Petra, the Taj Mahal and Delhi’s great Red Fort.

I guess that’s where he got the idea from.