

# **Reconfiguring family: the politics of love**

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## **Abstract**

This is a study that investigates what happens when people are unexpectedly thrown together to live the life of a family. Based on field research, the study explores the ways adults are performing in loving relationships with non-biological children in contemporary Australia. I have sought to examine how people are making these relationships intelligible when language does not always allow articulation of the intersecting lines of desire, conflict and loss that they bring. This involved analysing ten face-to-face interviews and interpreting the emotional and psycho-social phenomena they revealed through a creative writing process. Key to both the analysis and the creative work has been my engagement with Judith Butler's work and in particular her book *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000). Butler's writings have helped me discover tensions and ambiguities when relationships form amid a current of opposing discourses, in a society that persists in privileging the nuclear family model. Her concept of performativity provides a means of understanding why each family is doing things differently. These texts have helped me to think through radical possibilities in the cultural intelligibility of kinship.

The dissertation package includes three items: an essay providing discursive analysis of the fieldwork (ten interviews with adults parenting children in step, adoptive or blended living arrangements), a novella on these same themes, and ten short stories (each of the latter correlating to one interview and written with a specific eye to that interview's impact upon this researcher). I have chosen to use discourse analysis to review my fieldwork archive as it is a way to capture the effects of the many power-plays that influence this group of people. The interviews involved responses to questions about family rituals on the grounds that ritual plays a large part in a subject's organisation of emotional and social life by allowing for the integration of psychological and cultural elements. It was my intention that such a focus would cast some light on the way processes of love and aspects of the unconscious interact. The creative writing methodology, on the other hand, allowed me both to work through some of the more immeasurable emotional phenomena, and to highlight moments of conflict, confusion and ambiguity revealed in the analysis.

The findings were revealing in that, while these relationships can be confusing and fragile, people are reworking discourses to find ways of making loving kinship relationships intelligible. The two discourses of most interest were those of: “Meritorious parenting,” where adults hyper-performed in roles in an effort to earn the right to a parental position unproblematically attributed those in a nuclear family, and of “one big family”, where non-related groups of people interacted to meet the needs commonly ascribed to family. Just as *Antigone’s Claim* anticipates a social revision of kinship — where the unwritten rules are examined and new possibilities of fulfilling family relationships can emerge — this fieldwork supports theory in Adoption scholarship and Queer theory that find possibilities of love between adults and non-biological children outside of hegemonic discourses.

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## **Out in the Sea**

*She crouches down on the river bank swirling the brown water: fast, and then slowly, always anticlockwise. Her small hand is invisible beneath the surface of the thick, chocolaty water. Absorbed, Eske lets her fingers flick up bits of mud and sand; sometimes she feels hardness and sharp stone edges. Always she keeps the same alternating rhythm — scooping big, then small circles. She remains there for a long time, squatting by the water's edge. A man's pale face is repeatedly reflected in the shimmer of the water. He stands still, peering over her, waiting.*

1.

Eske rearranged the collection of stones on her dressing table according to shape. She began the line with the smooth, round, black stones, and then she placed the bigger, clumpier ones beside them. She wasn't satisfied with the design or the dullness of the stones. The effect they made displayed on her small table was irritating; it was nothing like the magic of the river-scape she had imagined. She took the biggest, roughest stone, which still had traces of mud in the crevices, and threw it forcefully through the small gap left by her open window. She heard it thud onto the lawn and then she threw another stone. The third stone missed the gap and crashed against the glass pane. The window didn't break but she heard her parents, outside the kitchen, stop talking. There was a long silence and she stood still and waited, but nothing came of it, so she went back to her task of ridding the room of the stones.

Eske could hear her mother's voice getting louder as she kept telling Jack she wanted to have a party. Eske watched another stone thud onto the lawn and waited, hoping to hear Jack's footsteps coming down the hall. She wanted him to take her down to the river.

“Well if you’d said you wanted a party back when I was trying to plan one I would have timed the trip differently. There’s a lot I have to do before we can have people here. Look at the place.” Jack said.

“I didn’t want a party but I have to have one,” Sylvana said. She waited for him to speak but Jack was pacing and touching the overgrown plants in the yard. “You told me I freeze people out,” she said.

“You’re confusing what I said,” Jack said, snapping off a dead branch then turning to walk inside.

“Well, we have to have friends, don’t we?” she said.

“I noticed you haven’t put your sister on the list.”

“They wouldn’t come. They won’t travel. There’d be some excuse..”

Eske hit the pane again and the jarring sound made Jack jump.

“Well if we are having a party I better get started now,” he said, turning his back on her and walking quickly towards Eske’s bedroom.

Jack had been thinking of the pink, salt lakes on and off all morning, and, as he walked toward Eske’s closed bedroom door, the image returned. He pictured the pale, glistening lake, oval shaped like a gemstone, shrouded by bush, and with it an unnerving sense of something out of the ordinary in the atmosphere. Each time he felt himself drawn to the cracked, pink crystals, glistening sharply in the sunlight, he experienced a deep, sad feeling that he could not exactly describe. He had thought of taking Eske for a drive out to the pink lake that afternoon, but instead they would have to go to the hardware store, and he would make some phone calls. The thought of getting his old band together was exciting. He inspected Eske’s window. It hadn’t cracked, so they left Sylvana writing lists and drove off with the radio blaring.

Eske wore a white African dress with tiny, gold beads sewn across the bodice. She was ready early on the evening of the party and, like Jack, excited about the band. They had built the small stage themselves and cleared some space in front of it for dancing. They had painted the old wooden furniture in bright colours and hung lanterns and streamers from the pergola. Eske had helped make the cushions and overlays from the African fabrics Jack had brought back. They had installed an outdoor speaker system, and Jack had put in a fountain as a surprise for Sylvana, but they argued about it. Sylvana ran her hand through the running, splashing jets of coloured water. She found them both soothing and exciting, but she said she did not like the pretentious piece Jack had chosen. The design was modelled on the three Graces, but was one naked woman, almost life size, holding a spherical globe that spouted the water. It took up most of the area between the house and the fence. Jack rigged it up with coloured lights so that the water changed colour periodically: from purple, red, orange, pink and green. The constant splashing and gentle background noise of the pump and the running water was mesmerising; but Sylvana felt like someone was watching her.

Sylvana was pleased when people started to arrive and were dressed just the way she had imagined. She hugged each person and kissed both cheeks as they came into the yard. Eske stood back with Jack in front of the band. Nearly everyone they had asked turned up and crowded into the spaces around the fountain and the dance floor, talking loudly and drinking the wine. The band hadn't played together for fifteen years and had been drinking beer and rehearsing their old songs all afternoon. They started off with a Kink's song, with Jack dancing about in front singing loudly, "I'm an ape man, I'm an ape ape man..." Some of the children danced, but the adults talked over the music.

“You know he’s hyperactive,” Malcolm said to the small group who were sitting under some swinging, rice paper lanterns, watching the dance floor. Their faces were shining with a red glow from the lights. People were moving around them, and reaching across them for the Turkish food on the table. The three women around Malc nodded, waiting to hear more about Jack.

“It’s more than just restless energy you know,” he went on, “it’s physical and mental, and it’s something more.”

“Well you know libidinous energy is meant to be the most powerful,” one of the women said.

They all looked over and watched Jack. He danced with jerky, exaggerated movements, moving his head about. He had looked at Malc just as he had spoken. As they watched they all thought different things about him. Watching the outlines of his body move in the flickering light he seemed quite young at times, but the movements were not fluid. He could be past his peak, aging without ever having become exactly who he had intended to be; or maybe he was becoming that person performing now. They all watched him, unable to look away.

“I had trouble keeping up with him in Africa,” Malc said. “The minute the plane landed he was off —people to meet, buses to catch, talk, talk, talk and all the beers and coffees we drank. He’s nearly fluent in Amharic. We heard so many stories. He made me feel,” Malc paused to look round at the others’ faces, “lazy,” he said, unconvincingly. Sylvana, who had perched on the edge of Rosey’s chair and joined the group, flinched. She wanted to know what they had done in Africa, but Jack had hardly told her anything about it. She couldn’t imagine how anyone could spend three weeks travelling with him.

Sylvana tapped her feet to the music and wriggled on the arm of the chair. Malc smiled at her. He lent toward her and for a minute it seemed that she might stand up to dance.

“Was it just the two of you who went?” one of the women asked. He turned to face her and the strength in his shoulders was easily visible through the Hawaiian shirt. Malc’s eyes seemed to move quickly, though he spoke slowly. “Yes,” he said, smiling. He looked over at Jack again and Sylvana stood and moved away.

“What a tune.” she heard Malc say as the group followed him over to dance. Sylvana watched them moving around, staring with unblinking eyes until there was just a blur of moving colour. She then looked at the party lights and began to count the ones that already had broken. She wanted to pull the fragments of coloured shells away from the shining globes.

*An hour or more passes and the sun is sinking in a red glow behind the hills. Eske is still squatting in the same position and swirling water slowly with her hand. Jack doesn’t want to interrupt her reverie. He walks about resolutely, never very far from the river’s edge, stepping from the sand to the denser parts of thick soil and mulched, fallen leaves, then back again into the soft mud of the edge. He pulls at strangling, green vines that have sprung up onto the old trees in the last rain. They are destructive. At times Jack thinks to himself as if he is talking out loud to Eske. As he paces, he flicks a stick through the thickness of the decaying leaves to the firmness beneath. The stick breaks. Jack glances back to Eske and sees a small lizard. He roams, looking up and down, always circling back to look at her.*

*It still troubles him, how to think of her as compared to him. He can’t hang on to any steady feeling. She is comfortable with him watching her. She is not his. He is learning to read her responses as she moves things around in the water with her fingers, breathing*

*in short, hard bursts and then hums quietly — but, it is hard. It is so hard that sometimes he longs to rest for a minute.*

*“Sylvana would do absolutely anything for you, you know,” he speaks softly, looking at Eske’s brown legs curled beneath her. The difference is still strange to him, her edginess with them, and her moods. She can be sullen or absorbed one minute, then angry, or full of wild, excitable joy, the next. He thinks about Sylvana and the way she doesn’t stop to consider things. He just doesn’t understand why she believes that her steady insistence on love will be enough to get them through when she doesn’t even want to delve into what it is that this child really experiences. He stares at the sun rays beating onto the exposed skin on Eske’s back.*

*“What’s up Eske?” he calls quietly to her. She turns to look at him and then slowly smiles, without speaking.*

*“This is a good place,” he says. “Do you like being here like this? It’s quiet, but really there’s a fair bit going on: fish swimming about in the river, birds and insects busy in the trees, everything’s moving; but things can be hard to see.”*

*Again she smiles. She goes back to smoothing the dirt around the well she has made.*

*Jack knows that Sylvana thinks he makes too much out of things. She told him that she thinks he’s trying to make himself seem powerful by always wanting to interrogate things. When it’s all boiled down, he thinks, it is her that’s naive, and it’s her that has to go on and on delving into things that should be left alone. He wonders if she really thinks that he believes her to be un-calculating. He knows what she wants him to believe: that what they are, just the three of them now, is enough. She doesn’t get it though — things change.*

*Jack approaches her spot again and this time Eske moves into the water, looking right at him. His steps are heavier on the ground and she can hear him breathing as if he is about to say something. She looks up and he sees that her brown eyes are as liquid as the river water. She doesn't wait for him to speak.*

*"I'm hungry," she says simply and kicks a spray of water at her father and jumps away.*

*"Don't you get wet," Jack says, splashing her back, "Mum will get cross."*

*They hurl water at each other, laughing, getting deeper into the river. Then Eske trips, grabs for Jack but misses him and falls face down in the water. He watches her slowly disappear under the water without a struggle. He is right there and grabs her under the arms to pull her up. He can't believe the way she let herself sink without even trying to find the surface. Jack holds her in his arms as they both get their breath, patting her back as she coughs.*

3.

"I think Malc was quite right with what he said about Jack," Birgit said to Sylvana toward the end of the party, "he is full on, isn't he?"

After midnight a wind came up and the twenty or so people left moved inside. They refilled their glasses and some of them continued dancing in the kitchen. Children were lying on couches and cushions on the floor watching a music show on the television. Outside dogs barked in the street and the wind was becoming colder. Eske got up from the couch and slammed the door to the yard, yelling at the dogs to shut up.

“What makes you bring that up now?” Sylvana asked and looked closely at her friend. She could see that Birgit had drunk more than usual as her lips were drawn in tightly to her teeth and she had undone some of the buttons on her shirt. She stood, swaying slightly, in front of Sylvana and gazing about at the others.

“I keep thinking about what Malc said about Jack, about their trip. You know, because now they’ve become so close, closer than ever since the trip, like brothers...”

Birgit smiled at Sylvana.

“What are brothers like?” Sylvana said.

“Like sisters I guess,” she laughed, “they have secrets.”

“They have always been close,” Sylvana said. She decided that for the rest of the night she would keep her distance from Birgit. Sylvana moved into an empty room and leant her body against the back of a couch. She could hear the door to the garage banging repeatedly in the wind.

“But he is diligent though, isn’t he?” Birgit continued when she found Sylvana again. “With his life, I mean.”

“What?” Sylvana let it show that she was annoyed. “What sort of word is that anyway? Sounds like a white, middle class, school boy.”

“Well that’s what he is really,” Birgit continued, reaching out to touch her friend’s arm, but Sylvana pulled away.

“He’s not some bourgeois...” She stopped trying to find the words.

“I mean in a good way,” Birgit interrupted. “Like he’s answering to something, you know, something deeper in himself.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, not you too, you’ve had too much to drink.”

Sylvana looked past Birgit, and saw Eske dancing around with some other children and beckoned to her. She felt tears come into her eyes.

“It’s all for show. Surely you can see that,” she said to Birgit. “Everything Jack does is to make himself look good; it’s all for him, not for me and Eske.” Sylvana found her daughter, “are you all blind?” she said angrily, sitting heavily on a couch wrapping her arms around Eske.

4.

“So you’re telling me you really don’t feel anything exciting or sexual between us anymore?” Jack wasn’t tired when they all went home and wanted to drive down to the river with Sylvana. “Remember those secret meetings by the boatshed?”

Sylvana shook her head. The sky was already getting lighter and the early morning birds chorused. Jack held her slumped against him.

“I know you remember. ‘We’re in deep water now.’ Remember I said that to you when we swam out and made love for the first time, in the middle of the river?”

“Why do you think I want to remember that?” Sylvana said. “This is what is real now: you and me and Eskeda.”

“I’m trying to remind you...”

“Of your ex-wife we were always hiding from. Having sex in the dirty, river water so no one would see us, and she wouldn’t hear about it.”

“She was harmless.”

“She was manipulative.”

“OK,” Jack said, and poured himself the remaining red wine from a bottle on the bench. “You go to bed. We can clean the rest of this up after we’ve had some sleep. It was a good party,” he said, releasing her. “People were having fun. You should be happy.” Sylvana watched him walk away and decided to watch television.

Later, when the sun was fully up, she woke; the television was still on and the house was empty. Jack had cleaned it all up and taken the rubbish away. There was nothing left of the night before, not even a smell of cigarette smoke in the air. It was almost as if the party had never been. She guessed that Jack had taken Eske with him down the river again. Sylvana was glad of the space. She needed time to go to the bathroom mirror, to study her face and repair the wear. She had avoided some hard conversations at the party. Her skin was dry and her eyes were puffy. She noticed that the wrinkles around her eyes remained all the time, even when her face was blank.

It used to annoy Sylvana the way Jack regularly took off to the river with Eske; he insisted that she needed space, and the bush. Eventually she became too tired to argue. She used to yell out to him: “You’re wrong. She needs people and community. She comes from a place crammed full of people —people everywhere!” She knew he knew this too, but off they would go anyway.

“I don’t know why you can’t just be happy at home.” Sylvana said to him once, remembering how he had once looked at her as if she was someone who had something to say.

Jack thought he could sense a release in Eske when they got into the familiar open bush space, smelt the pungent, mouldy pools and recognised certain bird calls. They always followed the same trails between the trunks of the tallest eucalypts. There

was rarely anyone else around; only occasionally a punt would motor past down the river. He had plans to buy a kayak once she learnt to swim.

Sylvana had started painting while they were gone. She was painting all the bedrooms white. She had talked about the vision of the white house at lunch one day with some friends, but no one was interested. All it seemed they wanted was to know more about Eske, but Sylvana would tell them nothing about her daughter. She assumed that what she felt for her daughter was no different to what the other women were feeling for their children, but she couldn't be exactly sure. Their prying just made her angry and ruined the taste of the food.

"How are you getting on back at work?" Birgit asked her.

"Not so good," she said. "They're all so young now, and really I'm not valued anymore."

"Oh, that's bad luck." The women offered her no solutions.

"So I need to be good at something else," she said. "I might go back to school myself."

Birgit looked at her, surprised, but no one asked her about her plans.

Sylvana looked at herself in the mirror of the empty house and wondered what people really thought of her.

5.

Sylvana cringed at the chink of light coming through the closed door. She gazed at the intensity of whiteness in the cracks behind the curtains. She was not able to move much but she didn't really care.

“Want anything to sip?” the nurse asked.

Sylvana thought she was alone. She was suddenly on edge and a pain started up in her head. She had been picturing scenes in tepid seawater, scenes of pubescent touch and excitement. With her eyes closed to the sun she relived the games she had played with Carla, the girl who stayed at the caravan park for summer. Diving under the water with eyes open and blurred they would stumble into each other and, holding their breath, pull at the bathers of the other. Then they would come up for air; then dive again, with arms out reaching and feeling, not knowing what would result, again and again. Sylvana could feel the strength in Carla’s body as she kicked out at her and reached for her, and the excitement of her own responses.

They would lie in the sun behind the bushes and rub sun cream all over each other, reaching under the bikini tops to cream the hard nipples. Once they had ventured further inland and rubbed thick, brown mud over each other’s bodies. It felt soothingly cool going on but in the sun it hardened, cracked and pulled the skin, so they had to run into the sea to wash it off. It was the memory of the heat of the sun and the cool of the water on her skin that Sylvana did not want to let go of.

“We were just little kids,” she said to the nurse and rolled onto her side to face her.

“You are still a bit groggy,” the nurse said. “It’s the concussion,” she said to someone behind her and Sylvana realised there were others in the room. The door remained closed tight and the room was quite dark.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

“Mum,” Eske said quietly and walked up to the bed. She leaned in to hug her, but hesitated and stroked her hand. She stepped back and neither of them spoke.

“We’ve been here most of the afternoon.” She heard Jack’s voice. “Watching you sleep. You look good; better now.”

Sylvana drifted into another water-dream-sleep without answering. All the real action was going on in that other room, she thought, where the light was coming from. In there, she knew there was something out of her reach, something better. She’d caught a glimpse of it, so she just had to remember it was there and she would eventually find a way to get through.

When she opened her eyes again it was daylight. The curtains were open in the white room and there were loud noises coming from the corridor. It was impossible to get back to sleep. Jack walked through the door with a bunch of flowers, smiling.

“Where’s Eske?” she asked.

“At school,” Jack said. “What day is it?” She asked.

No one answered her.

“When did this happen again?” She asked and realised how vague she was about what had happened to her.

“Yesterday,” Jack said, leaning over and kissing her cheek. She shifted towards him and felt dizzy.

“Tell me exactly,” she asked, fingering a bandage on her head.

“You were in the room under the house, getting a tin of paint,” He looked closely at Sylvana’s face. She was frowning.

“A pipe had burst and when you were bucketing out water, you slammed your head into the door frame. I had to get an ambulance.”

“I don’t remember,” she said. “I feel stupid.” She looked at his eyes and then began to cry loudly.

“It can make them a bit uninhibited,” the nurse whispered.

Sylvana reached out for him. Jack took hold of her and felt the blood rush through her body as their skin touched. He smiled.

“When can I go home?” She asked him. “I nearly died, didn’t I?”

“No,” they both answered.

6.

The sky was full of crimson clouds when Jack ran quietly down the street towards Malc’s house. He saw a dark shape by the mailbox that started moving in step as he approached. There was a loud rally of kookaburras as they jogged slowly down the hill together.

Malc asked about Sylvana, speaking into the silence when the kookaburras stopped. Jack hesitated and they heard the uniform stepping of their feet and breathing as they turned up the hill towards the church.

“She’s struggling,” Jack said.

“It’s harder than she thought,” Malc said.

“It’s hard, but Eske’s a good kid.”

They jogged on in silence.

“Eskeda just has different ways of seeing things, and expressing things,” Jack said finally.

“And Sylv doesn’t get that?” Malc asked.

“No, she’s more about results than meanings,” he said, and they ran in silence. In time their breathing became deeper as they built up pace. At the banyan tree they both started to run harder.

“Stressful,” Malc said and upped his pace as they ran past the last row of houses and onto the track to the river. As soon as they hurdled the gate both men started racing. They ran as fast as they could to the jetty. Jack nudged Malc with his shoulder as he passed him. They arrived at the jetty, out of breath, together. Sweat streaked down their bodies as they faced each other panting and shook hands. Jack’s eyes were shining in the glare. They stripped off their singlets and ran into the cold water, first floating on their backs, and then swimming out into the middle of the river, as the sun rose higher in the sky. Eventually they walked back up the ramp, shook themselves almost dry and put their wet singlets back on. They sat down to put on their shoes, and then they began the slow jog back to town.

“You know what’s hard?” Jack said, breathing deeply. “It’s getting the sense of who Eske really is, you know; sometimes I think she just does what she thinks we want her to do.” In the silence they adjusted their breathing again. “Sometimes it’s like she’s really somewhere else, and I’ve got no idea what goes on in her head.”

“Maybe you’re not meant to.”

They turned back past the church in full daylight. People were moving about on the streets as they jogged slowly on in silence.

Sylvana was waiting in the kitchen for Jack with two cups of hot coffee.

“How was your run?” she asked.

“It was a bastard,” Jack said. “But I beat him.”

“I’d still like to hear more about what you two did in Africa,” she said.

Jack walked away with his coffee without answering.

"I'm not stupid," Sylvana said.

7.

Eske set out for the river. She had filled a drink bottle with orange cordial and stuffed her pockets with lollies. She walked past three houses in a row that all looked the same and then she started to run, impatiently, feeling the drumming of her heart. She slowed down once she got to the end of the street and turned down someone's long driveway, walked behind a two story, wooden house with a veranda, and then out onto a stretch of wasteland. The long grass reached up to her chest and the weeds scratched her arms and legs. There were no fences and she could find no sign of the track. She stopped to look around, worried that there may be dogs lying hidden in the grass. Eske took a long time to make her way down the track by the river. She stopped to drink some of the cordial when she finally saw the shine of the water, realising then that the day was not going to be what she had imagined. She thought of returning home, but the desire to finish the mud building she had started for Jack was too strong. Eske had smoothed out circles in the mud around a pile of stones with Jack the day before. She planned to make the stones into a circular church, and inside it arrange sticks to support a roof. Angels made from feathers and metal could hover on the roof.

Following the glittering bend of water she started to hurry over tree roots, searching for her place. Eske recognised certain trees and smells and saw familiar patterns in the big roots. Looking carefully, she walked back and forth, bending down to scan the ground. She felt hot and agitated in the sun when she finally spotted the stones, seeing that her construction was smaller than she was imagining, and the mud circles spiraling into it were cracked and dry. It all looked messy. Eske drank some more cordial

and then tipped the last portion out to use her drink bottle to carry river water up from the river to smooth out the mud again with her fingers. She was pleased not to have anyone around while she worked. Sometimes she imagined high singing, like the woman's voices drifting from the church near her orphanage; but the sounds were mixed with noises of birds screeching. After a short time she got very hot and lay down. She dozed and dreamt that she was making something from pieces of ice. Around her everything was made of ice blocks. She started to walk over them but she sank and had to cling onto a canoe and paddle through cold water with her hands. Finally she got onto solid ground, but she couldn't find her way back to where she started. It all looked the same and there was no one around to ask for directions.

Sylvana and Birgit were out of breath. They were barefoot running along the track, searching the water in the river for movement, or stillness. Birgit saw her first. They ran towards her, calling her name. Eske was sleeping beside the building of stones and didn't hear them coming. Sylvana wailed and woke Eske up. She was dazed and annoyed to see them. She stood up and faced them.

"How dare you?" Sylvana yelled at her, reaching her arms out trying to hug her. Eske pulled away and stepped backwards onto her construction.

"You've ruined it now," she said and turned her back to walk off into the bush away from them.

"Go on," Birgit urged Sylvana to follow her into the trees.

"Sorry!" Sylvana called. "I'm sorry, come back."

Eske let Sylvana approach her, too tired to run from her. They faced each other, waiting. Something in the air made their noses run and their skin itchy. Sylvana moved

forward to embrace Eske but she nudged past her to start slowly walking along the track back.

“Let’s get you girls home,” Birgit said, taking Eske by the hand. They walked silently to the car, hearing the rough lapping of the water on the bank as a speedboat roared past and some menacing bird calls.

Jack was waiting on the driveway for them.

“She could have drowned,” is all he said. Sylvana ignored him.

“She can’t swim. You can’t just let her run off. She needs to learn. We’ll have to ground her,” he continued.

“What does that mean?”

“We have to stop her from going out, until she learns about danger. She has no sense.”

“Lock her up?” Sylvana asked, incredulous.

“She could have died,” he said without looking at her.

“She was building a kind of altar, with stones and mud. She had some kind of a purpose. I didn’t know she was religious. Did you?”

“That’s not the point. She is a nine year old child with no common sense and a limited grasp of reality. We need to teach her. She is not allowed out of the house without an adult again. Come on, I’m taking her back to school now,” Jack said and looked at his watch.

“I told her I’d take a day off work and we’d go back down there tomorrow, and we’d build it again. She can miss school for a couple of days.”

Sylvana moved away from him out of the sun. She opened and closed the front door without stepping inside. She looked at him and at Eske, who was silent and unreadable.

“You really do live in a world of fairy tales Sylvana,” he said. “She has to go to school and we have to tell them she might run off. We’ll take her back tomorrow. She can’t go traipsing off into the bush when she needs to be learning.”

Jack left the house abruptly without touching either of them.

8.

Eske sat at her desk looking around the room, then she went to sickbay. Some of the staff were wary of her unusual ways and would let her lie on the white sheets whenever she turned up holding her stomach or head. Sometimes she would lie still and hum to herself and sometimes her lips would move and she would murmur rhythmically, poems or prayers in words they didn’t understand. Other times she would lie completely still and cry quietly. The trips to the river with Jack had stopped and she needed a quiet place to be in order to imagine properly.

Sylvana sent emails to Birgit from her desk at work, complaining about Jack’s moods, his long absences from home, and Eske’s demanding behavior in the house.

“One of them won’t leave me alone and the other won’t come to me,” she wrote.

“Eske can come away with me to the coast if you like. Would she like that?” Birgit suggested impulsively, “A beach holiday? Then you and Jack can spend some time together, work things out between you,”

“Sure,” Sylvana replied.

“You need time.”

“That’s what I want,” Sylvana agreed.

“Malc has a conference up north in a month; I’ll be going south, to the coast. I’ll call you,” Birgit said.

Eske packed her bathers and her best dresses neatly into her black and white travel bag and waited for the month to pass.

9.

A north-easterly wind came in off the sea chilling them. It was a cloudless day but the sun was not warming. Birgit and Eske stepped out into the loud screeching of crickets and cicadas in the new landscape. They had not been alone together much before and Birgit watched Eske closely. The house was half way up a steep hill from the beach; it was surrounded by salmon coloured gum trees with spiralling branches, casuarinas with whistling, needle leaves, and vivid green plants. There were lizards in the undergrowth and spiders’ webs moving with trapped insects that hung in the trees. Everything seemed to be in dizzying movement against the background noises and loud crashing of waves.

On the first afternoon they explored close to the house and then sat in the padded deck chairs on the balcony, wrapped up in warm jackets to eat dinner early. Birgit had prepared injera with tomato and cucumber cut into small cubes, and added a pile of red burbera spice to the plates. Then they ate a spicy vegetable curry with their fingers. They could hear the ocean but, surrounded by trees, there were only occasional glimpses of the shining water through the moving branches.

“Why is it so light on the water?” Eske asked.

“There’s a full moon. Look up there when the clouds move. Some people think that things can change when there’s a full moon.”

“You mean it could make you be powerful. You can feel it,” Eske said, surprising Birgit.

“Really? Can you feel it? You are like your mother used to be. She could feel energy, and work with it. Once she did Reiki on me, years ago, before she got you, and her hands, when she put them on me, were hot.” Birgit said, licking the spice from her fingers. They both stared at the sky through the gaps in the branches.

“Her hands are warmish now.”

“That was a long time ago, before she met Jack even. Let’s go for a walk down to the beach,” Birgit said.

“I’m not like her really,” Eske said as they walked down the road, huddled in their coats.

“You are in some ways.”

“I’m more like other people than her,” Eske said.

“Well, really,” Birgit said, “you have different stories.”

They walked on in silence, following the light of the moon to the beach. Birgit stopped to smell a frangipani and Eske skipped on ahead of her, gaining speed down the hill. She shrieked as she reached the corner and fell onto some grass.

Eske waited for Birgit and the two of them climbed down the rocks onto the beach together. Cold water washed their feet and legs as they walked in silence, sinking into course, gritty sand.

“I once swam out a very long way in the sea,” Birgit said. “I was young then. My mates on the beach were worried and told me not to. I thought it would be okay and I

could follow the moonbeams. They made a kind of arc of golden light over the sea back to where they were on the beach. I put my head down, forgot myself and felt how strong I could be in the power of the sea as I swam through it, further and further out, gliding like I was flying. Then I got tired, and I got all wrinkly and hungry, and I needed to turn back in. Guess what happened?"

"You drowned."

"Nearly," Birgit laughed. "When you look at the moon the beams seem to come towards you in a line wherever you are, so of course I moved and the path moved, and I ended up completely lost."

"What did you do?"

"I swam back and forth for awhile, and then I caught a wave into the shore, and didn't know which way to start walking. There were camp fires in both directions, and the coastline was dark, and it was cold. I had no towel. I felt naked walking along the shore in a bikini at night. For all I knew there were bad people around some of those fires."

"Were there?"

"I don't remember exactly who they were, it was dark. It wasn't good. I wasn't safe.

I talked to some of the people at the fires and they didn't know which way to direct me to my friends. It seemed like I walked half the night, crying. Then I found my friends, finally. I was so relieved."

"I would have been scared too. But I can't really swim," Eske said.

They saw the dark shapes of the overhanging cliff and the rocks, and the trees above them seem to loom in on them as they started to walk back up to the house. The moon had been covered by a cloud and they could only really make out the solid shapes

of things, with the edges blurred. Occasionally there was a white gleam of foam as the waves crashed and were illuminated by streaks of lightening out to sea. Eske took hold of Birgit's arm as they walked. The clouds continued to move across the sky, coming in closer to the beach. They walked tentatively back the way they came, trying to store the memory of the landscape in the flashes of illumination. Birgit had been surprised that they hadn't seen anyone else out walking earlier in the evening, but walking back in the dark she remembered what she knew of the beach at night.

"Are you missing your mum?" she asked.

"I don't get homesick," Eske said. "I just miss Dad sometimes when he goes off to the bush; mostly when its night-time and he doesn't come and tuck me in. Do you miss Malc when he goes off?"

"Oh," Birgit stopped to look at Eske. She seemed small for a nine year-old, but she already had a powerful presence. She stopped walking too and looked around at Birgit. They couldn't really see each other in the dark, just the shapes of their bodies and features.

"Malc is a bit of a moody person at times. He gets stuck thinking about things sometimes."

"Like the way my dad gets about Africa?" Eske interrupted.

"I guess," she said. "So, I don't mind if he wants to go off exploring sometimes, and then we both have some private time, like this. It's good. I can do what I like doing, which is getting to know you better."

"Yes," Eske said, "because you don't have any kids."

"But you're really like part of our family, aren't you?" Birgit said.

Eske walked on ahead of Birgit to the house saying something about brothers that Birgit couldn't hear.

10.

"She was crying in the night," Birgit told Sylvana on the phone. "I didn't know what to do."

"You have to rock her," Sylvana said, "with big, rough shaking movements. Hold her whole body and rock her. She used to cry all the time when we first got her and that's what the couple at the guesthouse did. But don't worry, she'll be fine today — like it never happened."

"Yes," Birgit said, "you're right; she is as bright as anything. She's having breakfast watching television. How are things with Jack?"

"He's not talking to me, or listening to me."

"Oh dear."

"Do you think it's because of something that happened over there?" Sylvana asked.

"No, I wouldn't know what the two of them talked about, and I wouldn't care. Let it go."

Sylvana hung up the phone and saw emptiness. She looked at the kitchen. There was one white wall and the stacks of utensils and crockery on the bench. She picked up the two dirty coffee cups, lightly by the handles, and let them fall from her fingers and smash onto the floor; then she walked outside to get some old gardening clogs so she could stomp around in the kitchen without cutting her feet. She shivered, recollecting

the wretched feeling of hearing Jack drive off in the night. She put some stale white bread into the toaster, and then impulsively swiped everything off the bench into the plastic garbage bin she had been using for painting; the blender, the sandwich iron, and the percolator. The thin edge of the toast burnt and smoked and she dropped it into the bin too, burning her fingertips.

Sylvana woke with a start in the night. She saw the headlights swerve past the fence and heard the engine surge as Jack took off. She forced her eyes to focus on the digital numbers on the phone beside her. It was one-thirty in the morning when he left. She felt completely cold and was unable to get back to sleep, knowing that something had changed permanently; but, without Jack, there was no one to tell. She had not been able to stay in the empty bed by herself and had paced around the house going over and over the argument.

“It’s not working,” he said. She was too confused to answer.

“What’s not?” she said into the silence, “the marriage or Eske?”

“None of it,” he said flatly. “No-one is getting what they need; it’s all a shambles, a lie.”

“But we are a family; it’s not a lie, it’s reality...” she said, then she lost her way of thinking, and she looked straight into Jack’s eyes, hoping he would look at her and soften.

“You have to admit that this is not what you expected...”

“I didn’t ever expect that you’d try to take her away from me...”

She had not known she would say that. But she didn’t regret the words. It was what had happened. He always had to get in deeper with people, and when he did there was only room for him.

Sylvana drank some coke from the bottle in the fridge and took the phone outside to call Birgit.

“Jack has run off,” she said, “for good this time.”

“Are you sure?” Birgit sighed. “Are you alright? What have you done now?”

“It’s not me, it’s him. He hasn’t told me everything, something’s going on; you probably know what it is.”

“Sylvana, nothing is going on. I can see why Jack gets so frustrated with you.”

Sylvana caught sight of her reflection in the sliding glass door and started to cry.

“Come on Sylv. You need to be stronger than this. You and Jack are all Eske’s got. She just needs to be loved.”

“So you believe in love do you?”

“What a stupid thing to say,” Birgit said, checking to see if Eske was listening, but she seemed to be engrossed in the television.

“But it doesn’t work,” Sylvana said and began to cry again.

“I don’t understand, you were so positive.”

“First Eske, now Jack...”

Birgit sighed again and took some time to answer her.

“Well there must have been love there. You can’t reject nothing. Can you see what I mean?”

“No, I can’t. I can’t see things. That’s why Jack has gone off...”

11.

Jack sat right back in the chair so his weight was suspended by the canvas.

Looking out from Malcolm’s balcony he could see the river that had just flooded and left

piles of washed up detritus and fallen trees along the banks. There was a pleasant breeze after the heat of the day. He let his mind go back to the conversation he had with Malc in Addis Ababa, picturing the two of them, exhausted, slouching on their chairs at the guesthouse, waiting for the row of coloured lights to come on above the bar.

He replayed the scene again in his mind, feeling himself sitting in both chairs, smiling in the dark, sipping beer from the bottle. Jack looked into the blurry glow of the lights until he saw things, then abruptly, everything was pitch black. He closed his eyes to stop himself from straining to see things that were invisible. He sat waiting. He heard a door slam shut and then Malc's heavy steps coming across the swept dirt, then the paved courtyard, to join him.

"Power's gone off again, before I could save anything," he said.

"Was it important?"

"Debatable," Malc said.

They sat in silence for a long time, Jack still thinking about their visit to the orphanage and wondering what Malcolm made of it. The children had not had toys to play with, but there had been singing and chanting and some of them had been moving about in a dance with the nannies. There had been one girl that had looked like Eske, which had upset him.

"What are you thinking about?" Jack said to Malc, and then the row of coloured lights came on again above the bar, and a group of young Ethiopians seemed to appear from nowhere, talking and laughing. They sat at the table next to them and called for coffee.

"Birgit," he said.

Jack waited.

They drank a little more beer and listened to the young people's conversations, trying to pick up words.

"You two seem happy enough," Jack said finally.

"Trouble is," Malc said quietly, "she won't get pregnant."

"She can't have children then?" Jack asked.

"No, no. It's not that; it's more that she doesn't want to. She thinks there's something wrong with her — like a curse in the family. In the last two generations, her grandmother and her mother; they've both only had the one baby and both of them got sick with it, you know depression, but really bad. Anyway, Birgit made up her mind when she was a kid, that she never wanted any of that, and she's sticking to it, it seems." Malc spoke quite quickly, leaning forward in his chair and then, when he finished speaking, he sat back and reached for his drink.

"What can I say?" Jack said and reached for his drink. "I'm guessing you want to have kids?" he asked.

"I never really thought about whether I'd have them or not, it never came up, but I must have always just expected it. Sometimes it just hits me though; I mean what it is we might be missing."

When Malc went back to check his laptop Jack continued to sit in the chair, quite still, feeling pleasantly drunk. He liked the blackness, and the sounds: someone crying, hints of laughter, singing, guitars playing, and a constant thrumming that was inside and out and was blending things together and making his fingertips feel numb. Black shapes and shadows moved around in the dark in an easy way and things seemed to belong. Jack didn't ever really feel part of the place in the daylight, but in the night-light it was different.

That night the two of them lay on their beds, awake but not talking, waiting for the morning light to enter the room that seemed to be spinning quietly.

Malc joined Jack on the balcony with a beer in his hand. He put a folder on the table and Jack saw he has a pair of reading glasses on the top of his head.

“It could be another long night mate,” he said to Jack, and they clinked the beer bottles.

12.

Birgit walked about in the kitchen reorganising things pointlessly, talking to Sylvana on the phone.

“You two have more in common than you think,” Birgit said, looking over at Eske who was trying to braid her matted hair.

“You’re both very physical, and you’ve both got your heads up in the spirit world, angels and churches and, you know, I was even remembering that Reiki you used to do. I can see you’re often on the same wave lengths.”

“No, Ethiopian religion and that new age healing you’re talking about, they are nothing alike,” Sylvana said.

“Do you want to know what I really think then?” Birgit said and took the phone with her to the back door step.

“What?” Sylvana asked in a flat tone.

“You try too hard to be what you think you have to be.” She slapped at a mosquito on her arm and nearly dropped the phone.

“What?” Sylvana shouted.

“It’s not that you aren’t good at things, I just mean you don’t have to always be what you think is expected of you. If you can just be yourself...’

Sylvana was silent for a long time.

“Do you get what I mean?” Birgit asked.

“It’s impossible...” She paused, and then had a thought. “You’ve been talking to Jack haven’t you? All that stuff about lies. There is really nothing left now,” Sylvana said. “That’s not what I’m saying,” Birgit ended the conversation, walking back into the kitchen to chop some shallots for the omelet. “We should talk about it later. Eske wants me, I have to go.”

Birgit heard a familiar sounding sneeze. She tried to place the particular sound, and then realised with surprise that the sound reminded her of her mother. She looked around at Eske who was standing with her back to her on the veranda, blowing her nose.

Birgit stood and watched Eske from behind the door. There was something so trusting and confident, yet vulnerable, in her small, straight back and upturned head. She found herself unconsciously rocking from foot to foot. Eske looked up and then came inside, slamming the door. Humming to herself, she lay down in her usual spot by the window, rocking with her arms around her legs, and looking out into the moving trees tops. The strength contained in the rhythmic movements reminded Birgit again of some feeling or mood from her own childhood; a feeling on the verge of loneliness.

“Your mum is going to join us tonight,” she said.

“Oh?” Eske didn’t look at Birgit.

“She’s missing you,” she added.

There was silence.

Birgit's skin itched from the bites on her arms and legs. She wanted to leave the coast and go back home, but she agreed to keep the house for another week so Sylvana could come down.

Eske was not in the sunroom when Birgit returned from her walk. She called out to her but there was no noise anywhere in the house. Birgit worried, remembering the river episode; she could have gone off anywhere. She called again and Eske came running into the room wearing her pyjamas that she had cut to fashion some lingerie she has seen in a magazine. She posed like a model, swinging her hips and tilting her head with a fake smile.

"You better put your gown on," Birgit said, "Sylvana will be here soon."

It was dark when Sylvana arrived. The night time bird calls rose from the bush and the sea sounded closer than it was. They had wet hair from an impulsive, evening swim and were sitting together on the couch, cross-legged, waiting for her, cold and hungry.

"Look at you," Sylvana yelled to Eske from the doorway, frightening her. Eske walked to Sylvana and they hugged; then she walked back and lay on her stomach on the floor with her legs bent up, slowly kicking them, looking out the window at the dark forms.

"Well you'll be happy to know I'm better," Sylvana said kissing Birgit's cheeks.

"Is he back?" Birgit asked, surprised.

Sylvana looked at Eske and shook her head.

"No, he's not back," she says. "I was at my wits end, as you know, so I did what Jack does and took myself off to the river. While I was sitting there in the car, staring at the water, I saw this blue winged little bird take off in the reeds just near me. I was

watching its wings and I just felt suddenly happy. It was more a memory I think, from being a kid and having this budgie; but I let the feeling get stronger, and then I felt that everything was going to be alright again. Does it sound strange? How could just looking at a bird help? So then I drove, and I thought about it all even more, and I saw how I gave myself to what I thought we had — to what I thought was something we shared — but it was a lie, and I was just stumbling about.” Sylvana stopped talking and hugged Birgit again.

Birgit looked over to Eske who had stopped kicking her legs, but was still staring into the dark.

“I wouldn’t say it was a lie,” Birgit said uncertainly.

“Can we eat now?” Sylvana asked, “I’m hungry.”

13.

That night Sylvana did not sleep but lay quietly by herself on an unfamiliar mattress, listening to distant waves that formed and crashed. She moved her fingers to her throat and felt the necklace of sharp, broken shells on a string that Eske had made. The shells had been difficult to puncture with the needle and thread, and only four of them still remained on the string.

Sylvana pictured herself on the beach, lying flat so the bones in her spine were supported, feeling thick and heavy on the sand. Her chest expanded and a thrill moved to the breasts — a potent feeling of swelling that she remembered as at once agonising and exciting.

Sylvana heard Eske cry out in the night. She went to stand outside her door and watched her struggle silently, knowing not to wake her up. She knew she would settle back to regular breathing eventually. Feeling so alert in the night, she knew that once there was a time when she might have wandered down to the beach and walked alone in the starlight, but instead she hesitated, watching Eske. Everything in her life seemed to be changing, so she couldn't wander too far. Eske settled and Sylvana lay back on her bed, but with her eyes open, and listening.

*Eske watches the brown, circular ripples form and disperse as they paddle down the river through thick reeds that flicker in the harsh sun. Jack turns back to paddle alongside her for a bit, pointing out an eagle that is flying high, a long way off in the sky, then he paddles on ahead again. Sometimes their kayaking trips go all day and they pull in somewhere for drinks and sandwiches. Eske moves through the water very slowly. She likes to drift along and play with the oars in the water. Jack strokes on ahead, and loops back, repeatedly, so they are close and then there is space. It suits them both.*

*As the day begins to lose its radiance and the shadows form patterns on the river, Jack swings around on Eske to tease her into making some bigger strokes. He surprises her and her oar flicks up a spray of water. She laughs and tries to flick a bigger spray at him and her kayak tips. It happens quickly and soundlessly. Her body splashes into the water. She is buoyed by the life-jacket, yet still she tips face down without resistance.*

*It is easy for Jack to jump in and rescue her. He grabs Eske under the arms and drags her through the water to rest her over the upturned kayak. They have practiced the drill, but it is much colder in the water in the spring. It astounds him the way Eske is still almost paralysed when she falls in, still putting up no struggle.*

*He helps her, shivering and quiet, back into her kayak and urges her to start paddling. They have a long way to go to get back to the jetty. She strokes slowly beside him when suddenly she drops an oar and yells something to him. He turns to see her trying to stand up in her kayak, and again it tips. Jack can see she is looking for something in the water as she falls again.*

*“What the hell are you doing?” he yells.*

*He pulls her out again but this time she is kicking and reaching around in the water. She sees what she wants — a small bit of paper floating away from her. Jack holds her tightly against the kayak.*

*“We have to get it,” she yells.*

*He leaves her on the upturned kayak and tries to swim for what he has worked out is the photograph of the boy that Birgit and Malc are in the process of adopting. Jack cannot retrieve the soggy, disintegrating photograph of the boy she has been calling her brother. Eske rights her kayak and gets in quietly.*

*He paddles back to the jetty behind her, watching her slow, careful strokes and the ripples in the water, and waits for her to speak again.*

The end.

## **Exegesis**

### **I Introduction**

“Fragile, porous and expansive” kinship (Butler, 2000, p. 22)

I'd get really frustrated, and think, when is this relationship going to deepen? It'll be hovering, and then we keep going back to square one. It's a different bonding, more backwards, forwards, sideways sort of thing. (Emily)

#### **I.1**

##### **Research questions**

What happens when people are unexpectedly thrown together to live the life of a family?

Family and kinship studies are well represented in anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies and fiction. My interest, however, is quite specific. I am examining how people not related by blood are achieving loving connections in reconfigured families. This research comes as a result of probing my own and others' personal experiences. I want to discover the psycho-social realities of reconfigured families: the intersecting of desires, the creation of loving relationships, and the conflicts and losses.

What the reader will find in these pages is a study based on field research intended to answer the question: how are adults performing to connect in loving relationships with non-biological children? The study involves face-to-face interviews with ten adults parenting non-biological children. I asked questions about family rituals to discover the means in which individuals interact to establish loving relationships in a society that privileges nuclear family discourses. As these discourses work by excluding those that do not fit the model there are areas where loving relationships can be delegitimised.

Similarly, I look for possibilities that destabilise hegemonic norms, places where love between parents and children not related by blood prevails. Looking at families in my own local area, I find relationships are forming against a current of opposing discourses. To think through radical possibilities in the cultural intelligibility of kinship I will examine some of the ideas presented in Judith Butler's book, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000). In addition, I will interpret the interview narratives using a creative writing process.

Undoubtedly, Butler has had a huge role to play in Queer theory. This and Adoption scholarship together inform my analysis and interpretation of the archive. Adoption scholarship fieldwork studies are informative, covering the intricacies of identity formation in transnational, transracial adoption, while Queer theory's intention is "to explore possibilities outside of patriarchal, hierarchical and heteronormative discursive practices" (Ruffolo, 2009, p. 2). This has resulted in pertinent research exemplifying the success of loving family relationships outside of nuclear family models.. Although there has been much scholarship on reconfigured families in both these fields separately, my project draws on them equally, as my interest lies in the possibilities of love in families formed around any sort of non-biological parenting situation. I will refer to some of these studies in the following chapters.

The purpose of this introduction will be to contextualise the current situation in terms of the history of the family and historical understandings of concepts of familial love. I will also examine the way love interfaces with institutions to become legitimate, referring to Butler's work to open up future possibilities. To foreshadow that analysis, the following passage captures the current crisis in contemporary kinship and its

emerging possibilities, and is very germane to my interviews. Butler draws on a reading of Antigone and the history of comment on that text to ask the question: when the maternal or paternal place is not secure, and we can no longer rely on the stability of psychoanalytic structuralism, what does Oedipus stand for?

I ask this question ... during a time in which the family is at once idealised in nostalgic ways within various cultural forms, a time in which the Vatican protests against homosexuality not only as an assault on the family but also on the notion of the human, where to become human, for some, requires participation in the family in its normative sense. I ask this as well during a time in which children, because of divorce and remarriage, because of migration, exile and refugee status, because of global displacements of various kinds, move from one family to another, move from a family to no family, move from no family to a family, or in which they live, psychically, at the crossroads of the family, or in multiply layered family situations, in which they may well have more than one woman who operates as the mother, more than one man who operates as the father, or no mother or no father, with half-brothers who are also friends — this is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous and expansive. It is also a time in which straight and gay families are sometimes blended, or in which gay families emerge in nuclear and non-nuclear forms. What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds? (Butler, 2000, p. 22)

## The Outline of this Project and the Exegesis

This research project records and interprets the narratives from ten interviews that I carried out with adults who are parenting non-biological children within the ACT and NSW. These people engaged with me in dialogue around open-ended questions candidly describing their experiences. The narratives were then explored through a process of creative writing, informed by post-structuralist theory and contemporary Australian literature.

This dissertation package begins with the novella *Out in the Sea*, in which the fragility and vulnerabilities of an adoptive family are portrayed from different points of view. The novella brings questions about the lived experiences of reconfigured families to the forefront. Following the novella is this exegesis, which is structured as follows: the introduction contextualises the situation in terms of post-structuralist theory as well as the history of the family and concepts of familial love. Chapter One relates the research questions to the theory and describes the methodology. Chapter Two interprets and analyses the interviews through discourse analysis. Chapter Three presents further analysis of interview narratives, including those that push at discursive limitations. Chapter Four expounds my creative process as informed by theory and also discusses two examples of Australian contemporary fiction on this topic. This fourth chapter also concludes the exegesis with a summary of the themes and concepts delivered. Ten short stories follow, each one picking up on a particular theme or emotion correlated to one of the interviews. The final short story, and the final item in this package, is an extension of the novella and depicts a scene in the future lives of its characters. This format, continuing the story of some of the original characters, reinforces two of the ideas that emerged in the project: that time, energy and care are needed to negotiate and sustain

creative efforts to work through the limitations of hegemonic discourses. But also that this is possible, because contemporary family life ultimately relies on discursive understandings of kinship rather than any innate biological bond; understandings can always be reworked.

The next section contextualises meanings given to love within the family. A convenient way to indicate the sort of love I will be discussing here is through Plutarch's observation that love between two persons cannot exist, "unless each has been affected by the force of the other" (Plutarch, 1957, p. 49). This notion encompasses the situation of adoption for example, where an adult might proceed with the intention of loving the child in the fashion that he or she was parented, according to a particular family or cultural discourse, regardless of the way the child might feel or be accustomed to. This mismatch can apply especially in the case of older children being adopted or step-parented, and with those adopted transglobally where the adult's fixed and pre-given plan for love prevents the occurrence of the inter-subjective affectivity Plutarch is discussing.

These situations require sharing actions, language, emotions, and intention. Comparing mutual exchanges of feelings to instances when one individual loves the other as an object, as might happen in the case of a fan adoring a celebrity, can be a way of investigating these relationships. When adults and children become a family by circumstances they may not have had a choice in, such as adoption or step-parenting, there are many factors at play that impact on the possibilities of forming loving relationships, including discursive limitations. One of the men in my study, Tom, who has step-parented two girls from a young age who are now teenagers, recounted holiday stories and some of the girls' relationship dramas that they have been through together;

he then said “I don’t have any children of my own,” when he was drawing the family tree, which I asked all participants to draw as part of the interviews. Nuclear family discourses infiltrate the inner workings of the individual and the family in subtle but powerful ways.

Emily, another respondent, gives another perspective on the way discourses of “normal” family can prejudice possibilities of genuine connection between would-be kin. She talked about an inter-country adoptive situation she knew of that had broken down:

I know [a family] that accepted two sisters and then there was a family that adopted their cousins, but [lived] a couple of hours away, and they didn’t want anyone to know that they were related, They didn’t tell anybody, the family or anybody that their children had cousins, that they weren’t far away, cause they just wanted it to be normal you know, and they really, really struggled, it was just a lot of rules, quite a religious family, there was a coldness about it.

### I.3

#### About Love

I knew I could love him, but would that love have a different quality when the child was adopted rather than born to me? Would I miss not being able to recognise my grandmother’s eyes or my husband’s smile in the child? Would I feel that this baby was really, truly my own child? (Rollings, 2008, p. 17)

People tell me they want to know if love, when one is parenting other people’s children, is the same as it is for birth children. But few of those people want to have to define what they mean by love. I want to know what sort of connections — loving, sometimes

loving, ambivalent, hostile, hating — can develop when adults parent other peoples' children. I want to know how these parent-child dyads communicate in emotional areas in changing social contexts and with changing personal and psychic developments, as they live lives following their own pursuits and individual lines of desire, under the one roof. And I wonder why so many people think living in a nuclear family form is desirable when, as we will see in the archive, such relationships can be confusing and fragile.

Mark Padilla et al (2007) in *Love and Globalization: transformations of intimacy in the contemporary world* present comparative studies of love as an “opportunity to revitalise the field of kinship” (Padilla, Hirsch, Muñoz-Laboy, Sember, & Parker, 2007, p. xv). They claim that even as society is impacted by globalisation, people remain committed to the idea that “love makes a family” (Padilla, Hirsch, Muñoz-Laboy, Sember, & Parker, 2007, p. xv). In their research they find that there has been a shift away from the “traditional” family to relationships that are more personal and unpredictable. They accordingly focus on “the human emotional bonds that cohere and maintain kinship systems,” asking:

What is love? A virtue? A form of knowledge? An instinct? And what does the contemplation of love illuminate about fundamental human experiences, such as intimacy, sexual and marital bonding, gender relations, kinship, consumption and pleasure? (Padilla et al., 2007, p. ix)

Their response to these questions, a book of comparative studies, examines the ways love and emotions interface with contemporary culture, and examines how “desires, pleasures, and emotions circulate as commodities in the global marketplace” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. x). In postmodern times “we cannot predict the social expressions of love

and intimacy solely on the basis of the material structures within which they operate” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. xii). Instead, the authors link expressions of intimacy to social and political inequalities, including gender, and the economy, and consider that expressions of intimacy also depend “on how groups and individuals construct experiences” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. xiii). These findings reinforce the need to consider different experiential narratives from a wide range of social contexts to gain knowledge in this area. The authors emphasise the study of love, noting the important role of subjectivity in the analysis of kinship when interpreting social phenomena. They see this as preferable to using the classifications or taxonomies of kinship structure that made up most past research studies, which involved dividing subjects into groups or categories according to a hierarchical system of naturalised relationships.

Padilla et al refer to Jacques Derrida’s quote, that love is the “original and central question of philosophy” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. ix). They discuss the way that love, though such a product of discourse, can be made to seem natural; this “gives it power to shape social organization” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. ix). In other words, the ideas about love — for example, when and where it should occur — that a society treats as a natural influence on the way people behave can limit or enhance possibilities of forming loving relationships; but despite such pressures, there is evidence both in Queer theory and Adoption scholarship that people are living fulfilling and loving family lives outside of hegemonic discourses.

Linnell Secomb is another writer who describes the way “earlier stories, images and rituals of familial and erotic love infuse and produce our current fantasies and behaviours” (Secomb, 2007, p. 57). She describes love as performance, not an inner

state, saying, “our identities and our relationships are shaped and formed through the narratives that form our cultural understandings of love” (Secomb, 2007, p. 57). Secomb writes that Luce Irigaray, who “focuses on the intermediary role of love,” sees love as mediating “between opposites” and “always in the process of becoming,” never resolved (Secomb, 2007, p. 14).

These concepts and analyses open up the discussion of love as a form of performance, a process that provides another way of thinking about what is binding in kinship ties, one which is not just linked to biology. For the purposes of this project, I assume that everyone is impacted by loving encounters as they move in and out of familial relationships. As so many people have asked me this, I also wonder if loving someone else’s child is different to biological parenting, and I wonder if, after all, it really matters. What is at stake, it seems, is making these relationships intelligible when the prevailing discourses do not articulate the dilemmas these adults and children can face. Accordingly, the creative product and the interview analysis demonstrate loving encounters disrupted by confusion and sadness.

Another way of looking at love's interface with the family is via Foucault's reference to the way the eighteenth century family turned into "an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love" and became understood as the place where sexuality develops. Foucault says that "for this reason sexuality is "incestuous" from the start" (Foucault, 2008, p. 108). In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (2008) he describes the family form that we have inherited from that epoch as at "the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance" (Foucault, 2008, p. 108).

Foucault describes the way the deployment of alliance — marriage, kinship ties and legitimacy — ordered society by governing what sorts of sexual and pleasurable relations were permitted. Family roles were prescribed by society, with the family home as the expected centre of permissible loving relationships as well as understood sexual prohibitions.

In *Friendship as a Way of Life*, an interview conducted with Foucault for the French magazine *Gai Pied*, that appeared in April 1981, Foucault examines friendship as a way of life, illuminating how it is possible for, in this case, homosexual men to "live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences" (Rabinow, 1994, p. 136). The forming of intimate relationships—that may or may not be loving — outside of the social institutions of marriage and family is particularly relevant to some of the parent-child dyads in this project, especially in the adoptive community. My archive includes three examples of families relying on their wider friendship circles to meet some of the needs commonly ascribed to family. This supports a theory put forward by Michèle Barrett and

Mary McIntosh, as I will explain later in this chapter, who argue that before the family can transform to a more sociable institution there must be social and political changes that allow the community to better meet the subject's needs. Secomb, following Foucault, also describes an alternate model for intimacy to the nuclear family in her discussion of gay communities. These

diverse and continually transforming networks provide intimacy, connection, erotic pleasures, care and nurturing, undermining the strict rules and boundaries that regulate and determine the limits and relations between family and kinship on the one hand, and public institutions on the other (Secomb, 2007, p. 136).

Again, we see how analysis of gay communities and their disruption of the hegemony of the nuclear family can inform the way all reconfigured families might find ways to live and love within society's institutions.

Butler also advocates social kinship and refers to Carol Stack's work *All Our Kin* (1975), which shows that:

despite governmental efforts to label fatherless families as dysfunctional, those black, urban kinship arrangements constituted by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends who work together to raise children and reproduce the material conditions of life are extremely functional and would be seriously misdescribed if measured against an Anglo-American standard of family normalcy (Butler, 2000, p. 73).

I have not been able to find many researchers using love as a means of analysis of contemporary kinship configurations, other than those already cited; however, the growth of gender and sexuality studies and accumulating literature on changes in the

way intimacy is transacted in a contemporary context, where desire and personal choice, rather than social and material concerns, govern relationships, are certainly changing the way family is perceived. “[A] number of scholars... have come to think about families as simultaneously sites of pleasure, intimacy and sharing *and* exploitation, oppression, and inequality” (Padilla et al., 2007, p. xv). There is no doubt that globalisation has contributed to a diversity in the way intimacy is transacted and the resulting movement of individuals in and out of differing family situations. This study considers the way family is perceived in an Australian middle class setting, seeking to discover what makes love possible. This means looking within the home and at the way love might interface with institutional settings.

#### I.4 Kinship against love

In order to contextualise the current kinship situation, still with a view to analysing the way subjects form within families and the inter-subjective relationships that occur in the domestic space, I will now provide some brief historical perspectives on contemporary kinship. The cultural intelligibility of kinship has been largely understood in the Western world according to nuclear family discourses over the last two hundred years. There is much research being undertaken on variations of this model in the wake of global ideological, political and economic shifts. My project, along with others that will be cited later, discovers many instances where adherence to hegemonic discourses constrains relationship possibilities and limits the intelligibility of reconfigured family life. Examples of this fallout are: exclusion of extended stepfamily members — including of their own volition — from forming deep bonds; barriers between step-parents and teenagers of different gender; and rejection of adopted children by siblings. In

contextualising kinship I hope to add to the articulation of another problem without a name, which is the deep unhappiness that can result from trying to make reconfigured families align with the rules and assumptions of nuclear family discourses. I will elucidate this idea further in Chapter 1.4. As Judith Butler says, the family is “idealised in nostalgic ways” (Butler, 2000, p. 22), and for some individuals to feel that their life counts requires participating in a family in its hegemonic form.

The phenomenon of the nuclear family came about in the last two centuries. Friedrich Engels held that the nuclear family was established to make the man supreme in the family and children his undisputed heirs (Engels, 1968, p. 4). Interestingly, when the respondents in this project were asked if they envisaged that the children they were parenting would own their own homes in the future, nine out of the ten replied that they did. This is one area where the relationship between the nuclear family form and capitalism is deeply entwined. Viewing the family as a social and political institution, at the boundary of private and public domains, it is evident that there has been political incentive to maintain the “traditional” family form in the West for social and economic purposes. A century on from Engels, the American sociologist William Goode argued that promoting the nuclear family form has been valuable politically from the point of view of managers of labour. For Goode, family “serves as an instrumental agency for the larger social structures,” by perpetuating the divisions of labour, social exchanges and economy, and punishing family members who did not conform (Goode, 1982, p. 2). Moreover, in the Foucault-inspired text *The Policing of Families* (1977), Jacques Donzelot described the ways in which the state began to infiltrate the domain of the family in the eighteenth century to exert control over families through medicine, social work, education, and psychiatry, so that families internalised society’s norms. Donzelot held that through adherence to this form of kinship, that is, by dividing society into families,

“social order is perpetuated, including its social divisions of class, race, sex” (as cited in Barrett and McIntosh 1982, p. 47).

However, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, familial discourses had critics. The following example has the side-benefit of demonstrating how fiction is able to illuminate the cracks and fissures in hegemonic discourses, a phenomenon to which I will return. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* depicts contradictions in the playing of family roles when it comes to intimacy, and as such constitutes an expose of the impossibility of perfect family love. According to Secomb, Shelley surrounds the monster’s desire for a mate with “contending images of idealised maternal love, maternal abjection and motherless existence.” In this fashion, “familial love is juxtaposed against murderous hatred” (Secomb, 2007, p. 26). Elizabeth — Victor Frankenstein’s cousin, adopted sister and eventual wife — has a role in the story that exposes hypocrisy in the traditional family form:

Within the family circle, love, endlessly safe, comfortable and familiar, circulates monotonously, with parental love seemingly equivalent to filial love and to conjugal and sibling love. This equivalent faultlessness of each love relation and the unremitting sweetness Elizabeth brings to her rotating roles finally transforms Elizabeth into a robotic figure: an ever-replaceable empty idyll... Elizabeth, the emblem of perfect familial love, is an empty void- a de-animated, inhuman replicant (Secomb, 2007, p. 26).

Yet challenges also came from outside literature, indeed from material forces themselves. Consider for instance the disruption of the 19th century European socio-sexual order by proletarianisation, urbanisation, and then birth control after the depression in 1873, as extensively analysed by Gustav Therborn (2005). He outlines

further social change that then resulted with the emerging press and the spread of the Marxist labour movement (p. 94). Analysing the family in the context of these social and political changes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century — a period which also includes a sexual revolution and the growing presence of women in the workforce — can lead us to an understanding of where we find ourselves now in regard to kinship theory today.

Critiques of the nuclear family have been mounted since its origins and, thanks to much feminist scholarship, the hypocrisies and inequalities that this style of family is based on have been regularly highlighted. In the fifties, cracks were appearing palpably. Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1965) after surveying college graduates in 1957. Her text presented the “problem with no name” that suburban housewives suffered: “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning ... [a]s she made the beds, shopped for groceries ... she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question ‘Is this all?’” (Friedan, 1965, p. 13).

Friedan researched the predicament of women who “try to live according to an image that makes them deny their minds ... [and] deny the reality of the changing world” (Friedan, 1965, p. 59). I have chosen this example as it rings true with this project, for Friedan expresses personal problems and dissatisfactions that are not well articulated in society. Currently I believe there is a scarcity of conversation about what the many women in step-parent roles are experiencing at the personal level — which I see as another complex situation arising with no name. Furthermore, Friedan demonstrates another similar finding in that the predicament women were finding themselves in was one which they had voluntarily succumbed to, by adhering to the dominant discourses of

the time. Two decades on, feminist scholars documented the problems that women, and accordingly family, suffered under patriarchal control.

More recent theorists of the family form, such as Anthony Giddens, have documented social changes and trends since the late 1960s. Giddens argues that: the worldwide communications revolution, the replacement of the industrial economy by a “weightless economy”, the end of communism in the Soviet Union after 1989, and the concomitant transformations in everyday life, particularly the growing equality between men and women, have affected the family and emotional life (Giddens, 2000, pp 1-3). His research has “explored the impact of globalisation on the personal relationships and inner lives of those living in advanced capitalist societies of the West” (Gross and Simmons, 2002, p. 1). Giddens concludes that intimate and sexual relationships are tending away from the “traditional” model: today a relationship is seen as “a means to self-development and is expected to be dissolved when it no longer serves this purpose” (as cited in Gross and Simmons, 2002, p. 1).

On the other hand, Jillian Sandell notes that an effect of globalisation in some cases has been to mobilise right wing political efforts to promote traditional family in the western world, and in many cases the traditional family model is still used as a reference point for family. She says: “most writers continue to act as if the traditional American family does exist, and use it as a reference point for discussions of lesbian and gay families” (Sandell 1994, p. 1). This view will be explored in relation to the discourse of biogenetic superiority.

The nuclear family only accounted for 47% of families in Australia in 2001, down from 54% in 1986, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trend*,

2003. Yet, its privilege continues, largely due to the powerful discourses that have emerged from this hegemonic institution, politically and socially. The punishment for non-conformity mentioned by Goode is still relevant to contemporary Australian society, as can be seen from Dennis Altman's comments at the Sydney Writers' Festival this year, where he sat on a panel that included Jeanette Winterson, entitled "Why get married when you could be happy?" They debated the issues surrounding gay marriage. Altman argued that punishment for lack of conformity can take the form of social exclusion, but for homosexual relationships that punishment also includes certain restrictions on civil rights, including: marriage, superannuation and immigration rights. An intention of this project, as I've said above, is to show that hegemonic family discourses do not only exclude and limit homosexual lifestyles, but all reconfigured family living arrangements can be impacted in all or some of the ways Altman mentions, depending on the configuration.

So why is the nuclear family form still so prominent? The critical theorists I have surveyed above define the family as a social unit, not a natural unit. The perpetuation of the nuclear family structure has been due partly to a politically reinforced view that society needs parents to establish the internalisation of authority in children. Barrett and McIntosh argue that it is social privilege that keeps the nuclear family powerful, despite its anti-social nature. This anti-social nature they attribute to the view that if the family is classed as the place where people's material and emotional needs are best met, millions of people are excluded; furthermore, the ideological promotion of family life leads to a depiction of the outside world as bereft and impoverished (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p. 80). This is not to say they see it on the wane:

We dissent most strongly ... from those who argue that 'the family' is in decline. We have stressed the anti-social character of the present form of the family but also the social privilege that makes it such a powerful entity (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p. 130).

Barrett and McIntosh believe that most studies don't tell us what we want to know, which is "why marriage is fragile and why family life is painful?" They consider that the benefits of family life depend on the exclusion and suffering of those who do not conform. They, along with other feminist theorists, advocate for social and political change "so that such needs and desires can be met in a more genuinely social context" (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p. 133). Butler also states that society reinforces the heteronormative family, "where to become human, for some, requires participation in the family in its normative sense" (Butler, 2000, p. 22).

I will finish this section with another example from the study of literature. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) exposes inconsistencies and hypocrisies in "traditional" family life in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Juliet Mitchell analyses these features and in the process comments on literature's role in highlighting them: "As any society changes its social structure, changes its economic base, artefacts are re-created within in it. Literary forms arise as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subjects within a new social context." (Mitchell, 1984, p. 284)

*Wuthering Heights* tells the story of Catherine and Heathcliff. Heathcliff is a Gypsy child who is taken in by Catherine's father and given the name of her dead brother. They grow up together and, as adults, suffer unrequited love on the Yorkshire moors. Mitchell writes of the symbolic possibility of "Oneness" which Heathcliff and Catherine both

desire — “breaking the incest taboo” — but cannot allow themselves. Catherine makes the conventional choice, which Mitchell describes as “the hysteric’s ambiguous choice into a femininity which doesn’t work” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 293), and marries instead the respectable Edgar Linton. Mitchell, on the other hand, demonstrates the way women used the novel as a form to “construct themselves as women within new social structures” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 293). This strategy can also be seen played out today, as evidenced by the growing presence of gay and reconfigured families in television sitcoms and popular culture.

There is a further thematic link between *Wuthering Heights* and this project in the tragedy that results when forbidden loyalties and loves struggle to manifest — a link that allies it to *Antigone*, particularly in Judith Butler’s reading of that text, as well. Like both Butler and Mitchell, I would also like to flag the capacity of fiction to express issues such as incest, that enter disturbing territory intellectually, and to encompass heightened emotional reactions, when symbolic family structures define and limit relationship possibilities.

In the nineteen-eighties, Mitchell wrote: “Presently there is only one institutionalised form of intersexual and intergenerational relationship possible,” and she added that this is so, despite there being infinitely various intersexual and intergenerational relationships (Mitchell, 1984, p. 53). This now thirty-year old description leads me to Butler’s analysis of the current situation.

## I.5

### Judith Butler and current kinship

Butler's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* advocates for new kinship forms. The play results in the death of most of the main characters due to an act inspired by sibling love. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, and so a child of incest. The story begins when Oedipus is exiled and his two sons kill each other fighting over the throne. The new king, Creon, declares that one of the brothers, Eteocles, will be buried as a hero but the other, Polyneices, will be left unburied outside the city to be eaten by birds and dogs. Antigone defies the orders of the King, wishing to honour her brother. She decides to take the penalty of death and perform Polyneices' burial rites herself, saying to her sister, Ismene:

Go your own way; I will bury my brother;  
And if I die for it, what happiness!  
Convicted of reverence – I shall be content  
To lie beside a brother whom I love (Sophocles, 1968, p. 128).

When she is discovered, she does not deny the act. Antigone makes a point of claiming the act of burial, which she sees as her duty, and in doing so — one of Butler's key points — uses the language that is typically reserved for men conducting state affairs. She says to the king:

I did not think your edicts strong enough  
To overrule the unwritten unalterable laws  
Of God and heaven ... (Sophocles, 1968, p. 138).

She is sent outside Thebes to be locked up in a cave, to starve to death, never to marry Haemon, Creon's son, to whom she is engaged. Never to have a family of her own, she will be imprisoned in a living tomb. Haemon is distraught and hurries to the cave to free

her. But Antigone has already hung herself, so Haemon takes his own life. Creon's wife, Eurydice, is devastated by the loss of her son, and also kills herself. All the while the chorus lament that Creon refused to listen to the blind prophet Teiresias, who had proclaimed to the intransigent ruler:

[...] Ere the chariot of the sun  
Has rounded once or twice his wheeling way  
You shall have given a son of your own loins  
To death, in payment for death – to debts to pay:  
One for the life that you have sent to death,  
The life you have abominably entombed;  
One for the dead still lying above ground  
Unburied, unhonoured, unblest by the gods below (Sophocles 1968, p. 154).

Judith Butler uses this play to retheorise kinship in her *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000). She describes Antigone's deviation from expected social behaviour, which disrupts conventional kinship norms. She theorises that Antigone's action destabilises the social and the psychic order of kinship precisely because it involves her: 1) using the language of men of power, as if there were no necessary links between such language and our bodies, and 2) simply deciding for herself what kin ties most to observe, which in many ways is a further iteration of this first point. Butler's Antigone defies the state "at a point where it seems the laws of living a 'culturally intelligible' life are installed" (McRobbie, 2003, p. 130). Antigone exceeds the limits of the intelligibility of kinship and knowingly gives up her life to do so.

When she buries her brother, it is not simply that she acts from kinship, as if kinship furnishes a principle for action, but that her action is the action of kinship, the performative repetition that reinstates kinship as a public scandal. Kinship is what she repeats through the action; to redeploy a formulation from David Schneider, it is not a form of being but a form of doing. And her action implicates her in an aberrant repetition of a norm, a custom, a convention, not a formal law but a lawlike regulation of culture that operates with its own contingency (Butler 2000, p. 58).

Butler's analysis of kinship is complex in that her view of social revision combines analysis according to both psychoanalytical theory and notions of subject formation following Foucault's theories of power relations. But we can say summarily that in this work Butler presents us with two radical philosophical challenges. The first is the notion that, although the language of the law is patriarchal and oppressive, it is still available to all. As such, Antigone is able to act from within the normative regulation she is subverting, by taking on a masculine role and using the language of Creon.

What greater honour could I wish? All these  
Would say that what I did was honourable,  
But fear locks up their lips. To speak and act  
just as he likes is a king's prerogative (Sophocles, 1968, p. 139).

Butler comments:

[T]he father's words are surely upon Antigone; they are, as it were, the medium within which she acts and in whose voice she defends her act. She transmits those words in aberrant form, transmitting them loyally, and betraying them by

sending them in directions they were never intended to travel (Butler, 2000, p. 58).

This act of defiance, for all its personal cost, throws the whole meaning of kinship practice up for re-examination:

Although her words are heard, the price of her speech is death. Her language is not that of a survivable political agency. Her words, understood as deeds, are chiasmically related to the vernacular of sovereign power, speaking in and against it, delivering and defying imperatives at the same time (Butler, 2000, p. 28).

The second challenge that Butler presents us with is the notion that the sibling bond can be as important as the parent-child bond. Butler argues that although Antigone's actions cannot survive politically they challenge kinship from within. She criticises past critics of the play who have "responded with an idealisation of kinship that denies the challenge that is being made against it" (Butler 2000, p. 28). This challenge is seemingly relevant to instances from my archive where loving attachments and loyalties are decided individually, and not according to family positions, or unwritten rules of loyalty and love between parent and child.

If a single mother, for example, were to introduce a new man into the lives of her children in the family home, the chances are that one or more of their sibling bonds would be deeper than those formed with either of the men in the position of father. Butler's Antigone "represents a crisis of the oedipal symbolic" (Campbell, 2002, p. 643), by challenging the symbolic family structure; Butler theorises that the instability of

symbolic family order can offer the “possibility of new forms of kinship” (Campbell, 2002, p. 642).

Butler lists a variety of situations where adults parent other people’s children, such as: global displacements, divorce, exile and formation of gay and blended families. She describes a global trend: more and more parenting is being taken on by non-biological parents. This situation demands changes in society to accommodate different family structures, dynamics and interrelationships. However, as she says, “to become human, for some, requires participation in the family in its normative sense” (Butler, 2000, p. 22). I argue here that this prevailing attitude of normativity regarding family can delegitimise loving relationships by putting pressure on individuals in reconfigured families to perform roles according to the nuclear family discourses, and by leaving some people uncertain as to whether they have family roles. A pertinent example of this sort of fallout from my archive concerns the failure of grandparents to emotionally embrace step-grandchildren. One of my respondents talked about the sadness and loss that she experiences because her parents are not willing to consider the step-children she is co-parenting as their real kin, and as such they indirectly class her as not a ‘real’ mother. She went on to say that her brother’s wife had a baby so there was some sense of relief that they had in fact become ‘real’ grand-parents. Another, older woman respondent spoke about the “honour” that she felt in being included at a step-grandchild’s birthday party, which was sad in that she thought she almost had to earn her inclusion in the family.

Butler theorises, in *Antigone’s Claim*, that parental roles may be filled by multiple people, or left empty. She asks “[w]hat is the contemporary voice that enters into the language of the law to disrupt its univocal workings?” (Butler, 2000, p. 69) For example,

she asks: when a child does not have a father, is the loss really the unfulfilled norm, or rather the lack of language to articulate the terms of another attachment.

She asks if it makes sense to say that every psyche accepts the symbolic terms of mother and father regardless of the social form of the family and families around them. Will the symbolic power of these nuclear roles really hold as society changes? As she puts it, sceptically, “is there a way of reinstating a heterosexual organization of parenting at the psychic level that can accommodate all manner of gender variation at the social level?” (Butler, 2000, p. 69)

Butler believes that the assumption of symbolic kinship norms directs the intelligibility of culture, and she invites us to question what would be the result if Freud had chosen a different metaphor and based psychoanalysis on Antigone rather than Oedipus, saying such a revision “might put into question the assumption that the incest taboo legitimates and normalises kinship based in biological reproduction and the heterosexualisation of the family” (Butler, 2000, p. 66). Such an assumption, she says, is found not only in Lacanian discourse: “It is invoked in popular culture, by psychiatric “experts” and policy makers” (Butler 2000, p. 71). She goes on to say that

It is quite possible to argue in a Lacanian vein that the symbolic place of the mother can be multiply occupied, that it is never identified or identifiable with an individual, and that this is what distinguishes it as symbolic. But why is the symbolic place singular and its inhabitants multiple? (Butler, 2000, p. 71)

Any person of any gender can fill the positions of parents, which is what we see happening in society all around us as the symbolic structure of the nuclear family is purely formal. However, the fact that there is still a perceived structure in application influences the perceived understanding of family, thus contributing to the discord and

tensions that manifest in projects such as this one. Butler describes the problem as follows: “If the relation between the inhabitant and the form is arbitrary, it is still structured, and its structure works to domesticate in advance any radical reformulation of kinship.” (Butler, 2000, p. 71)

Yet Butler’s analysis of *Antigone*, while critical of a certain type of structural psychoanalysis, works not just by extending Foucault’s theories of discourse, but also by maintaining reference to psychoanalytic theories that discuss “desire and its unruly proliferations, the unconscious, fear, trauma, dreams, obsessions, compulsive repetitions, and so on” (McRobbie, 2003, p. 132). Hence its relevance to literary projects like mine, which necessarily explore these domains.

*Antigone’s Claim* anticipates a social revision of kinship where the unwritten rules are examined and new possibilities of fulfilling family relationships emerge. In this study I explore Butler’s theories through field research. The archive is analysed according to discourse theory, with an eye for inter-personal psychological and emotional happenings, as revealed by the language used in the related stories, dreams and rituals. My intention is to discover circumstances that facilitate the possibilities of love between adults and non-biological children, where hegemonic discourses might be overcome, and generative moments occur.

## I.6

### Personal connections

The compulsion to investigate what is going on in the inner lives of newly constructed families, around identity formation and exchanges of emotion and love, came with the adoption of my, then seven-year-old, daughter from Ethiopia. I quickly understood that

being the single parent of a child from another culture attracts government and community interest and interference. The apparent assumption in the community that my daughter, straight from a life spent in the confines of an orphanage, would take on board the norms and behaviours instilled at the local primary school confounded me. Her first few weeks at school were not happy, and we were both punished for her disobedience, as she could not resist wandering around the classroom touching the children's pencils and other belongings on their desks or stealing the odd lunch-box. The most obvious way she was subtly excluded by the other children for non conformity was by not being invited to any birthday parties for over a year.

I have older biological children and have participated in family life as a parent for the last 23 years. I have always been aware at some level of the battles reconfigured families deal with socially, and in policy, as the discourses of the nuclear family model prevail. It was not, however, until the bizarre struggles of our day-to-day interactions that I became moved to investigate this global phenomenon of inequity and add my voice to others showing that it is possible to have creative, loving family lives despite the hegemonic power of prevailing discourses.

My enquiry eventually led to the university and was formalised by the ethics process; it then became firmly linked to Judith Butler's theories on intelligible kinship and performativity. This study combines my background in health sciences and the creative arts with qualitative research, and aims to make a contribution to the area of kinship studies. The interview narratives reveal the vulnerability of families socially, and the struggles of individuals within them personally, as people live and love in the midst of ambiguities and discord that can occur when society privileges those who perform to

recognisable nuclear family roles as the ones who count as a real family. As I will demonstrate, there are also some generative moments in my archive, moments where norms are destabilised and cross-cultural embraces and understandings occur.

It is important to note that the people who have shared their stories are all doing things differently. Every family faces decisions when it comes to creating a reputation in the community and a way of being regarded as legitimate in the eyes of the rest of society, while finding ways of meeting individual needs within the domestic space, where identity is also formed. This research, relying on face-to-face dialogue, involved crossing public-private boundaries as personal stories were disclosed. In all the different situations encountered I noted that no two situations were ever the same. Every relationship was subject to changing power dynamics occurring both within the family and also impacting upon the family.

I end this introduction with an anecdote to remind the reader of the sadness that can be associated with these issues. I was recently at a camp with my daughter and a number of other families with children adopted from overseas. A male friend of ours, Garry, turned up looking pale and gaunt, with his daughter. They both seemed uncharacteristically reluctant to join in the activities. It wasn't until much later in the night, when Garry and I took a group of children to the beach with torches, that he told me he had separated from his wife. It took a minute for the penny to drop. They had a file approving the adoption of a child already accepted overseas and were waiting for the allocation. This would no longer be a possibility. Garry said he had been unsuccessful in convincing the adoption agency to allow him to proceed with the adoption as a single father. As we see in these situations, where old and new discourses clash and state authority aligns with

traditional family norms, it can be a lose-lose situation for parents, children and extended family when it comes to establishing loving family lives.



## Chapter One

“New schemes of intelligibility”

Scotty loved her, there was no doubt, in the tentative way in which we love other people’s children, fearful of rejection, even of mockery, loving without rights, thanklessly. Scotty’s love was awkward and intellectual (Garner, 1980, p. 110).

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[W]hat new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognisable? (Butler, 2000, p.24)

In this chapter I will present my methodology and explore the dilemmas of kinship in relation to post-structuralist theory, in particular Judith Butler’s concept of performativity. My aim is to make sense of the tragedy in situations where: relationships are not allowed to proceed; are doomed, such as when step-grandparents do not want to risk loving non-biological grandchildren; are fraught, as they often are between fathers and teenage step-daughters; or they breakdown. My opening quotation from Helen Garner’s *Honour and Other People’s Children* (1980) draws attention to a tendency for subjects to intellectualise love when in non-biological situations, as well as an uncertainty around the reciprocation of feelings in new relationships. The fragility and loss, when love is not intelligible, will be my focus, along with a search for possibilities of achieving loving moments regardless.

Butler’s conception of the processes by which the human body embodies cultural possibilities draws from theatrical, anthropological, philosophical and phenomenological traditions (Butler, 1988, p. 520). In particular, it expands Foucault’s ideas as to discourse’s productive regulatory effects. Butler’s subjects have bodies,

minds and emotions, through which they communicate identity. Performativity explains the way in which such subjects are formed. But exploring how subjects perform discursive constructions is also a way to identify and imagine possibilities of disruption. Butler theorises the boundaries of discursive formations in *Gender Trouble* (1990), arguing that “these limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (Butler 1990, p. 13). While her description relates to the construction of gender, it applies in the same way to my topic, in that the hegemonic nuclear family has been made to seem natural; as such, it also defines the limits and intelligibility of kinship relationships.

The two key themes that relate Butler’s theory to my findings are thus: a) the concept of performativity, and b) the way normative discourses operate, including in relation to challenges and re-imaginings. I will discuss these in terms of how one performs the reconfigured family. But first I will turn to the methodology I utilised in constructing the archive to which these theoretical understandings have been applied.

## 1.1

### Methodology

This study is an interpretive analysis of qualitative data. I received approval from the University of Canberra Research Ethics Committee to interview ten subjects who responded to an advertisement published in the *Canberra Chronicle* and posted on community notice boards in November, 2010, calling for parents of non-biological

children to participate in an hour-long interview about family rituals. The key criterion for eligibility was that subjects had been parenting in step, adopted or blended family forms for twelve months or longer while living in the one home. The questions were designed to explore family rituals, on the understanding that ritual plays a part in a subject's organisation of emotional and social life by integrating psychological and cultural elements.

The theoretical justification for this focus on ritual can be found in Butler's comment, following Victor Turner, that ritual "is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 1988, p. 525). Matieu Deflem, also reading Turner, pushes the point even further, to claim that ritual compensates for a "limited range of effective political control and for the instability of kinship and affinal ties to which political value is attached" (Deflem, 1991, p. 2). This is how Turner himself put the matter:

After all, the ritual symbol has, in common with the dream symbol, the characteristic, discovered by Freud, of being a compromise formation between two main opposing tendencies ... the need for social control, and certain innate and universal human drives whose complete gratification would result in a breakdown of that control (Turner, 1967, p. 37).

It was my intention that such a focus would thus cast some light on the way rituals, processes of love and aspects of the unconscious interact.

Turning back to the actual method, the interviews were conducted in quiet, convenient spaces, such as an office or library. The respondents talked to me about their

experiences in response to a list of seven open-ended questions around rituals to do with: parties and celebrations, mealtimes, holidays, sharing of meaningful time, sharing emotion and dreams, bedtimes and storytelling. They were also asked if they wanted the children they were parenting to aspire to owning their own homes, and the final request was to draw a family tree. The sessions were digitally recorded and I transcribed them. I shared my situation of being an adoptive, single parent, with each respondent.

The interviews are analysed in the following chapters and informed by theoretical concepts from Butler and others. All respondents have been disidentified by name in the analysis, and further by gender and context in the creative product. A novella and ten short stories, each of the latter correlating to one interview, and written with a specific eye to that interview's impact upon this researcher, make up the finished interpretive product. There are two additional quotations included, from an eleventh interview I conducted later. 'Sarah' contacted me after the completion of the interviews, and on hearing of her unusual situation I could not resist the opportunity to talk with her. This creative methodology allowed me to work through some of the more immeasurable emotional phenomena. It will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Limitations of this study are: the small sample size and the demographic restrictions. In order for me to continue to work, to support my own family while researching, I was restricted to interviewing respondents from within ACT and NSW. This particular demographic, the ACT, is flavoured by a strong political presence, having the Australian Parliament in its centre, and a large public service.

## 1.2

## Discourse theory

I have chosen to use discourse analysis to review my fieldwork archive as it is a way to capture the effects of the many power plays that influence this group of people — adults who parent non-biological children — and their extended families and friends. Power dynamics are here understood to operate both internally within the family and externally upon the family. I am referring to social and political systems that operate according to unspoken, normative constructions of family, and discourses running through schools, medical institutions and other community organisations. I also refer to family discourses that pass through generations. Discourse analysis investigates social practices and the way they constitute the subject by involving the body, the mind and the emotions. This is well summarised by Foucault's response to the initial resistance directed at this type of analysis:

[W]hat is being bewailed is the possibility of reanimating through the project, the work of meaning, or the movement of totalisation, the interplay of material determinations, rules of practice, unconscious systems, rigorous but unreflected relations, correlations that elude all lived experience (Foucault, 1972, p. 14).

Foucault uses discourse analysis to question the way links are made and repeated so that things, such as acceptance of groupings, are made to seem "natural." In doing so, he scrutinises the rules by which commonly accepted links and categories have been constructed (Foucault, 1972, p. 22). These commonly accepted classifications exclude those who do not fit the "natural" structure; they are therefore not helpful in understanding complex situations, such as reconfigured families.

Foucault conceived discourse theory in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), as a way to analyse the history of thought and ideas, not by following an intellectual tradition and

its continuities, but by analysing division and limits, arguing that it is “transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations” (Foucault, 1972, p. 5). This type of analysis differs from earlier historian’s categories based on structural classifications. His aim was not to tell the truth of the past but to show the various ways that people think the truth can be told, each of which amounts to a discourse. An example of this discursive prefiguration is the debate about single parent adoption that assumes that adoption is a matter of the parent-child relationship. This excludes many other understandings of what a family can involve, such as the sharing of roles in groups, like the Australian African Children's Aid Support Association (AACASA).

Generally speaking, the definition of discourse theory can be summarised as follows:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation (Foucault, 1972, p. 38).

To discover the rules of formation that determine a subject’s conditions of existence, the analysis should include the relations between “institutions, economic and social process, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterisation” (Foucault, 1972, p. 45).

The value of applying this concept, as well as Butler’s extension of it in terms of performativity, to the interpretation of my project, is the ability it allows me to explore the way subjects perform identity, both in unique personal settings, as part of the wider family, and as part of society as a whole. In this project I have used discourse analysis to

discover how and why people are living their lives the way they do regarding loving and meaningful interrelationships, as family appears in its varied forms, and particularly as we see more and more people parenting non-biological children.

Butler extends Foucault's concept to describe the way discourses constitute a subject, theorising that the effects of perceived universality, and the appearance of being natural, creates, restrains and undermines the subject. Initially she argued this in *Gender Trouble* (1990) in regard to the subject of feminism, which she thought constrained women's agency through a discourse that represented and falsely unified feminism. In *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000) she uses the figure of Antigone to demonstrate the way a subject can subvert this situation — the hegemonic regulation of culture — with the “aberrant repetition of a norm, a custom, a convention, not a formal law but a lawlike regulation of culture” (Butler, 2000, p. 58). Butler points out that, while cultural configurations have power over what is possible by being made to seem to be natural, agency lies in the critique and exposure of the limits of intelligibility. I understand this concept in relation to this study on reconfigured family to mean that presumptions as to the universality of what being a family means can limit a subject's possibilities for forming intelligible loving relationships. What is the family most people imagine when the institution is referred to? In our, as in Butler's, country: a household of two parents, of different gender, and one or more children. By keeping this increasingly less common reality but still popular image alive as the culturally intelligible form of family, many peoples' ways of living are excluded from counting, with consequences that can be harrowing.

In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler asks, “what new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognisable, and our losses true losses?” (Butler, 2000, p. 24) She argues

that those who set out to make kinship normative suppress the answer to this question. She wants a larger frame of analysis and looks at the subject both from Foucault's perspective of regulatory discourses and Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of the way subjects are formed. Vicki Kirby (2006), reading Butler, says that the task is to understand how normative practices can provide opportunities for change by "distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" (Kirby, 2006, p. 123).

I am looking to do something similar in this project.

Normative discourses run through society as power dynamics that can be productive or restrictive; the way an individual might be affected varies, with possibilities for subversion occurring if the subject exceeds the limitations. Power plays within the home can be manifest as one person trying to change another's behaviour or views.

As each subject acts according to their own individual script, there is opportunity to create "new identities and possibilities through their unpredictable fluctuations" (Secomb, 2007, p. 135). Foucault believes that power relations can be reversible and productive; he says that these dynamics ensconce the Western family "by constructing and maintaining the forms of subjectivity which are appropriate to a given type of social practice" (Minson, 1985, p. 44). These forms are facilitated by both family and schools, the latter being the "main vehicles of ideological conditioning into the values and norms of capitalist society" (Minson, 1985, p. 185). This power can be exercised on a subject discursively, based on such things as commemorative knowledge, ritual and the family tree, and by seeking to "individualise those who deviate from the population's norms" (Minson, 1985, p. 46).

I have named the discourses, or discursive groups, I have selected as a means of analysis of this archive as follows: 1) the “biogenetic basis of adult-child bonds,” 2) “one big family,” 3) the family line, 4) social regulatory discourses, physical affection and sexual taboos, 5) role-playing and the theatrical metaphor, and 6) meritorious parenting. The workings of these discourses will be fully examined in the following three chapters.

### 1.3

#### The concept of performativity

The term performativity derives from Victor Turner’s analysis of social drama and has been developed by Butler to describe how the subject performs identity. J Lowell Lewis, writing on Turner’s distinction between special events and events of everyday life (though they are in many ways on a continuum), states that Turner argued for this dualism based on “the underlying potential for any human event ... to become patterned, framed, and set apart from the everyday, a potential that I call ‘performativity’” (Lowell Lewis 2008, p. 55). Butler describes gender and kinship not as essence but action. In this way we understand kinship to be a “kind of doing... an enacting practice” (Butler 2002, p. 34). An “utterance”, as Jonathan Culler similarly suggests, “accomplishes the act that it designates” (Culler 2000, p. 506); he further comments that “what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions” (Culler, 2000, p. 507).

The notion of the performative constitution of the subject is used in this study to discover the ways people are responding to regulatory discourses that have developed over time. Butler argues that

in effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of 'a subject before the law' in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalised foundational premise that subsequently legitimises that law's own regulatory hegemony (Butler, 1990, p. 5).

Using the concept of performativity to explore family rituals is a means to discover how subjects are being constituted, and where there could be opportunity for agency within social processes. Incidents that emerged from my interviews exemplify the fragility of performing roles and managing relationships. This includes one respondent's comments, based on his own childhood experience, that adoption does not work, leading him to conclude that his children may not form bonds that endure into adult life with their step-siblings.

As Butler says, opportunities to exceed historical conventions depend on how the subject performs identity.

The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives (Butler, 1988, p. 527).

There are many discourses operating and influencing how a subject may perform family roles — always within the limitations of the scripts available — but there are also

opportunities to interpret and choose. There can be consequences when subjects slip between discourses and exceed cultural restrictions, and these can be transformative, or equally can result in sadness and loss. Linnell Secomb agrees with Foucault, that agency can be found in exposing the limits in “the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks that pre-exist the subject” (Secomb, 2008, p. xiv).

I will now mention an example of Butler’s theory of performativity as applied to field research. However, due to the nature of my work — a Masters dissertation with creative research — I will not be undertaking a comprehensive literature review. Rather, I defer closer analysis of Butler’s performativity, and other such bodies of work to doctoral analysis.

I have chosen to specifically highlight the exploration of performativity by Affrica Taylor. Taylor, in *Taking Account of Childhood Excess: “Bringing the Elsewhere Home,”* (2008), has researched the way young children “perform” sociocultural identity in creative play, which she relates to the formation of a sense of belonging. Through observing interactions in preschool centres, Taylor documents “individual lines of desire [that] intersect to drive the game” and records the way “conflict is staged and resolved” (Taylor, 2008, p. 213). While I have directed my questions to adults in reconfigured families the same mechanisms of competing desires and resolving conflicts are important to understand regarding emotional dynamics between children and adults. I argue that, in situations where people may be thrown together, ongoing social and emotional negotiations take place and the scripts change accordingly. In Taylor’s work we see how it is that individuals “change the play according to each other’s desires and scripts” (Taylor, 2008, p. 214). Her subjects engaged with desire and fantasy, “becoming

other with, for and through each other,” to disrupt the boundaries of the heteronormative script (Taylor, 2008, p. 21).

Another work that can only be mentioned briefly in this dissertation is Kit Myer's Masters dissertation, *Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption* (2009). Myers examines love and/or rescue narratives that transracial adoptive parents may use to legitimise their roles. She describes the way such narratives “demarcate[s] the boundaries of family and realness” (Myers, 2009, p.130), allowing adoptive family language to produce the idea of the 'real family'.

The historical practice of privileging the biological has without a doubt pressured many adoptive parents to claim the trophy of realness in order to validate their own family to not just themselves but also to the sceptical public (Myers, 2009, p.130).

#### 1.4

##### The theory and the project

The theories outlined above support my project in a number of ways. Firstly I argue that anyone can fill the roles of mother, father, brother, sister; the positions are symbolic and do not have to be occupied by people related by blood. In the interviews I conducted — and indeed in my own situation — there is evidence of successful, loving parenting arrangements that are not determined by biology. Equally, the positions can be filled by more than one person or left vacant. Butler writes, regarding the inter-changeability of kinship terms:

Consider that in the situation of blended families, a child says “mother” and might expect more than one individual to respond to the call. Or that, in the case of adoption, a child might say “father” and might mean both the absent phantasm she never knew as well the one who assumes that place in living memory. The child might mean that at once, or sequentially, or in ways that are not always clearly disarticulated from one another. Or when a young girl comes to be fond of her stepbrother, what dilemma of kinship is she in? For a woman who is a single mother and has her child without a man, is the father still there, a spectral “position” or “place” that remains unfilled, or is there no such “place” or “position”? Is the father absent or does this child have no father, no position, and no inhabitant? Is this a loss, which assumes the unfulfilled norm, or is it another configuration of primary attachment whose primary loss is not to have a language in which to articulate its terms? (Butler, 2000, p. 69)

Furthermore, when there is no script available to follow, new discourses may emerge as ideas from different known discourses are combined, and we see this generation of something new in an “endless process of becoming” (Salih, 2002, p. 2), as the positions are interchanged. The reiteration of a new performance may eventually lead to social change, as the “aberrant repetition of a norm, a custom, a convention, not a formal law but a law like regulation of culture” (Butler, 2000, p. 58). Such social changes that have already been observed include the steady reduction in the erstwhile stigma associated with both divorce and single parenting. Gay parenting was once considered aberrant but is now widely accepted, and inter-country adoption, while remaining a politically contested issue, has been steadily increasing. This study is not large enough to detect such social changes, but can indicate where to look for the ensuing effects.

My study, examining emotional connections in the domestic space, relies on narratives around social rituals such as mealtimes, parties, celebrations and holidays, as well as anecdotes regarding the sharing of meaningful times, stories and dreams. Whether or not non-biological parents and children are mostly happy or unhappy in the kinship roles they acquire, kinship operations continue on in one form or another as people move in and out of the family relationships, and this is where we see the moments of sadness, confusion, discord, imagination and surprise.

Clearly the theory supports this research as there is more than one reference to performance in the interviews. The stories the respondents told concerning emotional areas were related often as performance. Further, the respondent's rearticulation could themselves be seen as part of an interview performance, as at times they used the opportunity to perform their version of emotional events. Derrida holds that the effect of the performative language is not because of intention but because it is recognised and thus reproduces social and linguistic convention (Secomb, 2007, p. 147). In this study some performances fit within existing norms and conventions, some almost fit but might be slipping between discourses, and some have resulted in different family rituals. And again it seems that love — in order to be seen as valid — needs to be given the context of recognisable discursive forms.

I have been suggesting that anyone can fill parental roles because, as Butler shows, they really amount to positions in a symbolic structure more than extensions of one's own body and blood. Yet rather than challenging the nuclear family's hegemony in the manner of that theory, my archive, as we shall see, shows people availing themselves of what might seem a neoliberal discourse — the notion that one can earn the right through meritorious conduct to be considered a parent. Ironically, this very discursive

act shows them taking on almost Butlerian notion of the performativity of kinship. As with Antigone's claim, made in the very language of the hegemonic structure she was opposing, there are examples of just this type of appropriation in my archive, which I will examine in the following chapters. The section titled "Meritorious parenting" will show how some respondents have taken on the language and performances associated with nuclear family discourse to prove that they have equalled, or surpassed, expectations attributed to these roles. This challenge is not, to my mind, as effective a method to make love intelligible in reconfigured family arrangements as would be Butler's call for the re-articulation of kinship:

Butler conceives the re-articulation of kinship in terms of individual affiliations of care: parents, lovers and friends. This re-articulation of kin rests upon an individualistic notion of kinship as a relationship of responsibility of one person to another (Cambell, 2002, p. 647).

In both Butler's case and the discourse of meritorious parenting, the articulation is individualistic but the consequences are radical.

To conclude this section I refer to another example of field research that is aligned with this theory. This project has some similarities in findings, especially in regard to ritual, with my project. Sara Dorow and Amy Swiffin are among researchers who have found various displays of intimacy in transnational-transracial Adoption scholarship. These authors also take the view that kinship is a "process in which the social and biological interact in multiple ways" (Dorow and Swiffin, 2009, p. 585). The following ritual — which they describe in *Blood and Desire: The Secret of Heteronormativity in Adoption Narratives of Culture* (2009) — was an exciting coincidence with my project. They describe an American family with adopted Chinese children who created a new family

ritual in order to celebrate both Jewish and Chinese festivals that coincided: “they erected a sukkah, looked at the moon and thought of their child’s birth family” (Dorow and Swiffin, 2009, p. 585). The sukkah is a temporary hut, often made of branches, that commemorates the shelters made by the Jewish people in the forty years of exodus in the desert. The similar narrative in my research was told by a family who have adopted African children. This family lies on the trampoline and looks up at the stars that they have named after the children’s deceased birth parents, after they have been on a ritual weekly outing to a restaurant together. Both these examples demonstrate the importance of keeping the birth family of adopted children alive in the children’s worlds — that is, keeping two mothers alive in the position of mother and two fathers in the position of father. And, both families make use of a new ritual to accomplish these connections so as to draw on psychological and emotional processes.

## 1.5 Conclusions

In light of this theory my archive will be interpreted to add to research which is examining the intelligibility of kinship, in a way that might serve to “rethink how ideas of blood origin and social desire operate in the construction of socially intelligible kinship in general” (Dorow and Swiffin, 2009, p. 239). In society now, where changes concurrent with globalisation are well documented, Butler argues that it is necessary to refuse “normalising interdictions that limit kinship to biological reproduction and naturalise the heterosexual family” (Campbell, 2002, p. 643). Butler’s theory encompasses changes in family arrangements, from nuclear to blended forms, single, lesbian and gay relationships, adoptive and foster parenting, all representing new possibilities of loving relationships. Campbell likens these family’s performances to

Antigone's, saying: "These families represent the contemporary voice that enters into the language of the law to disrupt its univocal workings." (Campbell, 2002, p. 645)

In the following chapters I will analyse and interpret the interviews undertaken with a range of people who are parenting non-biological children, to reveal aspects of the lived reality of the theory Butler and others have explained, looking for possibilities of making love and loss intelligible within family.



## Chapter Two

### Biogenetic superiority

This chapter features the voices, thoughts, emotions and confusions of the people I interviewed. I have mined the interviews to reveal something of the inner workings of the respondent's kinship situations, looking at the ways that they are reacting to different discourses. In this chapter I look at discourses based on biogenetic bonds; the family line; physical affection in light of sexual taboos; and role playing and the theatrical metaphor.

To grasp how it is that each subject has fashioned a life to meet social pressures and personal needs requires understanding how they are negotiating the scripts available. I refer again to Foucault's view that "a system of thought can be reconstituted only on the basis of a definite discursive totality." But this analysis needs to be extended "beyond the statements themselves [to] the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant, or, again, the unconscious activity that took place, despite himself" (Foucault, 1972, p. 27). These subjects do speak clearly for themselves, but there is more that is not being said; like Foucault, I want to "rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them." (Foucault, 1972, p. 27)

The way people describe their lives within the framework of the discourses at play is analysed over the next two chapters and then followed by a further exploration of "the tiny, invisible text" of the interviews in the creative writing. This provides a lens for understanding the complex phenomena of interpersonal relationships in reconfigured

families. The respondents speak candidly, slipping between different discourses, often demonstrating how hegemonic nuclear family discourses, promoting biogenetic offspring, can affect reconfigured families at different levels of experience. Both the performance of family that is presented to society, and the interactions that occur within the walls of the home are implicated. This focus allows for some distinction between private realities and public performance.

In this study every family does things differently. New family configurations bring people to live together at different life stages and open up possibilities for relationships. Some of the people I interviewed are creatively reworking the discourses. As I said, all of the respondents have been de-identified.

## 2.1

“The biogenetic basis of adult-child bonds” (Hicks 2006, p. 761).

I am beginning with what Steven Hicks makes implicit reference to in the quote above, the discourse of biogenetic superiority, which affords power and privilege to biological parents, reinforcing the hegemonic nuclear family model. This section looks carefully at what respondents have said, exploring ways that social families can survive the tyranny of this discursive situation by adapting some strategies and reworking others. I chose to name the discourse this way to challenge dominant genealogy discourse, and the idea of ‘natural’ parenting, as Hicks does in his paper, *Genealogy’s Desires: Practices of Kinship amongst Lesbian and Gay Foster-carers and Adopters* (2006). He discovers “new forms of intimacy, care and parenting developed by lesbians and gay men” (Hicks, 2006, p. 761),

and, like me, argues that his archive shows that intimacy and care between children and adults are not necessarily based on biogenetic adult-child bonds.

Most of the scholarship on this topic seeks to expand peoples' ideas "about what counts as a proper human relationship" (Hicks 2006, p. 762) between adults and other people's children and comes to us from Queer theory. My respondents were not asked to reveal their sexuality but, by examining non-biogenetic parenting situations, in relation to dominant discourses, I see this project as a valid contribution to queering the norms that have been established by nuclear family dominance since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The privilege given to the nuclear family is underpinned by the dominant discourse of kinship. Butler (2004) believes that the dominant discourse of kinship values some ways of life over others and, as I will show, there are references to this underlying discrimination throughout the interviews.

Turning now to the archive I will show how these issues look as lived experiences, starting with the way an opinion of biogenetic superiority affects family dynamics in cases where this belief seems to be upheld without question. Jeff, a professional man in his fifties in a blended family, began the interview by telling me that the real reason he was participating in my project was because he wanted to say that he didn't think that adoption worked. He had come to this conclusion from his own childhood experience; as we see here, this conclusion is clearly based in biogenetic terminology.

One of my brothers was adopted. There were three of us, biological siblings, and he came along with a completely different nature, looks and intellect. All three of us went on to post-graduate levels at uni and the adopted brother left school in year 10. He saw all the differences [between himself and the other three siblings].

Jeff described the discord and eventual breakdown of the siblings' relationships, saying: "He tried to find his birth family, which wasn't successful. He's now estranged from us." Jeff said that he thinks the possibility of eventual discord and estrangement, could also happen with the children from his blended family, and mine, as the issues between the siblings can arise later in life, but he hopes not. He insinuated that this fracture occurs as adopted and biological children are not equal. Shifting the discussion then to his own blended family, Jeff joked that all the four children are equal, but "one's more equal than the others." He was referring to the fourth child that both he and his partner had together.

Another respondent, Emily, was not so conservative in this regard; but, regardless of her different opinions, she still had to negotiate the same dominant discourses. Emily explains that she was initially rejected by her adopted son as, for him, his birth mother still filled the position of mother. This is a complicated understanding as Emily both privileges the biogenetic discourse, by adopting her first son's brother, and then later she goes on to demonstrate how it can be exceeded: by allowing two people to fill the maternal position. Here Emily describes adopting a ten year-old boy, the older brother of the four year-old boy they had previously adopted; which also meant that she would forgo her chance to adopt the baby that she had been imagining.

We both said we couldn't not go through the process; it was just horrendous, meeting him so many times and watching the door of the orphanage slam in his face. We both knew we had to try no matter what, so yes, that was great, but that meant that another little one didn't come, and I was resentful. All of a sudden I had a ten year-old, and he didn't want me as his mum. He wanted his mum, he wanted his birth mum, and I didn't want this tricky ten year-old. I mean I did,

'cause part of us and part of him is all part of [his brother], but the day to day stuff; day to day we would get pissed off with each other.

Emily states that they are united as a family, not distinguishing 'blood' as necessary for parenting. She privileges the sibling relationship of the two boys over her own desire to parent a baby. She does not struggle with working to achieve the deeper connections, but she does with the "day to day stuff." Later we see that Emily and her son did establish a close relationship after this initial ambivalence.

Other different examples of how this discourse has been interpreted follow now. Rosa was the oldest person to contact me to participate in the study. I was a bit confused by all the names in her stories, not finding it clear who were her birth or step-children, or her grandchildren. The family tree was drawn as a sort of sweeping overlay of lines and names in a circular shape, so I found it funny when she told me that the book she remembers reading, over and over again, to her children was, *Who is my mother?*. Rosa said that all she remembers being read as a child is *Noah's Ark*, a story reminiscent of the biogenetic discourse she felt she had abandoned. Later Rosa describes being taken to see her grandchild by one of the step-daughters.

Desiree, when she got her driver's licence, well she offered to drive me home from a visit to my grandchild in hospital, when my grandchild had just been born... and I was very touched by that because it was an honour.

This statement alludes to biogenetic superiority discourse, as Rosa calls it "an honour" to be invited to the hospital to visit the child to whom she is in the role of grandparent, given that she is only a step-grandparent.

Another example is taken from Sandra's interview. Sandra is a young, single, adoptive mother. This story is about her daughter's conception of family.

At the moment her teacher is pregnant so, she'll say things, like, when I grow up I'm going to have ... three biological and one adopted child.

I find this a moment of possibility — that a six year-old girl fantasises about both giving birth and adopting a baby — envisaging future parenting possibilities outside of dominant discourses.

The perception that only the biogenetic bonds are the real bonds, can also affect the extended family, such as this example where Fiona describes her parents' inability to regard her step-children as real grandchildren.

When Annie and Tom came [mum] was hesitant toward them, in a funny way, and I didn't expect it. But I think she was so worried about getting attached to them, and then if something happened to Graeme and me they wouldn't be there.

Fiona's mother decides that it is better not to become attached in the first place than to suffer possible loss. Fiona said, "I've never been under pressure to have kids or anything, but I know that she would love grandchildren." Fiona's use of the word *would* indicates that she too is not counting her step-children as 'real' children. She goes on to say, laughingly, "but my brother's wife had a baby last year so that's been exciting... and taken the pressure off."

In the above examples we see the full force of Butler's arguments. In speaking of Antigone's deed, which she describes as a "trespass on the norms of kinship and gender, that exposes the precarious character of those norms, their sudden and disturbing transferability," Butler further says that Antigone puts the

reigning regimes of representation into crisis and raises the question of what the conditions of intelligibility could have been that would have made her life possible, indeed, what sustaining web of relations make our lives possible ...

What new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognisable?

(Butler, 2000, p. 24)

Tom's comment, when drawing his family tree, that he has "no children of his own," was one of the hardest hitting for me. I had to stop myself from saying, "but you have these two daughters you've been telling me about." Tom drew a line between his parents, then four lines down from that line to himself and his three siblings. He drew lines and labelled each of all his sibling's children. He drew a line to connect him and his partner but then he drew the lines down for the two girls from her name only, not from the line between him and her. He does not see himself as the 'real' father of the girls; although he describes the way he supports the girls emotionally and materially.

Fiona also revealed certain otherwise unexpressed beliefs when she drew her family tree. She separated the tree into two diagrams: one of her own biological family, and the other of her partner's. On her side of the page she drew her parents, then herself and her brother with his partner and child. On the separate tree for her partner she drew the lines to indicate children from him, with no connecting line between him and her. Like Tom, on a diagrammatic level Fiona deferred to biogenetic terminology, although elsewhere in the interview she described the growth of the maternal relationship she has with the children. In both these cases there is discord according to the Western tendency only to place one person in a maternal position, only one other in a paternal position. On the other hand, Emily was able to reduce the discord in her family by

freeing up the symbolic structure to encourage her children to include two figures in each parenting position, both the adoptive and biological parents.

This current discussion resonates with the work of Sara Ahmed. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed writes about the way the horizontal and vertical lines of the family tree reinforce heterosexual expectations, as the vertical lines describe the “blood tie, the line of descent” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 83), which connects parents and children. This brings the boy into line as an imagined narrative of becoming father to future sons.. Ahmed then discusses the presumptions that the family inheritance goes with the straight lines. On a similar note Judith Halberstam in, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), describes inheritance as “generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5). In this area, where nuclear family discourses are bound up with family wealth, reputation and values, there can be confusion between what is lived reality and what people imagine the form of the family should entail.

## 2.2

### The family line

There are a set of discourses particular to each family, handed down through the generations by way of rules and mottos, photo albums, stories and heirlooms, as well as inheritances. This passing down of a family’s beliefs and reputation becomes a factor in the way a child forms identity. An example of the way a family might attempt to instil its

own internal discourse is Sandra's description of being read to and having the books edited in the performance.

My mum's dad was the best because he did all the character voices, like *Wind in the Willows*, he'd do each part consistently all the way through. And he'd edit, you know, when you look back at some of the books, like Richard Scarry's *Bedtime Tales*, and it would be: 'now we go hunting, now we go fishing, now we choose a wife.' They're a bit more PC now, anyway, he would edit as he went, like they might be in Africa facing wild animals, and all of a sudden the animals would be talking, and then they'd all be friends.

Ahmed has an interesting discussion of family trees; I will refer to it to elucidate my comments on what the archive revealed about the discourses internal to individual families. Ahmed uses the analysis of a case of Freud's to theorise that the vertical lines in the family tree symbolise the way that family love requires "following a certain direction, or having a certain orientation" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 73). She discusses the "pressure to inherit this line," from the past to the future, as "a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes us along specific paths" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 90). Here she is indicating that there can be consequences if an individual veers from the expected ways the family usually performs, for example to pursue a gay relationship, and, as a result love, happiness and care may no longer be available from the family. I will explore this theme of orientation according to discourses further in the creative writing.

At the end of each interview the respondents were asked to draw their family tree. This was a symbolic way of seeing how they saw their family unit within the context of the wider families connected to their non-biological children. Responses varied, but notably

three out of the ten respondents got mixed up trying to add names and roles into the line where the parents' names went. One in particular had four fathers and two mothers with arrows criss-crossing to five children. Three people became overwhelmed and started again, then resorted to drawing the lines between the present people in the immediate family unit only. This confusion is emblematic of the poor fit of reconfigured family with nuclear family symbols and language. Yet if my respondents indicate confusion in the lines of transmission there are still ideas consistent with Ahmed's metaphor of internal tradition.

I note that in these interviews those of my respondents who mentioned religious discourses within their family all chose not to follow this discursive line with their children. In the seventies feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone, wrote of the prevailing hold religion had on concepts of family in America, citing sermons and the media as reinforcing traditional family forms. Firestone wrote that "artificial cultural reinforcements" and sentiment were keeping the family form as it then was alive, although it was no longer a good fit with social practices (Firestone 1979, p. 206). In my archive there were few references to religious practices. There is therefore a sense that, in religious matters the respondents did not necessarily follow the family line.

Emily laughingly described the way her relationship with her mother was influenced by her mother's religious beliefs. Contrast this with the story of her way of parenting where physical affection, as a way of connecting with the boys, is a continual process of negotiation.

My mum had never been big on physical affection. She grew up in a catholic convent and she thought that girls weren't allowed to touch because the nuns were worried that you'd become lesbians ... So she's quite tight with affection.

In contrast:

Isti's just come out of a stage ... where it's freaked him out to have me anywhere near him, giving him any affection, and he asked me not to kiss him goodnight when he was lying in bed. (Laughs) Now he's gone out of that again for a while, but with Micky, I'd do that thing where I'd maybe just touch him on the shoulder, or grab his hand ... I'll just grab his hand so we can just make contact ... When he first came, he was used to a lot of physical contact with other boys, um, it's a cultural thing there, boys are always holding hands, and there'd always be one with his elbow on another one's shoulders or something, they're always on top of each other.

In this case touch was related by the grandmother's religious beliefs to sexuality, in particular homosexuality, and prohibited, but touching that equates to friendship, and hand holding between men is culturally accepted. For Emily to establish emotional closeness with her sons she rejects the family discourse she inherited.

Maggie, a mother of three and step-mother of one, said that her childhood was influenced by both her mother's religious beliefs and the lack of physical affection she received. Maggie said she could not remember ever being tucked into bed at night. All she remembered as close emotional times were walks in the country-side with her mother. She remembered family celebrations negatively. She recalled only one birthday party.

Yer, [I remember] being told off for not thanking the guests for coming. I remember that the preparations, getting involved with the party food was exciting... seeing all the food displayed on the table

Like Emily, Maggie went on to describe how she deviated from her family's expectations recounting the painstaking effort she made to connect with her step-son. She described making time to be alone with him to talk to him about his ambitions, and to take him to the movies. She also told of her awkwardness to embrace him.

I felt a bit funny as I'm always giving my boys hugs and I don't know whether to include him or not, even though I've been given permission. I'm feeling my way.

Christmas is another area where respondents did not always follow the family line, adding to the sense of change, and formation of new discourses. Christmas is ritualised in the West so that family gatherings, traditional food and presents are expected. This can be a stressful time where conflicts arise as individuals have different internal family discourses, and often children, and adults, have to choose between joining blood or social families. Rosa, for example, related that receiving presents was a big part of her childhood, so the dilemma she describes on how much she should give to the step-children was significant to her.

Well my parents were Salvation Army officers and we had a limited income, but two things they insisted on were a big Christmas and a week's holiday at the beach, and that happened every year. So on Christmas morning there was a big box, not just a stocking, of presents; there was a box of presents.

You've heard of the Disneyland dad, well I'm the three times Disneyland mother. I took my children three times, but I didn't take my non-biological children,

because I didn't know how to ask. I just thought that they [the birth parents] might think I was implying that they should take them, so I didn't.

Outside of the interviews, my own personal experiences as an adult also deviate from the family discourse I inherited. The Christmas celebration I attended with one of my children last year could not have been further removed from the small nuclear family gatherings I experienced as a child. Of the twenty or so people present more were African than Australian, few of us were related by blood — some children were adopted and some adults were refugees and students — and others were friends of friends. Traditions were combined in a haphazard way and we were not stressed, talking religion and politics, having abandoned many internal family discourses.

## 2.3

Social regulatory discourses, physical affection and sexual taboos.

People are treading carefully, making their way around prevailing discourses that include sexual taboos, particularly, as I will show now, in the parenting relationships between the adult males and teenage girls. Social regulatory discourses on sexual interactions have moral and legal implications. The discourses on sexual taboos and the role of physical affection in intimacy operate alongside legal statutes and child protection practices. Sourcing these discourses, Foucault, speaking about Western society after Freud, says:

There was on the one hand a general phenomenon, located only at the level of the individual, of the subject's misunderstanding of his own desire... At the same

time, on the other hand, there was a phenomenon of cultural, social, scientific and theoretical over-knowledge of sexuality (Foucault, 1999, p. 117).

He sees that these two phenomena are not contradictory and that they coexist in the West, influencing both the social norms and mores regarding permissible sexual relationships and the individual's reckoning with desire.

The incest taboo that regulates the nuclear family, by extension applies to the reconfigured family, but with less authority. I did not ask questions specifically about sexual relationships in this study but I include some analysis according to this discourse as its effect on any family relationships cannot be ignored: both public services and society monitor and influence what is acceptable behaviour between adults and children regarding physical contact and this necessarily gives this discourse a power, even if only implicitly.

Angela McRobbie in, *Mothers and Fathers who needs Them?* (2003), quotes Judith Butler's comment "that along with families of choice there comes into being new and expansive forms of constraint, control and surveillance" (McRobbie, 2003, p. 134), in a plea for feminist political attention to this subject that might reflect what is happening in society now. As a community health worker myself I am all too aware of the necessity of mandatory reporting regarding the welfare of children, but in this instance my aim is to investigate the way the power of this discourse can inhibit and confuse intimacy between parents and step-children. Asked to talk about physical affection with the non-biological children, most respondents were hesitant. Media and popular culture keep alive the subject of the possibilities of sexual liaisons, sanctioned and otherwise, establishing an ever present, silent awareness lurking in the background around this

topic. A lack of pre-existing scripts in this area adds to tensions. The following narratives illuminate such tensions.

Three of the respondents were adult men who have been step-parenting daughters who are now in their teens, or adult women. None of them recounted any examples of occasions where they expressed physical affection, other than giving each other kisses and hugs for greetings. The two women with teenage step or adopted sons both expressed the confusion and effort involved in establishing the place of physical contact in emotional unions. Maggie's story of the first hug with her step-son shows her nervousness.

Embrace? I'm only just starting to. My partner asked me to. I'm a bit awkward about it. He's a big, tall fifteen year old. I'm very physical with my boys. We had the first embrace yesterday... I gave my son a hug and he, the non-biological, Fin, was behind him, and I thought, well now's my opportunity to give him a big hug, and he was sort of the first to hug me. He initiated it and that's broken the ice now, cause my partner has said, don't be afraid to hug him and give him lots of physical embraces... not that I don't want to, but its awkward... I thought maybe he doesn't want it, cause he's a teenage boy... I'm feeling my way. My partner has suggested I could just start with something like giving him a rub on the arm.

Tom said he did not tuck the two girls in to bed or read to them at night when they were young. He referred to his wife as "the mother" to further disassociate himself from the role of providing physical intimacy.

Um, no. When they were at that age it was probably more of a one to one thing with the mother. They were living week about then so generally, when it came to

any bedtime things or anything like that, it was normally just done with the mother.

Asked about embraces, he said,

Um, with greetings yes. As they got older they would generally come up and they'd give you a hug, probably more so the oldest daughter, rather than the youngest daughter, which was more personality related. When they were little, again, any tucking in at bedtime would have been just their mother.

Fiona, who is step-mother to two young children, explains their family's process of understanding the changing lines of desire and affiliation in the home.

I think they definitely come forward with feelings. In the early days when they were first sort of settling into living at my place, um, if we sat down to watch a movie on TV, or something like that, they'd always both fight to sit on their dad, so you know it was like a bit um, but it was just everyone sort of finding their place. But I've noticed of recent, like we were on holidays, and Graeme's daughter was with me all the time, like sitting on my lap anywhere I was. If we had drinks with friends and Graeme and I were sitting together, she'd come up and sit on my lap. So it's just taken time for people, but it is, the kids are very emotional and show their affection and um they actually like it, like I know Annie, if we're in the supermarket, she'll come up to hold my hand all the time and she likes that security, or someone being there.

Maggie's account of her step-son's private life, on the other hand, is a disclosure of the awkwardness, uncertainty and lack of available discourses for step-parenting teenagers. Her stress in re-counting the following episode was evident in the way she changed her

voice to take on her partner's voice, and ran on the sentences breathlessly. In this case, the father of the boy would not tolerate the discussion of his son's sex life with his step-mother as even the shared language of sexual relationships was considered a breach of the assumed regulatory code, whereas Maggie said she would discuss this area with her biological sons.

I said well does Adam know ... that it's illegal to sleep with someone under 16 years of age, and my partner didn't want me to let him know that, and didn't want me to get involved and share any of that information with him. It was interesting because I thought I was doing the right thing and that he should be informed, but my partner saw it as no, putting a real negative spin on something that should come naturally, and you don't want to bombard him with all these negative images, and let's protect him from all this ... I'm finding that difficult.

While Tom told of delegating physical affection to "the mother," he also demonstrates the possibilities of loving and caring for a child in providing emotional support, without expressing feelings physically. Tom demonstrates the strength of his paternal bond:

Phoebe, the youngest ... she'd been rude, quite rude to her mother, and then she came out into the lounge room and she sat down and she tried to explain what was going on, and she said that, she's just feeling rejected ... She hasn't had much contact with her father for quite some time ... she just started sending him some text messages before last Christmas and for his birthday, and never ever heard anything back... and then after a bust up with her boyfriend she just sort of felt like she was rejected all the time ... so she sat down and spoke to both of us about it. She does understand things but she still lacks knowing how to put things into perspective currently.

A further example of how such complex relationship can be played out is in John Clanchy's fictive story, *A Question of Blood*, (2008). Here the step-father, Geoffrey, develops a paternal bond that allows him to intervene when the step-daughter, distanced from her mother, reveals to him that she is working in prostitution and is addicted to heroin. Her confession takes place in a tense scene where Geoffrey has to masquerade as a customer and pay her in order to talk to her, highlighting the forbidden sexual areas that hover between adult men and teenage step-daughters. When she asks Geoffrey for financial help Clanchy also asks the reader to consider how the issue of inheritance, the bourgeois basis for the nuclear family in maintaining a class system, works in this relationship. In this passage he links the two areas of sexual taboo and biogenetic superiority. Clanchy makes Geoffrey cross the line — though only in a contrived performance — of incest taboo, and then points out that he has a different way of emotionally and materially dealing with her than he has with his biological children. In this way, she challenges the traditional intelligibility of parent-child relationships.

'You'd do anything for them, wouldn't you?'

Knowing the answer. 'So why not for me?'

She had to supply the answer for herself. Since nothing else was being said.

'Is it just a question of blood?'

I felt ashamed then. Of my own pettiness. The tiny bourgeois calculations of my own life. My inability to provide for them all. To protect them all.

'No,' I found myself saying, 'no, it's not' (Clanchy, 2006, p. 253).

## 2.4

### Role-playing and the theatrical metaphor

There are some instances in the interview archive where subjects make reference to 'roles' or 'performance' or 'theatre', indicating the different ways that adults can view their roles as mother or father, and the possibilities available to perform these roles. In the light of this interview material, Butler's view that for some individuals to feel that their life counts requires participating in a family in its hegemonic form seems borne out. Some are going to lengths to perform what they consider socially defined parenting roles, thus making sense of their situations in the face of the discrepancies highlighted by the previous accounts, and aiming to be seen as legitimate. This can also lead to hyper-performances, as will be seen in Chapter Three.

Emily uses the theatrical metaphors of imposter and princess when describing her adopted son's initial reaction to her:

Micky, [adopted when he was 10] thought of me as a bit of an impostor really. Paul [her partner] was fine, cause Micky's dad, he died when he was a lot younger and he didn't really seem to have the strong feeling; but his mum, she was to him a princess and there was nothing that she could have done wrong, so I was an impostor.

The archive demonstrates the importance subjects placed on performing some of the more commonly traditional family rituals, in particular celebrations and parties, so as to count as a proper family. Throwing parties that included extended family, having pets and maintaining a recognizable domestic space to delineate a family's private boundaries, are also associated with performing family roles in this archive. All but two

of the respondents said that they ate meals together at the table as a family. In discussing mealtime rituals, Maggie indicates that she is “learning” her role as mother to Adam.

I was haphazard about meals until I met my partner... now we are routine orientated and he really likes the family to sit together at meals. I'd have the TV on but not now, no, it's a set mealtime with us all sitting together... Sometimes I have to do separate meals for the children. My partner thinks it's totally wrong, that they should eat what they are given if they like it or not. I'm still learning Adam, like what he likes to eat, coming from America they have different foods ... he's introduced different snacks to my boys, toast and sugar and cinnamon.

Rosa, on the other hand was not as rigid in following traditional parenting rituals, but she still placed an emphasis on rituals around meals. I see Rosa describing the way she filled up the lunch boxes with fresh food as her wanting to make clear that in the role of mother she was able to nourish the children nutritionally and, by association, emotionally.

I think the child will let you know when it's had enough to eat. I was a very busy doctor and I was working full time, so we always had two take away meals a week. They were always Maria's spaghetti bar, or that sort of thing. In the morning I would take the children swimming and then afterwards we would go to the Queen Victoria market and have our breakfast there, and I would fill their lunch boxes with food from the market.

Performativity, as discussed in Chapter One, is a concept Judith Butler drew on, and extended, from gender to kinship terms; it describes the way identity is constructed according to discourse. As Butler explains:

The body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation which any phenomenological theory of embodiment needs to describe (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

The ways a subject defines or constructs identity is a continuing process. This study allows only glimpses of the lives of the people who described their practices and feelings. This concept is useful to look at families in the context of the society they inhabit, and the different beliefs and expectations that the children and adults involved in the interaction might hold.

Anna Mudde writes in her analysis of Butler's *Antigone's Claim*, "I do not know who/what I am until I have acted and my community has reflected my action back to me" (Mudde, 2009, p. 197). By performing socially recognizable parenting roles, adults can improve their perception of themselves as parents and make sense of their situations. They may find themselves parenting other people's children because of adult relationships, due to the desire to partner and cohabit, which may or may not include the desire to be a parent of any children, or the particular children involved. Seeing themselves as performing to recognizable roles can provide a means to work through these situations on a day-to-day basis, with the reward of legitimacy from society. Generally, in this archive, it was more often the case that the step and blended families described performing to more traditionally styled roles, while the adoptive parents described performing rituals that they created.

Steve was the only respondent to directly refer to the importance he gave to the correct performance of family roles: “As long as there’s clarity in the roles it’s not a drama.” He describes the way his family has extended a traditional family weekly mealtime ritual to include his wife’s ex-husband and their children. I assume by this comment that he means that as long as everyone knows that he is in the role of father to the girls, and the biological father has deferred his position, there will not be drama. He also comments that discord in ideologies can occur between generations where there was once less flexibility in assigning parenting roles.

We had meals around the table and we talked. We had to make a rule no phones ... and no television ... and that really set a pattern, it’s one of the reasons the kids keep coming back every Sunday for Sunday lunches. There is actually a new ritual now. The kid’s dad had a long period in England, and every time he was out here, we’d have him and his family here for a meal. So it’s growing the family—and even now he lives out here, pretty much every time he comes to Canberra we have them round, for a big chunk of time. We have a large family gathering. There’s only one person who doesn’t come, but that’s the same with my mother when she got divorced neither of her parents actually spoke to the old man again for the rest of his life. That generation couldn’t handle divorce. It’s a real challenge to their values. Stereotyped positions held out till our generation, that’s when they started body screening in court. People are complicated. As long as there’s clarity in the roles it’s not a drama.

Steve is a man in his fifties who has seen the stigma of divorce change from when his own parents divorced in the seventies to the situation now. Pointing out that there is always one person who doesn’t come denotes that this transition is not seamless.

I spoke with the respondents about which parent the children went to when they wanted to discuss emotional issues. Jeff made it clear that the role of emotional support giver was open to both parents: step and biological, and that it depended on the different temperaments of the children as to how much they disclosed.

When she dumped her boyfriend she let us know, then she sat under the shower for an hour or so, which was annoying as there wasn't enough hot water for everyone. Kiya, the introvert, it's not typical for her to have deep and meaningful conversations with me or [her mother], whereas Julia, the extrovert, does. It's more about the temperament of the child, and at some ages the girls don't want to volunteer a lot of information. I might voice it for them if I know they're having a fight. Their mother is no different. I don't think they treat me any differently to her, within reason. I think I have a pretty good relationship with Kiya and Julia. They were toddlers when we met so can't remember me not being around... I was emotionally available from the start.

Steve considers himself to be emotionally available to his teenage and adult step-daughters; he distinguishes, however, between the roles the two parents play in this area according to gender rather than biology. I asked him, 'Who initiates the sharing of feelings between you and the girls?'

Probably the girls, but that could be a boy- girl thing. We found out when Deb and David broke up, and that was major. They actually spend more time speaking to [their mother] than me, but both of them will come up. I think you talk in depth to your mum more about things than you do than to your dad, but they still talk to me about it, and I still sympathise, but I think the other role is the one that attracts the empathy seeking. You always go to your mother if you're after

empathy, it's a stereotype. I talk to Deb a lot about her job, and she knows more about computers and cars than I do.

Steve then demonstrated the ring tone on his mobile phone, which is the sound of a baby laughing: his step-daughter's new baby. I also point out here that he referred to himself as 'dad', which is different to Tom's belief about the validity of the role he plays.

In this fashion, Steve demonstrates that he sees himself in the rightful role of father. To refer back to Antigone's disruption of the law in Thebes, her claim was made in the masculine language of the court, where "[h]er words, understood as deeds, are chiasmically related to the vernacular of sovereign power, speaking in and against it, delivering and defying imperatives at the same time" (Butler, 2000, p. 58). I make the point here that speaking the language of the family is often used as a way of aspiring to hegemonic norms by reconfigured families.

Performing to scripted roles when parenting children from inter-country adoptions can be fraught. In my own case I acknowledge that my child has not had any choice or consent in the arrangement, and the type of relationship that develops between us may or may not be loving. I strongly believe that my performing the role commonly ascribed to a Western mother in the hegemonic nuclear family is not likely to advance her development or our relationship. As Emily said: bonding is "a more backwards, forwards, sideways sort of thing".

In the three interviews conducted with parents of children transnationally adopted there can be added difficulties forming relationships as cultural practices are vastly different; again these are not commonly catered for with existing family scripts, and they are addressed differently in each case in this study. In addition to cultural considerations in adoptive cases, the past experiences of the adoptive children may have

been traumatic. Myers (2009) has also theorised that the removal of the child from the extended birth family and/or other significant relationships formed in the orphanage, is itself traumatic and can be regarded as a form of violence that needs to be acknowledged, not foreclosed. Dorow and Swiffen analyse narratives of cultural identity in the paper, *Blood and Desire: The Secret of Heteronormativity in Adoption Narratives of Culture* (2009). Having interviewed American parents of children adopted from China, they also point out that the child's consent is not included and adoptive parents need to negotiate their relationship to their children's cultural heritage and the "gap between biology and desire, in which social intelligibility depends on containing the continuities of difference represented by Chinese-culture." (Dorow and Swiffen, 2009, p. 567) They say:

On the one hand, transnational, transracial adoption is quintessentially a form of 'new kinship,' a dispersal of bloodlines and heterosex as the foundation of domestic belonging. On the other hand, the classed, gendered, and raced aspects that attend the desire for intelligibility in such adoptions belie the connotations of consent that accompany the concept of 'chosen family'. (Dorow and Swiffen, 2009, p. 570)

This investigation of the way parenting roles are performed will now be contrasted to other ways of achieving meaningful kinship relationships in the next chapter in the discourse: "One big family". What I am proposing is that the roles commonly ascribed to nuclear family do not apply when 'families of choice' do not necessarily involve the consent of the children.

In this chapter I presented excerpts from the archive analysed according to some of the discourses operating in the lives of reconfigured families concerning: biogenetic

superiority, the family line, sexual taboos, and role-playing and the theatrical metaphor. In the next chapter I highlight ways that step and adoptive parents are negotiating their way through regulating norms to make love and kinship intelligible: sometimes taking on the language of the hegemonic norms to earn the right to the parent role and sometimes breaking free from these restrictions.

## Chapter Three

“That beautiful embrace”

This chapter celebrates instances where the actions of individuals and families have exceeded existing discourses to create new rituals and understandings that promote emotional connections. Some of the vignettes in this chapter have originated from a less conscious area, and are discussed under the headings of: dreams, forming identity, and transformative events. To find instances of generation and transformation it is necessary to look first for the irregularities. As Foucault writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), “the use of concepts of discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series and transformation present all historical analysis not only with the questions of procedure, but with theoretical problems” (Foucault, 1972, p.1). This chapter further analyses the archive, offering glimpses of change in the way family interacts.

### 3.1

#### Meritorious parenting

Reading through the narratives many times it became obvious that another theme linked some of the respondents’ efforts to make a good job of their roles. As well as occasionally using the interview opportunity as a chance to point out how they parent differently to the parent they had displaced, or doubled, they often spoke of the ways they were better meeting the children’s wishes. Their terminology could, in addition, be related to vocational work, as in Emily’s description of mothering as “a full time job”. Borrowing from the meritocratic discourses abundant in our society, I have headed this section “Meritorious parenting” to describe the sense I gained from some of the

interviewees that the right to count in the parent role should go to the person who performs best in this role. On the face of it, this way of speaking fits in with neoliberal culture, where everything is assessed and people are rated on their performances. The irony is that people who are making these meritocratic gestures while parenting in reconfigurations of family are often implicitly treating the family in a far more radical way than we would ever associate with neoliberalism. Sometimes it seems people have subverted a discourse in a way they may not really have intended.

Emily described the process from becoming an “imposter” to “mum” as follows:

Now I’m mum, totally, I’m mum, and he’s my son and we’re really close and we don’t have any of those feelings now. It is a full time job. We’ve merged now.

We’ve become part of each other now.

In the following instance Fiona seems to relate the story of the children’s birth mother abandoning their pet to the pound, and then her provision of the dog they now love, to a similar economy. Fiona’s unspoken message is that she is better at recognising and filling the children’s loss regarding the pet, thus earning the position of mother:

The other thing the kids have become really attached to is, I’ve got a little dog and at school Annie’s been drawing pictures of the dog in all her books and putting them up, and when they have free time or something, or at the end of term, when you go in and get their work for the year, she’s always got pictures of the dog, and telling people about the dog, so that’s had a really big impact. She kept asking me very early on, whose dog is this? And I kept saying, it’s a family dog, it’s our dog. And she said, isn’t it yours? No it’s ours. It’s been a really big thing with her, and she asked to take some photos to school, because it’s a schnauzer, so it has a

beard, so she wanted to take all these photos in to show them. (laughs) And the dog actually misses them when they're not there, the day that they go back to their mum's, [the dog] actually sits in their room, or goes looking for them. When they go to bed and have story time the dog will sit on the end of the bed and they love it if she starts to fall asleep and then we have to bring her back out once the kids are asleep. The other thing is that they had a dog and their mum took it to the pound, so I think that's been a really big impact and they've been upset about that, so it's been great cause my dog has really filled that hole.

For all the women who responded, providing the new children with special food was seen to be a part of forming the parent relationship. Rosa, Fiona and Jane all spoke a lot about the food they gave the step-children. Rosa recounts a story from thirty years ago where she enjoyed giving her stepchild treats that the child's birth mother prohibited.

I remember when Carrie came and stayed for the weekend when she was about five, and we went to the local Anglican Church, and there was a morning tea afterwards, and she really enjoyed having the kinds of foods that her mother wouldn't approve of her having at home.

When two mothers fill the position of mother, alive or dead, there is often a comparison lurking. Jane openly compared her superior efforts with providing food to those of her step-daughter's birth mother. She also commented on the birth mother's thin, controlling nature and implicitly opposed it to her generosity.

I remember [a birthday party] where we had lots and lots of her favourite food, and, you know, she sort of had more input into it, she got to say, can we have

that? And, again, her mum is very thin, and very controlled in what she eats and I don't think she's allowed to have popcorn, or all the things she asks for at home.

Moving now to what can only be described as hyper-performances, I will discuss instances where individuals in this project — all women — out-perform any existing scripts in a bid to earn the right to fill the maternal position. There is an anxiety apparent in the descriptions that follow. Following Butler's reading of *Antigone*, where she contests the necessity of having singular parenting roles, it is no wonder that these exertions to out-perform birth parents are tinged with tension.

It is quite possible to argue in a Lacanian vein that the symbolic place of the mother can be multiply occupied, that it is never identified or identifiable with an individual, and that this is what distinguishes it as symbolic. But why is the symbolic place singular and its inhabitants multiple?" (Butler, 2000, p. 71).

Jane's bid to provide superior meals was also performed physically during the interview, as she switched voices and accents, and gestured her actions.

One time I decided to change the house into an Indian restaurant, and I designed menus and dressed myself in a sheet with a dot of red lipstick on my forehead, and I sort of did all this bowing, and did all this Indian food. And then another time I put on this striped shirt of Josh's, and a pair of plain pants and a baseball cap, and I made a label that said, 'my name is Jane', and I turned the house into a MacDonald's, and I was talking with an American accent, saying, "Can I take your order?" "Do you want fries with that?" And Catie just thought that was fabulous, and so she would quite often request, "Can we have MacDonald's, your MacDonald's?" And so I'd have to go out and buy some shoe string fries, and I'd

make the burgers and let them choose whether they wanted cheese on it and that sort of stuff. And sometimes I'd do nuggets.

I consider that the following story of Fiona's also enters the realms of hyper-performance when seen in the context of family dinner time.

And I think because of junior master chef being on at the moment there's a big thing about cooking in the household. When I get home from work, that's the bit I love, getting home to cook a dinner, and so with the kids there was a bit of a fight cause they both wanted to help so much. So now it's taking it in turns, so one will set the table and the other one will cook, and then we'll all eat. But it's a big thing that they have to get in and help to stir or chop or something. And the other thing they're big on now is presentation. We have to plate up and it's got to have a garnish, so they'll go and pick something out of the garden ... With deserts, if they have ice cream it's got to be molded, or it's got to be dressed up. So recently we've been trying to come up with more ideas ... and they get the other people to score it. (Laughs). It's become quite competitive.

In some cases, the meritorious parent's superiority over the biological parent concerns not the replaced birth parent, but the actual partner. In the following narrative Maggie displays what she considers to be her superior parenting efforts in describing her ability to know, and do, what her step-son enjoys. She says that he can relax more with her than he can with even his father.

I took Adam out to a film evening. It was just the two of us, cause he was interested in going and his dad wasn't; and that was a really nice outing for us and we talked about his ambitions for the future, and umm, he really liked my

support, that I was there. And that I took him to something that he really wanted to go to, that was nice. And one night a week his dad's not there; it's just me and the boys, and I find Adam opens up a lot. It's like he's a little bit more relaxed I think.

I will conclude this section on meritorious parenting with a comment from the additional interview. Sarah, who adopted a daughter locally, wanted to demonstrate to me her belief that children should be encouraged to love both the birth and adoptive parents; however, her final remark also focuses on her implication that, as the replacement parent following the child's abandonment, her performance in the role is superior to the birth mother's:

Bedtime is also the time I talk with Meg in her room, as it's more private and peaceful and we're focused, and she has questions and I always let her talk about her birth parents. And she does always want to know about the birth parents, and because she can be scared of hurting us, often it's me who initiates the talks. She can love whoever she likes, that's fine. And of course there are issues about it when they've been left by the birth parents; like how does it feel when you've let them down?

## 3.2

“One big family”

Understood as a socially alterable set of arrangements that has no cross-cultural structural features that might be fully extracted from its social operations, kinship signifies any number of social arrangements (Butler, 2000, p. 72).

“One big family” is an idiom used in differing contexts to unite people discursively with the qualities presupposed to make up the traditional family. The reader will see examples of how this belief can look in practice, particularly in Wendy’s interview. She used this phrase to mean that she literally saw the wider group of people that they spend their meaningful time with as family. This is the discourse I believe has the most promise as it does not vie with hegemonic norms. Rather, it aligns with the theory that community should better meet the subject’s needs in order for family to transform. This discourse also concurs with Butler’s theory that the symbolic positions of mother and father do not need to be filled, or can be multiply filled.

Here Rosa clearly says that in her experience family has been bigger than biology:

Well we recently had a grandchild’s first birthday party in Melbourne, where all the extended family went, and an ex’s daughter was the baby’s birthday helper.  
Family is bigger than biology.

Rosa recounted some memories of her own birthday parties on a mission in Africa, with the Salvation Army, so I hypothesise that her experience as part of a bigger social kinship group may have assisted her understanding of this concept thirty years ago when she became a step-parent.

Wendy is the respondent who used the phrase “one big family”. She describes their family activities as existing in three separate realms. She and Matt parent a family of ten children formed from births, step-relationships and inter-country adoption. They operate sometimes according to traditional family discourse, having had traditional family weddings and Christmas lunch at their home for Wendy and Matt’s biological families. Wendy also describes two other equally valid family experiences that they

include in their lives. They frequently travel to Africa; one or more in the family go once or twice every year, where they interact with the adopted children's birth communities. In addition, this family form part of a group of five close-knit families, all of whom have adopted children from overseas, whom they see as the 'real family' and with whom they spend meaningful time.

The following passages from Wendy's interview are telling about the way this family manages to live lives that count as a regular family in terms of social expectations, and yet enjoy the benefits of kinship with social family connections. Importantly they also incorporate the adopted children's birth communities and culture into their day-to-day life. In her study Myers reflects on the "violence" done to adopted subjects who are not assisted to keep their pasts alive.

The materialisation of statements that explicitly reject the historical and global, through the trope of "clean break" and articulations that the past does not matter enacts further violence on adoptees and related subjects, specifically birth parents. Thus, the act of adoption, which has been interpreted as an act of love, compassion, and humanitarianism, can also be an act of violence (Myers, 2009, p.120).

Compare the closed nuclear family implied in the "clean break" model with Wendy's description of a rather more porous entity:

On the weekend we tend to separate, so the girl's ritual is shop together, and we get a cuppa out. Dad and boys watch football. But our main meaningful rituals are the barbies we have at our friend's place, with all the kids (adopted) and the

camp, three or four times a year at the coast. They're when we're with other families, but really we are all one big family now.

Referring to the group as "one big family" was the way she could best express the relationships between this group of people living outside the hegemonic nuclear family confines. Wendy seemed to me to be describing an extended kinship model while using the language of family. She described the camping trips as follows:

Well we go camping at least twice a year, always down the coast after Christmas, inland from Moruya, and there are the three families always, and sometimes some extras. There would be eleven kids or more; it's just fantastic, we all have tents and there's the one big communal tent and we drape it all over with scarves, you know, and fill it with cushions so you can just literally lie around. The kids can swim and they canoe all day, and fish, if they want, we're on the river. It's where we spend our real time, you know what I mean. We're all just so close and the kids just love it. They've grown up with it. Even our big ones still come along when they can.

Tom's attempts to legitimate his "big family", are accompanied by a tinge of sadness as Tom wants to be considered and celebrated in the paternal role, but we know he doesn't believe he deserves the recognition. Tom describes a party for his step-daughter, where all his relatives attended.

We had a small party you'd say, for the eldest step- daughter in the last 12 months. She turned 18 and some of my family came round and we just had a few hors d'oevrey type things and that, and it started at about 4.30 and then come about 8.30 she went out with her friends ... My mother and father and sisters and

nephews and nieces all came, the whole family. But I have one brother that lives down the coast and he didn't come.

Sarah also spoke in terms of forming "one big family", describing an unusual situation. Sarah said that after she adopted her, now six year-old, daughter she discovered that her daughter had a half sister, Abbie, and the sister lived nearby to them with her biological father; the two girls having the same birth mother. Sarah described how she and her family have included Abbie and her father into their family life. They have a bedroom for Abbie and she stays there two to three times each week. There are photos on the wall of the two girls growing up together. She said:

Her sister is a part of this family. Abbie has her own room here and she sleeps over all the time. She's a part of our family; we just live in different houses.

### 3.3

#### Dreams and magical thinking

The ways that processes of loving, theorised in previous chapters, operate in practice are not likely to be revealed in one hour conversations with a recorder running. For this reason I was hoping to uncover some less conscious disclosures by questioning the respondents about dreams. There are various theories on what the meaning of dreaming is. In this case I was interested in whether the members of the family discussed their dreams as an indicator of whether connections were recognised on levels other than regarding the demands of daily life, and how the respondents interpreted these dreams. A technique I became familiar with when studying Mental Health Sciences was looking at the language and the symbols people used when retelling

stories and dreams. The stories that the respondent's chose to relate can be revealing of the language of their own family discourses, past and present, and indicate what matters to them in their lives.

Two of the respondents had much to relate on this topic; three people skipped the question and the remainder were only able to remember vaguely that the children might have spoken about their dreams, and nightmares, but nothing was memorable. Emily said that their family commonly discusses their dreams, and more significantly, their nightmares. In answer to the question, 'have you ever had the same dream as one of the children?' She said:

Yes, I'm sure that I had the same dream as Micky one night ... because I can remember telling him [my dream], and he finished it off for me, what was happening. I only remember it happening once.

Emily was the only one to have had the experience.

Sandra, who is the single mother of a six year-old daughter, thinks that it is a good sign that her daughter laughs in her dreams. She also raises a point that has started to appear in Adoption scholarship, that adoptive families often believe that fate has led to the unions. In a New York Times parenting blog Matthew Hutson (2012) reported that a doctoral student interviewed 38 adoptive parents and "most of the parents told her that their children had been brought to them by destiny." He goes on to theorise that such narratives of destiny can provide a sense of legitimacy to adoptive parents.

Sandra said:

She laughs in her dreams a lot, and that takes the pressure off me as a parent. About a year ago she made an announcement that she'd had a dream and a brother was coming; he had brown skin, but different to hers and his name is Sydney. It was an announcement. I'm not a believer in clairvoyance, but nor am I religious ... She is more a Buddhist, she believes in reincarnation, but I think all families that go through the adoption process are more open to fate, and I guess we wonder how things come together they way they do, it's a different understanding. But it was an announcement, he's coming and we just have to wait.

She went on to joke that the adoption agency might not go with this prediction; however, we did talk more about the part chance and luck might play in getting adoptions through in this country where families often wait more than five years. Sandra said she has heard of many stories of coincidence in the adoptive community, and that she knows of other people who believe their adoptions have been fated.

Wendy also said in her interview that she thinks that using intuition and going with your instincts results in people ending up where they should be. She told the following story in response to a question about meaningful shared times — describing one of their trips to Africa to reconnect with the birth family of two of the children.

Well with Sibby and Yesem, their mother died, and then their father died, of a virus, and so they were brought up by the bigger family the aunts and uncles and grandparents. And when we went back and we talked with all these people, through a translator ... we worked out there were two significant people that kind

of took the kids on when their mother died. There was the mother's cousin, M, and the father's brother, B, and these two people really had to decide what became of Sibby and Yesem. The family sort of divided into two factions, one that thought the kids should stay put and the grandmother should bring them up, and she was the one that beat their mother with sticks, and the other that thought, well their mother wanted them to be given a chance, and their mother had asked specifically that they not be treated the way she had been by her mother, by the grandmother. So these two significant people, they thought the kids should be put up for adoption and given a chance in life. We had been approved and we were waiting to go and get them at that time. So they had this family meeting and it ended up being decided that they would stay with the grandmother, so it was all off. And this is where it gets interesting. This is what I found out when we went back. The next day, she dies, the grandmother died. She was a healthy woman. When I heard that I couldn't help it, I said, [looking up and pointing up to the sky] 'her wish,' [meaning their dead mother's wish] and [the translator] said, 'that's what we think too.'

Emily also related another way that dreams were dealt with by her family that I had not anticipated when I was thinking about the interview questions. She tells here of how she, and her partner Paul, have worked through some of the psychological ramifications of one of their boy's dreams, by physically enacting them, performing them, with reversals of power plays.

Isti's had in the past recurring dreams that are terrifying him ... in the early days he had a dream about a monster coming and killing him ... he was too scared to go to sleep, so we set up ... a scenario where, Micky has a Buzz Lightyear, quite a

big one, and we had a doll, and then we had a whole lot of dinosaurs, plastic dinosaurs, and then we had a whole army as well. One of the dinosaurs was the monster... and we had Buzz Lightyear, and all the creatures who came in and fought the monster, and we all played a different part. It was Isti who held Buzz, who eventually came in and annihilated the monster... the other creatures sort of wore the monster down, and Buzz came in and cleaned up at the end and destroyed him, and I think he had that dream once more and then it was over. And he also had a recurring dream of a rock, which is, my image of it anyway, is this massive rock that's just so big that you can't see the edges, coming down and just squashing him, and killing him, bang like that. So we did a lot of stuff sort of getting rocks and catapulting them off into the distance, trying to sort of physically get rid of it, so he could feel he was in control of it.

Emily related the performativity of the family's rituals to fight off their son's terrifying nightmares of being crushed by a rock and dying, in much the same light-hearted way that she told the stories of their daily mealtimes. Their shifts into fantasy, to embrace the boys' psychological issues, were not described as being out of the general scope of living. Emily had another story to tell about night time disturbance when the two brothers were reunited. In this story they introduced a new ritual to their family — having the dogs sleep with the boys. Emily also reiterates with this story the strength of the sibling bond as one of the boys searches for his brother in his sleep.

They [the boys] were sleeping on the floor on a double mattress next to our bed and we were all in together, and Micky got up after a couple of hours and was really upset and walking around, he was sleep walking, and he was looking for something and he couldn't find it, and he was inconsolable and Paul said, 'just

leave him,' and he just followed him around, and Paul was great. He followed him and he'd just grab him at the right time and he'd cry and then he'd fall back into a deep sleep, and he did this for a number of weeks, every night. The interesting thing was, when they were separated, Isti was moved into the [adoption orphanage] and [the man in charge] told us Micky was always crawling round the room, trying to get out, and looking for something, looking for his brother. So when they came back together again it's like it was just all sparked off again ... In the first 2-3 weeks he'd go to sleep then his body would relax and then he'd wake up and just vomit everywhere. It was really full on, and someone suggested to us to just lie beside them, so we'd just lie, both of us would lie, sort of spooning, and then we'd even, which we weren't into, but we got into, put a dog each up on the bed with them, cause it would sort of calm them down and they'd just go to sleep.

### 3.4

#### Transformative events

Some of the most interesting narratives in the archive concern evidence of new rituals and generative moments. Creative experiences occur when un-useful discourses are discarded and adults and children invent ways of living and loving that are real and useful to them, by combining ideas from different discourses, disregarding, or perhaps reformulating, the unwritten rules that regulate nuclear family. Jane proudly recounted the story of her marriage to Josh, over fifteen years ago now, where her step-daughter spontaneously took on the role of the bride's father and gave Jane's hand to Josh.

We got married on the beach ... and Catie was four, and she was taken there by Josh's mum, who'd dressed her and done her hair, made her look special ... and she was standing there on the beach, with Josh's mum, and she had let go of Catie's hand, and when Catie saw me walking across, in the big bridal dress, she just sprinted, and she just dived into my arms, and so our friend, who was giving me away, just kind of melted into the background, and Catie held my hand, and she took me onto the beach, and she gave my hand to daddy, and everyone teared up, and to this day I think it's one of the nicest gifts she's ever given me, that beautiful embrace, and giving me her four year old permission.

Similarly, Emily's story about the ritual that evolved with their boys, lying on the trampoline, was a spontaneous extension into fantasy which created a way of acknowledging that the boys' birth parents still occupied parenting positions. Moving from the domestic space to an open space in the wider cosmos, and reorienting themselves became a ritual and they "repeated it many, many times, because it was so important."

We'd come home from going out to dinner; there's a trampoline out the back, and we'd lie on the trampoline, all in a line. I tried to do it recently and they told me to get nicked. (Laughs) And we lie on the trampoline and, because we had a thing about their first mum and dad, where they were in the sky, so that they could look down and see that the boys were OK, and that they were with us, and it was part of the southern cross, and Lemi, the mum, was the pointer star and their dad was one of the ones that was pointing to her. So we'd lie on our backs on the trampoline, all together and we'd look up at the sky, and those two stars, and we'd just sort of, you know, lie there and look at them, and it was a really lovely

little ritual thing that we did, many, many times, because it was so important.

With Isti it was really important to acknowledge them a lot.

Emily also described another bedtime ritual that she created with her son when he was small which they did for about two or three years. It was a way of keeping his culture and birth family alive for him by enacting the words and performing the actions, but with original dance moves being created on the spot by the mother and son together.

I know Micky and I used to do a ritual every single night. It was a little obsessive, (laughs) obsessive compulsive thing that he used to have, because he went through that when Isti came. He became quite ritualised with everything, and if he didn't have the same thing always at the same time he'd be worried that he'd die, or whatever, it'd all fall apart. And so we began to do this thing, he and I, every night, for about two or three years. We'd start off by saying good night to each other, and for both of them actually we'd always say 'goodnight' and 'I love you' in Amharic, and then we made up a little silly thing that'd come out of that, like a little rhyme, you know, and so he and I did that, and then it would turn into a little dance thing, and it went on for a couple of minutes this whole thing. Then we'd hold hands and we'd spin around or whatever, and that happened every single night, and his brother would be in the other bed listening, and he'd start to chime in, in certain bits.

The next narrative outlines Maggie's description of their family circle ritual. While this does not really introduce a new ritual — the talking stick idea originates from American Indian culture and was taken up by family counselling practice, to ensure that each person is listened to — it is inventively performed to facilitate this family's experiences of communicating and connecting.

The family meeting time... it's become a group thing with this new, blended family. My partner, I guess, has initiated most of the rituals... [We have] family circle time once a week. Last week's family circle, he got me to run it, and it was all about dreams; state what your goals and dreams are... We all have a turn to speak; we have like a speaking stick we pass around ... We try to have a theme for every family circle and we finish with a gratitude session ... It's a good way for the boys to really learn gratitude... They are starting to appreciate other things, like a sunny day, and starting to think a bit deeper and be a bit more aware and open to everything in their lives. It's been good. Interesting that my partner set up the circle and everything but he says, well the children don't have a say, if the parents say what's for dinner.

It seems fitting that this section ends with this hint of discord, as it is in the irregularities that transformations can be sparked. In this chapter I have presented instances where individuals and families have discovered ways to use fantasy and performance to reformulate existing discourses, and new rituals have appeared. The following, and final chapter, is a discussion that relates the research archive to some contemporary Australasian literature, the theory established, and to my creative work.

## Chapter Four

“... who knows when you may need the help of a fellow human?”

### Discussion

Once the guest has eaten and drunk at your table, the guest becomes kin... beggar or enemy, friend or chief, if they knock on your door it will open; if they seek your shelter, it will be given, and if they ask for hospitality, give them your bread and wine... for who knows when you may need the help of a fellow human? (The Bone People (1984) Keri Hulme)

### 4.1

#### Theory as analysis

In this project I have written creatively in response to my archive of interviews, and to an examination of the way contemporary theory and literature address this subject. To begin with I will contrast the work of Giddens to the picture emerging from my findings. In the following chapter, I will then describe the way Australasian literature approaches loving relationships between adults and non-biological children.

In the previous two chapters, I showed that love cannot be taken as a given in parent-child and extended family relationships. People are vulnerable and relationships are fragile. I referred to Anthony Giddens's theory on the effect that globalization has had on family in the Introduction and now I will include his theory on intimacy as another way of viewing intra-personal relationships. Giddens's theory follows a “post traditional model” in the exploration of the “impact of globalisation on the personal relationships and inner lives of those living in advanced capitalist societies of the west” (Gross and

Simmons, 2002, p. 1). Giddens theorises that adult relationships are now expected to end when both parties no longer feel their needs are being met. In a study that tests these theories, Gross and Simmons find some evidence that such “pure love” relationships do provide freedom and happiness, but they do not agree with Giddens’s theory that these relationships are so “unpredictable that they threaten to overwhelm people with anxiety... and compensatory addictive behaviours” (Gross and Simmons, 2002, p. 1).

Gross and Simmon’s conclusion corresponds with my own findings that, despite being unpredictable, fulfilling relationships do occur. Children may live with one, none, or both birth parents, and either parent may have any number and type of intimate relationships with another adult, and may also be step-parenting other children.

Obviously not all adults in relationships are going to form loving relationships with their partner’s children, and what is described in the following discussion of the novels, and evidenced in the some of the interviews, are situations where the interactions are seen clearly as what they are: relationships between children and non-biological parents, not bound by traditional ideas of parental love.

My position is that parenting relationships can be viewed as legitimate if they fulfil a child’s practical, social and emotional needs. For example, when discussing his step-daughter with me, Jeff did not ascribe to the traditional familial discourses of parental love, despite questions intended to elicit such a response. Rather, he described a functional home, his emotional availability, and mutual support in domestic life: the early starts he has driving his step-daughter to work, conversations about boyfriends, and the parties they have had for her.

I'll drop her off at work at 7am and then pick her up, and she'll tell me all about her day. She has a bee in her bonnet at the moment about the cyclists who all descend at once in their spandex and just order coffees.

This attitude — which does not follow the traditional discursive style — has the potential to articulate new forms of intimacy.

## 4.2

### Australasian literature as analysis

Australasian literature illuminates further difficulties and rewards that emerge when relationships between adults and other people's children are pursued. The examples I have chosen, which explore new territory in adult-child relationships, assist in highlighting the tensions and discord in my own archive. The authors I will discuss are Keri Hulme, Peter Carey and Kate Grenville.

The quotation I have used to set the tone for this chapter, from Keri Hulme's, *The Bone People*, (1984) draws attention to the difficult subject of child abuse, and extends the meaning of kin beyond biological relationships. Again, this supports Barrett and McIntosh's ideas already discussed about meeting the subject's needs in the community. Hulme portrays the psychological and emotional effects of social isolation in *The Bone People*, where she relates the story of the misuse of power by Joe, a single man who cares for a seven year-old, orphaned boy, Simon. Simon is mute and has no memory of his previous identity. Joe and Simon become involved with Kerewin, who is an artist and a loner and lives in a spiral tower she has built. She witnesses the episodes of love and of violence between them, and eventually child abuse. The depictions of the abuse are

graphic and hard to read as it is a long time before Kerewin intervenes. Joe is ultimately jailed and Simon is placed in a home. At the end of the book Kerewin has adopted Simon and Joe is out of jail, but there is no indication that the three will reunite. While there has been no mention of any abuse in my archive I choose to include this reference as it is a discourse that hovers with great intensity in the background of non-biological parent-child relationships and accordingly can silently effect what is possible in these interactions. We have already encountered an element of these tensions in my discussion of sexual taboos in Chapter 2.3.

The relationships between adults and other people's children have also been examined by Peter Carey, in his novel *His Illegal Self* (2009), and Kate Grenville, in *The Lieutenant* (2008). In what follows, I will give a brief synopsis of both books and then show how these authors have used fiction to convey the deeper senses of unease, fragility and loving care between two human beings in new and difficult social contexts.

Carey tells the story of Che, a seven-year-old boy, taken from his parents, who are involved in anti-war protest organizations in the sixties in America, by his rich grandmother. He is then kidnapped by Dial, a young woman, initially intending to return him to his mother, but as circumstances change, Dial ends up flying to Australia with him. It is the descriptions of the relationships between Dial and Che, and Trevor, the man who befriends them as they settle into life in a hippie commune, that I will explore. Carey's writing incorporates: ideas of love between parents and the children of others, politics, and the sense of the power of the landscape in Australia.

There are themes evident in *His Illegal Self* that resonate with things that the respondents have said in my research. Carey's emphasis on identity and names, discord

in relationships, and the power of adults over children, conveys themes that coincide with my study to some extent. He uses landscape to portray psychological and emotional space as characters move to new ways of being. A visual conceptual way of portraying psychological moods lends itself to descriptions of phenomena that can be changeable and difficult to articulate.

Like the theorists already discussed, Carey is interested in identity and subject formation in this situation. He uses notions of orientation according to place with regard to the child's perceived need to find his or her way and name the new social circumstances he finds him or herself in. Metaphors of the landscape are used to represent the emotional journeys as Carey's characters interact in new relationships. When he is first moved to Australia, Che is completely disoriented. "The boy had no idea on earth where he stood. He understood the names of hardly anything, himself included." (Carey, 2009, p. 22)

Carey depicts the way Che forms a new identity through the relationships he establishes with Dial and Trevor. The processes of forming identity — as expounded by Sara Salih's reading of Butler — are not based on fixed truths, and need to be understood in specific historical and discursive contexts. Salih points out that Butler is interested in the "processes by which the individual assumes the position of subject" (Salih, 2002, p. 10). These processes necessarily differ from case to case, and while Carey writes of an extreme situation, the people I spoke to each offered unique variations regarding discourses that impacted on their relationships as well. This passage brings back to mind Sandra's daughter's negotiation about their dog from the pound keeping its name:

When we got the dog I said to her, 'what do you want to call your dog?' and she said, 'she already has a name', and she said, 'you didn't change my name...'

Another idea in the book that coincides with both my findings and Butler's theory is that Che's parents continue to exist in his imagination as real parents. Despite the constant attempts he makes to find them, he develops a sense of connection and dependency on Dial and, as such, wants to name her as mother. In essence, he has two women in the role of mother, three if we count the grandmother who has the legal right to parent him. Carey shows the confusion this development causes in an adult who is used to considering that the maternal position can only be filled by one name:

He could have turned and run away but he followed her through a beat-up swing door and into a long passage with white cinder blocks and the smell of pee everywhere and when she came to a doorway marked FACILITY, she turned and squatted in front of him.

You've got to be a big boy, she said.

I'm only seven.

I won't call you Che. Don't you call me anything.

Don't you say shut up.

OK.

Can I call you Mom?

She paused, her mouth open, searching in his eyes for something.

You can call me Dial, she said at last, her colour gone all high (Carey, 2009, p. 9).

Naming and identity formation are important in this book. All the main characters have two names, delineating two aspects of their lived realities. There were some examples in my research archive, particularly with the adoptive families, two of whom mentioned their children's birth parent's names. In the book Dial's real name is Anna Xenos. She is an ex-activist and an English professor. The name Che's grandmother gives him is Jay,

reminiscent of the rich, entitled character in *The Great Gatsby*, while Che is a symbol of counter culture, referring of course to Che Guevara.

Che has kept a collection of cards to remind him of who he is following the disruption of being moved from his parents. When he lived with his grandmother he was not allowed to watch television where he might see stories about his parents, and she would not answer his questions about them. Again Carey demonstrates the importance of symbols and language in identity formation, against the power that adults can wield by withholding or changing information. Carey demonstrates that people in parenting roles control what information children can have of their past lives and can thus impact on what the child can possess psychically and materially. I use a similar technique — that of hanging onto a past identity through a collection of objects — in my novella, which I will describe further into this chapter. In the story the child, Eske, has collections of stones that she uses to try to recreate an earlier childhood identity which she remembers in connection with Ethiopian churches. The following exchange between Che and Dial exemplifies how Che cuts off his affection when Dial keeps personal information, which he relies on, from him. He tries to hurt her by changing his identity back to a previous existence in a bid to find out about his parents in order to construct his identity.

He wants to know how his father will find him; everyday his skin got hurt or broken.

Che, talk to me.

I'm Jay he said. He did not have many ways to hurt her (Carey, 2009, p. 146).

When Che finds a cat he says, "He's lucky he found us, Dial" (Carey, 2009, p. 61). He names the cat Buck, after the dog in Jack London's novella, *The Call of the Wild* (1903), which tells of a domestic dog that has to rely on instinct to survive in the wild. Che uses

the pet, as some of the children in my interviews did, to assert a sense of family, conjuring responsibility and caring. The correlation to their survival in the wild, new territory in Australia and in new relationships is obvious.

As seen below, Trevor inadvertently compares himself to Che's father and outlines the way he sees the difference in the roles and the bond. In doing so, he outlines the view, based on biogenetic superiority, that men who are not blood related have a choice in the way they treat children, but biological parents do not. It is interesting that Trevor, who is not emotionally attached at this point, privileges the position of biogenetic superiority which he later subverts, while Che's birth father does not appear.

I'm not going to hurt you, said the man.

My dad would kill you, said the boy.

He's your dad, said the man. What choice would he have? (Carey, 2009, p. 161)

The third theme I have chosen to explore is the way Carey encourages the reader to experience his characters' deeper feelings, such as: loss, fear, hope and love, by relating their emotions to the landscape. It is a device I use in the creative writing to establish the emotional moods that accompany inter-personal relationships. Contradictions and points of discord can be more readily experienced with images of landscape, such as the following two descriptions of Che's sadness at the loss of his mother.

But at Kenoza Lake he never had a mother. That was the biggest thing about it. It would always be summer, in his memory, the roadsides dense with goldenrod and the women from the village coming to steal the white hydrangeas just like their mothers stole before them. The geese would be heading up to Canada and the Boeings spinning their white contrails across the cold blue sky – loneliness and hope, expanding, like paper flowers in water. It was always summer, always

chilled by fall; the mother's absence everywhere in the air, in the maple leaves  
(Carey, 2009, p. 13).

Compare to:

The mother and the boy were adrift, together in a trailer, with her Harvard book bag hugged between them, and the boy pretended that the prowling storm was just boatspray on Kenoza Lake, in his face and on his feet, and the mother was warm and foggy and he held her tight, his lips against her arm, no matter what  
(Carey, 2009, p. 60).

The fourth thematic area that this novel brings up for examination is the discourse of sexual abuse that hovers in the relationship and the dialogue between Trevor and Che. While no assault ever takes place, and Trevor sometimes appears to be more attuned to the boy's psyche than Dial, Carey raises the possibility by skilfully presenting the background story of the violence and possible paedophilia that Trevor reports enduring as a child from the priests at the orphanage. As we see these scenes through Che's eyes we have a premonition of danger over and above the more innocent understanding of the boy. The following two passages are examples of the subtle way that Carey introduces these undercurrents of potential abuse and tension.

The priests liked my blue eyes, can you imagine that? Would you say I was a pretty man?

I should go soon.

No, I'm not a pretty man, and I was not a pretty boy, but the brothers took a liking to my eyes and they left me in such despair I tried to beat my eyes out with a rock so they would change their colour. You understand why?

The boy shook his head. He knew he could not leave (Carey, 2009, p. 170).

Physical contact can be an area of ambiguity as people commonly use touch to demonstrate affection. This is an area I worked through in examining the archive as a background to the stories, as there were three respondents who were adult males step-parenting teenage girls, and one woman step-parenting a teenage son. There were silences and sometimes awkwardness around the area of using physical affection. Though I was not told any stories of crossed boundaries, the tension still impacted in the discussions about family dynamics. I will write more specifically on how I have responded creatively to this topic later in this chapter.

In Carey's novel, when adults are in parenting roles to non-biological children, we see deep drives for loyalty and love, such as Dial's comment: "I love you Che. Every single thing was worth it" (Carey, 2009, p. 270); accompanied by fear of the unknown and presentiments of danger.

In the final scene Che lays frightened, hiding on the ground, waiting to be picked up from a drop off point in the bush by the police and returned to his legal guardian, presumably in America. The choice of image Carey has chosen here, blood and bone, relates his exploration of these relationships to the theory of biogenetic superiority, indicating here that — in this case from the child's perspective — it does not hold in the social context. "He wished he could just lie down with Trevor and Dial and feel the blood and bone and earth around him and never move again" (Carey, 2009, p. 272).

There is a twist in the ending, however, when Dial, acting in her real persona, Anna Xenos, shows up at the last minute with Trevor to kidnap him again.

[B]ehind the glistening windshield was Anna Xenos, her elbows wide, her head forward, and beside her was Trevor and they were coming so fast that the boy jumped up so as not to get killed and they saw him and opened the passenger door to scoop him up, to hold him tight, to take him now, recklessly, because they would not lose him from their lives (Carey, 2009, p. 272).

Carey uses descriptions of actions more than emotions to demonstrate Dial's love for Che as in the description of this action of deep emotional significance which is reckless and risky. Like Antigone, these characters break society's rules and conventions to disrupt hegemonic discourse and demonstrate new possibilities in commitment to kinship.

I will now discuss *The Lieutenant*, by Kate Grenville. This book tells the story of a lieutenant on the first fleet, Daniel Rooke, and his encounter with a young aboriginal girl. Rooke is a cultured, sensitive man interested in understanding other worlds. He has a telescope to study the stars and he is learning languages and mathematics. The girl, Tagaran, befriends him and they learn about each other's very different lives as they teach each other their respective languages. Again we experience tension and confusion as Grenville portrays the fragility of the relationship as these two people find a way to communicate and reflect, meeting intellectually, emotionally and physically, as they do in this unknown territory. Their personal discoveries are played out here against the background of the discovery and colonisation of Australia. For Rooke, the possibilities are limited by social and political rules and taboos, including the threat of court martial.

The story is told by Rooke, who essentially has to choose between performing the role of the regulated naval life and exploring the freedom and new insights to life that are stimulated by his encounter with Tagaran. This idea of choice — between staying with

the security of the hegemonic discourse and moving into the territory between discourses — aligns with Antigone's action and also with Carey's novel. My view is that fear of the consequences that might arise from choosing to deviate from the norms are one of the reasons that so many people in my archive go to lengths to perform in accordance with the hegemonic norms, rather than defying them.

The first theme I will look at in discussing *The Lieutenant* is how intimacy and self transformation can develop between two people from different experiences and ontological understandings. This writing stimulated a search in my archive for findings regarding the intelligibility of intimacy across cultures. I have written about characters perceiving themselves as existing in different realities as a theme, which I will expound on later in this chapter; but first I refer again to Emily's interview, as she describes the family's strategies for achieving a deep, loving communication by creating an imaginary emotional space. Grenville made use of the metaphor of astronomy and the stars, creating an image of limitless possibilities of the universe, as did Emily's family, and the family in the interview previously cited by Dorow and Swiffen (2009).

As Rooke and Tagaran form an intimate friendship through the process of learning new language, Grenville creates a mood of hovering discord around social regulations and sexual taboos. The relationship is never completely defined in the characters' dialogue, but Grenville shows the depth of emotional connections that can arise from communication not based on speech. Specifically, she shows the emotional connections that arise when these two people find that there are not adequate words to define what they are discovering in this territory of continuing differences: "There was no word for what he had learned with Tagaran. He could not attach a name to what he felt for her. But she had shown him the existence of the man he could be." (Grenville, 2008, p. 281)

This is another description of a relationship that exceeds the possibilities of language and existing discourses.

The second theme I have chosen, that Grenville elucidates in this book, is the notion of a person choosing between living two different realities, or according to extremely different discourses. In this discussion I make references to other realities that a person might be searching for, may glimpse, or may slip in and out of, which are ways of being and feeling that are separate from the roles of day-to-day life. Grenville's description of Rooke, "slipping into an extension of himself" (Grenville, 2008, p. 278), which he found through the process of his relationship with Tagaran, is a way of trying to depict the inter-subjective possibilities created, and necessary, in achieving intimacy with the other.

Breaking the skin of the water and sliding beneath it was like slipping into an extension of himself. It was warm, warmer than during the day, almost the temperature of his body. It buoyed him up, lapping itself around him, making him a floating nothing, not of land, not of sea, not of this world, not of another (Grenville, 2008, p. 278).

Ways of depicting a character's movement into other imagined realities, by the use of such metaphors as moving through water, can be used in fiction to convey the feelings such as mental and psychological shifts and expansion. In my short story, *The Patterns of the Vines*, I use patterns in nature as a device to depict the feeling of movement between states, to step out of the roles prescribed by the prevailing discourses. Grenville uses Rooke's hut as such a place, a space between discourses.

A world existed here in his hut, a world he shared with Tagaran and the others. It was on another orbit altogether from the one he shared with his own kind. But a man could not travel along two different paths. Tagaran knew that. Now he knew it too ... the pleasure he found with Tagaran cast a shadow (Grenville, 2008, p. 218).

When Rooke tries to reconcile the two different existences he realises that the power of the traditional family discourse operating in his society renders his living in the newly discovered existence incomprehensible.

Perhaps this was what it was like to have children of one's own, and move with them in an atmosphere of easy playfulness. He supposed that one day, like most men, he would marry. If he did, and had those unimaginable children of his own, he would remember this. He tried to picture himself telling them the story. *Then one night two native children slept in my hut* (Grenville, 2008, p. 191).

The third theme I will comment on is how Grenville also skilfully brings up the taboos around sexuality in this intimate relationship. Rooke himself is unable to name the relationship he has with Tagaran. He sometimes thinks of her as his child, or his sister. Rooke struggles to make sense of things after accidentally touching the skin on Tagaran's shoulder. He knows the touch is too familiar, even though she reminds him of his sister. He realises that she wanted to be naked in front of the fire to dry herself, and he sees that she is explaining something else too. "She had seen his unease and she understood the cause" (Grenville, 2008, p. 179). Grenville attributes sophisticated thinking to the young girl and elaborates on Rooke's physiological response to indicate his complete confusion.

Still he felt awkward ... He could feel the warmth coursing through his blood, beating out against the skin. He turned to the table and made a to-do of getting the notebook and pen out and writing (Grenville, 2008, p. 180).

In these descriptions Grenville depicts situations where people do not necessarily have adequate words to express their understanding of a relationship. As touch can be construed as sexual and sexual taboos regulate society, Rooke struggles to convey his dilemma, but he sees Tagaran understands him with “effortless authority.” He describes her as having “more than intelligence...Tagaran’s understanding was like quicksilver” (Grenville, 2008, p. 175). Later, when he is analysing his colleague Silk’s response to this relationship, Rooke again cannot find words to describe the situation. This indicates that there is no discourse available, and he finds himself, as many do in my project, in new territory.

In Silk’s mind there could be no intimacy with a native girl that was not physical. And how can I hope to persuade him otherwise, Rooke thought, when I myself do not understand and have no word for intimacy? (Grenville, 2008, p. 209)

Grenville uses symbols and imagery to define the boundaries of Rooke’s imaginings and understandings of Tagaran. As Carey used images of ripe fruit for their sexual connotations, Grenville creates sexual tension in the following description of the cockles and mud oysters.

He had often seen the smoke rising there, and Tagaran had told him how the cockles and thick mud oysters loved the still water of that narrow bay. Once he had gone with her as far as a big rock from which the camp could be seen: a

couple of bark shelters, a patch of cleared earth, a fire. She had made it clear that he should not go further, and he had not insisted (Grenville, 2008, p. 227).

When Rooke leaves we see that the relationship will remain alive in his imagination, just as Che's parents live on in his imagination, and the deceased parents of adopted children remain as real figures in their lives: "Between them across the water a long thread stretched out, spinning out longer and longer as their figures grew small." (Grenville, 2008, p. 302)

Grenville writes again about the stars and the universe as the boat leaves: "Tagaran was invisible now, but she was a part of everything he could see, like the faintest, most distant star, sending its steady light out towards him across space." (Grenville, 2008, p. 302)

These novels deal with many of the factors that serve to make loving relationships possible between adults and other people's children, and what limits or forecloses them. Both novels inform my creative writing process, thematically and stylistically.

#### 4.3

##### Creative Process Rationale

There are several rationales for presenting an archive like mine creatively. Firstly, creative interpretation of the interviews allows de-identification of the respondents by changing their names and the contexts of their stories. Secondly, I am able to metaphorically open up the themes to include the moods associated with emotional and social encounters. A third reason for this choice of presentation is that personal, rather than academic, writing allows the reader to imagine themselves as an insider to the

subject's thinking; to experience the sort of immeasurable, emotional phenomena I am looking for.

To create an understanding of the inherent tensions from multiple points of view was important in regard to the discursive analysis of the interviews, and this was made possible by writing in a way that the voices of different subjects could be displayed. This is not the sort of research that can categorise responses but rather develops a picture that shows change from different perspectives. I have used the methods of changing the narrator, and the tense, in all the short stories to convey the multiple ways that complex situations can be understood. For example, in the short story, *Beach Cricket*, an extended family gathers on the beach for a christening: the young ones play cricket while those from the older generation watch and drink wine, and try to place who is related to whom. In the end when, Anne, one of the older ladies, collapses on the sand and the confusion between the different discursive possibilities comes to the fore as they have to decide who each should leave with. In the creative work I show such confusion by giving different perceptions and reactions to new situations, and often there is a third person narrator. Academic writing, on the other hand, is forced to adopt one, totalising perspective, however much it might quote from others, and as such takes the immediacy from such a situation.

Interpreting each interview by writing imaginatively on the emotional tensions articulated allows me to expand on the performative conception of life I find in Butler, but with references to my own encounters and other's stories I have been told in the course of this research. The interview that corresponds to *The Chickens* is Fiona's: she tells of her mother deliberately keeping an emotional distance from the grandchildren. In the story the buying of chickens, and then the killing of the chickens, is a metaphor for

the confusion between her desire for a loving relationship and the pain and destruction the decision to forgo it causes.

Depicting rituals — Victor Turner’s “notion of social drama as a device to look beneath the surface of social regularities into the hidden contradictions and eruptions of conflict” (Deflem, 1991, p. 2) — aligns well with creative writing. The two genres I have chosen, short stories and the novella, are related directly to the archive. The short stories each correspond to the physical and emotional content of one participant’s shared anecdotes, worked up in the creative writing process, stimulated by my own memories, as well as the theory and fiction examined, all of which reflect confusions, tensions and scope for new possibilities. The novella addresses the intelligibility of relationships within a reconfigured family in the context of contemporary Australian society. The novella form allows for subjectivity which augments interpretation of the interviews, so the personal and emotional development of the main characters becomes the focus of the writing.

Everyone has a family so the issues being raised should be applicable across the board. Access to other people’s lived experiences enables understandings from emotional and psychological positions, and insights into what norms may be restricting emotional connections. Using performativity as a concept of analysis that “shifts our understanding, beginning to illuminate the complex relations among body, action, and language” (Secomb, 2008, p. xix) involves the use of somatosensory imagery that can trigger emotional responses beyond the ambiguities and tensions in relationships. This technique follows Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, where human visceral reactions that can accompany exclusion refer to a “place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva,

1982, p.2). This passage from my short-story *The Wedding*, is an example of the type of visceral imagery I use to convey overwhelming emotional reactions to loss.

I walked a fair way away from my car, well out of reach of a chance glancing of the beach, and I hoisted up my skirt and bent my legs all the way to the ground, right between two big, green garbage bins. No sooner had I started to empty my bladder than my eyes started running. Then the tears came with a force that made me gulp out loud. There was nothing I could do, so I just gave in and sobbed, and back came the memory of Lacey's birth with it. Three years ago I had been squatting, not alone then though, one inside me, Lacey, and one holding me up, Robert.

Creative writing provides a means to work through tensions, loss and confusion, such as Tom's description of his step-daughter's feelings of rejection and Emily's awareness of adoptive relationships breaking down and children being relinquished. If there is a chance of failure of emotional bonds to form within a family, or a perceived failure, finding different ways of living together can be hard to articulate as there are tensions around the need to maintain loving relationships as sanctioned by traditional family discourses. This situation can lead to the hyper-performances I discussed under the heading "Meritorious parenting". In the case of Tom, such hyper-performance became apparent after his interview as he walked with me to the car-park and continued talking, for some time, about the hours and hours of work that he put into helping his step-daughter to fill out forms and appeal for government assistance, not to mention banking and car loans etcetera.

There is a tension in the creative writing process, as there is in living, as experienced phenomena are interpreted, and relationships compete within normalising

interdictions. Some of the characters in my fiction struggle to understand and reveal their inner lives while performing family roles in the way they believe society expects them to. There are confusions as discourses compete. Like us, my characters are fallible, and they each need one another. In the novella I explore tensions, particularly at the interface of family and community, questioning how it is that community can best support the subject's needs. In the novella, *Out in the Sea*, Sylvana and Jack are the parents of nine year-old Eske, adopted from Ethiopia. Each member of the family strives toward self determination, each having a different concept of what living as a family entails. Birgit and Malc, their friends, are the other main characters. Birgit and Sylvana's complicated friendship, which is one of the main driving forces of the novella, is defined by a tension of misunderstandings and misconceptions and is intended to stimulate questions about why the nuclear family discourse is still such a powerful influence on contemporary thinking. I intend this friendship also to trigger questions about what qualities sustain friendships and parenting relationships, and where the differences lie. At different times all the characters need to have their thoughts reconfirmed by others as they enter new territory. This is reminiscent of Anna Mudde's interpretation of Hegel, cited in Chapter Two, "I do not know who/what I am until I have acted and my community has reflected my action back to me" (Mudde, 2009, p. 197).

#### 4.4

#### Concluding thoughts

Unexpectedly a handful of thin fingers reaches for her wrist ... she meets the child's eyes, seabluegreen ... "let go my wrist" but the grip tightens (Hulme, 1984, p. 17).

The novella and the short stories reflect the different motivations and means by which individuals in non-biological families, and their extended kinship groups, find possibilities of forming and maintaining loving connections. In the archive each respondent told a unique story of how their family operates, each with different obstacles to overcome, and some extending their definition of family to include a wider group of friends and kin. Having analysed the archive discursively and using a creative process, I have come to favour this more communal idea of the social family, as is advocated in Queer theory, that escapes the normalising interdictions associated with hegemonic nuclear family discourses. The stories reflect the findings that adults can and do move in and out of parenting roles forming different types of connections: loving and other. There is a clear discussion of parenting as a role in the literature and the archive and I offer different interpretations of ways these roles can be enacted.

Making reference to Butler's understanding of kinship as social, rather than reliant on bloodlines, means that it is possible to challenge the ways of describing and enacting kinship. Antigone's radical choice contextualises this archive, as norms — devices that structure society and are not rigid — that can be interpreted differently by different people, and can be destabilised.

The analysis of this small study indicates that there is no common way that people are exploring possibilities of making loving connections with other people's children, as there are many factors at play: social and personal. The study was about looking for the unexpected, hidden, and creative ways of interacting that are going on and not often

spoken about, as well as exploring the sometimes ambiguous and fragile bonds that hold relationships together.

In this Masters dissertation I have explored reconfigured family in a time when children are increasingly likely to be parented by non-biological adults. I have conducted a research project to discover how it is that loving relationships can be made intelligible in these different parenting situations. I have looked for taboos and boundaries, tensions and slippages, as well as instances where new rituals have been generated outside of hegemonic discourses. In trying to decipher the intelligibility of love as people find themselves in new territory I have developed themes of orientation, changing realities and sexual taboos that the literature models. It is evident that examining kinship practices requires the bigger analytical framework that Butler calls for.

To end the exegesis, before moving to the short stories, I will reiterate Butler's view on kinship as a practice:

Understood as a socially alterable set of arrangements that has no cross-cultural structural features that might be fully extracted from its social operations, kinship signifies any number of social arrangements that organise the reproduction of marital life, that can include the ritualization of birth and death, that provide bonds of intimate alliance both enduring and breakable, and that regulate sexuality through sanction and taboo (Butler, 2000, p. 71).

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## Collection of short stories

1.

### The Wedding

#### Part 1

That particular song would have to be playing then, just as I stopped the car: first an old lady dies, there are intentions dropped to the floor, and a new baby cries. I couldn't sing properly at first as my throat had swollen, so I rocked on the car seat, backwards and forwards, in time to some deep pain in me that wouldn't quite surface. I focussed on a small cloud drifting across the sky, looking ahead through the windscreen; it moved in front of deeper banks of grey and purple storm clouds.

"A new baby cries ..." I kept grinding and rocking in time to the music, and with the movement I made the white cloud look like it was dancing on a musical trajectory.

I sat in my car, trying to hold it in and trying to cry some tears at the same time, staring straight at the brown, brick building — the surf life-saving club. It completely blocked my view of the beach, but I could see the curve of yellow sand and the white, choppy waves clearly in my mind. I surprised myself yelling out the final chorus in a deep throaty voice I had never heard before. 'Confusion sets in,' I sang as loud as I could.

Then I turned the radio off; it was bad reception anyway, but I kept jiggling on the seat as I had been sitting there for quite a while and I needed to get out and find the toilet. But I couldn't move. I knew where the toilet was, just inside the entrance to the surf club, but I couldn't go in there; not push that glass door open or hurry over the gritty tiles with my bare feet. There was no way I could risk even catching a glimpse of what was going on down on the beach. I considered squatting beside the car, opening the door

and letting the urine gush onto the bitumen, knowing that I could be seen by cars passing down the road, and that I might spray my legs.

I watched the cloud, the same one, and it seemed sort of marooned, out of place; still it was the only light in the stormy sky. Eventually I decided I would have to find somewhere to squat; I couldn't wait any longer. I walked a fair way away from my car, well out of reach of a chance glancing of the beach, and I hoisted up my skirt and bent my legs all the way to the ground, right between two big, green garbage bins. No sooner had I started to empty my bladder than my eyes started running. Then the tears came with a force that made me gulp out loud. There was nothing I could do, so I just gave in and sobbed, and back came the memory of Lacey's birth with it. Four years ago I had been squatting, not alone then though, one inside me, Lacey, and one holding me up, Robert, on that surreal walk down the brown, dirt track, waiting for the contractions to get closer together so we could go to the hospital.

I was walking a few steps, then squatting, as I felt I would piss myself or tear in half, then walking, and of course then my water broke, and all that warm fluid ran down my legs, and I cried out in wonder and pain as the birth started. My belly heaved in memory as I squatted, imagining my child, now four years old, on the other side of that brick building, dressed as a flower girl.

I pulled myself up to standing as if I still held her inside me, leaning heavily on the bins. I kicked off my wet underwear and left it there on the ground, and I forced myself to walk on to the club, to peer around the corner. They wouldn't be able to see my face — it was too dull. It was hardly the sunset wedding they'd planned; there was an eerie, bright light, more like shipwreck weather, and I saw crows and seagulls squawking as they circled above the gathering. I held onto the corner of the building with my fingertips,

using just one eye to take in the scene. It was at that moment that Lacey turned around. She seemed to be looking straight at my face, and I half expected her to run to me, but she turned away again, preoccupied. She couldn't have seen me. I waited in an invisible numbness. I found I could keep watching without the pain getting any worse. I found I could keep watching and I could become less and less part of the scene, even less part of myself. Soon I was able to watch myself watching the wedding.

Lacey is intent on her part. Her hair has been braided and she has a halo of flowers around her forehead, white daisies and something pink. She looks completely different; standing, swaying, gripping a small posy of violets tightly bound in aluminium foil.

I mostly watched her, and then the waves, and then I cast my eye over Robert's mother who was fussing around near Lacey and constantly adjusting her clothes. The weather was coming in from the sea and I thought I saw lightening far out over the horizon. The group stood crowded together under the balcony of the club in their flimsy summer dresses, and I saw the party was using the big brazier heaters from the restaurant. My feet were cold and I could feel a chafing from the wind on my damp legs. Time passed quickly; it was a race between the rain coming and the ceremony finishing. I stepped further around the corner and then I didn't care whether anyone saw me there or not. I had been invited after all, which was nice, so everyone said. My ex-husband kept everyone happy all of the time, they all said so.

This was to be a very different ceremony to the one the two of us had had in the registry office, not that long ago really; but I said: definitely not, to the invite. It would be too much for Lacey. Paula thanked me for that and then bought her the fancy dress she had on.

I didn't wait until the end of the ceremony. I had to look away when Paula came walking down the steps in the long, white dress. I turned my head from her to Lacey, hoping to catch Lacey's eye, but her gaze was fixed on the bride.

Paula steps off the bottom step and Lacey starts moving towards her, and I see her start to run, and I turn quickly in case I yell out. I make it back home; somehow, I don't remember any of the trip, just the awful feeling of my wet legs touching against each other on the seat.

## Part 2

Paula: I didn't want Rob to compete, it was too much, but he really wanted to and he had organised his friend to run alongside him. In the end I agreed to it, but reluctantly. The four of us headed off to Manly. It was cold at five in the morning. Rob was so determined to finish that race that we all ended up going. My heart was really in my mouth.

Rob: It was the best day of my life — one of them anyway. I had no idea if I'd get through the race or not; I didn't even know if I'd make it through the swim because I'd only swum in the pool since the accident, and swimming in the sea is a whole different story: currents and swells, and its bloody cold. But that was the least of my worries — the bike course went right round the corner that I had the crash on. I didn't tell Paula that, and I don't think she looked at the course map, but I talked to the psychologist and he said that if I wanted to move on in the rehab then I should "take a deep breath" and do it.

Paula eventually came around to the idea, when I said that Mitch was going to do it with me, and she got the girls out of school to come across the day before. Everyone was there to cheer me on, that was the best bit. That's what drove me on to the finish. I

thought I'd never run again, but picturing them there at the end, on the sand, that got me fired up, pumping the blood in the veins, right to the end.

Paula: Lacey was ten and Bree was only two, so I was holding her on my lap and Lacey was walking about nervously. There was dance music blaring through the speakers and it was a bit chilly, windy, but not freezing. We couldn't see Rob as he had to go off to the tent to get registered and numbered, and then get his bike set up. I just sat on the steps on the surf-club holding Bree into my body, keeping warm, and watching Lacey skipping about on the edge of the waves, waiting.

We were all proud of Rob wanting to try it. His vision was affected and he still had attacks of dizziness, but he had sailed through rehab and even started running on the sand. When the siren went I stood up and cheered. We all moved closer as they thrashed their way out through the waves. I think he saw me mouth, 'good luck,' to him, but then I couldn't tell which one he was out there, so I just had to wait and pray that he'd come back in up the sand.

Lacey called out to me from the beach, "There he is! I see him! He's not even the last." Then she ran up to me and threw her arms around me and Bree, and I felt her heart pounding. She raced off and cheered for him as he lumbered in to get ready for his ride. I could hear her screaming for him as he pulled out with Mitch. They were at the end of the pack, but he was on that bike and pedalling. Then Lacey was back, her arms wrapped around me again and we shared the excitement and fear. I needed those arms around me. I didn't know if Rob knew or not but the bike course went right round the corner of the accident. I sat still looking at the sky, looking at the wispy clouds and listening to the guy on the microphone, but not hearing a word he said. It was only an eighteen-kilometre ride, but it seemed to go forever.

Rob: I took the corner too fast. I heard Mitch call out but it was too late, I skidded into the gutter and landed like a tonne of bricks. The volunteers checked my bike. I was stunned but that's nothing new. "You keep going," I yelled at Mitch, but he had stopped. Right then I was suddenly filled with rage, anger like I've never felt before and next thing you know I'm burning up the course, passing people, swearing, yelling, and pedalling like a mad thing. There was blood running down my face, they said, blood and tears.

Paula: We had a group hug at the end, the four of us, all crying, all messed up, after he came in over the line and he grabbed us all in his arms; there were the four of us sitting on those sandy steps, all panting. That would have to be one of the most intense moments I've ever had, and not one of us said a word.

2.

Sometimes

Sometimes people say the hardest hitting things at the most unexpected times. I was watching my daughter through the branches of a tree. She had just come last in the running race she had insisted on being in, and both of us were feeling very out of place.

I'll fill you in. I became a mother again late in life, so on the day I'm talking about I was nearing fifty three years old and I'd become short-sighted and short tempered, and Nebbi was eight — energetic and restless. I had just adopted her from Africa. Back then she was either overly confident or frightened as a rabbit. In the blaring, hot sun we stood around with people we didn't know at the cross-country venue for the day, which was the Cotter Dam. The girls and boys had to run one and a half kilometres around a dirt track that went up a hill and over a bridge and ended up on the bank in front of us. Nebbi ran off with the group of under ten girls up the hill, and I saw her scowl at me as she ran by and she saw me standing in the line of attractive, young mothers in shorts; all of them filming their daughters on their iPods or phones. I was hanging back, clapping her with my two empty hands, and ready to move along to clap her again at the next bend in the track, with no cute dog or baby to bring with me.

Nebbi ran well for the first 100 or so meters. I could tell she was really trying as her elbows were beating back and forth like propellers, but by the seven hundred meter mark she was walking, with her head hanging. I moved to the next point and kept clapping, hoping that someone else would walk soon too, the two of them would form a bond, and all would end well. But all the other girls sprinted in to the finish. They got their place cards and stood in a line in their order, smiling for photos.

So, after this, I was standing around, watching her through the branches of a gum tree, burning irritably in the heat, while the girls jumped about in the river water, making up games with the pine cones in the mud. The games seemed to have complex, unspoken rules and Nebbi was sitting back watching them play. The other parents were talking to each other. I didn't know any of them, though I could place a few faces, and I wasn't in the mood to start any conversations.

I was getting ready to spring through the trees and signal to Nebbi that it was time to leave when one of the girls left the game and grabbed Nebbi by the hand. She ran with her to another little enclave and, right before my eyes, they started their own pine cone in the mud game. I had tears in my eyes as I retraced my steps back through the trees. I could hear them laughing against the sounds of water and chatter and bird noises. That one kind gesture ignited a memory of a place of long green leaves and stems, flowers and incense, reminding me of things that are mostly dormant but can sing inside the mind. The space somehow seemed to change around us.

I wandered happily back to the car when, who should approach me with a thermos of coffee — which I was nearly beside myself with cravings for — but a young woman wearing high-waisted shorts and huge sunglasses. The smell of the coffee had me nearly grabbing her arm when she stopped beside me.

"I'm Paula", she said, and looked toward the girls, and I realised it was her girl that had befriended Nebbi. She told me that her husband coaches athletics and that she thought he once coached one of my older children.

Here we go, I thought. "Nebbi's not athletic," I said.

“She’s beautiful”, Paula said, still watching them and not looking like she was going to pour any coffee. Then it was as if she must have read my mind: “Oh”, she said, “would you like a cup of coffee? I’m having one”

Paula poured the strong coffee into the lid of the thermos and another cup she had in the bag over her arm. We rested our bottoms against the bonnet of my car as we drank in silence and watched the two girls playing.

“Your daughter is the first one here to play with Nebbi,” I said impulsively. “Usually she just watches the others.”

“Bree’s a caring soul”, she said. “She’s like my mother; she’s just one of those people. I was once told by a psychic that she has no karma; this incarnation, she’s here to create art. She makes people happy.”

“I didn’t know there really were such people,” I said, “without karma.”

We continued to drink the coffee in silence and the breeze was thick and warm around us. The water shimmered so the air above it puffed in and out.

“You know I don’t often tell people this,” Paula said, “but I think she is my mother, reincarnated.”

That was not something that I had been expecting to hear. I had a hot flush of recognition and found myself lost for words. The fact is that the situation around Nebiet’s adoption was completely weird: involving coincidences and dreams, and money coming my way just when it was needed; consequences of things eventuating that we could never have imagined happening. I couldn’t help but think, once or twice, that this could be some kind of reuniting of souls — that it was meant to be. I had never voiced

those thoughts. Paula poured more coffee into the two cups and we stood burning in the silence.

"Nebbi and I knew more about each other when we first met than was physically possible," I finally gave her as my response.

Paula looked at me and nodded.

"And Nebbi has my mother's exact same sneeze."

I sometimes think of that hot day by the river — the coffee, the girl with no karma playing in the mud, and the intensity of the silence as they played together — and I wonder what became of that girl. Paula, the coach's wife, had fitted in with the group of parents so well she had made me crazy with happiness and doubt.

Now, ten years on from that day, I'm sitting by the window, waiting for Nebbi. She's coming to pick me up and we're going to have a picnic lunch at the Cotter Dam. I don't know what her memories are like of those days doing cross-country running, but that won't be what we're discussing today. I have a feeling she has some important news to share with me.

In the car, remembering that day and the other mothers with their cameras and dogs, I remind her of the story of her first dog, the cocker spaniel we got from the pound. I'm not a dog person, and neither is she, but all the other kids had dogs so Nebbi had insisted we get one too. I chose the prettiest, laziest dog I could see, and we put it in the box in the back of the car.

"What do you want to call him?" I asked her.

“Don’t you know his name?” She asked. She had wanted me to turn around and drive back to the pound to find out.

“They might not know it,” I said. “He was lost and he mightn’t have had a name-tag.”

“He must have a name,” she said. “We can’t make something up,” she said.

“No,” I agreed.

We drove back to the pound and the man said he thought the dog was called Rufus. We tested that and the dog seemed to respond.

“Remember Rufus,” I say as we pull into the car park and look at the dam. There has been a lot of rain in the last month and the banks are overgrown with long green grass. The water shines. Nebiet laughs.

We sit in silence and eat the rolls she has packed and drink coffee from the thermos. It is on the tip of my tongue to ask her what is brewing, but I don’t want to be the one to speak first. I settle into the chair next to her and sit quietly, listening to the hum of insects in the reeds and the water splashing. She will tell me when she is ready, and I’m pretty sure she knows that I have a feeling about her news.

She fills me in just as we start to pack up, both of us standing side on to the river, so, as she runs her hand down over the mound of belly, she is highlighted by the light from the sun over the water. Everything glistens as we feel each other’s excitement.



3.

### You Should Read It

I was watching the two heads in front of me on the plane, two men in business suits, one with short dark hair and the other with a head of grey curls. At first I thought the grey-haired head was a woman, so I guessed I was looking at a middle aged man sitting beside his old mother, and I had a pang for my son who had moved to live overseas a few months ago, to Spain. I imagined how comforting it was for the mother to have the son taking care of the travel plans, making sure she would order the right sort of food and have the right change in foreign currencies.

Then they turned their heads, for different reasons, and I saw that they were in fact two men in business clothes, and they didn't know each other at all. They didn't speak to each other even though they were sitting shoulder to shoulder.

I flicked open the magazine I had bought at the drinks counter and I recognised a woman I know from Simone's school, smiling up at me from a small side photo on the front cover.

"Look."

I showed Simone the photograph. "I've seen her in the office at the school. Does she work on the canteen?"

Simone didn't know and she wasn't interested. Mark had bought her a smart phone before we left and, from what I could see, she was filing it up with photos of herself. She tilted the screen so I couldn't see it and I opened the magazine to read the story about Yvonne.

The story turned out to be so disturbing that I didn't notice when the hostess put the plastic cup of water on my tray. I read that Yvonne had witnessed the way her uncle, who was a priest, sat young children from the parish on his knee and fondled them. It said that only now, in her middle age, had she found the strength in herself to turn him in. The article was part of a series of similar exposes. I stared at the photo. She didn't look a courageous type of woman: simple clothes, no makeup, nearly fifty. I wondered what possessed her to tell this story to a tabloid reporter.

"You should read it," I said to Simone, who had plugged her earphones in and was humming to herself in a happy state, unaware of the irritating squeaking noise a child and mother were making as they tried to twist a balloon into a dog shape a few seats back.

She didn't answer, but she slid the magazine over onto her lap, open at the page and kept humming. That meant I had nothing to occupy me. I wanted to flick through the rest of the magazine — not sit staring at the two heads in front of me, one of which had wobbled over to rest on the older one's shoulder, then jerked upright — but I decided to wait and let her read it. She needed to be informed.

Some time passed and I realised that Simone's eyes were closed. I snatched the magazine back and flipped through it, looking for something to take my interest. She had slumped back in her chair with her thin, green skirt stretched tight over her knees that were spread out into the space of both our seats. She slept with her lips together in a secretive smile. I looked at the lists of ingredients in the Christmas recipes and reminded myself that I hate cooking. I hate chopping and I hate trying to read the recipes. Mark is the cook. I rubbed some of the body lotion he gave me for the trip into

my hands and neck. It has a faint sandalwood smell, my favourite. The cream is thick, a yellowy colour and rich for my skin.

Before Mark moved in with us Simone and I happily lived on packet food, heated up in the microwave, and salads and vegetables. On one wage with three children to feed I didn't ever have any money to spend on extravagant meals, and none of us liked being in the kitchen much. The day after Mark carried a bag of pyjamas and bathroom things up to my bedroom, and I realised that he was here to stay; he came home from work with a big box of knives. I was dumbstruck; they had cost him a fortune. He sharpened them up daily and they stood ready in the block in the corner of our old kitchen, like magic weapons ready to transform us.

The guy with the short brown hair eventually had his head fully resting on the other one's shoulder, deeply asleep, dreaming so close to a stranger, it was funny. I indicated them to Simone who had finished dozing and was shifting about in her seat restlessly.

"I always do that," she said. "Last bus trip to Adelaide to see Dad I woke up with my head on this random man's shoulder, and I'd dribbled all over him."

I couldn't answer. I didn't want to picture it.

"He could have been anyone," I said finally, and put the magazine back on her lap. She let it slide to the floor as she stretched.

"My back's still sore," she said. "I wish Mark came with us."

Then I surprised myself by speaking so loudly that I woke the man in front, who turned to look around at me.

"I don't want you to let him massage you."

I got an imaginary whiff of the balm he uses on us, and I blocked it out, and the balloon squeaking started again. "I wish that thing would fuckin' pop itself," I said loudly and Simone smiled. Then I stopped breathing, realising what I was insinuating, but she didn't understand it that way.

"Mark doesn't mind," she said, "and it makes it feel a bit better."

"I'd feel better paying someone who's trained to treat backs," I said.

The man turned around again and she went back to sorting through her music files.

I composed a letter in my head to my son, Jake, in Spain, and wondered if I should ask to borrow her new phone so I could type it out to him. She was still shifting about uncomfortably, so I left it and scribbled some lines on the drinks menu from the plane. We only had another hour of flight time and I was a slow typist.

"Everything's good, we are on our way to the conference in Bali, just me and Simone. Mark's at home. He and Simone have been making a maquette for her folio: amazing to watch. I hadn't guessed he was creative or good with fiddly things with his fingers." I closed my eyes to remember the hours of construction that went on, on the big wooden table in the next room. While they worked I took over the domestic work and kept the kitchen in order. They worked well together and it seemed they shared the same taste in music. He had once sung in a punk band he told her, and he had spiked hair and black leathers. The music blared from the room while they drew the patterns onto the balsa wood, then carved the small figures with sharp Stanley knives. He held the pieces together while she delicately glued them.

"Are you allowed to collaborate?" I called out to her from the kitchen.

“She’s doing all the work,” Mark answered for her. “It’s her project; I’m just holding the pieces up for her while she assembles it.”

“I’m coming in to see,” I said, wiping my wet hands on my legs, and peering around the corner.

“You should have seen it,” I wrote to Jake. “They made a circus stage, and erected a tower, and a moving spotlight, and then all these little figures suspended on cotton ropes. It’s not finished yet. Mark had to agree not to work on it while we’re away, but you can tell he’s itching to get on with it.”

“Why don’t you make one of your own while we’re gone?” I asked him.

He said it wasn’t fun doing creative work alone.

I, on the other hand, find inspiration being alone, especially in the bigger landscapes, like the beach, and when I walk. That’s what I was hoping for with this trip, to get some different perspectives on things. I wanted to hear the writer who would be speaking about how our experiences might be taking place in three different realities at once: physical, mythical and historical. I really hope things will come a bit clearer.

The plane landed and we were excited to see blue skies and feel a warm wind on our bare arms as we walked across the tarmac. I was sure I could smell the sea but Simone said we were too far from the shore. I never finished writing to Jake. It was a bit awkward because I had the feeling that he didn’t really get on that well with Mark, but he was making an effort for my sake. I decided to ask Simone to send them both some messages from her new phone instead.



4.

### It's Happened Before

I was sitting in the small waiting room at the police station, scratching at my scalp with my fingernails and feeling nauseous, as if I were carsick, even though nothing was moving. I didn't want to pick up a magazine. Just thinking about reading brought the article that Dan's son, Ian, had written about swarming back into my mind. It was terrifying. Women, mothers, bodily and emotionally pushed past the boundaries of fear, not knowing what would happen to their teenage sons — what those Palestinian women had described to him terrified me. I remembered it right there; sitting in an empty room with no air circulating, waiting. My stomach was lurching and my mind jumped from thing to thing, like so many soldiers with blackened faces jumping through holes that appear suddenly in living room walls.

Dan was out searching the streets and the pubs and clubs, while I sat waiting. The police officers went behind the door, and occasionally one came out again to ask me something else about Aaron.

"He's been victimised before..." I started to say.

I wanted to tell them about the time he won the award for sculpture and how he made a funny speech, him and Colby both wearing sarongs, and how he had everyone laughing. Dan and I were there. His friends liked us. I've always been a drinker and Dan has a cruel wit and they found us entertaining. But we didn't go on with the young ones to the Blue Bar. If only we had, but we were all pretty pissed, and we ending up getting a taxi home. I took Aaron's prize, which was a sculpture of a rusted fish, home with me. So Dan and I were both out of it and it wasn't until the next morning we heard from Steve, his

sculpture teacher, that a group of them had found Aaron wandering up the road from Apex Park, bruised and bleeding, at six in the morning. They'd all had more to drink evidently and Colby got angry with him about something and left, and then when Aaron chased him down the street, still in his sarong, he was grabbed by a bunch of thugs and beaten and threatened with all sorts of homophobic things, and then tossed out of the car. It was the same road Dan and I used to walk up and down with him when he got his first two-wheel bike. I wanted the police to know about that other time, but I couldn't think of how to say it.

"Bernadette," the old guy said sharply, slamming the door, interrogating me. I tried not to rip at my hair and kept my lips together so the smell of wine wasn't so strong on me.

"We are still looking for your son. Are you absolutely sure he is missing? He hasn't gone off with his friends without telling you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sure. He calls me every day. Every single day, just a few words, sometimes; sometimes we talk for hours. This has been three days and not a word from him. His friends tell me he's missed a party. Aaron doesn't do that. When he was seventeen..."

I started to tell him about the abduction but he interrupted me.

"We need more to go on. You'll have to give us more for us to be able to help you."

I tried not to picture Aaron in the boot of a car, then I started to imagine those soldiers bursting in on people, through the walls again, hyped up men pointing guns at women and children, rounding up their boys, storming into people's living rooms, and I started to cry.

Then Dan rang and I jumped up, even though my phone was in my bag on my lap. I stumbled as I answered, and I hated myself for being drunk at the police station.

“What?” I yelled.

It sounded like Dan was crying. I pictured Aaron lying still, hurting, and I made a big gulping noise. “What’s happened?”

“I can’t find him,” Dan said, and I could feel the aching in him through the phone. He’s always been the protective father.

“What?” An officer asked me.

“He can’t find him,” I said.

“Where’s he been looking?” The policeman asked.

I stared around me and wished there was a window.

“He’s been to see everyone who knows him: to all his friends’ places, to the clubs, the bars, to the shops, and he’s been down to Apex Park,” I sobbed, and I fell back into the vinyl chair. He looked at me with what I thought was disgust as I heaved myself up.

“You’re sure he hasn’t gone on a holiday? It’s only been three days since you spoke to him, and he is an adult,” he says. “He might have flown to Bali for example?” This was a strange coincidence to bring up as Ian, who is ten years older than Aaron, went to Bali on a holiday, just before he took the posting in the Middle East. We never heard much from him when he was there.

“No,” I said, “he’s broke.”

My phone rang again and I jumped.

“Bernie?”

Lee is the only one who calls me that, still after everything, she uses that name which always makes me sad for what we had. I was about to tell Lee what’s going on, but then I suddenly recalled the other time Aaron was lost, when he was just a little boy. We lost him, before Dan and I were together and before I was off the dope. Lee and I lost him in the water park place in Queensland. He got on a float and we waited at the end of the ride, burning in the sun, sick of squealing kids, and all the other kids climbed off their mats, but no Aaron. He was only missing for fifteen minutes, but that was intense. We both panicked. Everything about the time with Lee was intense like that though; the feeling between us was palpable. I twisted on the chair and realised I needed a bathroom.

” “Can you come and get me?” I begged her. “I can’t do anything more from here. Please?”

I was surprised when she agreed, as with Lee you have to work to make things happen. She hadn’t been friendly to me for a long time. She said she thought I was too casual with things, but she never understood. I make big efforts — for example what I did to be alone with her in the first place — I had to change all the rosters at work to end up in her car for the Muswellbrook trip. She drove, wearing dark glasses, and I spent most of the trip talking, looking at the side of her head, the line where the dark brown fringe stopped, the cheek and the short straight hair behind her ear. When she took her sunglasses off at the petrol station and looked at me there was no turning back. We sat looking at each other in that unexpected moment, and it was one of the highlights of my life. “You know I’m not gay,” she said, as I kissed her on the side of her face. “Neither am I,” I said, and we just sat there without speaking, feeling so happy. Aaron was in the baby capsule asleep in the back of the car.

Lee arrived at the station looking worn out. She had a few words with the officer, which I guessed were about me. I would never have had those few drinks if I'd realised what was ahead. We drove to my place in silence.

"I rang Dan," Lee said. "He's a mess. Someone needs to be with him."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't go to him, not like that, not with the black images in my mind, and feeling off balance, my stomach upset, and the fear that I wouldn't see Aaron again.

"I can't," I said. "I can't do anything."

"I'll go," Lee said.

Dan could never really get his head around the whole thing I had with Lee, but that's not what mattered then.

She let me out and drove off. I wanted her to hold me, but that would really have taken away the last skerrick of my grip on things. She wouldn't have wanted that anyway.

A policeman arrived at the door about an hour later. I'd been lying on the floor in Aaron's old room. He stood there waiting for me to speak, but I couldn't.

"Your son's in the car," he said.

I ran straight past the policeman, yelled out with crazy disbelief, and there he was, and there was Dan, holding him up in the seat, red faced and crying.

"I thought I was literally going to lose it," Dan said. "I thought they'd got him this time."

I remembered the water park again: how we found him, holding his mat, crying, with snot running out of both nostrils. He'd stopped before the end of the ride, pulled himself up onto a platform and walked to the end.

God knows where he's been this time. Then it all went blank for me. I collapsed on the driveway and woke up later on my bed.

"I've taken Dan to the hospital," Lee said from beside me.

"He'll be kept in. They do that with chest pain," she said. "Aaron's at the police station. They're not happy with him. You know Dan found him in some druggie's flat. He'd blacked out and doesn't remember anything. One of us will need to be with Dan and one with Aaron."

I looked at her face, side on, and saw no fringe, no smile lines, just a set jaw. She turned to face me and I looked at her eyes but she ignored me.

5.

## Patterns in the Vines

1.

Harvey placed his empty glass on the table by the bed. He guided Sofia onto the bed and into the curve of his body, sweeping her dress up to her waist. He bent her knees sideways with his leg and ran his hands over her. He kicked the batik bedspread to the ground and then closed his eyes to block out the blandness of the five-star room. Sofia closed her eyes too, without checking that the door was locked, concentrating on the feeling of his hands on her skin.

When the door opened they were both lying flat on their backs under a sheet, looking up. A myriad of tiny spiders covered the ceiling. They were miniature spiders, as still as an illusion, but occasionally there would be a rush of movements like a spiralling symphony, and then they would all stop still again in different positions, or maybe in the same places.

Willow walked over to the vanity table and used her finger to put on some lip-gloss. She sneezed. Sofia kept her eyes on the spiders, but when she lowered her gaze she could see the girl's reflection moving in the window.

"I got invited to a party," Willow said, piling her long, fair hair up into a bun on top of her head.

"That was a bit quick wasn't it?" Harvey said, pulling the sheet up over Sofia's back as she rolled away from him.

"We've hardly even unpacked," he said. "Can't you just relax by the pool?"

“He’s staying in the Royal Suite. The party’s on the rooftop, and there’s a pool there. I need new bathers. I already said I would come.”

“We better check this person out first,” Sofia muttered, without moving. “He could be a conman.”

”Dad,” Willow said.

“It’s true,” Harvey said. “We don’t know anything about anyone here yet Willow.”

“He’s just a normal guy who happens to be royalty.”

“You don’t think it’s a bit suspicious that he’s asking people he doesn’t know to his suite?” Dan asked as Willow left the room.

2.

One hour after Willow left for the party Sofia took the lift to the rooftop and sat on a stool at the bar. Sentimental songs played endlessly and men looked openly at her, but she resolved not to leave her post. She wore her sunglasses and studied a magazine, sipping from a bottle of Dutch beer, trying to get a feel for what was going on. There were two pools visible but neither was full of young people, so she decided she would drink her beer and then look around. Sofia sat uncomfortably on the stool, avoiding the eyes of the men and annoyed by the unnecessary attention of the staff. Her legs felt heavy and moist; she felt plumped up, swollen like the grapes in the humidity. She really wanted to immerse herself in a cold pool, or swim at the beach; the tepid Hotel pools made her think of germs. She also found the artificial lights and air-conditioning

exhausting. But Willow was somewhere on the same floor and she knew the girl had little common sense.

Sofia often thought of herself at the same age. She had also often been in that heightened state of physical being, and she had not been shy with boys either, but she had more natural wariness. Willow was never on her guard. Sofia had tried to share some stories, to talk about dangers, but Willow sighed with boredom and fidgeted in such an aggravating way that she gave up.

Sofia walked down one long corridor after another, checking for open doors and listening for sounds of a party. Eventually she heard music thudding. There were voices yelling and singing. Door 24 was locked. She dragged a chair along from a guest area and sat down with her book a few meters from the door. Occasionally staff members would come to enquire what she wanted, trying to move her along, but she answered them with hostility and she held her position for nearly two hours.

3.

Willow saw Sofia sitting on the chair waiting for her as soon as she walked through the door. She composed herself. Sofia looked up.

“All good?” Sofia asked and stood. They turned toward the elevator.

They stood side by side as they descended, both staring at the floor. Various people got on and off. Glancing at the mirror Sofia guessed that Willow was in her right mind and was somewhat subdued. She saw that she had been swimming as her hair was not done up, but she didn't seem otherwise changed. As they neared their floor she looked at her own reflection. She did not look the way she felt. She felt tall and strong. She looked aged

and panicked. There were creases down the side of her face and her neck. Her breasts were too low. She made some adjustments before following Willow from the lift to her room. She waited outside her door until she heard the shower running.

“Thanks for doing that,” Harvey said when she came in and locked the door. “I appreciate it. Was she okay?”

“She was fine.”

4.

Sofia was on the phone to her sister backing the car out of the driveway. It was a hot day and there was too much moisture in the air — the type of day when mould forms on the fruit on the grapevines and people pray for wind.

“It’s our turn; you should all come to us this year,” she said and moved the phone away from her ear to change gears. A blast of hot air hit her cheek as she swung the car around.

“I haven’t seen you since Thailand and we have to talk. You’ll come won’t you? Harvey’s brother won’t come, they won’t leave the city, but that doesn’t matter, I don’t like his kids anyway. Besides, they bring out the worst in Willow.”

“Are you two getting along any better?”

“We are fine now she knows me better.”

“No more letters about you?”

“We get along fine,” Sofia said.

There was silence. Sofia looked at her phone and saw there was no signal. She threw it onto the back seat and accelerated, buttoning her blouse with one hand and then using a finger to smear some lip-gloss onto her lips. She didn't want to be late for work. The phone rang so she reached back behind her seat to feel for it, twisting at the wheel. The car swerved, then smacked into a guy pole with a thud and stopped.

5.

Sofia lay perfectly still on the trolley in the emergency department. She felt like crying. Harvey passed her the cup of water and painkillers. She looked to see if Willow had come with him, but he was alone.

"I'm just feeling sad that we can't have Christmas lunch at our place," she said.

"Just worry about your leg for now," he said.

"But the roses. I wanted to have them all blooming for Christmas."

Harvey could see the shape of her circular rose garden in his mind. The rose bushes were stunted, barely alive. She had planted them in the ground where he used to have the fruit drying racks and it occurred to him, too late, that the sprays he used on the sultanas poisoned the clay soil — the rose bushes might never flower.

"They flower at the same time as the grapes; you know that, not until February."

He drove her home and she lay on the bed, dozing, trying to calm her mind by thinking of the garden. She dreamt that the roses had tiny buds which sat perfectly still on the plants while she looked at them, but when she moved her gaze the buds started to jump about from bush to bush in a weird kind of dance. When she focused again they were all back in position. She woke feeling anxious. Then she imagined a sheen of aquamarine

and silver and let herself drift off with the painkillers again to an imagined place of beach sounds and smells, trying to conjure the feelings she had that day on the bed in Phuket. But Sofia can't muster the emotion so she makes up a scenario where she is lying wet and sunburnt on the sand, hearing soft words, and feeling so young that she desires something out of reach, something that makes her ache.

6.

Harvey mopped sweat from his forehead, clasp his phone to his ear, waiting for Sofia to answer. It rang out and he called her number again. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rear view mirror and saw an old man. He saw a worried man who looked like he was perpetually trying to make up for things. He reached for his glasses and called Sofia again, imagining her limping around the house, unaware of the ringing.

She answered.

"Sofia, expect a call from the police," he said. "I'm on my way home."

He paused but didn't listen for a response. He checked the speedometer and increased his speed anyway, travelling up the gravel road that shortcuts to the highway.

"Willow had another fight with her mother," he continued. "A big one, you know, her mother called her a slut. So Willow lashed out at her and she said she hates Warwick. Anyway, Warwick got upset and evidently he just grabs Willow by the hair, and when she starts wailing he grabs these scissors and cuts some of her hair off; cuts her hair off! Then apparently Willow grabbed the scissors from him and tried to stab him with them. I don't believe that."

Again he paused, but no sound came from Sofia, so again, checking his speed, he continued.

"So then her mother panicked and rung the cops. But it gets worse. Warwick started yelling to the cops that the reason she's the way she is, is because you get stuck into her, or I do, one of us anyway. So now they want to speak to us. Can you believe it?"

"She's here," Sofia said.

"Who is?"

"Willow is. She's here, lying on the bed beside me."

"Doing what?"

"Doing her nails actually. We've finished the hair. I had to shave the sides and we've dyed the top bit really blonde. It looks good."

"Is she okay?"

"She's pretty upset."

"I'm on my way."

Harvey slowed down. He saw the white pole that Sofia swiped still standing on a sixty-degree angle to the road and his mind travelled to the ugly, stunted rose bushes she still watered every day, and then he felt warm, wet tears rolling down his face. He stopped the car on the side of the road to let the tears run, breathing deeply, until his mind slowed enough to imagine Sofia holding him, and the warm, salty sweat running between their bodies in Phuket, with the little spiders scuttling about on the roof.

There was a police car on the driveway when he got home.

7.

Sofia waited in the reception area for Willow. The appointments were part of her rehabilitation agreement. Sofia opened the magnifying glasses she had just bought and spread some aqua coloured silk across her lap. She had cut the piece to the bodice shape and tacked the edges. In six small containers were the beads to attach in the precise pattern they had marked. Willow chose the motif of a small swallow that would cover at least one third of the piece. Sofia stitched carefully, occasionally piercing the skin of her index finger, but no blood spilt onto the dress. In each of the one-hour appointments she was able to attach no more than fifteen beads. The jars of beads didn't seem to diminish. Sofia resolved not to continue with beading at the end of the project. The sewing occupied her mind while she sat in the stale office area, and often she would think of the design when she couldn't sleep at night. She saw the dress materialising in her mind and worked toward the moment that Willow would walk into the room wearing it. She hoped she would wear it to Christmas lunch at her sister's.

Behind the door she occasionally heard sounds that could be the girl crying, but always when she came out Willow showed no sign of distress. Sofia carefully folded the material in a clean white wrap and put away all the jars of beads, smiling at the counsellor.

They drove home listening to music without talking. Harvey was always on the tractor when they come down the drive, always in the same place, as if he had been circling the same area of vines waiting to catch sight of the car.

"What did he say?" He asked each time.

"Nothing much."

“So is it helping?”

Willow went into the house without answering him.

“What do you think?” He asked Sofia.

“Time will tell. She has a lot on her mind.”

She stared at the patterns in the vines — they were planted in rows that each curved subtly in the one direction and then all abruptly ended. Harvey too looked over the vines and saw a series of movements. Tiny green grasshoppers hopped from leaf to leaf. The green against green was dazzling.

“I’m going to be out here spraying most of the night,” he announced.

Sofia looked in vain for a rosebud on her way into the house.



6.

I Hate Gossip

1.

“Hello Tej, how funny to see you here when I was just thinking about you. We are off to India again,” Shannon said, reaching her hand out in greeting.

“Oh. You are? You know it’s my own country and I just don’t like to go there anymore,” Tej said. Shannon noticed that although Tej had assumed an exhausted looking pose, her skin was glowing and her eyes were bright.

“We have just been, my mother had some surgery on her hip. We were there for three weeks to help out, and now she is fine. She’s walking around everywhere without a stick. But really I wouldn’t want to go back there for a holiday anymore. Too many people now, everywhere there’s just more and more people. It feels like there are people crawling all over you, touching you, like creeping insects.”

Tej looked at Shannon moving her fingers. Shannon shuddered.

“Well, Francie, my eldest daughter, is going to India again this March, with a friend.”

“There’ll be fogs. Warn her not to fly. And the main airline is going broke, due to mismanagement. Warn her.”

“We love India,” Shannon said.

“So you’ve been before then?”

“Many times,” Shannon said, and she looked around the large reception area to see who might be listening to their conversation. Every seat was occupied. People were mostly

looking down and listening to the two women, who were the only ones in the room speaking. They all held small, numbered tickets, waiting to go to the counter and pay the money to register their cars.

“We love going there,” Shannon said, looking into Tej’s brown eyes. Shannon wanted Tej to ask her why she loved India.

Tej said nothing but looked at her ticket and then at the screen and then sighed.

“You know we adopted Ash from India?” Shannon said, and felt several people look up at her.

“So whereabouts is Francie travelling?”

They had both spoken at the same time, just as there was a screech of brakes, followed by a loud crash on the road outside the building. A number of people jumped up from their seats and rushed to look out the door. The two women stayed where they were.

“Ash is your youngest daughter?”

“Yes, she’s ten, from Delhi, from the orphanage at Delhi. I thought everyone in the office knew about our adoption, all the trouble we had, the drama.”

There was shouting coming from the road: a man’s loud voice cursing and a high-pitched woman’s voice yelling and swearing.

“I did know that, now you mention it,” Tej said. “Maybe eight years ago now, right? I’d only just started with the company, and, apart from that, really I’m a private person. I don’t like to ask personal information or pry. Unless someone comes to me and tells me about their life, because they want to share something with me, I don’t go around asking about other people’s business.”

"I'm the same," Shannon said loudly, and people looked up at her. "The same," she said. "I hate gossip. I tell my girls never to talk about other people's stuff. There are things that matter more. I'm glad I found someone who thinks like me on that, Tej. No one should know what goes on in the home at the deeper levels."

Tej looked up at the number flashing on the screen and down at her ticket. "That's me," she said. "Should we meet for coffee one day soon?"

"Sure. I'll call you at work," Shannon said, looking flustered.

"Remember, please tell your daughter about the fog," Tej said as she walked to the counter.

2.

"Can Gran please not come?" Ash says quietly, but just loudly enough for Shannon to hear her. She sees that Ash is sulking again, about to cry, pulling at her bathers and exposing her nipples. Shannon stops herself from slapping her daughter's hand.

"Gran has paid for our tickets. We are going because she wants to go. She loves going to India, and she loves you girls."

"So if I wasn't born there we wouldn't be going there right? Say if you got me in Fiji we'd go there?"

Shannon moves Ash's hands away from the bikini strap, which she has started to suck and covers her with her top. She hugs her skinny body and a shiver passes through her own solid body at the fragile feel of her daughter's small bones through the flesh. She feels as if she could just snap in her hands. She holds her tightly. Shannon has been

having recurring dreams that they are walking through the crowded streets in Mumbai and, in the heated bustle of bodies, Ash vanishes from her sight.

"Do we have to go there? What if you lose me there?" Ash asks.

Shannon remembers the first time they went back, when Ash was only four and she had refused to leave the hotel room. She had cried and clung to her, and she wouldn't sleep in her own bed. Later she told her of her terror that, with everyone in the streets, they wouldn't be able to recognise her, and she'd get lost, and they'd bring the wrong girl back home.

"Is that it?" Shannon asks. "You think Gran will take my attention away from you and I'll lose you? That won't happen, we've talked about that. You are safe now, and anyway I have a new necklace for you with all our details on it, in both languages, my phone number is on it so if anything happened someone would call me..."

"I guess she can come."

Shannon adjusts Ash's top again.

"Hurry up, we're going to be late for your swimming lesson. Of course Gran can come. Don't you dare make her feel like a burden. She loves you."

3.

"So how was your trip?" Tej asks.

"It was interesting, and I told you Francie and her friend went to Goa and then they flew to Srinigar. No one can believe they would go there."

“Very daring,” Tej agrees.

“And me and Ash, and my mother, we just went to Mumbai, and thereabouts. It was exhausting actually, emotionally exhausting.”

“So many things going on at so many levels over there, and three generations of family travelling together.”

“Frankly Tej, Shannon says, ‘I was exhausted by my mother and my child competing with each other for my attention. And we had some real drama. Never again.’”

“Family are very demanding, I agree,” Tej says.

They sit down at an outside table to overlook the lake, and ask a waiter to move a big umbrella over to shade them both. Around them tables are filling up with men and women dressed in expensive looking suits and carrying briefcases. They come for lunch from the old sandstone treasury building in the next street. It is a sunny day, but cold, and the water looks dull and grey. There are ripples on the lake and the flag flaps behind the fountain. Lunchtime joggers and walkers are making their way around the shore to complete the running circuit.

Shannon orders a Cesar salad and a glass of white wine, knowing that if she drinks wine in the daytime she will probably become a bit drunk and possibly say things that she will regret. But she orders confidently, hoping that she will be able to understand what happened in India better by putting it into words, as Tej, she has discovered, is a good listener. She had relived the trip in her mind while driving to their meeting, but only as a series of images and words, so as to be able to describe all of it.

4.

They opened the door of the hotel room in Mumbai and saw a clean white room with three single beds and a big television set. Shannon wasn't experiencing jet lag. The flights were pleasant with plenty of food and wine and movies to watch, and she had dozed on and off the whole trip. She arrived feeling quite youthful and adventurous and wanted to go straight out to a local restaurant where she had arranged to have a drink with two younger backpackers she had been talking to on the plane.

"You stay with Gran," she told Ash. "You can watch TV and rest on the beds until I get back. But don't go off anywhere, either of you. If you want anything just call room service."

Shannon hurried out of the room. She had an idea of where the restaurant was, remembering the layout of Mumbai from her previous trips. The heat and the smells exhilarated her as she pushed through the crowded streets in her loose clothes and sandals. She had put some makeup on and let her hair down from the usual pinned up ponytail. The sun was low in the sky and some neon lights lit up various shrines and shop fronts. She found her way to the meeting point and ordered a bottle of water.

In the hotel Ash and Jean dozed on the beds. They both woke feeling hungry and saw that it was dark outside and Shannon hadn't come back.

"Can we go and get something to eat?" Ash asked.

"I don't see why not," Jean said and went into the bathroom to get ready.

When Jean finally came out of the bathroom wearing different clothes, with her walking shoes on and her money belt strapped to her waist, Ash was not in the room. Jean hid

their passports in the top of a cupboard under a pillow and picked up the room card. She looked around, calling for Ash, and then saw a note on the vanity table.

“I will be at the market right outside the front door of this hotel, love Ash.”

Jean told herself to stay calm. She caught the lift down to the ground floor and smiled and waved to the men behind the desk. They smiled and waved back. She walked through the door and saw that the whole street was a market place really, in both directions. Everywhere there were people. There were groups of beautiful women in saris of all different colours, motorbikes carrying whole families putting along the road alongside bicycles and pedestrians, and there were street vendors everywhere, roasting nuts and cooking fish and strong smelling curries. She could smell incense and smoke, delicious food, and raw meat, and she could smell sewerage and decay. The sky had darkened but there are lights all around. It was exciting but Jean started to panic. She had thought Ash would be right near the hotel entrance. She couldn't decide which way to walk. She called out her name but her voice sounded thin against the dense background of activity. She looked around and saw Indian children who looked like Ash everywhere, and when they saw her they stared at her. She walked back and forth and called out for Ash and she looked for someone who might be able to help her, but she couldn't find it in herself to trust anyone. Jean understood then that the very thing that brought her there, that huge sense of otherness — knowing that there are realms of things going on that she can never understand — is the thing that has taken her grandchild. She sat in the gutter and cried.

Shannon found her friends and they sat at a table and ordered beers. They offered her a joint and, although she hadn't smoked since she was in college, she accepted. She was looking through the window at a brightly lit, green and pink Ganesh. She felt her blood

heat up so her arms seemed heavy and thick, then everything slowed, and the elephant shone and blurred. Shannon found a release she had been craving as she began to talk.

When she woke up alone on the floor under the changing colours flashing from the Ganesh a group of young boys in white uniforms were carrying metal buckets and swiping mops, standing over her. She saw a pile of offal scraps near her head and smelt the stench. She vomited and the boys stepped back. Her eyes were dry and her head ached. She stood up and the boys backed away laughing. She looked for her bag and found it. Her wallet was gone. She was too worried about Ash to care about her wallet. She forced herself to concentrate. She had to find the hotel and find her daughter. The boys hung around and watched her wash her face in a basin and tidy herself up, then one of them asked her in English if he could help her.

Shannon found her way back to the hotel with the help of the boys at six in the morning. She said she would pay the boys but when they got there Ash and Jean were not in the room. "Where are they? My daughter and my mother?" she called to the hotel boys who had crowded into the room with them. The boys shrugged and smiled to each other.

Shannon showered quickly and took a few painkillers while the staff went to ask around, sending messages through the streets. She was beside herself by the time another Indian man in a black uniform came into her room to inform her that the old lady and the girl had been found in a nearby suburb. They were presently having breakfast in a restaurant recommended to them by the manager of the hotel. They could be brought back in a taxi if she would like to pay him.

Jean and Ash were brought back in a taxi at ten o'clock. They had both been crying and they both look as drained as the white chickens she passed hanging on the hooks. Jean

had promised Ash on the way back that she would not tell Shannon that she had lost her the night before. They both stuck to the story that they left the room to find something to eat as they were so hungry. The three were reunited in the room with at least twelve Indian men in white uniforms. Shannon used the money in Jean's wallet to pay them all. When they were alone Shannon suggested that they all get some sleep, but it was a bright, sunny day and both Jean and Ash were strangely alert and aggravated, and both of them were constantly talking to her, wanting her to listen to them. They told her what they'd seen out on the streets, and both of them wanted her to go with them for a tour of the shops. Ash asked her to brush her hair and Jean asked her to pick up a dropped stitch in her knitting.

There was a knock at the door just as they were beginning to settle down and the manager came in. He told them he had arranged to have them taken to a friend's shop as he had some beautiful rubies at a cheap price, and they would be the perfect memento for their trip. Before Shannon could answer him Jean picked up her bag. It was exactly what she had wanted all along, she said. "We will get a necklace for Ash and a ring for Shannon, and a brooch for me. And I'll get a small stone for Francie for her nose piercing. That way we are all permanently linked by something precious, all our lives tied together, like that piece of crimson cotton we had to tie us to you while the adoption went through," she said to Ash.

5.

"She spent a fortune," Shannon says, showing Tej her ruby ring. "There was nothing I could do. The whole experience was really too much."

Shannon finishes her wine and doesn't know if she wants to laugh or cry. "I'm embarrassed about the whole thing really. I haven't told another soul."

"Well maybe you all found what you needed to find there," Tej says and holds Shannon's hand up to look closely at her ring. "Isn't that why people go to India?"

"That's a funny way to look at it," she says, relieved. "Even the fact that the stone is fake isn't really important."

7.

At Dad's

Some of my friends don't have to work for a living anymore. Some of them married men who made more than enough money for the whole family. Nearly everyone I knew went to university after school, as it was free back then, and there was really nothing else expected of us, but not all of us went on to work at a career. Janice completed a degree in landscape architecture thirty years ago, and apart from a few freelance jobs with the council, she never had a job. I lost touch with her soon after we finished university.

So I was more than a little surprised when Janice called me to say she had rented a beach house and discovered that it was just down the road from my father's house. She remembered staying with me there once and she wondered if we could catch up. She asked if I ever went to stay with him. I hardly knew what to say. I wasn't sure why Janice was interested in catching up with me again, but I felt a small thrill of anticipation anyway. At school we had become quite close, just for a few months: sharing secrets, and being weekend drinking buddies.. I was always the wilder of the two, but she didn't give up on me, not even when we were camping at Barr Beach and I accidentally invited two of my lovers up to stay. They both drove up with their tents and things went from bad to worse. In the end I vomited into a saucepan after too much vodka when they both left me.

Janice had followed a more or less traditional path for a middle-class Sydney girl. She had been married in a cream, lace dress at a private golf club. Her husband had a brilliant mind and had retired early, wealthy and full of energy, volunteering his

organisational services to environmental groups and overseas aid organizations. Their four daughters studied hard and were content with their lives.

I called Dad and told him that I would be coming to stay for the arranged two weeks. I had study leave for two months anyway, so I decided it was good timing, and just the right setting to work on writing up my research. He sounded pleased to have some company. I knew that there were times that he found the beach lonely since Mum had died. I did too, especially when the weather was stormy and the crashing of waves would seem extra loud. He wanted to know who would be coming with me. I caught the wariness in his voice. He had had a slight falling out with my eldest boy over some karaoke on our last visit. We had apologised for the swearing and there were no hard feelings, but when he told me that his hearing was still good I got the impression he was referring to one of my mistakes.

“Just me at this stage,” I told him.

My girls were busy with projects and I hadn't asked them if they wanted to come anyway. I was seriously picturing myself sitting at his kitchen table with the reams of paper, all handwritten notes, typing up and interpreting all those interviews on my plug in laptop. I had initially promised Sally, Sean's daughter, that if I went to the coast while I was on leave she could come along, but I didn't want Sean planning any romantic nights and interrupting me, so I never called Sal.

Two full days went by before I caught up with Janice on the beach. I had been walking the bush trails at dawn as there was no way you could sleep in with the bright morning sunlight beaming through the front of the house, which was all glass, and the crazy loud kookaburras in the trees next to the windows. I walked and tried to organise the

information from the interviews in my mind, ready to interpret them to support my theory. For the first two days I did no writing and spoke to no one other than Dad. On the second night he left me at home and walked to the RSL for happy hour with his mates. Unexpectedly overcome with an intense feeling of loneliness and despondent from the lack of production, I lay on my bed crying. It wasn't really self-pity. I had chosen to live alone, and not to remarry. I hadn't been overlooked, but something about being in the house made me ache with all sorts of needs that I thought might never be realised. I'd finished crying and was pouring myself a glass of red wine when Janice rang and we arranged to meet on the beach the next morning.

I recognised her immediately, sitting up tall in a straight back chair under a new green umbrella. She waved as I stomped down over the burning sand in my clogs. She looked like her mother sitting there, waiting with a smile. We kissed and I sat on the other beach chair next to hers that I assumed was set up for me. It was a burning hot day and glary. I looked down to the surf and saw a mass of dark shapes bouncing about in the waves between the flags. I decided not to swim until later, down the other end of the beach, away from the people and the lifeguards. Janice kept her fair skin covered in clothes and creams. She looked quieter and more sedate, but I could still catch the tendency she had to want to do the wrong thing at times, just by a note in her voice.

"So what's the topic?" She asked eventually.

"It's called: An investigation into the privileges of the nuclear family," I said in an expressionless voice.

"So you're doing a study on yourself?"

I was infuriated by the way whenever anyone wrote a story the reader almost always related the work to the author's personal life.

"It's bigger than me," I said. "I know there's nothing unusual about single parent families these days. This is more about power, and social control," I said.

My voice trailed off into the waves as I lost my train of thought, trying to think of something I could quote from my literature review; from the post-structuralist philosophers I was reading. I wanted to say something about hegemony.

"But haven't you always gone out of your way not to do things the way everyone else does?"

I couldn't help but think that the examples Janice would be drawing on, from our time together, was back when we were twenty and the things I did then were perhaps more extreme than just not marrying, or not wanting to live in the same house as my partner at the time. I think she caught my thought, but before we could go down that path, a young girl came bounding up from the surf toward us. As she bent down, dripping wet, to kiss my cheek, I recognised Fabien. I had not seen her since she was ten, at a chance meeting in the city.

"What a surprise to see you," I said, staring at her healthy brown skin and long dark, hair which was almost in natural ringlets. "I didn't know you were here too. I should have brought Paddy with me after all, but Dad got angry with him last time. I know he would have loved to have met you again, I have the baby photos."

"I could look him up online," she suggested.

"Great."

We sat — the three of us crammed under the umbrella — as the sun got hotter and our bodies started to sweat and smell. Fabien offered to walk to the shop to bring us take-away coffees.

I didn't get up for the walk but let her go. It was as if I was stuck.

"Let's swim while she's getting them," Janice said, and stood up, shaking sand on me.

"We'll go down there, away from the flags. Too many people."

I walked along behind her, burning my feet and squinting into the sun. She moved like a middle-aged woman with thick legs that rubbed together at the tops and a kind of self-consciousness about her body. I realised that I would look the same, but I still felt much the same as I did when we used to go camping at the beach. That was thirty years ago, and, with everything that had happened between then and now, more had changed about me than the way I moved. I hated the direction my thoughts were going so I ran past her and dived into the sea. It was cold and choppy and it felt good to be tossed around again.

Sitting back under the umbrella, sipping the coffee, Janice and Fabien asked me more about my research.

"My task today is the hardest," I said. "I have to write about an interview I did with an academic guy who is part of a blended family, and I have to make it interesting, find an edge."

"What do you mean?"

"Well there are two teenage girls, one from each parent, both parents are academics and both girls are high achievers. They operate pretty much as a nuclear family, but it seems

too perfect. There is no conflict: everyone shares the jobs, they have skiing holidays and they travel overseas. They all want to do more study. They have lovely parties for all their birthdays and they don't fight. How can I make that sound interesting?"

"Rules and routines; that's what we have too. I still insist we all sit at the table for dinner, with no telephones," Janice said.

"Exactly the same as them," I said.

I dug into the sand so it went up my fingernails, and again my thoughts circled back on themselves.

"Why does it have to be interesting to read?" Fabien asked.

"Well, really I was expecting to find was that non-nuclear families that try to emulate nuclear families will fail in some sense."

"But this one didn't?"

"Not as far as I can read from the interview — but there must be something. Life can't be organised so perfectly."

"Well that's what I meant when I said the study was really about you," Janice said, speaking in the same soft voice I remembered her from when she used to correct me.

"You could make it more interesting by having them plan out their perfect deaths," Fabien said.

"Oh, you're thinking of Dad's fishing friends," Janice half laughed.

"That's perfect," I thought.

“They go on euthanasia protest walks. They’ve already got their pills from South America.”

“But university professors wouldn’t march in euthanasia protests,” Fabien says.

“No, they’d sign petitions, and look at research.”

I became so excited by the prospect of fictionalising these two people into mountain hikers — wearing khaki shirts and using walking poles, and having them walk up and down the more unnerving tracks, like the eerie ledge at the Grampians, and always sticking to balanced, dehydrated diets, and only drinking one cupful each of port at night — that I missed my urge to go to the toilet, and found myself doubled up on my towel, almost leaving it too late to run up to the toilet block.

“Do you still do that?” Janice laughed as I sat jiggling my legs waiting for the urge to die down so I could make a run for it.

They said goodbye before I ran. They were getting too burnt and Janice had made a shopping list. I waved and ran in my clogs to the loos. When I got back to our spot the umbrella and chairs were gone and my towel lay screwed up in the sand by itself. I decided to have one more swim before going back to see if Dad fancied a beer for lunch. It was no fun swimming by myself; I didn’t even get my hair wet. I walked the long track back to the house, past the scraggy, burnt-out bushes growing between the beach and the road. The gully formed by the wind had become a dumping ground for people’s rubbish. Rather than try to plan my interpretive piece on the perfect, death-planning couple, I concentrated on thinking about nothing, all the way home. I wanted to be able to sit at the desk with the laptop and let the story evolve from the interview, rather than be formed into being by my words, my experience and my language.

Nothing came. Dad and I shared a couple of beers and we put the cricket on. The afternoon passed in no time and Dad suggested that we get fish and chips for dinner; neither of us enjoyed cooking. We wandered down the street and bought a big serving of chips and some fried flathead, and we sat, eating with our fingers, in front of the television. We both enjoyed crime shows. A four-wheel drive had tooted us as we walked back up the hill. Janice waved out the window. I would meet her again on the beach the next day. I decided to move onto a more interesting interview to discuss with her the next day, one containing some conflict, and emotion.

8.

### The Chickens

I was sitting in the kitchen, on a high stool, trying to finish eating the crunchy French toast that Andy had made me. It was dripping with honey and my fingers stuck to the newspaper I was trying to read. I drank a mug of strong, percolated coffee. I always started the day the same way, no matter what the weather was like and no matter what was in store for me. The cat rubbed against my legs and made me lose balance on the stool.

“Too hard,” I say to it. “Fuck off.”

I often forgot about Beau and Ruby in the mornings. No one really reacted. The cat kept trying to nudge me off the stool. The sun shone through the window behind the sink and reflected off the stainless steel basin and white laminate benches, so I had to squint to see the written words in a watery glare. The coffee was just right. My mobile phone rang. It was my mother.

“She’s got something for the kids,” I say to Andy, who is standing with his back to me, busy making their lunches, and he doesn’t look around.

“She wants to know if she can bring it around tonight?” I ask. He shakes his head, still with his back to me.

“What is it?” Both the kids ask at once.

“It’s a surprise,” I say.

“What have you got them Mum?” I ask patiently, checking the time. My secretary has already called to remind me that I must be at the airport an hour early. Mum tells me she

has got the kids some little, yellow chickens from the show. Dyed, scrawny little chickens. I remember when she brought some home for my brother and me; they felt bony and badly put together, like they would snap. They wiggled sadly in our hands as if somehow deprived of a real life. Someone told me that they had to dye them to make them look cute.

“How lovely,” I say, realising that between Andy’s cat and my Afghan hound, three chickens wouldn’t stand much of a chance.

“Not tonight though,” I say. “Ruby has dancing, don’t you?” She nods. “And I’m on the late flight back from Melbourne. How about we catch up on the weekend, after their soccer?”

Andy turns and nods. I kick the cat out of the way, slide my feet into the high heels I always wear to the minister’s office, and am about to jump down and head to the bathroom, when I feel pressure on my lap. Automatically my hand swipes out, but then I realise it’s Ruby climbing up with a brush. This has never happened before. Andy stops stacking dishes and looks over at me, smiling. Silently she hands me her hairbrush. I look at her hair and reach my hand out but I don’t touch her head. I’m not sure what she expects, but time is passing, so I make a few random brush swipes across her head, and then I stop to look at the effect. She has long, thin, white strands of hair. They don’t curl or flatten; they just fly apart from each other in a static fuzz. I realise that I might need to wet the hair, or squirt some product on it, in order to brush it all together, but I haven’t the time. I brush it a few more times, then lift her down onto the floor, with my hands supporting under her bony shoulder sockets, again over-balancing on the stool.

“Shit,” I mutter. “There you go,” I say, and peck her on the cheek.

I feel a bit giddy as I hug Andy and hurry off to get ready for the taxi, and, it's not until I'm sitting down and visualising the queues at the airport, that I realise I forgot to hug Beau.

"Shit," I say, and the taxi driver ignores me. He ignores me as we wind up one-way streets and dart across intersections, through orange lights, and I get increasingly nauseous, all the way to the airport.

I've left without having had a good look at the paper and now there is the chance to pick it up in the taxi, but I don't. I spend the time reviewing what we did at home instead: the cat and the sticky food, and forgetting to kiss Beau. I go through it again as if I had remembered, and he turns his cheek to me as I bend down to him. I like thinking about my home.

My house looks nice at this time of year. The spring blossoms have started early. It is frosty and sunny at the same time, and the crimson sheen of the crab-apples I planted down the driveway, fifteen years ago now, still makes me feel like a child at wonderland. They are pretty much at full height now and, sometimes as random branches move slowly about, weighed down with fruit and birds, it can seem like the movements are deliberate, like a type of background dance in an opera. Mum planted them with me, but now she can't admire the garden without reminding me of how fortunate Andy is to be living there.

Andy encourages them to call her Nan, and they run up and jump up on her lap, same as they do with their other Nans, and her arms automatically pull them in to her. But then something might remind her about the house, anything little, like a leaking washer that Dad might mend, and she lets them go. I've stopped trying to talk to her about it.

When I finally get home that night they have forgotten to leave the welcome light on for me and I trip up the front step. I had a glass of red wine on the plane back and then dozed off for ten minutes or so in the taxi, so I am feeling a bit groggy. The jolt to my back from tripping, then saving myself, rouses some adrenaline, and I bang on the door much too loudly. Andy lets me in. He hugs me and, as I relax in the strength of his arms, I start to feel happy. They are all watching television, both of the kids are brushing Pet, my dog, who doesn't even look up at me. Before I can even sit down Ruby asks:

"Janey, whose dog is this?"

"It's our dog," I say.

"Is it all of ours, or just yours and Dad's, or is she half yours and half all of ours?"

I look at Andy, waiting for him to answer, but he seems to be almost hypnotised watching the brushing. Then Beau answers her.

"Pet likes Janey best, then us, then Dad. You can tell; so if he chose his order it would be in that order."

"He's everyone's dog," I say again, and walk off to have a shower. No one moves and they are still brushing when I get back. Andy is asleep.

Mum arrives the next morning before we have finished breakfast. She's in her gardening gloves and has a fierce looking pair of secateurs in her hand.

"I saw a cedar wax-wing with a baby crab apple in its mouth," she says excitedly and walks straight across the room to look through the kitchen window.

It is a chilly day, but there are blue skies and no wind. There is not much movement in the garden.

“Did you bring the chicks?” Ruby asks.

Mum doesn’t answer straight away and I can tell by her body language that something is wrong. Pet runs through the kitchen barking and Beau follows him out onto the lawn.

“Did something happen?” I ask her as Andy pours more coffee.

“Well Ruby,” Mum says, “you’re a big girl so you’ll understand. Last night while Pop and I were sleeping, the three little chickens got out of their box and ran off.”

“You mean flew off,” Ruby says.

Andy and I look at each other. This is the first time she’s referred to dad as Pop.

“Look at those birds down there in the trees, she goes on. The chicks are free now, like them. I don’t think they wanted to be pets. I don’t think chickens can be pets.”

Mum carries her coffee out into the garden and starts snipping away at the azaleas. She won’t look up and she won’t offer us the real story.

I found out later from Dad that one of the scrawny little things had died in the cardboard box before they could lift it out, and, although Mum had wanted Dad to build a little chook pen for the kids, and she had plans to buy another chick, Dad had set his mind against the idea and wrung their necks. He did it with his bare hands with them still in the box, and then he took the whole box of dead chooks out into their yard. Mum had watched him fill the incinerator with wood and paper and light it up, and then when there was roaring fire, he dropped the box into it.

‘It was a nice thought though,’ I said to Mum. ‘But they do have a dog and a cat.’



9.

## Beach Cricket

1.

Mary lay in bed, looking out through her window across the neighbour's unkempt lawn. She saw the sky was overcast and she heard the wind rattling the side gate. She thought of calling Paul and telling him she couldn't make it to the christening, envisaging lying in bed all day with the television on and finishing off the wool blanket she was embroidering for the new baby. But really she knew she had to make the effort. All Paul wanted was for her to get along with Maggie, so she got out of bed and stretched her back in preparation for walking on sand.

Mary found the beach could be the most profoundly painful place. The happier those beach experiences once were — and there were plenty of them over the years— the more empty it felt to go walking by the sea on her own. She had lived a carefree, physical, sensuous life, never far from the relentless pounding waves with people she loved and who she foolishly imagined to be a permanent part of it all.

2.

The wind caught his white, cotton caftan as Bob stepped deliberately through the thick, soft sand. He was heading for the cement strip in front of the club house, where he could just make out a row of figures sitting back solidly in deck chairs. He decided to go straight to where he could see the other oldies sitting, rather than confronting Maggie straight away. He looked to the group on the beach but quickly turned his head before

meeting eyes with her. It was enough that he had come. He was angry and hurt from the conversation they had had the night before and he didn't want her to think that it was alright to treat him so carelessly.

"I'm Robert," he said, extending a big hand to the first person in the first chair. A woman in her late sixties, wearing a floral headscarf, and strings of plastic beads around her neck, shook his hand. She reached out her arm with hardly any movement of her bulk in the chair. Looking down Bob saw she had a thick neck with deep wrinkles that extended down to heavy bosoms protruding from a green and yellow sarong. She looked to have been crying.

"Mary," she said. "So who are you here with?"

"Of course," said Bob, "you're Paul's mother; you must be excited about the baby on the way."

They both turned their heads to look at the beach and squinted at the group of men, women and children playing cricket on the sand. The surf had been whipped up by the north-easterly wind and was peaking white crested waves way out to the horizon. There were at least twenty people, including the children there — some of the adults holding babies on their hips. They were organised into some kind of bizarre formation, moving in and out from the centre, all cheering at once, then wandering about, adjusting themselves in the wind. Bob didn't answer Mary's question, though the other three women sitting in the line of chairs all looked up at him eagerly. He cleared his throat, but stalled, worried his voice would tremble. It was the first time he had argued with Maggie in the nine years they had known each other. Mary spoke again.

“Well I’m Paul’s mother, as you seem to know, and I’m Alison’s aunty, the one with the baby who was christened. I didn’t see you at the church?”

Bob looked at her, then turned his back to the beach and finished his walk along the line of ladies in chairs. He shook every hand. They all kept their eyes on the game. Loose, dry sand whipped into the players’ legs and some of the children cried in pain.

“I’m here with Maggie,” Bob said.

The women exchanged glances, but none of them asked him what the relationship was between them. He was as old as they were, but he wasn’t her father. Maggie was the easiest to see on the beach with her long, fair hair flying about in the wind and her slender dancer’s movements. No one said anything.

“Can I get anyone a drink?” Bob asked.

“My word you can,” said Pat, jumping up from the furthest chair from Bob. “What’ll we have then?”

“I’ve brought a selection of beers, some Verdelho, and I think I even have a bottle of Merlot, in my esky.”

Bob indicated the esky and the picnic basket sitting up against the surf club wall in the shadow of the empty building. He hadn’t known what to expect when Maggie had asked him to join them, and then they had argued about her forgetting his farewell dinner so he remained none the wiser. Bob prepared a hamper in the same way as he used to do when she was still a child and he rode to the beach with her while her mother worked. He had packed the selection of cheeses and fruits, remembering that it was the camembert she liked the most, and some breadsticks.

“What are you having?” Pat asked him, walking heavily towards the esky.

“A glass of Verdelho for me, and one for you will it be Pat?” Bob asked, walking with her to unpack the glasses that were wrapped in table napkins.

“Which ones are Maggie’s kids?” He heard one of the women ask the others as he poured the two glasses.

“Anyone else?” he called to the women, shouting into the wind.

“Why not?” Anne said, and stood slowly up from her chair. She walked stiffly with her legs wide apart. Bob couldn’t tell if she was off balance or if her knees wouldn’t hold her weight. She approached them with a face that had aged into a sour look, with the corners of her mouth fixed in a look of complaint.

“It will do you good,” said Bob, as he handed her a full glass.

Anne drank the glass in a few big sips and staggered backwards a step to rest her bottom against the brick wall. She stared out at the figures running about after the ball in the wind and began a commentary on the game. They all watched the play.

“Of course, look at that! Wouldn’t you know it? That’s my boy flat on his face. Gob full of wet sand, can’t laugh now, not like that. That was always going to happen. And there’s Maggie coming to pull him up, isn’t she beautiful? But she shouldn’t be heaving like that, not in her condition. Good, he’s up, and it’s another big hit from the young boy, whoever he is, good hit, it’s a catch, no, it’ll be six. Who do those boys out there belong too? Anyone know?”

No one answered.

3.

Anne, yelling and talking into the wind, slid herself down the wall to a sitting position in a single movement.

“So how is Maggie?” Pat asked Bob, who had poured his second glass of wine and was standing, squinting to look at the game. He saw a blur of moving figures in the haze of blowing sand and salty mist coming in from the sea. To the far left the three stumps of the wickets were silhouetted against a silver glare of the ocean. They made a clear focal point and put his mind to a memory of standing stones in Ireland. He watched a small boy tapping the bat into the sand and a bigger girl with her dress hitched into her bathers racing at him, leaping as she hurled the ball.

“Yer Jonah! Whack it buddy!” Bob yelled, recognising the boy. Jonah struck the ball toward the sea and the two women who were closest to its path watched it sail by them without moving.

“Maggie is Maggie,” Bob said to Pat, but she had no idea what he meant. He walked along the row of deck chairs. He tried to go through the conversation he had had with Maggie again from a different perspective. Maybe it had been his fault; he was too quick to react. But it wasn’t just her missing his farewell that was on his mind; it was what would happen now there was to be another baby. He was overjoyed she was pregnant again of course, but with both of the previous two pregnancies she had shut him out, just that little bit more each time. It had hurt Bob as he hadn’t seen it coming, them being so close all those years, and especially when her mother died after the struggle with cancer it was he who Maggie had sought out.

“There’s another bottle here with your name on it Anne,” he said.

“Good man,” Anne said and relaxed back into the chair, waiting to be served.

When Bob poured her another glassful she turned her attention away from the game to look at him.

“Oi,” she said, “Who knows who all these little ones down here belong to?”

There was no answer.

“It’s a damn shame isn’t it? You’d think they couldn’t have put on a regular party for the christening. Somewhere nice, some balloons and cakes, that’s what kids like, not all this sand and running about, no-one knowing who’s who...”

“Do you know all these people?” Pat asked Bob. “Apart from Maggie?”

“All these vibrant, young people; remember what it was like to be young. Aren’t they wonderful?” Bob exclaimed.

“I know what you mean though; Maggie hasn’t really filled me in on how everyone fits in. We need a sort of social map, a family tree but extended, like social workers make in the hospitals...”

“Do you have any children of your own then?” Mary suddenly asked, standing and walking toward the esky, turning away from the wall so that her sarong flew open in the wind to reveal two thick legs, unshaven.

“My sons both live in Perth,” Bob said.

“Paul said you’ve been like a father to Maggie,” she said, uncertainly.

“Oh?” Bob looked at Mary. “I guess we’ve been more of a tribe. Maggie and Esther have a father, Pete, great man, lives up north; yes, more of a tribe.”

Pat, also walking toward the esky with her empty glass, tried to turn around to console Bob, but lost her footing and fell hard onto her knee on the cement. She screamed with the pain and swore loudly with the shock. None of the players heard her from the beach. Bob pulled her to her feet and dragged her chair over to position beneath her. He wrapped some ice from the esky in a tea towel.

“That’s it,” Anne said, staggering to her feet and walking with her legs wide toward the game. “That’s it! Games’ over,” she called, walking straight into the wickets, knocking them flat. “Time for the cake!”

Bob was impatient too and signalled to Maggie. She saw him and ran across the sand with her arms wide. “Robert,” she cried out to him. “You came, I’m so glad. I was so upset after that call, and the dinner, but you came. Thank you.” Maggie ran to Bob and wrapped her arms around him so her hair fell all over his face.

The game continued on around Anne, and a balding man in board shorts, who Pat guessed must be her son, ran to her. A skinny girl in a bikini holding a baby in her arms got between them and passed the man a dirty nappy she had taken off the baby. He held the dirty nappy in one hand and guided Anne to the side of the game with the other.

They tripped through the sandy mounds and turned their faces from the sprays of sharp sand flying up in the wind gusts. They were nearly to the boundary of the game when Anne suddenly dropped onto both knees. The man made an attempt to lift her up, but he couldn’t and she collapsed down onto the sand.

The group converged in on the three figures and they lay her on her side and waited for the ambulance. When her breathing stopped Paul and Bob started the resuscitation drill they had both learnt but never performed before. People backed away when the siren

was heard and Anne was finally strapped to the stretcher to disappear over the hill in the speeding van.

For a while there was confusion as people piled the children into cars. The wind had risen and sand was flying over them.

“I’ll take the boys with me; we can watch television at my place. You go after Paul. He’ll need someone with him,” Bob said to Maggie.

“What happens now? I haven’t done this before,” Maggie asked as she handed the boys’ bags to Bob. “Do I go to emergency?”

Bob started to lift the small boys into the car-seats in the back of his car, straining. He had trouble bending and twisting into the small space. One of the boys started to cry. He clicked their buckles up tight.

“We’ll be grand till you get back, don’t hurry,” Bob said.

“Thank you; but where do I go?”

Bob didn’t hear her and started the engine. He backed out and saw she was still standing in the same pose as he drove up the gravel road onto the main road. The beach looked forlorn. The sky was grey and the dark sea was covered with little, choppy waves, breaking in all directions. There were no big, well-shaped breakers rolling in. He pulled into the lookout and viewed the deserted beach. There was only Maggie left, still standing by her car. He saw that the stumps had been knocked sideways in the wind so each piece of wood stood at a strange angle to the other.

4.

Maggie watched the car drive off and felt an unexpected feeling of release as she walked towards the sea. She stepped confidently through the soft, sinking sand, gaining strength, feeling as if her mind were disconnected from her body. She strode out towards the waves. As she walked she threw off the long cotton shirt and then unwrapped the crimson, cheesecloth skirt from her hips, trailing them over the sand, adding streaks of colour, like fresh blood, to the emptiness of the beach. The wind drove her, pushing her on to the shore, where the crashing of the waves took over all other sounds. Her body flushed with an inner heat.

She closed her eyes and dove head first under the waves on the shore; the heat cooling swiftly with the thrill of cold water. She gasped with the pleasure. Despite her almost trance like state she went no further out than the place where the waves were breaking, right on the shoreline. Diving and rolling through the waves in water no deeper than thigh level, it occurred to her that she had become too self protective. She placed her hands over her womb and smiled. The boys were with Bob; everyone was safe for the time being.

Maggie swam for a long time in the waves on the edge wondering what relationship she would discover with the new being forming inside her. Eventually she stood and waded up to the dry sand. She tried to wrap myself back into her clothes but, because the wind was so strong, she gave up and let the whipping sand sting her flesh as she walked up to the car to drive off and find Paul and his mother. She had a strong sense that Mary would not recover and Paul would be beginning to feel that huge, painful loss she had herself experienced with her mother's early death. He would need her with him.

Maggie glanced down at the beach from the lookout and saw the wickets lying flat and a flock of nasty birds fighting over a smooth circular shape in the sand that must be what was left of the christening cake — the dark boiled fruit cake someone had made, covered in thick, white marzipan. The first big drops of rain fall as she drove off over the hill.

10.

Says It All

I was standing in the kitchen looking out the window. It was dark outside.

“Come and look at this,” I called out to Malc. “Come now.”

I had looked over to the clearing in the trees where the trampoline was set up for the boys, and at first I just saw the familiar shapes of the fruit trees and the casuarinas surrounding the small rectangular area of the trampoline, but then I noticed that both boys were lying flat on their backs in the centre of the black mat. Their bodies were touching each other all the way down and they lay perfectly still.

I called to Malc again to come to the window to look at the clouds. There were thick banks of crimson clouds moving down through the darkening sky — a thick Prussian blue colour, getting darker. The clouds moved steadily in and down, seeming to lower themselves to rest on the two boys lying on the trampoline. There was a brightness outlining them. It looked as if the sky was coming down over their two bodies to rest against their skin, immersing them in something thicker than air, but not fluid or solid; there was no weight on them.

By the time Malc joined me at the window the sun had set and the two of them were bathed in moonlight. Above them were the two pointer stars from the Southern Cross. These were the stars that we had named after their birth parents. Nothing moved, nothing at all. The boys just lay there and we could tell there was something going on — between them and the parent stars — just a sort of buzzing.

We poured ourselves a glass of beer each, unable to move away from the window, and Malc grabbed some cold sausages from the fridge. Time passed and we stood, eating but not speaking, witnessing this amazing scene, but not really understanding it. Then the deep, blue-black sheet of sky seemed to lift up again, thinning out as it drew up, higher and higher. It got colder. The two stars were still visible, but distant. The boys lay shivering together. They would be hungry. One of them started to cry.

Malc and I were then hit with this overpowering feeling of melancholy. It was hard to move from the kitchen into such a feeling of sadness. Malc was good though. He got to it and piled some sausages on a plate and heated them up in the microwave. I got a bottle of lemonade from the fridge, and two cups and we walked out into the dark yard. I put the porch light on and we hurried through the long, damp grass with the food, and then we climbed up onto the trampoline with them. No one said a word.

The boys sat up and we sat one on either side of them, and shared out the food and drinks. There were no noises or bright lights, just the movement of birds and possums in the trees. It seemed like we were it — just the four of us and no one around. We were all there was in the world. It was a perfectly quiet, still night.

The boys ate and I thought about what had just happened, and I knew I hadn't made the whole thing up because Malc had been there observing it happen too. And, it wasn't a complete surprise as I have only recently experienced an otherworldly type of experience. I had to be held up physically by Malc in the court in Addis, — I was so out of it. I'd been vomiting and I was just exhausted with all the waiting. What I did was to try to imagine being helped, being held up by three friends, imagining that they were there with me, holding me, and then I was able to walk. We walked into that place and handed over those papers. It worked; I got through it.

Anyway, there we were, eating in the cold, the four of us sitting up there, and then the boys finished and they lay down again, both at the same time; they are so tuned into one another. You know, they even both wet the bed at the same time. So they lay down and then one of them started to cry and then they both started sobbing, not just crying the way you hear little kids cry when they can't get their own way, this was like deep soul crying — it felt almost like being at a funeral. And this is all happening still without any of us speaking.

Then Malc, I think, did it first and then I did it too, we lay down on either side of the boys, sort of spooned them in between us, and we lay here, and then Solomon said: "Can you make the mother and father stars come back?"

So we all lay there, and we all looked at the same two stars, and we really concentrated on the stars, and then I thought about how I'd be feeling if that were me up there and I was looking down from the sky on my little boys. I tried to imagine how I would be feeling and I tried to transmit those feelings, which was weird I know, especially since it was to the same little boys I had beside me.

So we all did that for awhile, but the stars stayed distant, and then Malc got up and started jumping a bit, and so we'd all sort of lurch up toward the sky then sink back, and then the boys got up and joined in, and then I joined in, so we were all jumping about wildly until we didn't know what was up and what was down, just our bodies, just bouncing up higher each time and it happened.

"What happened?" Sylvana asked, feeling her fingertips tingle.

Birgit laughed and adjusted herself on the bed.

“Well, nothing really happened, the mood just changed or something and we all started feeling good. Something must have happened but it’s hard to say what.”

“That is the best story,” Sylvana said. “You should write it down.”

“People would think I’m mad.”

“But we are mad. It’s a great story. Really, it says it all.”

The end.