

**Imaginative truth: biographical narratives inspired by the lives of six lone older
women
with critical commentary**

A thesis submitted for the degree of

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By

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Abstract

This thesis comprises both creative and critical work. *Imaginative Truth* is a collection of biographical narratives in short story form inspired by the lives of six lone older women. Arranged chronologically per life depicted, every story and the accompanying transcript or manuscript excerpt offers a glimpse of a particular moment from each woman's life, written in a manner necessary to and reflective of the life being illuminated. The critical commentary documents the need for effective literary representations of older people, the problem of representation especially of lone older women and the value of life story narratives. It covers ethical issues relating to the representation of real people in narrative form and locates examples of best practice from both life writing critics and practitioners. The commentary includes a discussion of the fact/fiction dichotomy in life writing, providing case studies of works that effectively negotiate such boundaries and positing historical fiction theory and accounts of praxis as useful resources for life writers working at the intersection of fiction and lived experience. This thesis aims to test and explore the notion of biographical truth and the boundary between fact and fiction.

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Preface

This thesis comprises both creative and critical work. Unlike the traditional model where the creative work forms the bulk of the thesis and is accompanied by a much shorter critical reflection, the creative–critical split in this thesis is approximately half and half.

Imaginative Truth is a collection of biographical narratives in short story form inspired by the lives of six lone older women. Arranged chronologically, every story and the accompanying transcript or manuscript excerpt offers a glimpse of a particular moment from each woman's life, written in a manner necessary to and reflective of the life being illuminated.

The critical commentary documents the need for effective literary representations of older people, the problem of representation especially of lone older women and the value of life story narratives. It covers ethical issues relating to the representation of real people in narrative form and locates examples of best practice from both life writing critics and practitioners. The commentary includes a discussion of the fact/fiction dichotomy in life writing, providing case studies of works that effectively negotiate such boundaries and positing historical fiction theory and accounts of praxis as useful resources for life writers working at the intersection of fiction and lived experience. This thesis as a whole tests and explores the notion of biographical truth and the boundary between fact and fiction.

This project is an experiment in life writing, and readers should bear this in mind during their encounters with both the creative and critical texts, which together form a hybrid of life writing theory and practice.

Author's note

These stories are inspired by the lives of six real women. The sections in bold font within quote marks are extracts from original first-person transcripts and manuscripts. Techniques of fictionalisation have been used throughout to varying degrees – these stories should, therefore, be read as creative re-imaginings of real lives and not simply as fact.

Margaret

“With a daughter of 8 and a son of 6 they thought their family complete, but when my own presence was threatening my mother was furious. She drank a lot of Gin apparently, soaked in hot baths and ‘jumped off the copper top’ several times, which was the recognised way of procuring an abortion at that time.”

She took off her apron, noticing it was stained with gravy. She must have dripped some while preparing the casserole. It was all finished, the washing done, the tea prepared. She had two hours until the kids would be back from school, a little longer before he would be home from work. The door was locked and the bath poured, though she was unable to stop her hands shaking. He'd said that morning that she looked pale, that maybe she needed to eat properly, not pick at the food he worked hard to put on the table. She hoped he didn't suspect anything. She was just feeling a bit under the weather, she told him, and, thankfully, he had left for work by the time the sickness set in and she had to spend half an hour freezing down by the loo, her stomach twisting and wrenching. Taking off her dress, the old faded blue one with the flower print, she removed her greying undergarments and hovered a foot over the steaming tub. She dipped in a toe and flinched. It was too hot, but that was the point, after all. She didn't want to get burned though, so she added a little cold from the jug on the floor before stepping in. She eased her body down into the water, the white skin of her legs turning pink as it became immersed. She lay down, raising her knees up. It stung at first but after a few minutes everything felt better, actually quite nice. Baths were usually enjoyable, the chance to lay back and relax, your body encased in warmth, your mind free to wander, but this one was different.

Not another one, she couldn't have another one. They only just had enough to feed and clothe the two they'd already got. She couldn't tell him. He wouldn't be happy – not that he'd let on, hardly spoke a word to her anymore. He worked hard enough as it was, and with his ulcers and things he didn't need the pressure of another mouth to feed. Maybe it was just a false alarm, but best to take care of it as soon as possible. Susie said that gin did the trick, lots of gin and hot baths. If that didn't do it she could jump off the copper top – that worked for Emily down the road. She reached an arm out of the tub and grappled around until her fingers settled on what she wanted. She pulled the bottle into the tub, unscrewed the cap and took a long swig, grimacing as she did. She put it down and laid back, tears running down her cheeks.

*

Margaret appeared, breech with a rye neck and weepy eye, and she felt responsible for the poor little creature's misfortunes. Thing is, she loved Margaret as much, if not more than her other two children, and soon along came her fourth. Things were difficult, money was tight; she never had got the hang of how to manage the housekeeping budget, owing the grocer and on Saturdays hiding from the milkman – she would pay him next week, honest.

“My father’s voice, when he did speak, was a little more than a whisper as he had bronchitis all his life.”

He opened the front door, doing his best to stamp the clinging dried remnants of clay from his boots before stepping onto the mat. He bent down, groaning as his joints clicked and his muscles resisted, and picked and pulled at the laces until he could ease his thick-socked feet out of their strict confines. Next he pulled the socks off of his throbbing feet, almost losing his balance during the tug of war between right hand and left sweaty foot. He stuffed a soggy sock into each hollow boot and went through to the parlour, ignoring the smell of cabbage, the clatter of pots and pans and the hum of his wife's voice to a tune he did not recognise coming from the kitchen. He eased his body down into the chair – *his* chair – picked up the tobacco and pipe from the table and prepared it, cursing when he couldn't find the matches.

“Margaret, you hidden my matches again? I'll swing for you if you have, girl...oh.” It turned out he was sitting on them. He lit up, inhaled and gave a contented sigh before being seized by an enormous, hacking cough. Years of bronchitis meant that his voice had been reduced to little more than a husky whisper, but he would not give up his pipe. That and cigarettes, along with his walk to the pub every Sunday morning for his one pint, were his only indulgences.

His youngest was playing on the rug by the fire with a little painted wooden train, making choo-choo noises. He could have done with a bit of quiet after the day he'd had but didn't have the heart to tell the lass; she'd probably just start bawling anyway; wasn't worth the hassle. His daughter Margaret marched in and stood right in front of him, arms crossed, a frown on her brow. Her eye looked sore today, worse than usual. He'd have to take her to that fancy doctor again. She was the only one that complained about his smoking, said it was bad for his chest and cost a fortune. Maybe she was right, but he wasn't going to stop. He'd worked hard for this family to give them more, to make things better.

“Mam says your tea's getting cold,” said Margaret, relocating her hands to her hips and haughtily making her way through to the kitchen table. He was in the wife's bad books

again: late home as he'd stopped to pick up a bottle of Plymouth. The wife didn't say a word, just glared and flung his plate down so hard it nearly flew off the table. Not that he could eat it anyway, what with his ulcers playing up again.

All he wanted was some peace and quiet in which to smoke his pipe.

“My Father’s youngest brother Arthur, was the oddity of the family*. He was taught ballet dancing as a boy and been ‘on the stage’...there were one or two photographs of him in a ballet pose or dressed as a woman in a sequin encrusted dress. On our Sunday visits I remember him sitting surrounded by miles of net, sticking on thousands of sequins.

***no doubt these days he would have been termed ‘Gay’.”**

Arthur sat in a chair, only his head and hands visible under the miles of dress net material, working on his next costume. He could see his little niece, Margaret, had edged closer, mesmerised by the sparkle and shine of thousands of sequins, looking at him curiously. He liked it when his brother and sister-in-law came to visit, especially when they brought the little ones. Things did get a bit dull between shows when he was stuck at home caring for mother and her ulcerated leg – it had been like that since she was twenty-one and never got any better, despite all of the Germolene he put on it.

Margaret wasn't her usual cheerful self. Normally she'd question him about acting and being on the stage, ask to see all his costumes and play with some of the props and memorabilia he had around the place. His brother had mentioned taking her to an eye doctor for surgery the last time they visited, and here she was today, quiet and sulky and wearing an eye-patch. He cracked a couple of pirate jokes, disappearing into one of the back rooms where he kept his costumes and returning with an eye-patch, a treasure map and sword, which made them all laugh. He called her Captain Maggie for the rest of the visit, saying he'd always wanted to be a pirate and that she should wear her patch with pride.

“They'll tease me at school, Uncle Arthur, I don't want to go but Mam says I have to.” She wandered over to look at his pictures on the mantelpiece.

“Don't listen to the little brats, they're just jealous they don't get to be pirates too! There's nothing wrong with being a little...different. Trust me. And it's only temporary, think how grand it'll be when the patch comes off and your eye is good as new, you'll look smashing!”

Margaret gave a shy smile. She picked up a photograph, her brow furrowed. It was of Arthur as a boy, lithe and serene.

“I didn’t know boys could do ballet!” said Margaret. Her father hastily took the photograph from her hands and set it back on the mantle, not saying a word. Despite all of the photographs and makeup and sequins from a life on the stage, the rest of the family pretended, unsuccessfully, not to notice. They would never speak of it.

“Corporal punishment at that time was acceptable...the one who administered most of it was a female (I think) of about sixty who had taught and assaulted my mother 30 years previously. She was of German extraction and was, I now suspect, getting into practice for the concentration camps...She was a good Christian woman. She told us so several times.”

She walked into the classroom, placed the tan leather satchel on her desk, and eased her bulk down into the wooden chair that could only accommodate one buttock at a time. She sighed with pleasure, the sound a sort of whoosh much like air escaping from a bicycle tyre, relieved to get her enormous weight off of her tiny feet. It was a long walk in from her lodgings, and she would be on her feet for most of the day at the blackboard. She liked to get there early, set the room up for the day’s lessons and savour the silence before it was destroyed by the clamour of countless children. She undid the buckles on her bag and took out her lunch, placing it in the top drawer of her desk. Unlike the private schools she had worked in back home in Deutschland, this one had no canteen and barely even a staff room. But she mustn’t complain: she was a good Christian woman doing her duty. God would be very proud of her, and reserve a nice little spot up there for a woman such as herself with impeccable morals and the gift for educating others, teaching them what was right and proper.

It was all for a good cause, what Miss Richter did, educating the workers. Someone had to teach the Kinder some morals. Sometimes the strap was the only way to make them behave. Fear of it turned even the most deviant child into a silent little angel. There were the bad ones, though, those that never learned no matter how many times they got their knuckles rapped or heads bashed, bad seeds, not good Christian children, she could tell, the ones that didn’t go to church every Sunday or pray before bed. She blamed the parents, mostly. Their morals these days, despicable! Then there were the others, the ones that weren’t naughty, but *doof*. They were worse. Like that idiot girl, Perry. Dumb as a twig! Useless at arithmetic. Taught her mother, all those years ago, and she was the same. Never the right answers no matter how many times she tried, so of course there was no alternative. How else was the stubborn child to learn? Spare the rod and spoil the child.

She reached into the second desk drawer to retrieve her Bible, flicking through it to find a fitting passage with which to start the day.

*

The children slowly filed into the room. Their chatter and laughter abruptly ceased as they crossed the threshold into Miss Richter's domain, the previously lively, animated kids turning into vacant, obedient automatons. It was like *Pinocchio* in reverse – *real* boys and girls became stiff and wooden, voiceless and obedient, subjected to every whim of their master or, in this case, mistress, who could always tell when you weren't telling the truth, not that anyone dared to lie any more – they had learnt that lesson the hard way, which was the only way Miss Richter knew. They sat at their desks or, more accurately, hid behind them, the rickety wooden object their only shield from the bits of chalk, the eraser and the torrents of sharp-edged words that flew from her if you dared to get an answer wrong or tried to be 'smart' with her.

"Good morning, Class."

"*Good morning, Miss Richter, good morning everyone,*" they replied, elongating each syllable and stressing the cadence of the phrase in the sing-song manner they had been taught.

"We shall start the day as usual with the Word of the Lord before getting on with a bit of long division – one of my favourites...Revelations 2:25." She made exaggerated throat-clearing noises, then began to read in her best imitation-English accent:

"He shall rule them with a rod of iron..." She continued reading for a few more moments then, satisfied, closed the book and placed it carefully on the desk. With a fresh piece of chalk, she slowly wrote one large, sprawling sum across the blackboard.

"You have three minutes. Ein, zwei, drei."

They began to scratch frantically with pencils and count on fingers. She loved watching them stretch their brains with sums like these. She would teach them to do better, be better.

"Perry! Stop dozing and pay attention. What is the answer?"

"I...I...I'm not sure, Miss," Margaret said, eyes lowered, already resigned to her fate.

"Not sure? Well, *get* sure, child. Honestly! It's a simple sum and I would expect even you to be able to work it out...I am waiting, Perry." Miss Richter stood with her fat arms crossed over her heaving bosom, her booted foot tapping the stone floor. Heavy yellow braids hung from either side of her large, pink head and whenever she wanted to show her anger, she would flick them over her shoulders.

"I don't know, Miss," said Margaret almost inaudibly. Miss Richter rolled her eyes.

"Mein Gott, *dummkopf*. Watson?"

“The answer is seventy-three, Miss,” said a smug, red-haired child from the front of the class, evidently Watson.

“*Sehr gut*, as always,” said Miss Richter. “Perry, see me after class.”

“Yes, Miss”.

Margaret hung her head, trying to stop her eyes from stinging, to stop those treacherous tears squeezing out from under her lids. She knew well enough what ‘after class’ meant: the ruler if she was lucky, the strap if not.

“She was 50 when I was 8, but we were ‘friends’. We went to the cinema every Saturday night to the silent films then later the ‘talkies’...she also hatched out her own chickens in an incubator in her kitchen, she kept a dog, cat, rabbit and a tortoise in the living room.”

Marie put the fork in the sink and lifted two bowls, one large, one small, onto a mat on the floor. It was a good job she was wearing an apron over her housedress as she was covered with hairs and a few stray bits of straw. Its reds, blues and yellows clashed with the lilac dress beneath. She could hear the keys of the piano being picked out slowly and clumsily into a familiar tune in the next room.

“Bunny, Eddie, dinner time! Come and get it,” called Marie. It was feeding time for the pets – she had quite a few now, though Bertie was hibernating and the cat had hardly made an appearance since meeting the new ginger puss down the street. Eddie appeared almost at once – he must have smelled the meat – and a moment later the piano-tinkering ceased and Margaret appeared with Bunny in her arms. Marie liked having pets; they were far better company than her husband, who, like the cat, only ever came home for the occasional meal, spending most of his time, and their money, down the pub.

It was far too quiet since the boys left, Edmund working down south somewhere and Norman off to the war, silly boy. She was proud of him for signing up, though she was afraid she’d never see him again. Poor Norman, that horrible rumour that was going round before he left, all smart in his uniform, neighbours saying he used to take little girls out to the allotment. Her Norman would never do a thing like that. She hadn’t had a letter from him in a while, but he never was the type to express himself much. She hoped he was OK. Her friend Lillie had received a notice saying her Tom was “missing in action.” They went to the spiritualist church together before the talkies with Margaret last weekend, as Lillie wanted to find out if Tommy was simply missing, as the telegram stated, or dead, as it implied. The place was full of weeping mothers and sweethearts desperately seeking messages from

their dear departed, a bit depressing really, and that film with Maureen O'Hara at the Odeon afterwards didn't do much to lift the mood.

They'd try for something a bit more light-hearted this weekend; Margaret did mention something about a new Jean Harlow, *Personal* something. A real character, she was, guaranteed to have the audience roaring with laughter and quite popular with the lads, too. They called her The Blonde Bombshell, which made Marie doubt the actress' morals. That's Hollywood for you. She seemed loose, not the best role model for impressionable young English girls. Not all of them had the good sense that she'd had and that she'd instilled in Margaret since long before the girl was old enough to know what it meant. Anyway, she was sure the film would be good fun, and Margaret always enjoyed their trips to the talkies.

She loved Eddie and Norm, but had always wanted a daughter, and now she sort of had one. Margaret was a wonderful lass, been coming round for years, helping with the pets and housework after her piano lessons; nice to have someone to share a bit of music with, and the teaching had brought in a bob or two extra as well, until her Pa stopped paying for the lessons. He'd said she wasn't making any progress. Margaret had no natural talent, bless her, and Marie was a good teacher but couldn't work miracles. The lessons stopped, but Margaret kept on visiting. They'd been friends ever since, and Marie had enjoyed watching the skinny, self-conscious child grow into a charming young woman.

“My first boyfriend worked here as a sales-man and a window dresser...I wasn't in love with this boy...there was a certain amount of 'heavy petting' and he used furtively to relieve himself occasionally, but sex did not dominate our relationship.”

They pulled up by the old gate, propping their bicycles against it. Margaret had hardly said a word to him since he picked her up. He'd asked what was wrong but she said nothing and continued to stare off across the fields. Margaret checked her face in a little mirror from her bag, then absently tried to brush the creases from her skirt. He helped her climb over the wooden gate and passed across the picnic supplies before springing over it athletically. They walked slowly towards a crop of trees, Margaret trailing slightly behind.

They had been coming here on their days off since they first met at work. He was a salesman, she'd been a junior clerk. She was a nice lass, down to earth, lovely, not like the other girls that worked there with their posh accents, endless flirting and affectations. He fell for her right away, couldn't get enough of her. Never pressured her into anything, though; his mother had brought him up right, to respect women. Margaret never let him go all the way, said she wanted to wait till her wedding night. He didn't mind that she wouldn't allow him to do that because she still let him try plenty of other things. They would ride out to the country,

bring a picnic and a blanket, and would lie there together all day long, hidden among the trees, kissing in the dappled sunlight. Lately, though, he had the feeling that something wasn't quite right. She'd cancel their plans at the last minute, sigh a lot when they were together and wouldn't let him...you know. And he'd practically had to beg to get her to come here this time. He'd made a special effort: got a haircut, put on a new shirt, polished his shoes, and brought her a pink carnation that she'd held limply in her slender hands and which now lay discarded on the grass by her bicycle.

He found a spot, stooped to remove some twigs and stones, and spread out the blanket, which caught in the wind and fluttered like a tartan flag before settling on the grass. He sat down, got the sandwiches and pink lemonade out of the basket and called to Margaret, who was tiptoeing over the winding roots of the nearby giant oak, arms outstretched for balance. She didn't answer, but slowly made her way towards him. He knew he wasn't the most exciting of blokes, but he treated her right, loved her more than ever. He just couldn't understand it. He blamed that new posh job of hers, those new fancy friends. All she ever did was talk about the rich, glamorous people she'd met. He could tell her heart just wasn't in it anymore.

Margaret sat down on the blanket, folding her long, slender legs to one side and smoothing her skirt over them. She reached for one of the neat little sandwich triangles, a jam one, and took a meticulous bite, her teeth leaving a pink, crinkle-edged crescent. Dennis took a cheese and pickle one and demolished it in two mouthfuls. His mother insisted on cutting them that way, she said it made them look prettier. They ate in silence.

Dennis moved over so he was closer to Margaret and took her hand in his. She did not pull it away, but neither did she reciprocate the gesture. Her hand sat lifelessly in his. She would not meet his gaze, so he reached out a hand and gently lifted her chin up until she had no option but to look at him.

"What's wrong, love? Please tell me. You've not been yourself lately. Is there something bothering you?"

Margaret pulled her hand away.

"Is it me? Did I do something to upset you? Or forget to do something? Whatever it is I'm really sorry, love. Can we at least talk about it, try and fix it?" He tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him gently away.

"You didn't *do* anything, Dennis. It's not you. It's just...oh, I don't know."

"Go on, love, tell me what's bothering you."

"Nothing is bothering me, Dennis, except you asking all these questions! It's just, well...me and you. It's been nice, but I'm different now. I've grown up...I've changed."

"And I haven't. Is that what you mean? I can change, can grow up. I've been doing well at work recently, saving. Soon I can afford to get my own place, then maybe we

could..." he trailed off, turning from Margaret to wipe his eyes, disgusted with himself for being so weak. He walked off a little way, needing a moment. He loved her so much and couldn't stand the thought of losing her to some flashy city bloke with a posh accent who wouldn't look after her like he would. Rumour had it war was coming soon. Maybe he'd sign up – might be an idea to get away for a while, do something brave and adventurous for once, win Margaret back.

"After a few days on the beach acquiring the necessary tan, I was amazed to discover the British Army thought me worth a few winks and whistles."

They said the war was here and that it would be terrible, but to a seventeen-year-old girl the war was great, at first. The prospect of all those beautiful young men in uniform dispelled any lurking fear of the horrors to come. Margaret's new job was at the same place as Joyce, and they spent all day gossiping at each other's desks. Summer came and she went on her first ever holiday – with Maria and her granddaughter to Skegness. She was allowed to go to the local hop every night, which was fun, especially as the Territorial Army were in town.

Margaret lay on the beach in her cream-and-brown patterned two-piece. She had wanted a one-piece strapless swimsuit like the one the model was wearing on the front of *Look*, but she couldn't afford it. What she was wearing with its high-waist shorts and tight, thin-strap top was borrowed from her older sister, Beth. They were about the same size, and Beth had only worn it on the first day of her honeymoon (it rained for the rest of the week) so it was almost as good as new. She was working on her tan, which after four days of glorious August sunshine was coming along nicely. She could hear the tap of the spade on the bottom of the bucket as Maria made sandcastles with her granddaughter nearby, the lap of the gentle waves on the shore, the laughter of children and the far-away shriek of the gulls above. She had felt more at peace over the last few days than ever before. For once she was well-rested and well-fed, the sun had lifted her spirits and the fresh sea air invigorated her.

On lazy summer days such as these it was almost possible to forget there was a war on, that somewhere, right now, boys and men were fighting for their lives. Over the past few weeks she'd been feeling a little blue. She'd ended things with Dennis, outgrown him, even though he was four years her senior, and while she didn't miss him exactly, she was beginning to feel lonely. Then came the news that he'd signed up, and was off flying aeroplanes somewhere. Poor, kind, gentle Dennis!

Maria said that if she stopped moping and smiled once in a while, chances were she would get asked for a dance or two, and she had decided that tonight was the night. She

would wear her ivory dress, the one with the purple embroidery on the collar and hem, as it would accentuate her newly acquired bronze glow. Since she'd had the operation on her eye, she felt more confident about her appearance, and she'd always had a wonderful smile, which she was planning to put to good use on the more dashing of the young soldiers later that evening.

That's where she met him, her second boyfriend – a handsome, polite young fellow, gorgeous in his khaki uniform, shoes shined to sparkling and funny squashed cap worn to the side over his short dark hair. She was sat at one of the tables at the back talking to Agnes, a girl she had met earlier in the week who was on holiday with her parents and younger brothers. Her friend was quite dull and sickly, but it was better than sitting alone waiting to be asked to dance. Agnes had turned down a skinny nervous chap with the most astonishing blue eyes, claiming he was too young for her. She did have a rather high opinion of herself, odd considering she wasn't much to look at. Margaret had set her sights on Mr Tall, Dark and Handsome over by the bar with the infectious laugh. She had caught his eye on her way back from the Ladies' and gave him what she hoped was a shy but inviting smile, before returning to the table to listen to Agnes discuss at great length yet another of her supposed ailments. She was fond of referring to her "delicate nerves." Margaret made what she hoped were sympathetic noises in Agnes' direction when she saw him moving towards her. He approached, smiling, before stopping in front of her chair and introducing himself.

"Hello. I'm Lawrence. Pleasure to meet you." He stuck out his right hand.

Margaret stood, subtly smoothing out her skirt as she did so, and shook his hand. When he did not let go of hers, she giggled.

"Care to dance?" he asked, already pulling her out onto the floor where they swayed to the sultry sounds of Billie Holiday.

It didn't last long though. Boyfriend Number Two got killed, was one of the first to go over the top at Dunkirk. Then she heard the news that Dennis' plane had been shot down. Boyfriend Number Three was a beautiful young Canadian, also killed in France, so after that Margaret decided to steer clear of uniforms.

"However generously inclined we felt, the evening usually ended with a gentle struggle for one's honour...I lost the battle one night though. I remember his name though I never saw him again – I was rather forcefully seduced. Today it would be called rape."

Allan stood in front of the grimy bathroom mirror, wearing nothing but his pants, and he liked what he saw. His chest and arms were taut, well-muscled and sparsely haired, tapering

down to a hard, flat stomach. He rubbed at the centre of the mirror with a flannel until he could see his reflection clearly, unblemished by the sprays of toothpaste and soapy splashes that had coated its surface. He took the comb and carefully parted his hair on the top left side so that his scalp shone through the brown in a straight, white line, then combed it back from his forehead and, after dipping two fingers into the pot of grease on the sink below, slicked back his hair, running the comb through it one last time to get the right effect.

Back in his bedroom he lifted the navy trousers from the foot of the bed and put them on. His mother had ironed them for him as she did every Saturday, knowing he would be going out to the dance halls with his pals that evening. Leaving them undone he selected a white shirt from his wardrobe and slid his arms into the cool, crisp cotton, buttoning it all the way to the top. He tucked the tails into his trousers then wove his black leather belt, a gift from his father on his eighteenth birthday, through the loops, before buckling it tight. He pulled out four brightly-patterned ties, hesitating before selecting the cornflower-coloured one with the geometric design – it brought out the blue in his eyes, he'd been told. He sat on the bed to put on his black and white wingtips, taking care to tie each lace neatly and tightly. From his bedside table he took some money, a box of matches and his cigarette case, making sure there were plenty inside first, before placing them in his pockets.

“Goodbye, Ma,” he shouted as he left.

He waited for Henry and Patrick at the corner opposite the Rose and Crown, and Paddy was late as usual. They walked the two miles to the Palais de Danse together, discussing the week at work, the night ahead, the girls they were hoping to see, the ones they were hoping to avoid. Audrey had been great, at first. She was a real doll, loved to dance and was good at it, and knew how to have a good time. The other girls said she was fast, and the lads joked about her, but it wasn't as if he was going to marry the girl and for what he was after it wasn't a problem. Recently, though, she had begun to get needy and jealous, becoming angry at him for dancing with other girls, for not calling her, not paying her enough attention. Jeez! It wasn't as if they were going steady. Anyway, she was away visiting relatives for two weeks, so he could resume his old tricks without having to worry about her tears or tantrums.

They entered the Palais together and did the usual, a slow walk around the perimeter to take stock of this evening's offerings, before getting a beer at the bar and locating the rest of their crowd. It was slim pickings tonight, though Henry had started talking to a pretty little blonde, Joyce. Allan thought she was nice, but a little too plump. He much preferred her friend, a tall, slim brunette with a smile so good that he didn't even mind the glasses. Patrick was having no luck as usual. He tried too hard, that was his problem. Girls were put off by his virginal desperation; he needed to play it cool. The girls went to the Ladies', giggling, promising to be right back. Joyce even blew Henry a kiss.

“Looks like you’ll be getting lucky tonight, Henry!” said Allan.

“Yeah, and if you play your cards right so will you.”

“I *always* play my cards right,”

“Smug bastard.”

“Language, Henry. There are ladies present.”

“They’re not present, and I hope they’re not *ladies* either, not for what I’ve got in mind.”

Allan nudged Henry, urging him to be quiet as the girls approached. The band started playing *In the Mood*, and they asked the girls to dance. Margaret, her name was. Sounded quite posh, too. Later they danced slow to *Moonlight Serenade*, and he pulled her close, loving the feel of her tight, lithe body against his. The song finished and he asked her if she wanted to go out, ‘get some air.’ Everyone knew what that meant. Henry had left with Joyce half way through the song. Margaret nodded.

*

He didn’t do anything wrong. She was asking for it. Her and that little friend of hers, all dressed up, covered in makeup, tight little dresses. The girls at the Palais de Danse were usually so easy; trust him to pick the only prude in the room. They all say no at first, but can usually be persuaded. She led him on with her flirting, her suggestive tone, the kissing, running her hands over his body. When he suggested they go somewhere more private, she giggled and followed him. Seemed willing enough, what did she expect? They kissed some more, then he went further and she seemed to be enjoying it plenty, so he didn’t get what the problem was. He got it out and she became coy, but he could tell it was just an act. She was OK at it but he wanted more and when he tried she said no, she wouldn’t do that, wanted to wait, he needed to stop. Such a little tease! Think it was her first time, which made him feel bad about it. She cried afterwards. He considered calling her on the telephone the next day to see if she was OK, but thought she probably wouldn’t want to talk. Best stay away from the Palais for a while, he didn’t want to get a bad reputation.

“Peter’s heart was not in his work. He was in fact a pacifist, was married to a pacifist, and was giving a home to a German refugee, also a pacifist.”

Peter sat in his top floor office with the doors closed so the machinery’s terrible racket was reduced to an undulating hum. Working in a place like this, you quickly learned to shout your loudest and lip-read. It was nearly twelve, which meant Margaret would be up in a minute, if she was coming at all. He neatened the papers on his desk, straightened his tie, smoothed

back his unruly hair. They needed to talk. Things were getting too intense; it was all a bit unconventional...he had to explain.

The poor lass had hated her job here, at first. She'd been sent in as the new costing clerk, responsible for keeping track of how much wire came off the spindles, which wasn't as easy as it sounded. She could do the job, had a good head for figures, although she didn't exactly fit in. He honestly thought she'd pack it in after a week, didn't think she'd last. The lads and lasses on the factory floor were a coarse lot, crude and rough, and they hadn't exactly warmed to her. Tanner, who'd worked here for ever, called her a stuck-up snob to her face when she came asking for his worksheet. He'd expected her to run out in tears then and there, but she hadn't – she was tougher than she looked. Turned out she could give as good as she got, and when they realised she had a sense of humour, and wasn't afraid to take the piss out of herself and others, they began to take to her. She wasn't so different from them, grew up right here in fact, though they weren't sure where she'd picked up that affected accent. She was a pretty thing, too, and many a wolf-whistle could be heard when she left her office and made her way out onto the factory floor in her frilly blouses, skirts and pumps. He'd underestimated her, at first, thought her vain and dense, but it turned out she had a brain and an interest in politics.

As the clock hands finally reached twelve, he took out his cheese and pickle sandwiches and put the kettle on for a brew. The door opened and in she came, wearing a brown dress covered in tiny white dots and carrying a sheaf of crumpled papers. He smiled at her, and gestured to the chair, then prepared two cups of strong tea. He put them on the desk, and moved his chair round to sit by Margaret.

"How's it going out there? Were all the sheets filled in or you still having trouble with one or two of them?" he asked.

"It's not too bad, much better than it was. I think Mick forgets to keep a record, then makes up the numbers when he sees me coming, writing down the first thing that comes into his head. Makes me wonder why I bother, but explains why things haven't quite been adding up lately! And I can hardly read old Tom's scrawl, can't tell if it's a one or a seven, a six or an eight half the time!"

"Just do your best, love," he said.

Margaret looked at him, cradling her mug in her hands.

"Everything OK, Maggie? You don't seem your usual cheerful self. I'm sorry if it's got anything to do with...with me...us?"

He looked away, embarrassed. She'd come for dinner again on Saturday night, and it had been just the four of them: him and his wife Jean, Klaus the German refugee who was still staying with them, and Maggie. He knew his wife was sleeping with Klaus, and he had a feeling she knew how he felt about Margaret, but they didn't talk about it. It'd been a pleasant

enough evening. Margaret was fascinated, said she hadn't met any pacifists before, and they spent the time discussing the situation in Germany, socialism and anarchism...they'd drunk too much wine and gin, and at some point Klaus took Jean by the hand and led her upstairs, leaving him and Margaret alone in the sitting room. She hadn't been as surprised as he thought she would. He'd moved closer to her, put his hand on her leg, just above her knee, and when she didn't resist he moved it further up, the flimsy material of her dress gliding over her stockings. He slid his hand round so that his fingers were able to stroke the soft, exposed skin of her inner thigh. A little further and they gently brushed the cotton of her knickers. She gave a light gasp and he looked up at her, worried that he'd gone too far, but she had her eyes closed, her head tilted back, lips open slightly. She parted her knees a little, and that was all the encouragement he'd needed.

“No, it's not that...it's not you...”

She gave a shy smile and took a sip of her tea.

“I'm glad.” He reached over and took her hand in his. “I'll be honest with you, I was worried you'd come in today and not want to speak to me. It was such a relief when you walked through that door!”

She gave his hand a squeeze. “Of course I'd still be speaking to you!”

“I'm sorry, I know this is all rather unconventional...”

He felt guilty: they were both committing adultery, but so was his wife. He loved Jean, knew she loved him, but was also in love with Klaus, so what did it all mean? He enjoyed talking with Margaret. She made this damn job tolerable, made him laugh, and her questions kept him on his toes. Hard to believe she'd been married to a member of the Tory party, though she'd recently left him and moved back in with her mother.

“You should know...I won't leave her.”

“OK,” said Margaret, oddly calm. She still held on to his hand.

He leaned over and kissed her, not caring if anyone saw them. She kissed him back.

Anita

“Every Friday a little old man used to come with his Donkey Cart to sell Cockles and Mussels. He would give us a ride and make us laugh as he shouted his wares as he had a cleftroof to his mouth.”

They were gathered on a grass verge at the side of the road, if you could call it that. It was more of a dirt track, bumpy and windy, dry and cracked in summer, treacherous with ice in winter and a muddy bog the rest of the time. The wheels of the cart would stick or slip, feet would arrive home so soggy the toes had wrinkled like prunes and the skin begun to peel.

A small, untidy boy was poking a long twig down a crack in the baked earth, hoping to dislodge a creepy crawly to make his sisters run and cry with. Another boy passed the time by kicking up clouds of dust with the scuffed toe of his too-large boot. Two girls, one slightly taller than the other, were playing cat's cradle with a yellowing piece of string. Charlie, bored with his fruitless bug search, wandered over the grass verge to the pond and stuck his stick in there instead. He waggled it around in the water, feeling for the bottom, before walking around the perimeter, trailing the stick across the water's surface, startling various insects that were resting there. A dragonfly flitted to the centre of the pond, dipping once to meet the glassy veneer before darting away, its shimmering iridescence briefly captivating the boy. He stopped next to a rock at the edge, kneeled down and peered in.

“Tiddlers!” he shouted. “The tiddlers are out! Bobbie! Nellie! Come see! Anita, quick!” Bobbie ran over, crouching down next to Charlie and staring. The girls skipped over and peered from above. Bobbie reached a hand into the pool, watching as the tadpoles scurried away then back again as he pulled his hand from the pond and flicked the water at Anita who let out a scream and shoved him, the others giggling.

Anita moved away from her siblings, her face stern and creased into a frown. She sat on the verge sulking, disgusted by the greenish-brown water that had been flicked into her face. She lifted the yellow gingham of her dress up, wiping her cheeks with it, then squinted down the road as far as she could see until it bent out of view to the left of the old oak, waiting.

She heard him before she saw him.

“Cockles. Get yer cockles ‘ere. Mussels, fresh mussels. Get yer mussels ‘ere.” His cleft palate meant that he struggled to form certain sounds correctly, and the already-misshapen words seemed to whistle through the red line of the deformed lip that led up to his nose, providing an endless source of horror and entertainment for the children. They often asked him to say tongue-twisters and rhymes, *she sells sea shells by the sea shore*

and *Ring a Ring o' Roses*, laughing at the barely-recognisable sounds that issued forth. Anita stood, now smiling, and called to her brothers and sisters.

“He’s here! He’s here!”

They ran over to where she waited, all staring expectantly down the road until the donkey appeared clip-clopping round the corner pulling the rickety cart with Old Arthur perched on top. He waved as he did every week and eight arms waved eagerly back before the boys took off down the road running towards him, hoping for a ride on the cart. Anita and Nellie lingered on the verge. They loved Old Arthur, and liked to stroke the donkey’s nose, but the cart stank something awful – Anita hated both cockles *and* mussels, the smell alone was enough to turn her stomach, and Nellie rarely went anywhere without her little sister.

Anita’s face wrinkled in distaste as the cart approached with her brothers dangling precariously from its wooden sides. She pinched her nose between thumb and index finger, before following the cart back along the road into the village, skipping and twirling beside Nellie, not letting go of her nose until the exertion was so much that breathing only through her mouth became difficult. When they reached the village other children gathered round, petting the donkey and holding their noses in an exaggerated manner. Many adults came to purchase Arthur’s wares, the bizarre rubbery, slippery yellow and white appendages found clinging to the walls of little greyish cockle shells or the dark, long, narrow mussel shells, as they were cheap and plentiful.

“Nellie’s twelfth birthday came around and she started at the mill at Earnshaw Bridge, half-time, and then I started a year later, aged 12, also a half-timer at the cotton mill.”

“Ani, Ani, wake up!” Nellie whispered, giving her sister a gentle shove.

Anita didn't move.

“You have to get up or we'll be late!” said Nellie, louder, shaking Anita harder this time.

Without opening her eyes, Anita groaned and pulled the blanket up over her face. Nellie snatched it away, and Anita lay there in her cotton nightie, hair ruffled, bottom lip protruding petulantly. She opened her eyes and scowled at her sister.

“Come on, Ani, get dressed, I'll make us some tea.”

Anita slowly got out of the bed, angry that it was so dark, so cold, so early. She wanted to stay under her warm blanket till 7.30, when it would start to get light, and eat toast with her mum by the fire before heading off to school with her little brothers and sisters. She resented Dad for sending her to work in the mill instead of letting her stay on at school. Still, she had no-one to blame but herself. Dad said if she passed her exams she could stay in

school, but they were hard, too hard. She dressed quickly because of the chill, wrapping herself tightly in her shawl before making her way downstairs. She went into the kitchen where Nellie was making breakfast sandwiches. Two cups of hot milky tea sat on the table, so Ani gratefully wrapped two little hands around one. She yawned, her mouth stretching so wide it made her jaw ache. Nellie joined Ani at the table, and the girls sat sipping their tea in the gloom. The sleepy fog that clouded Ani's mind was lifting, and beneath it lurked the familiar dull anxiety she felt every time she had to go to the mill. She'd been working part time and had got to spend a couple of afternoons a week at school, but now she'd turned thirteen on Saturday, she, like Nellie, had to go full-time. That meant six till five-thirty Monday to Friday, and a half day on Saturdays.

"It won't be that bad, Ani. Full time isn't much different to part time. You'll get used to it," said Nellie, seeing the anguish on her sister's face. "I'll be there. We can eat our sandwiches together at half eight, and come home and have lunch with mum."

Ani didn't reply, she just sat mutely staring into her empty cup, trying to delay the inevitable.

"Come on," said Nellie. "Go get your shoes on. Can't be late on your first full day – they'll give your work to the tick-weavers, and Dad'll go barmy if we lose a day's wages!"

She put the mugs in the sink and left the room, Ani following reluctantly behind. At the front door both girls put their clogs on before helping each other into white aprons with an extra piece of calico at the front, tying the tape neatly at the back. They tightened their leather belts, picked up the bag of sandwiches and tea-cans, and set off, arriving at the gates by ten to six. They were both tenters, though soon Nellie would have two looms of her own, like their big sister Ermintrude, who worked a later shift. She couldn't wait to earn a shiny half-sovereign like Ermy. Once inside among the looms' rhythmic clatter they picked up a pair of scissors and a hook each and tucked them into their belts. Nellie gave Ani a brief hug, then went off to find Ruth, whose looms she tended. Ani slowly made her way over to her Missus, a large, coarse, cross woman in charge of four looms. Last shift Ani's hook had got caught on the warp as she walked around the beam and some of the threads had snapped. Missus was furious as she'd to stop the machine, and re-thread it, and the boss Paul was also mad because he wasn't making any money when the loom wasn't running – that's what he shouted at her, along with other choice phrases. Although she wasn't going to get her hopes up, she prayed they weren't still upset with her.

"There you are!" shouted the Missus. "Took your time, didn't you? Lazy little mite! Get to it, then!"

Ani glumly obliged, walking around the beam, careful this time not to get her hook caught. She ducked under the loom, which was picking up speed. Her stomach gave a rumble and she stifled a yawn. It was going to be a long day.

“The 1914 war broke out and young men were called up for the army and munitions etc. Frank being a craftsman was sent to Cammel Laird’s Shipyard at Birkenhead and worked on submarines for more than 3 years...our courting was done mostly by writing letters.”

Anita was just finishing up at her lathe when she noticed a commotion across the room. In swept a pale, haggard young man, tall and thin yet smart in his uniform. He looked tired though eager as he strode into the middle of the factory floor, hat in hand, and cast his eyes around the busy room. Jenny, a small, pretty, fair-haired girl in a brown dress and ragged, woollen shawl looked up, her gaze following that of every other hopeful female in the room and coming to rest on the back of the figure. She stepped out from behind her bench and tentatively walked over to him, reaching out a hand to his elbow and calling “Eddie?” He turned and clumsily grabbed her, crushing her small frame tight against his torso. He kissed first her blushing cheek, her forehead, her hair and finally her thin lips. There were cheers and whistles and the occasional lewd comment thrown their way before the foreman shouted at everyone to leave them be and tidy up, shift was nearly over. Some women smiled, gladdened by the reunion of soldier and sweetheart. Others, like Anita, gave deep, sorrowful sighs, longing for their absent lovers, wishing it had been them swept off their feet at the lathe. She snuck another glance at the embracing couple, startled by the soldier’s bloodshot eyes and the tears on his weatherworn face as he clung desperately to Jenny.

“Bye Ellie, bye Janet,” Anita called to the girls across from her, and hurried out of the foundry, harrowed by the raw emotion of what she had just witnessed, hoping she hadn’t offended the girls. She usually walked home with them, though today she wanted some quiet in which to think between the almost deafening clamour of the factory and the din at Nellie’s. She crossed Owen Street where she had first noticed Frank, her gaze lingering on the doorway in which he had stood watching her pass by on her way home for weeks, and gave a little smile. It was a lovely evening, the sun low but still warm, the birds singing sweetly, and for a moment it was almost possible to forget there was a war on, though the dull ache in her arms from ten hours of lifting shells on to the lathe at Butterworth and Dickenson’s acted as a constant reminder. The shift work in the foundry was hard, especially when she was on nights, but she much preferred munitions to the mill work she had resented for years. She longed to go straight home but had to stop at the butcher’s first. Since the rationing, meat was a rarity. You could only get it one or two days a week, and her shift work meant she had missed the best so would have to queue for what was left, if any, though with a bit of luck she would be able to get a nice pork chop for tea.

She did indeed get one, though it was small and stringy-looking, but with a bit of gravy and some potatoes from the garden it would be nice enough. She hurried on, eager to get home to her sister's and rest her feet, though home wasn't quite the right word. When it neared the time for Nellie's baby to arrive she moved in with them to 'lend a hand.' She opened the door to a screaming baby, a flustered Nellie and a smell much like burnt toast, but stronger. Nellie, with the baby in one arm and a wooden spatula in the other, was trying to remove crisp remnants from the tin next to the stove. Anita quickly dropped her coat and bag over the back of the chair and, easing her red, bellowing niece from her grateful sister's arms, made her way out into the small back yard. She sat on the step, rocking the flailing child, soothing and stroking the hot, soft little head with her hand. The baby was hungry, but Nellie was busy preparing, or rather burning, Bill's tea. She takes after our mother, thought Anita. Can't cook much that's edible, other than a Sunday roast. The baby was calmer now, one fist wrapped around a loose strand of Anita's hair, the other stuck firmly in its mouth. They stayed there a while, enjoying the cool twilight.

She made her way back into the house just as Bill came through the front door, pulled off his boots, lifted the child from her arms and sat down at the dinner table. All was silent as he stared for a moment at the blackened mass on his plate, Nellie and Anita waiting for his reaction. All of a sudden he let out a loud roaring laugh and poked at the crisp shell.

"You trying to kill me, Nell? Or just break my teeth? This thing's hard as a stone!" Nellie looked like she was about to cry. Bill got up and, with the baby in one arm, walked over to Nell, removed the tea towel from her hands and put his free arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, love, I was only mucking about. How about we take a little gander on round to the chippy, just me and you? Ani'll watch the wee one, won't you?"

"Course I will, though she needs a quick feed first, Nellie," Anita replied. Nellie gave Bill a quick kiss and lifted the baby from him, going through into the parlour. Anita and Bill exchanged a smile as she scraped the black mess and soggy carrots into the bin. "Not even the birds could eat that!" said Anita, and Bill laughed while counting the change from his pocket.

Anita got a pan for her chop and fetched some new potatoes from the sack, scrubbing the mud from them in the sink. She set the potatoes to boil, put the chop in the pan to fry and sat at the table with her head wearily resting in her hands. Nellie came back through with the contented, dozing baby, pulling a tattered-looking letter from her apron pocket and laying it gently in front of Anita on the table.

"Hopefully this'll cheer your face up," said Nellie. Anita smiled as she touched the letter with her fingertips.

Frank.

Nellie put the baby down to sleep before she and Bill left, and Anita was sure that after the chippy they would stop by The Rose for half a shandy and a glass of ginger ale. After washing the dishes she made her way to her room, leaving the door open so she could listen out for the baby. She took off her shoes, dress and slip, and after putting on a crisp cotton nightie she sat down on the bed, exhausted. Opening the drawer of her bedside table, she took out her Bible as well as a pile of letters tied together with a lilac ribbon. She put her hand on the Bible and prayed, 'Please God, let him be all right, send him home to me soon.' She picked up the new letter and lifted it to her face, inhaling its musty, damp smell. Carefully running her index finger under the lip, she broke the seal, trying to open it without it tearing too much. She eased out the cream pages, which were a little dirty and smudged, and her eyes darted across them, skimming quickly for any mention of injury, relocation, leave. She began again from the top, taking her time now that she had reassured herself that he was fine, still in Birkenhead, would be home in two weeks. She thanked God for Frank's neat handwriting. Janet regularly received letters from her man, John, but his script was so poor that no one could make out more than three words on the page – they had all tried! They had good fun 'imagining' what it said, though, making Janet giggle and blush.

“One of the greatest thrills of my life was to have my own key and unlock the door of my own home. It was evident someone had been there before us. Confetti was everywhere, in the curtains etc. and even in the kettle and in the cellar. Reg had drawn faces on the whitewashed walls and slogans and had also played jokes in our bedroom.”

Frank opened the door of the new red SLS model for Anita as she gathered the long skirt of her dress together, hitched it up then folded herself into the passenger seat. Making sure both she and the train of her dress were tucked in, Frank closed the door and then ran round to the driver's side, waving to the crowd of family and friends huddled by the church gate cheering, smiling, and crying (his new mother-in-law). He opened the door and got in, smiling at his bride who was picking bits of confetti from her hair and sweeping it from the silky fabric that clung tight across her hips and thighs before gently fanning out as it reached the floor. Frank reached over, gently pulling a tiny piece of pink paper from her hair. They drove down the narrow, bumpy lane that led away from the church, tin cans rattling and clattering away behind them – Anita's brothers Alex and Reg had tied them there along with the sign on the back bumper: 'Cooing Doves to Honeyland.'

Frank was grinning for the whole journey, although this had as much to do with the car he was driving as it did with his bride. He could remember the first model to come out of

Leyland, and had been fascinated ever since. This car was luxurious, a dream, borrowed for the day from a friend who worked for the Standard Motor Company in Coventry. As a craftsman himself Frank appreciated good work, and this was a fine example of solid, top-notch British manufacturing. He wished he could afford one, but his savings were nearly all gone, first on the diamond engagement ring, then on rent and furnishings for their new home, yet he did not regret a penny he had spent; it was all for her – she was worth it and more. He reached over and gave her little hands, which were nestled together in her lap, a squeeze, rubbing his fingertips over the thin gold band on her left hand, a smaller version of the one that now adorned his.

He pulled up outside a semi-detached three-bedroom house. It had needed a lot of work: they'd spent ages looking, and finally found one they could afford, and with the help of Anita's brothers Frank had managed to fix it up nice for her. Anita and his new mother-in-law had been busy sewing together on Sundays - curtains and cushions and the like with yards of fabric and flowers and the odd bit of ribbon – so it was now looking really homely. He got out and opened the door for Anita, offering his hand. She climbed out and let down her dress, smoothing out the crinkles. Their eyes met and they smiled simultaneously, their grins soon turning into laughter. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close to him, so her body was pressed up against his. He tilted her pointy little chin upwards as he leaned down to kiss her. His lips brushed across hers then pushed against the softness of them. They responded with little bird like pecks at first followed by longer, more lingering strokes. Feeling braver now that he was a married man he pushed his tongue into her mouth. She gasped in shock or surprise, and for a moment he was worried he had ruined it, that she would pull away, embarrassed, but soon enough her soft, hot little tongue reciprocated and he let out a sigh, relocating his hands to her hips and pulling them closer to him, his right hand slipping around to knead and squeeze her bottom through the cold, gliding satin of her dress.

She pulled away, and stood facing him, her face fligid, her pupils large and darting: she would not look at him. She was shy and nervous, excited yet afraid. He reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He lifted Anita's right hand and placed on to her palm a key, closing her fingers around it and quickly kissing her on the cheek. Wielding an identical key, Frank turned to unlock the freshly painted green door to their home but Anita reached out a hand, halting him, and stepping in front of him, unlocked the door with hers.

It was everywhere: on the doormat and every step of the stairs – on the armchairs and the mantelpiece, on the table and inside the kettle. Little bits of coloured paper like it had rained indoors in pastels, confetti. No matter how many times she swept and dusted, she would be finding bits for weeks. She opened the door to their bedroom and noticed her quilt looked ruffled – it was even in their bed, between the new white cotton sheets she had

embroidered herself. Her mother and Nellie, who came by the day before to unpack a few of her things – and who were obviously responsible for letting in Reg – had left out her pale blue suit by the dresser, along with her flat pumps and new stockings that she would be travelling in, as they were getting the train to Scarborough for their honeymoon in an hour's time.

“Frank!” she called down the stairs. “I need your help.”

He took the stairs two at a time, smiling as he reached her.

“Yes, my love?”

“It's the buttons, at the back of my dress. There's so many of them and I can't reach...”

He turned her around and placed his hands on her bare neck, then slowly worked at the row of tiny buttons until he had undone enough to be able to slip her dress down over her shoulders. He undid the last few and let go of the pale, cool material and watched as it slithered soundlessly into a heap at her feet.

“We spent a week in Scarborough in 1971, June 3-10...it revived happy memories of our honeymoon there 51 years previously.”

Anita stepped off the bus with the majority of the other passengers who slowly filtered out and away from the kerb. Half a century had passed since she was here last. She breathed in deeply, enjoying the smell of salt on the air. She could hear the rhythmic push and pull of the waves despite the bustle of the crowded seafront, though could not yet glimpse the beach as the bus was between her and it. Where was Frank? She'd thought he was right behind her. Looking back, she saw he was stuck behind three dithering, gossiping teenagers with their long hair flowing and jeans bleached and tattered. They were trying to get onto the bus, even though poor Frank was still attempting to get off. She went to give him a hand with their suitcases, which he was awkwardly manoeuvring from the bus onto the pavement as the girls still blocked the way.

“Excuse me,” said Anita, polite but firm, and the girls looked around, dazed, before drifting a few feet back in a cloud of perfume and hushed giggles. Frank got off the bus, and Anita picked up the smaller of the two buckled leather suitcases that sat at his feet.

“Come on, then. It's not too far from here,” she said.

Frank lifted the other suitcase and followed his wife along the busy promenade, past a variety of tea-rooms and shops selling postcards, buckets and spades, striped sticks of rock and jars of boiled sweets. Moustached young men clustered around a row of parked scooters, beige and red and green and chrome, helmets in their hands. Tiny babies and

chubby toddlers peered out of prams pushed by proud mothers. Older people walked by slowly, the men with hands in their pockets or a newspaper under their arm, the women clutching handbags, huddling under their scarves or pulling plaid trolleys laden with market goods. Small dogs scurried over the pavement beside owners out for a seaside stroll.

Anita stopped abruptly, looking up at a slim wooden structure sandwiched between a tour-operator and a gaudy amusement arcade.

"Is this it?" said Anita. "It can't be, surely?" She looked at Frank, her disappointment obvious. "It's nothing like I remember."

"This is the place." He stood a moment, contemplating. "Doesn't look like they've painted it since the last time we were here."

Anita took in the dull, peeling paint, once such a deep shade of green, the grimy windows draped with yellowing nets, the unappealing neighbours.

"The restaurant's gone, then. And the barbers." She eyed the arcade with disdain. "Come a long way since penny arcades, haven't they?" She looked miserable.

"I'm sure we'll still have a nice time, love," said Frank. "It's been years. I'm sure we don't quite look as good as we did back then, either. That guest house looks how I feel!"

Ani smiled and took Frank's spare hand in hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Maybe it'll look better inside than out," she said, trying her best to be optimistic, forcing a smile.

It didn't.

*

After a short rest, during which Frank had napped and Anita read, they got ready to go out for a spot of sight-seeing, then on to dinner. Ani put on a clean dress with her pink cardigan, and Frank put on a checked shirt, a little crumpled from the case, with a tie their eldest daughter had bought for him for his last birthday.

It was bizarre, really. Everything was so different, yet so familiar. The Grand, for instance, looked as it always had. The Spa was there, of course. The lighthouse had been resurrected. This place had been through two wars, and neither had shown any mercy. She was pleased to see that Boyes was still there, still going strong. She had bought a few yards of fabric there on her honeymoon, which she made into cushion covers when she got home. The castle was crumbling though it was still an impressive site up above the beach. She was glad they'd come back. Tired and hungry from their walk, they found a quiet little fish place, reasonably priced. Ani had the fishcakes, Frank the cod, both with chips swimming in vinegar and a generous sprinkling of salt. They had mushy peas on the side and a pot of tea to wash it down.

Afterwards, they strolled arm-in-arm along the front, the soft shades of the twilit sky the perfect accompaniment to romantic reminiscence.

“You were wearing that light blue suit, and you were quiet the whole way here.”

“I was nervous. So were you!” Ani teased.

“Had wanted to get you a nice room in a hotel, something like that big one overlooking South Bay.”

“The Grand.”

“Couldn't afford it, though, not after the house. I was worried you'd be disappointed.”

“I wasn't, it was lovely! A little tired, perhaps, but it had plenty of charm and a wonderful view across the water.”

“At least it still has the view,” said Frank.

“Sorry, love, it's my fault, getting all sentimental and wanting to stay in the same place as we did for our honeymoon. Didn't know they'd let it fall to ruins. Should have listened to you, paid a bit more and stayed in that one Jean and Donald recommended.”

“No use fretting about it now, dear. Come on, I'll buy you an ice cream.”

Frank led Ani towards a hut along the promenade with a sign declaring its wares – teas, ices, soda – and ordered two cones, both with large scoops of creamy vanilla, which they ate on their walk back to their dilapidated B&B. Once there Ani closed the faded curtains, and pulled back the thin cover on the bed.

“I think I saw some blankets in the top of the wardrobe when I was unpacking, think you could reach them?”

Frank retrieved them, and together they unfolded the two scratchy grey bundles, placing them over the bed.

“Rough, but real wool, so at least we'll be warm enough,” Ani said. She quickly undressed, turning from Frank as she removed her bra and slipped the nightie over her head, pulling the cotton down past her soft withered breasts and the folds of her stomach. How differently this very scene had played out fifty-one years ago, Ani thought.

Frank was struggling with the last of the buttons on his pyjama shirt. He hadn't been so good with his hands lately, had been clumsy, dropping things, which was so unlike him. They got into bed and lay on their backs, side-by-side. She felt Frank's hand touch hers, and she laced her fingers through his.

Emmeline

“We heard the adults saying not to go into the woods at the park because there was a flasher. We had no idea what a flasher was, so of course we went looking for it – we never found him.”

She skipped along the cobbled lane, swinging the hand-sewn bag that held her books, back and forth, round and round. The faded red drawstring twirled as the bag spun and spun until it twisted around the small hand that grasped it tight. She stopped, holding the bag straight out in front of her, watching as the cord slowly began to spin the other way, getting faster and faster, unravelling until it released its grip on her fingers that were now odd shades of pink and white. She passed the bag across to her other hand, flexing the one that had been unintentionally bound. Satisfied it was all right, she galloped the rest of the way down the lane until she reached the familiar green door of home.

“That was quick!” said a disembodied voice coming from the ceiling. Emmeline put her bag down and slipped off her shoes and placed them neatly in the row to the left of the front door with the others, taking care to line them all up straight and in order of size. She removed her cardigan and hung it on one of the hooks by the door. It took her four attempts – she had to jump and on the third attempt, although she got it on the hook, it slithered from the peg as she turned to leave and fell onto the floor in a crumpled heap.

“Where’s your sister?” the floating voice asked. Emmie began humming to herself, a folk song she’d learned from the choir mistress at school.

“Are you deaf?” said the voice, louder this time, followed by a low rumble and rhythmic thumps before her mother appeared, hands on hips, dusty and sweaty, her apron on and hair up in a scarf. She looked at Emmie and raised one eyebrow, expectantly.

“Orla’s at the park picking leaves. She said the orange ones were pretty. I told her to hurry up but she wouldn’t.”

“The park? She’s at the park? Oh, Christ!” Her mother made the sign of the cross, hurried down the stairs and flung open the front door, looking up and down the lane.

“What’s wrong, Mammy? It’s just the park. She’ll be here soon.”

Emmie pulled at her mother’s apron, looking up, confused. Her mother put one hand on each tiny shoulder and sank to her knees so their heads were level.

“Emmie, darlin’, promise me you won’t go near the park till I say so. Promise me!” She gave Emmie’s shoulders a light shake as if to emphasise the point.

“I promise, Mammy...but why? Why can’t we play in the park?”

“Never you mind why, child. Just you do as your mammy tells you like a good wee girl.”

Emmie picked up her book bag before slowly climbing the stairs to her room, dragging it so it trailed, thumping against each step in turn. She took off her school clothes then, in only her vest and pants, carefully folded them the way her sister had showed her. She pulled on an old dress, then lay on the floor on her stomach. Using her arms she pulled herself forwards, bit by bit, much like how she imagined a caterpillar would, until the entire upper half of her torso disappeared under the bed. Only her pale, skinny legs could be seen sticking out. She shimmied backwards awkwardly with her treasure in her arms – *Little Red Riding Hood*. She sat on the bed she shared with Orla and opened the book, her eyes roving over the pictures before tackling the words. Luckily, she knew the story by heart, just like she knew all the other fairy tales her daddy had bought for her. She touched the illustrations with her fingertips as her mind brought the story to life: the basket, the trees, the tail, the house, the teeth, the axe. The story frightened her a little: it had given her nightmares when her Pa first read it, but she was bigger now. She would never walk alone in the woods, though – she hardly ever went anywhere without Orla; she was brave. Maybe there was a big bad wolf in the woods by the park and that was why Mammy said she couldn't go. Tommy next door would know if there was. His mammy always knew everything about everyone, and Tommy was very good at listening when he wasn't supposed to.

A while later she heard the bang of the door as Orla returned, followed by her mother's almost simultaneous exclamations of relief and anger, matched by actions which shifted seamlessly between hugging the girl tight and delivering a clout around the ear. She heard Orla climb the stairs, rustling as she went. Emmie looked up from her book just as Orla deposited a pile of orange, red and gold leaves in front of her on the bed. Emmie laid her book aside, then both girls commenced, wordlessly, to sort the leaves into piles according to colour, hesitating over the few that seemed to be a mixture or were exactly half way between red and orange or orange and yellow, neither one shade, nor the other. Orla picked up one pile at a time and carried them over to the windowsill, then took off her school clothes. As she was folding them neatly into a pile, Emmie asked about the park.

“Mammy says we can't go to the park.”

“So.”

“So why can't we?”

“Don't know.”

“Is it because there's a wolf?”

“A wolf! Ha! No, course there's not a wolf, silly!”

“Well, what is it then? Shall we ask Billy after tea?”

“All right then.”

The girls went downstairs to do their designated jobs: Orla to help Mam serve the dinner and Emmie to set the table. After tea, which consisted of shepherd's pie, they went to see what Billy knew. He was with Sam, a large, rather dense lad from down the road, and the two were firing stones from a homemade slingshot at a target hastily chalked on the wall. The four of them sat at the bottom of Sam's back garden to discuss the business at hand.

"Well, Mum was talking to Ina what works in the shop, who said her Annie had got an awful fright one evening walking home. She took a shortcut through the park, by the woods at the back, and that's when it happened."

"When *what* happened?" said Orla.

"I'm not sure, though Ina said it was 'very disturbing' and that Annie was 'very upset' and that it was 'disgusting behaviour.' He mimicked Ina's voice as he spoke, making Sam and Orla giggle.

"What was disgusting?" asked Emmie.

"The flasher!" said Sam, grinning.

"What's a flasher?" asked Emmie.

Billy shrugged and Sam sniggered.

"Don't know," said Orla, "but it doesn't sound very nice."

"Stop being such a girl, Orla, you scared?" taunted Bill.

"No, course I'm not scared." Orla crossed her arms and turned away from the lads.

"We could go look for it," said Sam. The four regarded each other in grave silence, wide-eyed with nervous excitement. Sam stood up and headed for the back gate, and one by one the others followed.

"Years later I was walking home from work or a dance or something and I noticed a man on a bicycle, cycling very slowly. As I passed by he jumped off his bike and flung open his coat, exposing himself. I screamed, hit him with my umbrella and ran...I used to go to the French clubs because the boys danced. In the English clubs they didn't, they stood around the edges and waited for the last dance."

Emmie and Evelyn left the noisy French dance hall through the fire exit at the back. The music and laughter spilled out into the chilly air before hastily retreating back inside, becoming nothing but a muted clamour as the door swung shut behind them. They crossed the car park, juggling coats, umbrellas and patent clutch bags as they stopped briefly to put on their coats, the thick, dark material cloaking their vivid dresses, Emmie's a brilliant turquoise, Evelyn's a soft, flirtatious pink, until both girls almost blended into the darkness. Emme linked her arm through Evelyn's as the girls walked along the narrow path, heads

close together as they spoke hurriedly in hushed tones, as if imparting secrets into each other's ears. Occasionally, Evelyn would forget the late hour and a sharp squeal of a laugh would escape from her lips into night air before the startling sound was gobbled up by the sapphire sky.

"He likes you!" exclaimed Evelyn.

"No he doesn't," replied Emmie.

"Does!"

"Does not! And even if he did, I don't like him, so there!" Emmie's cheeks flushed a warm pink, and a shy smile picked at the corners of her mouth.

"Liar!" said Evelyn, and both girls giggled.

The French dance halls were better than the others. At the others the girls frolicked and swirled across the dance floor while the boys hovered at the edges, holding a drink, at most tapping a foot in time to the rather tame music, either too shy to ask a girl to dance, or simply too happy revelling in their passive role as voyeur as they leant and stared lecherously at the girls on display, twirling before their very eyes. At the French dance halls the boys actually *danced*. Not only did they dance; they danced *well*. The music was lively, the atmosphere sultry, the men foreign and exotic. Just that evening they had met an amorous Egyptian, beautifully dark and hypnotic, who had danced all night, both alone and with a number of beautiful, smitten girls and women, including, to her delight, Emmeline. She had been cooling off after a particularly energetic Bop, sipping her lemonade and casually (or so she thought) watching the dark-haired and doe-eyed Arabian prince dance indifferently with a rather plain girl who stared at him with equal measures of lust and awe while he looked nonchalantly around the room. His gaze met Emmie's. She blushed. He smiled and untangled himself from the grasping, desperate Jane, gently pushing her away and sauntering over to Emmie.

They danced and danced and danced. She had never had such fun before. She was hot and sweating with the exertion of it all, was dizzy and breathless but glowing – her eyes glistened with excitement, her cheeks and chest were florid, her body high on adrenaline, her skin tingling where he touched her and pulsing and throbbing deliciously elsewhere, too. Envious eyes followed them as they moved as one across the dance floor, the jealous girls missing nothing – seeing his broad hands tighten around her waist, occasionally drifting lower, to her hips, his long fingers gently pressing into the softer flesh at the top of her buttocks, causing the delicate material of her skirt to pucker and strain. He pulled her closer to him by her hips, so that they were touching, her hands resting on his chest as they danced slower, eyes fixed, lips slightly parted in anticipation.

And then he was gone. A call from a comrade across the room and off he went, out the back door and into the night.

Last week it had been a beautiful, lithe French boy who had danced away the night with Emme and had the girls gossiping and giggling on the way home. Who knew what next week had in store? Evelyn loved to dance and enjoyed the nights out with Emmie, but she had her Harry, so wasn't looking for romance. Emmie seemed to find it even when she wasn't looking, though she wasn't one for settling down. She liked having her fun, the flirting, the dancing...she always behaved herself, though, mostly.

They'd arrived at the corner of Evelyn's street and, after a hug, a quick peck on the cheek and a delicate wave, Emmie set off down the road alone. It was starting to get a bit nippy, so she pulled at the belt of her coat, tightening it across her middle. She heard a rustle behind her and turned to see a man on a bicycle. She kept walking but quickened her pace. After a few moments she noticed that he still hadn't overtaken her, which she thought was a little odd, and a peek over her shoulder confirmed that he was cycling really slowly. She hurried on, thinking, nearly home, everything's OK, keep going. Her nerves got the better of her and she glanced back again – he was closer, and was looking at her. She faced forward and kept going, telling herself she was just being paranoid, it was all perfectly innocent. Next thing she knew the man on the bike was parallel with her, he was cycling along side her, still at that unnaturally slow pace. All of a sudden he jumped off the bike and stood directly in her path, flinging open his coat. Emmie screamed, more in disgust than in genuine terror, as she took in his pale, sweaty chest, his flabby, hairy stomach, his engorged pink penis that just sort of bobbed there in front of her, expectantly. After the shock subsided she remembered the umbrella in her left hand and succeeded in delivering a barrage of jabs and blows to his naked frame before running awkwardly down the road in her heels.

She looked back to see him still standing there, meek, dejected, his coat still open, flapping gently in the wind, his penis now shrunken, deflated. His bike lay, discarded, on the road beside him, the front wheel spinning.

“My first job was in Shaftesbury Avenue as a dental nurse and I worked for this guy who was about four foot tall and four foot wide...if anything ever went wrong he used to cry...the prostitutes used to spend a lot of money on their dentistry.”

She'd been working at the surgery for almost a year now, and was finally starting to feel like she knew what was what. She hadn't wanted to work there, didn't exactly like the dentists, and guessed that nobody really did, but there she was. Thing was, she wasn't exactly bright, not like Orla. Dad wasn't going to scrimp and save to pay for college fees for a girl whose wit was mediocre at best. He had let Orla choose. Art school or secretarial school. She loved art, loved creating beautiful things, but head won over heart in the end – she needed the

money, and one seemed more likely to lead to a steady income than the other. Dad was relieved, it was obvious, but poor Orla was often bored to tears. Without brains or talent Emmie didn't have the luxury of choice, so when her Dad heard about the position going, she felt obliged to give it a try. It was a funny little surgery in Soho, up a narrow staircase behind a peeling door. It turned out to be far more interesting than expected, but not because of the nature of the job – unwashed mouths and rotting teeth would never be of interest to Emmie – but because of the people, both staff and clientele.

Hari owned the practice. He was a small, dark little man with soulful brown eyes. He talked longingly of home, telling Emmie tales from his childhood. She listened to his long laments and beautiful descriptions of a land she now longed to visit.

“The food. I miss the food the most – ah, such wonderful spices, the colour, the warmth, the *heat*.” The weather seemed to rub off on him – in summer he was bright and cheerful, in winter he was prone to long bouts of melancholy, and the rain made him sullen and sulky. The most amazing thing about this man, though, was that whenever anything went wrong, he would cry. Large, round, glistening tears would seep from his eyes and he would weep and whimper like a child. The first time it happened, Emmie had no idea what was wrong, or what to do, and she started in his direction, hoping to comfort him somehow, but Eileen, the nurse, put a restraining hand on her shoulder and shook her head, beckoning for Emmie to follow her out of the room.

“Don't mind him. It's best just to leave him be. He'll be all right in a few minutes. It's just what he does. Takes it so personally, you see. Can't handle it if anything don't go to plan. The man cares too much.”

“Oh. I see,” said Emmie, unsure how else to respond. They stood in the hallway until they could no longer hear any sobs. Eileen peeked her head round the door to check that it was all right to come back in. They entered the room and there was Hari ready and waiting for his next appointment, looking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. As for Eileen, she was nice enough, quiet and efficient, although could be a little cynical and bitter at times, especially if she hadn't had enough to drink. Emmie knew about the bottle she kept in the bottom drawer, had seen her sip or swig from it when she thought she was unobserved. Emmie had been concerned at first, thinking 'How can this woman attend to patients if she's drunk?' It can't be safe, is not proper, but she didn't say anything as she didn't want to lose her job – Dad would be so disappointed. So she kept her mouth shut and her eyes peeled, and it seemed like Eileen was much more pleasant and much more focused *after* a drink rather than without one. She even opened up after a few, and was quite a laugh, recounting the days of her 'prime' to Emmie, who found it hard to believe that the overweight, drunk old nurse had ever had one.

The best bit about her job was the prostitutes. They would waltz on in dressed, or rather undressed, in their uniforms, faces an inch thick with paint and potions. That was another great thing about Hari, he welcomed all walks of life into his surgery, treated everyone with equal respect, regardless of background or occupation, as long as they could pay their way. The prostitutes would come in, make small talk with Eileen and Hari, gossip, brag and tease, shock them by telling them the ins and outs of their latest encounters. You could tell some of Hari's other clients weren't impressed, were shocked that he allowed such undesirable sorts to frequent his practice.

"They have teeth just like you and me, and they pay me as well as you do," Hari would reply. The girls seemed to take pride in their teeth, would save up and book appointments to come in and get them cleaned and polished. She guessed it helped, in their line of work, to be a girl with a dazzling smile, among other things. She got to know some of the girls well, so that on her walks to and from work they would call out to her, and sometimes she would stop for a chat. They dished the dirt on all the local goings-on, the gangs, who owed who, who had been with a certain high profile someone whose career would be over if anyone ever found out. She was never sure how much of it was true, though loved hearing it all the same.

"He told me on the Wednesday that we were getting married on the Saturday. He didn't ask me, he told me, because he knew that if we got engaged I wouldn't marry him."

Emmie burst out of the club into the cool autumn evening. She hauled air into her lungs, enjoying the feel of the gentle breeze against her sweaty skin. God, had they danced! She'd been seeing the Iraqi on and off for the past eighteen months. Normally she'd have tired of the lad by now and moved on to another, but with this one the chemistry was still there. She felt like she'd never get bored of dancing with Idris. The door behind her creaked open and, as she turned to see who it was, Idris wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her neck, pulling her tight against him. She leaned back into his chest and put her small, pale hands over his larger, darker ones where they held onto her midriff. He continued to kiss her neck, and she softened into him, glad those strong arms were holding onto her. His teeth softly grazed and tugged at her right earlobe and she let out a little sigh.

"You are going to marry me," whispered Idris in his sexy, heavily-accented English.

"What?" Emmie gave a nervous, incredulous laugh, and turned in his arms so she was facing him, looking up into those gorgeous brown eyes and long lashes.

“I’m serious. Marry me, on Saturday.” He brushed her hair back from her face and looked at her in a manner so earnest and unlike his usual playful, seductive self that Emmie sobered up.

“Idris...you and me, we’re not the marrying type.”

“We are alike, my little dancer. We are perfect for each other. Say yes, my love, say yes.”

She kissed him, lips then tongue then sweet, breathless oblivion. This would be hers. He could be hers. She broke the kiss just long enough to answer.

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He was waiting for her outside work on Thursday when she came out for her lunch break.

“You’ve not forgot your promise, my love?”

“Hello, Idris.”

“You will marry me, and soon! I know the mind of my little dancer, and I cannot let her escape!”

“How on earth can we arrange a wedding in a few days?”

“Just a little wedding. Family, friends, some wine and dancing...what else do we need?”

“You’re crazy!”

“Quite possibly, my love. But you will marry me.”

“Fine! If that’s what you want. I suppose I should tell Mum and Dad...”

“Come on, let’s get some coffee and we can plan our magical day.”

Emmie laughed, linked arms with her Iraqi beau and wandered along the streets of Soho until they came to a little Middle-Eastern coffee shop. Idris had some of that thick, strong coffee he liked and Emmie some mint tea, and together they nibbled on flat bread and hummus. They planned the wedding and beyond. They’d need to find a place together. He’d have to tell his parents. She wondered how hers would react, if her sister would like him.

*

They spent days after the wedding scouring thrift stores and alleyways for cheap, unwanted furniture. So far they’d got a table and two chairs that actually matched at a jumble sale and a wicker sofa that someone had dumped. The fabric was a little stained and the pattern ugly but she’d cover it with a throw and some cushions. Idris had a lamp and a beautiful woven rug, and Emmie’s mother had let her take some wool blankets and pots and pans from home. Her sister was making them curtains. All they really needed now was a bed and a wardrobe. Her parents and a few relatives had given her a little money, but that was going towards sheets, towels, crockery, and stocking the pantry.

Idris pushed open the door of yet another shop full to the brim of haphazard cast-offs. The bell jingled as they entered. Emmie found a full-length mirror, only slightly tarnished, leaning precariously against an oriental-patterned folding screen, the paintwork peeling. She instantly wanted both. Idris found a wooden bedstead that was missing a couple of slats and haggled with the inept shopkeeper who ended up feeling like he'd got a good deal when in fact Idris had managed to buy the bed, screen and mirror for significantly less than the prices advertised on the little tickets stuck to each. Idris carried the mirror and promised the shopkeeper he would be back later to collect the bed and screen.

"My love, did I not tell you it would all be fine? Look here, we have some left." He opened his palm and revealed the rest of the money. "I will find you a mattress, my bride."

They made their way back to the little flat, no more than one room and a tiny bathroom, really, and Emmie began arranging what little they had so far while Idris went back out to round up Ali and David to help him bring the bed-frame and screen. Emmie then prepared dinner, chopping some potatoes, carrots, leek and onion and adding them to the pot of simmering stock. She gave it all a stir then went and flopped down onto the sofa. They were making the best of it, but it was tough. Idris got paid well, but the work was not regular so they couldn't depend on it. Emmie got paid all right at the dentist, but the rent, even for a little place like this, was steep. The trouble was, Idris had written to his parents to tell them the good news, but they hadn't reacted as he'd hoped. Instead, they tried to buy him off. His family were wealthy and powerful in Iraq, and offered Idris a very large sum of money to leave Emmie and come home. They had a very low opinion of English girls, and Idris would not tell her exactly what they'd called her in their letter, but he'd been so angry and ranted for hours in his foreign tongue. He was upset, conflicted, and understandably so, but he didn't leave her.

"You're my wife, and I love you. Of course I will not leave," he declared when Emmie had asked what he was going to do. They would make it work, somehow, he vowed. And they did.

"My husband died fifteen years ago, then I was back in touch with David and was going around with him for a couple of years. Unfortunately, he is an alcoholic, used to smoke around eighty cigarettes a day and I thought I don't want to sit and watch another man die. David was always one for the ladies, he was a very good looking man when he was young."

"Marry me, Emmie," asked David, for about the thirtieth time, as they sat at the table in her living room. Idris had been gone for four years now. She was lonely, and loved David, but

watching one man she loved die a long, slow death had been terrible enough. She wasn't prepared to go through that again, and the rate David smoked and knocked back the scotch it would be sooner rather than later – he'd already survived one heart attack and she'd no idea how he still had a functioning liver. She'd done her best to let him down gently, convince him they were too old for such frivolity, but he was persistent.

“David, we've talked about this.”

She'd tried to see less of him, but it was difficult. She'd a lot of time on her hands since she retired, though she still did a little editing here and there when the opportunity arose. She'd been on two cruises with Orla, which were fabulous, as well as a couple of jaunts round Europe, most recently a week in Lisbon. Spending time with her sister was always nice, but Orla had her husband, her children, her art. Emmie had one of Orla's paintings in the hall, a cross-stitch in her bedroom. She'd joined a local book group, but they seemed to have an aversion to reading science fiction and fantasy, and Emmie grew bored very quickly of Austen, Christie, Larsson and the chattering women. She read a lot, visiting other libraries in the borough as she'd got through all the sci fi at the local library and wanted more. She loved Russ and LeGuin, Moorcock and Tolkein, McCaffrey, Banks and Martin.

She'd joined a few other social groups, attended talks by the U3A, but the problem was, it was all women, and Emmie much preferred the company of men – always had. Older men, retired men, did not join social groups. So she'd no choice but to sit here with David, reminiscing about the good old days. Sometimes they met with Ali, and laughed as he regaled them with tales of his latest conquests. They danced, too, a North London gal and an Egyptian Jew, danced like they used to, as if dancing could ward off time and age and death.

Elizabeth

“Sarah Sutcliffe never missed an opportunity of pointing out one’s faults, of scolding the children, of extolling the virtues of her own family. Add to this that her appearance, in no way attractive, was made even more repellent by a large growth the size of a hen’s egg at the corner of her left eye. She really did embody a child’s idea of an old witch.”

Lizzie wriggled her hand out of her mother’s in order to inspect some of the more interesting fabrics, trailing her fingers over the various textures. Mrs Ogden kept back any bolts of fabric that were imperfect, knowing her mother would likely buy them at a reduced rate. This is what Lizzie’s dresses were made from, unlike the frilly, lacy, shiny concoctions her cousin wore.

“Lizzie, come here!” said her mum, beckoning her over to the till where Mrs Ogden was ringing up the cost for some unremarkable brown cloth with a noticeable run.

“Such a good, quiet little girl you’ve got,” cooed Mrs Ogden.

Her mother beamed and patted Lizzie’s hair. Lizzie said nothing, as usual, just stared at the woman, who was rummaging around beneath the counter. Mrs Ogden presented Lizzie with a Fry’s Medallion, and Lizzie’s eyes widened with glee. Her favourite! Four squares of happiness.

“What do you say to kind Mrs Ogden?” Lizzie’s mum prompted.

“Thank you,” said Lizzie, barely above a whisper.

They left the shop, her mum carrying a few metres of cloth while Lizzie held on tight to her prize. Half way up the lane a familiar shape emerged from behind a hedge. Lizzie drew in her breath and clung on to her mother’s hand. It was the witch.

“Her teeth’ll rot! You shouldn’t let her eat that rubbish, it’ll spoil her,” the witch leered at Lizzie, that bulbous face with its unnatural protrusion getting much too close. Lizzie melted into her mother’s side, trying to find shelter, make herself invisible, but there was no hiding from the witch. Whenever you did something wrong, she knew. She always knew. The witch made a swipe with a claw for the chocolate bar, but Lizzie, however terrified, wouldn’t give up her prize without a fight.

“Good afternoon, Sarah,” said Lizzie’s mother, cordially.

“It’s Mrs Sutcliffe to you,” said the witch, looking down her crooked nose at Lizzie’s mum, who sighed.

Lizzie tugged at her mother’s hand, urging her on to the safety of their own front gate. They made it inside, shrugged off shawls, and went their separate ways. Lizzie wanted to

wait, to save her chocolate for later, until she couldn't resist. She sat with it on her lap in her favourite spot on the window seat, alternating reading *Pilgrim's Progress* and watching the street hawkers out of the window.

"Lizzie! Tommy! Bath time," called Auntie, so Lizzie closed her book, grabbed her chocolate and made her way to her aunt and the zinc bathtub.

"You can't take that in with you! Hurry up and eat it." Auntie bustled from the room with an armful of dirty washing. Lizzie, fearing for the fate of her treasured Medallion, tore the foil wrapper, broke off a square and popped it into her mouth. She resolved to suck it to make it last longer. Tommy saw the chocolate and asked for a bit. Lizzie hesitated, then gave him a square, feeling pleased with herself for sharing. Dad would be proud of her. Tommy munched and swallowed then came asking for more. Lizzie shook her head, she had been generous enough, but his little grubby hands made a grab for the remaining squares. Lizzie stepped back, out of his reach, but the back of her legs slammed into the side of the tub. She wobbled and toppled backwards, landing with a splash and a piercing scream so loud that Auntie and her mum came running. Auntie didn't always remember to put cold in first. Lizzie's mum soothed and consoled while Auntie went to get the doctor. Together they pulled away Lizzie's skirts and peeled off her knickers, taking a layer of skin with them. The doctor covered her in linseed oil, put on some dressings, and left her lying on her front. Her chocolate lay soggy and abandoned in a pool of water, and, instead, Lizzie had extensive scarring that would remain for the rest of her life.

"The weekend rambles really thrilled me. My favourite companion was Cousin Jack, a compulsive rambler, who knew the countryside so much more intimately than any of the others...I was fascinated by all the chief sites chosen by the sisters for their settings...Wycoller Hall is, of course, the Ferndean Manor of Jane Eyre...Stone Gappe (Thornfield Hall)...Ponden Hall (the Thrushcross Grange of Wuthering Heights and Edgar Linton)...Americans and other tourists seem to favour Upper Withins (Wuthering heights), though it has fared the worst of all."

The house was one of the oldest in Haworth, the lintel above the door reading 1671. Its low ceilings, flagged floors and thick, dark beams made it feel smaller than it was, but sturdy and cosy, as if it were hunkering down. Elizabeth sat in a worn armchair in front of a vacant fireplace, drinking tea and reading. Once her cup was empty she put the book aside and made her way through to the kitchen. She cut four thick slices of bread, then some generous slabs of cheddar, which she wrapped up and placed in her bag along with two apples and the water. It was heavy but necessary, as they'd be out all day. The moors were often steep,

so they'd need plenty to drink. Jack would carry it, he usually did – together with his maps and other bits and bobs. She left the bag by the back door and laced up her walking boots. She'd been unsure what to wear that morning, as it was coming towards the end of September when the weather was fickle, reminiscent of July one minute, then skipping ahead to November the next, especially out on the moors where the wind from the Atlantic scoured the heather and made the clouds swirl and scurry. She decided on her beige cotton dress. It was designed for milder weather really, but it was light and easy to move in, which made it much better suited for rambling than her heavier, closer dresses. She'd be warm enough – she had on some thick stockings underneath and her shawl in case it got colder later on and, besides, today they wouldn't be going too far.

She went outside, taking care to close the door gently so she wouldn't wake little Lambert, and, after crossing the garden, walked along the lane and round the corner. The air was cool and damp, and a light breeze rustled the trees and tall grass. She climbed the steep, narrow, oddly-cobbled road, lined on each side with the familiar small houses made of distinctly-dark millstone grit. At the top of the hill she passed the Black Bull Inn, next to the church, where it was rumoured Branwell spent too much of his time. Further along the narrow high street she first came to the graveyard, and then the parsonage. She stopped by the path at the back of the building, the one that led straight out to the moors, and thought about the sisters, the effect of living in such a place, surrounded by graves on one side and desolate moors on the other. Scenes from *Jane Eyre* came rushing into her head as she stood staring at the purple heather, feeling the wind on her face, imagining the scene, not in its summer glory, but as it would be in winter with the cold, relentless wind and rain! How well Charlotte had captured this! After wandering round the outside of the building the sisters had called home, as near as she dared, given that someone still dwelt within, she sat beneath a tree and listened, waiting for the peals to begin. After a few minutes the peaceful sounds of wind through trees and the song of small birds were smothered as the bells rang out, first one, then another, then another, faster and faster until they seemed to overlap in their eagerness, like excited children clamouring for attention. She liked listening to the bell-ringers in the tower that was the only remaining part of the Bronte's church, the next incumbent supposedly having raised the rest to the ground, consumed by jealousy of the sister's fame and sick of living in their shadow. After a while she became impatient, wished Jack would hurry, annoyed that she'd forgotten her book. She couldn't wait to visit the places that had so greatly inspired the Brontes, even though she'd seen most of them many times before.

During the week she'd moseyed round the local area, the small winding paths through the moors or down the valley, encountering heather, bracken, long coarse grass, boulders and surprising little streams that seemed to trickle out of nowhere, but hardly ever

encountering another soul. This Wednesday just past she'd gone again to Upper Withins, the inspiration for the Earnshaw residence in *Wuthering Heights*, but it seemed smaller in reality, and was falling apart and, truthfully, it bore little resemblance to the house described by Emily. All that was similar was its elevated position, its isolation and the stormy weather that had given the novel its name. Today she was going with Jack to Ponden Hall at Stanbury, the model for Emily's Thrushcross Grange where Linton had stayed. They couldn't walk as far as usual, as Jack had started taking organ lessons at the church, which took up much of his time. She'd been torn between Ponden and Wycoller, but while she preferred Wycoller, as it was where Rochester made the wonderful speech that she could recite by heart, she'd been there recently with Connie, the Headmaster's daughter, who sometimes joined her and Jack and Clifford, an Adonis of a stonemason that Elizabeth was a little in awe of.

"Sorry I'm late," said Jack, startling Elizabeth. "You got everything?"

"Course I have," said Elizabeth, handing him the bag. "You know where we're going then?"

"Sure do."

He pulled a folded sheet from one of his pockets, smoothed it out, then held it down so Elizabeth could see too. They knew the way, of course, but the map added to the fun, the sense of adventure.

*

They walked up the sloping lane, idling by the railings in front of the long, two-storey house with its three protruding chimneys, many-paned upper windows and small, walled front garden. Elizabeth sauntered round to the gable end of the house where the stone wall rose higher and looked up at the tiny, single-paned window, the one broken by Linton as he reached his hand out into the night, seeking a troublesome branch which morphed, in a moment of gothic terror, into Catherine's cold, ghostly hand. Elizabeth loved piecing together different parts of the Sisters' novels from her local surroundings. She imagined Linton, snowed in after a visit to his odd landlord, running in fear from that room, then Heathcliff standing at that same window, hopeful, desperately searching for his beloved, beckoning her spirit to him.

They continued on up the lane, past a row of cottages, climbing higher still, along a dwindling road beside a wall of crumbling stones. At a solitary tree they turned left and walked along the gravel path until they came to a fork in the road with Height Laith farm on the left. They headed right, still climbing, until they reached the gate at the end of the track. Next to it was a stile. Jack hopped over easily with his long legs, then Elizabeth climbed up and jumped down the other side. They followed the track a while longer, then took a left out onto the moor. The view was wonderful: nothing but tufts of long grass, bracken, the odd

patch of fading purple heather meeting the sky where patches of blue were still visible between the billowing white puffs tinged with grey and mauve.

“1050 feet!” exclaimed Jack, after consulting his maps. He offered Elizabeth his arm, which she accepted with a laugh, as they made their way, slower now, watching their footing as there was no longer a path, only a sparse, rocky track of loose shale marked by occasional posts.

“There it is!” announced Elizabeth, pointing straight ahead. “I can see the kirk.” In her eagerness she quickened her pace, knowing the little stream and waterfall must be near, the trickle of water drowned out by the sound of the wind whipping at her skirt, sending tendrils of flaxen hair flying.

Once at the stream they stopped for a rest, Jack putting the bag down and sitting next to the kneeling Elizabeth who skimmed the water's hurrying surface with her fingers before plunging her hand in, cupping it under the cool, clear liquid and flicking a palm-full at Jack with a giggle. He lunged forward, quickly immersing both of his hands, each of which was twice the size of Elizabeth's, and hurled handful after handful at her until she had to run from the stream, squealing.

“Stop! I surrender,” she called. He held his hands up in the air, palms facing her. She crept forward, hesitating, suspicious of the truce, knowing from experience she might well end up drenched through, thankful it was only a stream and not a river, or she may have ended up getting dunked. Noticing her suspicious glance, Jack laughed and came towards her, pulling her to him in a rough bear-hug, before letting go and picking up the bag, stepping over the stream and walking on ahead.

“Come on, Cousin,” he called back, and she stepped over the stream and followed after him towards Ponden Kirk.

“I decided to buy a motor-bicycle – a most daring step for a woman in those days!...It had no kick starter, so I had I had to run with it to start it up and then to jump on...my costume was a real hotch-potch.”

She'd been saving for a rainy day, but now, thanks to *too many* rainy days, she knew what the money had been meant for. She was sick of walking those meandering, melancholic miles to work and back every day in the wind and rain, the fog and ice. Charlotte Bronte got it right when she talked of the ‘clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating.’ Elizabeth was happy teaching at a little school over in Taplow. It would be perfect if it wasn't that she had so far to traipse. It was quite a nice little stroll in summer and tolerable in spring, although as autumn cooled to winter and the days got shorter and darker, the mist lingered longer and

the driving rain began to carry with it an icy chill. Those few miles seemed to stretch into a marathon. She decided enough was enough. Now the 225cc Triumph Junior perched in the front garden, with cogs, chains, spokes, lights and brakes, all silver, black and green and gleaming. It was worth every single penny.

The trouble was that women simply did not do things as *daring* and *masculine* as ride motorbikes. It was unheard of and frowned upon, and so there weren't exactly any women's outfitters around that could provide the necessary gear. She had no choice, therefore, but to cobble together her own hotch-potch of a riding costume. Skirts and dresses were just awkward impediments as they would restrict her movement, plus they might get torn and stained with oil, or get caught in the machinery. No, they were too hazardous. She needed breeches and, thanks to cousin Jack, she had a fine pair of thick, brown cords that fitted perfectly about the waist and, after hours spent the night before with scissors, needle and thread, they were now neither too long nor too short, but just perfect for tucking into her black leather knee boots. She took off her skirt and pulled on the cords, pushing in her cream blouse. She went to the wardrobe and got out her tweed suit jacket and put it on, then walked down the hall to the back door and tugged the long boots over the thick trouser material. She picked up her gloves, the brown leather helmet Jack had got for her, as well as the driving goggles, and opened the back door. Once outside she put them both on, wedging the helmet over her head and fastening the chin strap, then walked round the side of the house to where Jack was waiting next to her motorcycle.

"How do I look?" asked Elizabeth, with a smirk. Jack glanced up from the manual he was reading and gave great staccato guffaws.

"Like you got dressed in the dark using the church's 'lost and found' box!" said Jack, suppressing yet another burst of mirth. "You do make a rather dashing young fella, though."

Elizabeth slapped at him and he shielded himself in mock fear – it was hard to be scared of a lass not even five feet tall, especially one dressed in his own breeches with those funny goggles on her face.

"You going to show me how this contraption works, then, Jack, or are you just going to stand there and laugh?" said Elizabeth, arms crossed in indignation.

"Go on then, hop on! Careful not to get your knickers in a twist."

Elizabeth hoisted one leg over the motorbike and settled into the seat. Her short legs barely reached the ground and she had to stretch far forwards to clutch the handles, but she managed it, just about.

*

The first day she rode the bike to school, she was surprised how easy it was, except for that one moment when she was rounding a sharp bend in the lane. The road was bumpy and the

curve tight, and she thought she was either going to tip over or bounce right up over the front. She would have to remember to slow down there tomorrow. It wasn't bad, though, for her first proper go. All that time spent practising with Jack round Haworth over the last few weeks had been well worth it. The sense of pride and achievement that surged through her when she arrived, surprisingly unscathed, in the school yard had been immense. She felt like a latter-day New Woman, with a motorbike rather than a bicycle and without the cigarette, of course.

As soon as she scooted into the yard the door opened and out came her colleagues Paul and David with great smiles on their faces. They clapped and cheered as she pulled her helmet from her head and got off the bike and stooped to prop it up on its stand. She'd told them she'd be riding into work in case something went wrong, some mishap on the road. She was usually very punctual and wanted to prepare for any eventuality.

"You made it safe and sound, then," said Paul. "Mind if I take a look at her?" Without waiting for a response he moved closer to the motorcycle and, bending down, examined the engine and various other parts, talking to himself all the while.

"Glad you made it in one piece, Elizabeth. I, er...was a little worried, to be honest," said David, the mild-mannered young headmaster. He smiled and patted Elizabeth on the shoulder, blushing as he did so.

He'd be quite a catch, thought Elizabeth, if it wasn't for his complexion. He was thoughtful, kind, caring, a decorated veteran with a good job – a very dependable sort. It was a shame, really. He'd been gassed in the war so badly that if you didn't know any better you'd think he had a severe case of jaundice.

"I'm alright, David, you know me – tough as old boots!" said Elizabeth.

"Not a bad machine at all, Elizabeth," Paul said, walking over to them, rubbing his oil-spotted hands onto his white hanky. "Rather splendid, in fact! Now tell me, how does she run?"

Elizabeth told Paul everything she knew about the bike, which was not much – just what Jack had explained to her and a few bits and bobs she remembered from the manual, then went inside to change into the skirt and stockings she'd brought with her, before the children arrived. Elizabeth could tell from the way Mildred raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips when she came into the small staff room that she didn't approve, but then there wasn't much the old lady did seem to approve of, so Elizabeth didn't take it personally. She secretly enjoyed antagonizing that fossil of a woman – every school seemed to have one.

At the end of the day she changed back into her brown breeches and boots and went out to where she'd left the bike only to find she couldn't get the darn thing to start. They were on a hill, and it didn't have a kick-starter. Paul had already left, but luckily David was still in

his office. He came out and helped her start it, as he would do at the end of every school day from then on.

“‘Can I help you?’ asked a pleasant voice, and I turned to see a tall, red-gold giant, with intensely blue eyes and an immense hooked nose that he always vowed he had inherited from the Phoenicians, since his father was a pure-blooded Cornishman, his mother being a Geordie. My heart missed several beats.”

She never did stay in the same place for very long. After a couple of years she grew bored and numb so began to cast her eyes about, eagerly searching for something new, a fresh challenge. She longed for a change of scene as well as of spirit, and had found herself thinking of London, where she'd spent some time studying at St. Katherine's on White Hart Lane, a C of E college for prospective women teachers. She loved the school she was currently teaching in where the boys were small, poor and tough, yet such good, kind little souls, and it was a pleasure working for the timid young yellow headmaster, though still she was not satisfied.

She came to the end of the street and looked around, trying to decide which way to go as she was unfamiliar with the grandeur of Kensington. She tucked some stray strands of mouse-coloured hair behind her ears and tugged her skirt straight, then walked left to the end of the adjoining lane. She peered around the corner but could still not locate anything looking remotely like a church or a school. She turned and walked brusquely back the way she'd come to the other end, yet this way didn't look promising either. 'I'll have to find someone to ask for directions,' she thought, but she couldn't see a soul as she let her eyes wander around her grand surroundings – nothing but houses, tall and elegantly looming. She stood still trying to decide what the best course of action would be for a lone lost woman, who would be late for an interview in that seemingly empty part of town. She shouldn't have strayed from the high street, and was about to turn and retrace her steps when...

“Can I help you?” said a gentle but most definitely male voice out of nowhere, and Elizabeth turned to come face to face, or rather face to middle of chest, with a red-gold giant. Her eyes were level with a maroon waistcoat under a grey woollen jacket. She raised her eyes, taking in a green tie, a thick, pinkish neck, and prominent chin over which there was a dusting of wiry, shimmering hairs in various shades of orange and bronze. Above this, a pair of full lips sheltered beneath an immense hooked nose. Finally, her gaze met with two intense, sparkling blue eyes that smiled down at her. Aware that she was staring at him as if she were deaf, dumb and more than a little dense, she recovered her manners enough to

greet him politely with 'Good Morning' and take this golden giant up on his offer of assistance.

"I'm here for an interview at the church school, yet can't seem to find it. Geography's not my specialty, you'll be relieved to know," said Elizabeth, aware her face had become uncharacteristically fligid. Her small, compact body was overwhelmed by the startling presence of this man.

On learning the school's name, he said, "I'm heading that way myself. Let me escort you." And with that he offered her his arm, which she self-consciously accepted, and led the way. Elizabeth paid little attention to their journey, to the passing locals and useful landmarks. She was encased in a blissful bubble encompassing both herself and the giant who walked beside her. She was intrigued by the sense of pleasure the contact of this stranger's arm aroused in her, warmed by the heat that seemed to emanate from his hulking form. She dared to sneak another look at that bizarre array of features that made up such an interesting and oddly pleasing face. He caught her peering up at him and bestowed on her a smile so soft and welcoming that instead of averting her gaze in mortification, she couldn't help but smile back.

"The main entrance is right over there. Give your name to the lady at the desk and she'll see to it."

He'd pointed to a set of double doors, nestling in a wall made of light reddish-brown stone. Elizabeth hadn't even realised they'd arrived at her destination, and as she allowed herself a moment to take stock of her surroundings, he was off, disappearing behind another smaller, windowless red door a few metres to the left of the one he'd bid her enter.

"Curiouser and curiouser," thought Elizabeth. Still reeling from the omnipresence of her guide, and needing a moment to gather her scattered wits, she smoothed her skirt and once again recaptured those rebellious strands of hair that had dared to escape. She took her little round spectacles off and polished them with a white, embroidered hanky from her pocket as she stood under a flowering tree. She settled them back onto the bridge of her stubbed nose before walking across the small paved yard towards those double doors.

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Elizabeth announced her presence to a wrinkled, wiry woman with a bell placed just inside the main doors sporting a handwritten sign that read 'Press for Attention.'

"Wait one moment, please," said the receptionist who then disappeared. After ten dull minutes she returned and led Elizabeth through a door and down a long, draughty corridor.

"We're running a little late this morning. Please be seated and wait for your name to be called," said the woman, before making a hasty retreat.

Elizabeth, who sat on a small, wooden chair outside what she assumed was the head teacher's office, felt like a reprimanded pupil rather than the experienced teacher she was.

Her appointment was meant to be at nine-thirty, and she could hear muffled speech from behind the door.

She shivered and took from her satchel a tattered, yellowing copy of *North and South*. She removed the leather bookmark, hoping to pass the time reading, though quickly gave up, unable to concentrate for long. She was nervous about the interview and further distracted by the golden image that took up residence in her mind like an uninvited but not unwelcome guest. She had, therefore, barely made it through five pages when the door opened and she saw a plump, pretty young woman leave.

"Elizabeth Rignall?"

Elizabeth looked up and saw a neat woman of about fifty appear from behind the half-open door and smile. Elizabeth put her book back into her bag and stood up, offering her hand to the woman.

"I'm Jean," said the woman, "pleased to meet you. Come inside." Elizabeth followed her into the room – a small classroom that was standing in for an office. There was a thin young man of about thirty with black hair and enormous eyebrows who sat to the left of a big oak desk.

"This is Gregory Smith, our deputy, and this is..."

"Oh!" exclaimed Elizabeth.

For there, across the room, sitting behind the desk, was her golden giant.

She got the job.

"I had gone upstairs to get a small item of stock that was kept in the corner of the large, empty classroom that he used as his own office and I was making my way out when the door opened, he entered, and stood holding the door for me. I passed him quickly and the next instant his arms were round me from behind and his lips on the nape of my neck..."

It was not till four years later that either of them knew the other's feelings. Elizabeth had loved him ever since she'd walked arm in arm with him, basking in his warmth, but she thought there was no hope for what would such a man see in a small, stout woman, almost thirty, with spectacles on her rather mundane face and that funny northern accent? So she pined in silence until that fateful day.

It was an autumn afternoon, the season that suited him best with the gold and auburn of its falling leaves. The final bell had rung and the pupils departed. Elizabeth made her way up to fetch a new box of pencils ready for the next morning's drawing lesson. The stock was kept at the back of the empty classroom that Bob used as his office. Elizabeth found what she was looking for and headed for the door, although as she got near, it opened and there was Bob. He smiled his patient, glowing smile, held the door open for her and stood aside to let her pass. She clutched the pencils to her, noticing her palms were suddenly moist, hoping he didn't notice the blotchy blush that crept across her usually pallid cheeks, and hurried past him, cursing herself for not possessing the courage to tell him how she felt.

She'd barely passed when she felt huge hands grab her on the shoulder and around the waist. She stopped and stood very still, not daring to breathe as his thick, long arms reached around and clasped her. He stepped closer, tightening his hold on her. She could feel his body pressed up against her back, the heat radiating from him and the rise and fall of his chest as his breathing became thick and ragged. With one hand he lifted the loose tendrils of hair up and away from her neck, then bent and gently placed a hot, wet, lingering kiss on the side of her throat, just under her jaw. She leaned into him, letting her head loll as his lips continued to place kisses up and down her burning neck. He sighed and dropped his arms, and in that moment the spell was broken. She ran from him, from the room, from the school, the box of pencils dropped and scattered, forgotten on the classroom floor.

When she arrived at work the next day she headed straight for her classroom rather than lingering to chat with the other staff for she had too much to think about. She needed more time to process what had happened and what it meant, if anything. She headed over to the desk and was about to swing her satchel from her shoulder onto its surface when something made her hesitate and she placed it instead on the floor. There on her desk was the box of pencils she'd forgotten in her confused haste and next to it a small white envelope bearing her name. With shaking fingers she opened the letter without tearing the paper and slid the single sheet out. She unfolded the page and read, then re-read its contents as tears slowly wandered down her flushed cheeks.

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It was hard keeping it a secret, at first, so they decided it would be best for Elizabeth to get a post at another school, which she did, at a very small council school just off Wandsworth Common with only three teachers. This meant they could only see each other at weekends, as he had work to do most evenings. Elizabeth filled hers with novels and countless trips to the theatre, sometimes even seeing the same play two or three times, which she could only afford because her friend Nick always reserved her a great seat at a highly discounted rate. Bob wanted to marry her, do things properly, but they couldn't afford to live on his salary alone. He sent a proportion of his meagre earnings home for his parents

and Elizabeth was helping to pay for her younger brother's studies, and London County Council rules stated that if a woman married, she had to leave the service. Elizabeth often wondered how many other women had been driven to commit the same sin because of this pointless, archaic rule! She couldn't tell her parents for her father was very religious and had strict notions about proper conduct, sex having to occur only after marriage or else you would go to Hell.

Six secret years of furtive Saturdays, Sundays and the occasional holiday followed. If Bob had finished his work early enough, he'd come over to Elizabeth's flat on a Friday night with two newspaper cones, having stopped at the corner chip shop on his way. They would eat straight from the paper with their hands, licking residues of salt and vinegar from their fingers when they'd done. They'd discuss their families and respective homes, Elizabeth giving long descriptions of the meandering moors, the sombre clouds and penetrating rain and her weekend rambles. Bob would talk of the sea, its moods, its sound and scent, and about simple home comforts like sitting by a fire with a jar of local cider and a hot Cornish pasty. Elizabeth would share her passion for literature, review the plays she'd recently seen and read him certain passages from her favourite novels, he'd tell her folk tales, teach her traditional songs and share with her his vast knowledge of Celtic culture and history.

They'd managed to go away together for two whole blissful weeks during the summer, renting a little cottage cheap through a friend of a friend. It was perfect: miles from home, where no one would know them, secluded, quiet, surrounded by vast green fields...heaven. They walked miles every day, enjoying picnics in the shade, cooling off at streams. Elizabeth missed rambling, didn't really get the chance any more. She still walked, but it wasn't the same. They were climbing a particularly stubborn hill when Elizabeth noticed that Bob was trailing behind.

"Hurry up, it'll be dark before we get to the top at this rate," she called, teasing, down the incline towards her man. When he didn't offer a witty reply or chase after her as he usually would, she grew concerned and walked down towards him. He was pale, sweating profusely, drawing in fast, shallow breaths.

"I think we best be getting back," said Elizabeth, taking Bob's hand and leading him slowly down the hill.

"Six years later cancer killed him."

Elizabeth sat on the couch in her old flannel nightgown, safely huddled under a tartan blanket, cushions behind and on either side. Her feet, enclosed in thick socks, were tucked up beside her, her left hand hidden beneath the cover, her right keeping the book open on

her lap. It was *Jane Eyre*. She hadn't looked at it properly in...gosh, how long? Why, she must have been just fifteen when she first read it. She remembered identifying with Jane, especially her plain looks and her outspokenness. It gave her hope that someone as average in face and unusual in disposition could find happiness and share her life with a man as magnificent as Rochester. Elizabeth had begun to despair, fearing that, with thirty approaching, she'd never find her Rochester and be destined to live her life in solitary resignation. Then along came her red-gold giant, Bob, but life's cruel for after only ten years together here she was sitting by herself once more, contemplating the rest of her existence alone.

She'd buried Bob the day before, committed his large, cold corpse to the earth. Cancer had wrenched the warmth from his body, the sparkle from his eyes, and the red from his lips. It invaded, plundered, murdered, leaving her partnerless, not that anyone would understand her loss; they'd consider her a spinster, when she felt, with heart and soul, a widow.

A solitary card that read 'with deepest sympathy' rested on the chest of drawers beside her. In front of it lay a single whitish-green lily. Both were from Nick of the Lyric Hammersmith, her friend and confidante. He was the only one who understood, the only one she could trust not to judge, as he too led an unconventional life. He'd invited her out that night, promising her the best seat in the house, to "help take her mind off things," but she just couldn't face it. And anyway, she didn't *want* to take her mind off Bob. Quite the opposite, in fact. For weeks and weeks she'd watched Bob fade and cool, like a candle starved of oxygen, waning to nothing. This night, instead, she'd remember the good times, for while their relationship wasn't ideal, she was happy. She'd loved and been loved in return, and for that she'd always be grateful.

She flung the blanket back before making her way over to the area at the back of her tiny flat that constituted a kitchen to put the kettle on. Every trip down memory lane should start with a good cup of tea, thought Elizabeth, who'd been subsisting on the stuff since Bob passed four days ago – she couldn't stand the thought of food, the smell alone was enough to turn her stomach, never mind the thought of all the chewing, the swallowing...no, not yet. A nice cup of milky tea with a heaped spoon of sugar stirred in would do just fine. And, besides, she could afford to lose weight, always had been a bit too plump. She carried her chipped mug back to the couch where she sat and again arranged the blanket protectively about her, watching the small curls of steam rise from the rippling beige and dance and swirl into the ether...

She remembered her pleasant surprise when she found out that the gentle giant who showed her the way was indeed her headmaster. She thought of their first holiday together, a long weekend in a shabby B&B at a small seaside town and the relentless rain that kept

them indoors that Sunday. It was then she'd asked him the questions she'd wanted to ask him ever since it happened. What made him finally decide to kiss her after four whole years of nothing, not one hint or clue? Had he loved her the entire time, as she had him, or did he warm to her over time as he got to know her? Was his longing finally too much to bear?

"You mean, what happened in my office?" Bob looked down at her small, peering face and smiled his slow, patient smile.

Elizabeth nodded, then shuffled closer, resting her cheek on his pale bare chest.

"I didn't decide. I didn't even think. It just happened," said Bob. "I'd thought about kissing you every day for years, told myself a million times it was a bad idea, talked myself out of it, convinced myself I shouldn't, that it was for the best. I'd no idea if you liked me back! I was worried I might scare you, upset you...repulse you, even, and I didn't want to risk losing you. But that day...I just couldn't take it any longer. It was agony having you so close and not being able to hold you, touch you, tell you how I felt. I'd tried many times, but the words just wouldn't come." He sighed and put his arms around Elizabeth, clutching her to him. "And when you ran...God, I thought that was it, I'd ruined it, that you'd never talk to me again, that you'd resign, and it was all my fault. I'd nothing left to lose so I decided, finally, to tell you the truth."

"The truth?" said Elizabeth, a frown furrowing her brow as she looked up.

"That I was in love with you, Elizabeth, you with all your books and maps and spectacles and funny clothes, little tiny you with your big ideas, your motorcycle, your small, inquisitive face, your lovely little smile. I'd never met a woman like you before...the way you taught those boys to be honest and kind and proud..."

Bob looked down at Elizabeth and saw the slow, quiet tears making their way down her cheeks. He pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head, his own blue eyes brimming. "You deserve so much more than I can give you, and it hurts not to be able to give you what you should have – a marriage, a home...a family." Bob drew in a shaky, shuddering breath, trying to dispel the tears that threatened to spill.

Elizabeth took a sip of her now luke-warm tea, then dabbed at her eyes with the edge of the blanket. Despite the rain and the dank, draughty B&B, that long weekend was bliss, and she would cherish the memory forever. She knew there could never be anyone else.

"This was a part of the country that I did not know at all, and to my shame I admit that I had no idea of the existence of the Avebury Ring... I can believe in the lingering atmosphere in the Ring, where electric blue halos would on occasion surround each stone as I watched at night."

What a place! She knew almost instantly she'd be happy there. She'd arrived a little over a week ago, on a Saturday, giving herself time to become acquainted with her new surroundings and get settled in to her accommodation before starting work. A headship! She could hardly believe her luck: to be in charge of a three-teacher school in such a quaint, enchanting place! She was ashamed of her ignorance of the stones, the ring, and others like it. Jack had given her a book about neolithic monuments before she left, but the scant, scratchy mono prints failed to capture their magnificence and the awe you felt when confronted by Avebury's towering obelisks and Stonehenge's imposing lintels. It was more than just their impressive sight, it was the overwhelming feeling they induced in you. Elizabeth noticed a change in the atmosphere when she stood close to the stones. She wasn't particularly religious or superstitious, but she could feel their age, their history, seeping out of them, the magic and ritual surrounding them reaching her as if by osmosis, penetrating her very soul.

The village consisted of clutches of cottages huddled in the thick of the ring, beside the roads that quartered the circle, with other houses, sheds and buildings dotted around, growing sparser the more distant they became. She'd been lucky enough to find an apartment – if you could call it that – in the heart of the village. It was more of an annexe, really, and she had her doubts about how well it would hold up in winter, as the walls were thin and damp – she had visions of herself huddled over the stove to keep warm, while water, seeping through the leaky roof, plopped into buckets – but it meant she didn't have to face a long walk or ride twice a day, and she was content with that.

Elizabeth had studied Jack's map of the village and its surroundings, and was intrigued by its shape, the avenues that led from one prehistoric site to another, the strange valleys and ditches and mounds in the earth – it seemed the stones that formed the big ring were only a part of a much larger endeavour.

On her first twenty-mile journey to gape at the large sarsen and bluestones on Salisbury Plain she little realised that the stone circles, both at Stonehenge and Avebury, also contained smaller circles, and these smaller circles themselves contained a rock or two within them. Around the stone circles yet another was visible, dug into the earth, making a steep bank that surrounded each site. The whole thing from the sky must look concentric, she thought. Next on her list to visit were the enclosures at Windmill Hill and the long barrows at East and West Kennet.

It was the first day of her new job. She was wearing her nicest blouse and a camel-coloured skirt, along with her tweed jacket. Winter was on its way but hadn't yet arrived, so she didn't need her heavy wool coat for such a short walk. She tied her shoes, picked up her battered old satchel and opened the door. It was a lovely morning. The mist had cleared, yet dew was still sparkling on the green. She rounded the corner and the school came into sight,

but something was wrong. Puffs of charcoal-coloured smoke were billowing from the door and two small windows, making it appear as if storm clouds had collected in the school-yard and were about to unleash their wrath. Worried that the whole place was going up in flames, she hurried over to the green beside the school where she was met with many expectant, rather than concerned, little faces. Her suspicion had been piqued. She'd been at this for years, was used to the many tricks and whiles employed by sneaky schoolchildren. She knew all their excuses and ploys, anything to get out of a bit of work. She singled out a boy who was looking rather pleased with himself.

“What's your name, lad?”

“It's Jimmy, Ma'am. Are you the new headmistress?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Now what on earth's going on here?”

“Happens all the time. Something to do with the heating, Ma'am; it's broken.

Something to do with the pipes and chimneys, miss. When this happens the old headmaster used to let us have the day off.”

He was trying his best to look solemn.

“Did he, now? Well, let's not get carried away. I need two volunteers, please.” She looked around expectantly, until one and, hesitantly, two hands were raised. “Now, go and find out why the smoke's coming out the windows and door, instead of the chimney!”

The boys loped off, looking glum. A few minutes later the lads appeared looking sheepish, carrying soot-sodden sacks.

“We found these stuffed up the flues, Ma'am. We've got no idea how they got there!”

They looked up, eyes widened in a manner they hoped made them look innocent.

“Well, isn't that strange?” she said, deciding not to let on that she knew who did the deed. It was only her first day, after all, and it couldn't hurt to make some friends. She wasn't that soft, though: they weren't getting the day off! “Right, everyone – I want all the windows opened right out. You two, there, go and wedge open the doors.”

There was a flurry of action in the school-yard. A man who looked to be in his mid-forties approached Elizabeth, smiling. He was blonde, slightly pink, and wearing a garish red and yellow jumper, but looked sensible enough.

“They tried to get one over on you, did they? See they didn't get away with it,” he said.

“Nope. Seem like a creative bunch, though!” said Elizabeth.

“I'm Henry, Henry Morton. Maths and Geography. The juniors are my lot. Sorry about that.”

“Nice to meet you, Henry. You obviously already know who I am.”

“Yes, and it seems you're going to fit in here. They're a good bunch really.”

“I'm sure they are.”

“How about a cup of tea, then I'll show you to your office? Susan will be along any minute to round up the rabble, then we can do proper introductions.”

Elizabeth smiled and followed him into the schoolhouse where thick grey smoke had reduced to a thin ashy veil.

*

She'd been there nearly three months and felt right at home. She got on well with the other teachers, which was a relief. She had worried that they might not be so accepting of a female head and had been prepared to face animosity from the more traditional among the staff but had been pleasantly surprised. Susan, a stern mother hen, loved her job, but was not ambitious. Henry's main passion was Geography, and each year he tried and mostly failed to rouse this passion in others. For him, teaching was just a job. It paid the rent and allowed him sufficient time to pursue his true love – gallivanting across country to various mountains, beaches, rock-formations, and so on – and, like Elizabeth, he had no significant other. With their similar interests she enjoyed talking over a cup of tea about Haworth, the moors, her rambling days with Jack, her motorcycle. He, in his turn, talked about local history and the landscape, and it was from him she learned much about the stones, the uniqueness of Avebury and its surrounds. There were also a few others who came in for an hour or so a week to teach specific classes. On Fridays before lunch the local vicar ran a session with the seniors on morals and ethics and so on. Elizabeth enjoyed his visits: he was a great source of local gossip and she could always rely on him to keep her up-to-date on the goings on in the village.

However, upon entering the classroom one day, she found him not his usual cheery self. He seemed distressed, disappointed, even a little angry: his cheeks were flushed and his hands shook as he took the cup of tea offered by Elizabeth. She soon found out why.

“Disgraceful. Terrible behaviour,” he mumbled, seating himself. By this point Elizabeth had become worried. What on earth had happened to get the usually docile vicar into such a state?

“The stones, the stones!” he exclaimed.

The seniors, perplexed by the state of the vicar but respecting the solemnity of the situation, sat waiting quietly.

“The stones? What about them? Do tell us,” coaxed Elizabeth, anxious but intrigued.

“Chalk. Chalk all over them. Defaced!”

He looked pained.

Over the next twenty minutes Elizabeth managed to deduce that during the night, people had used the chalk that littered the local area to scribble on the ancient stones. One of the seniors, an audacious lad, dared to ask what form the graffiti took and in response the vicar's eye's widened, his mouth turned into a grimace, and he once again began to mutter.

Elizabeth managed to catch the words 'sinful' and 'obscenity.' A couple of seniors giggled, probably imagining exactly what it was that had been etched onto the stone. One look from Elizabeth was enough to silence them.

"...surrounded by such wonderful heritage and history." The vicar's mumbles were becoming gradually louder. "People should take pride in it, respect it, uphold it, not turn such a magnificent piece of our past into an object of crude mockery!"

Elizabeth did her best to calm him, sending Jane, one of the more mature and helpful seniors, to tell Henry and Susan that she was calling an emergency assembly at the end of the day, and that everyone must attend. While Jane was gone, she told the seniors to go home at lunch time and pick up cleaning supplies, whatever they could find.

"Lessons this afternoon are cancelled. Instead, we shall be out on the green scrubbing those foul markings from the stones, returning them to their former glory," announced Elizabeth.

The class erupted into excited chatter before dashing out of the classroom the instant Elizabeth gave them the signal. Henry came in, wanting to know what all the fuss was about. Elizabeth filled him in, sparing the vicar the trouble.

"Defaced! The little devils, if I find out who's responsible..." Henry evidently suspected some of his juniors.

"We'll sort it, Henry. Me and the vicar, here, were talking about the assembly this afternoon. We thought a little history lesson was in order, that between us we could prepare a short talk on the stones, on Avebury, how special it all is, and how it's their duty to help maintain it."

"Splendid!" said Henry, and that's exactly what they did for the remainder of the lunch hour.

When the seniors returned at one, laden with buckets and mops, Elizabeth split them into pairs, each with a bucket of soapy water and an assortment of cloths and brushes, and sent them out onto the green. Once there, Elizabeth took stock of the damage, then allocated each pair a specific task. She noticed that the wall of the churchyard had also been the unfortunate recipient of some new decoration and re-allocated a pair of seniors to tackle that.

"I had for long been bitten by the bug to run a home-made cake and jam shop...after two years we had to sell out, incurring debt."

The shop front was painted a pale, pastel green, and looked like it belonged on the promenade of some shabby, but jolly seaside resort. There was a bell above the door that

jangled whenever a customer entered, which was seldom. On the right stood a long, low counter, with three cake stands and plates of scones, teacakes, eccles cakes and rock cakes, as well as some mismatched cups, saucers and teapots, sourced by Elizabeth from markets, jumble sales, fêtes and second-hand shops. The walls behind the counter held wooden shelves each bearing frilly-lidded jars with labels denoting the type of preserve, from the most popular strawberry and thick-cut marmalade to blackcurrant, blueberry, and damson. One shelf held jars of honey in various shades of translucent and opaque yellow and amber. On the left were many little wooden chairs, no more than two that matched and tables that were tall and dark, low and light, varnished and shiny or bleached and scratched. Each one was decorated with a little white vase, containing a single pink carnation and a small ceramic bowl of white and brown sparkly cubes. The walls were adorned with picture frames containing black and white prints of Haworth or with pressed flowers, including pink and purple heather, tied with fading ribbon.

Elizabeth stood behind the counter, brow furrowed in concentration as she neatly cut a generous slice of Jesse's most recent creation, the sweet beige butter-icing oozing between two moist, bouncy slabs of reddish brown sponge. Flavoured icing delicately topped the cake, with walnuts pressed into it at regular intervals. Picking up a clean cake slice, she lifted the lid off of the next cake over, a Victoria sponge, and cut a wedge, the wobbling globs of red and white leaving a sweetly gruesome trail across the shiny, silver-toned utensil. Elizabeth picked up two plates and walked around the counter and along the narrow café, before sitting at the table at the back where the tea was stewing, waiting for Jack, who would be back any minute, having nipped out to fetch the paper and a little something from the butcher for supper. She poured the tea into the dainty, gaily-patterned porcelain cups, adding a square lump of white sugar to each, before giving them a stir. She put the spoon down with a clink and gave a big sigh, seeming to deflate a little as she did so.

A dull rhythmic pain pulsed in the balls of her feet, and her knees felt stiff and creaky. She'd been on them all day: she liked to stand behind the counter, as if in readiness for the next customer who'd be along any minute, but time gathered and stretched until thirty, forty-five or even sixty minutes passed without the bell sounding once. Her regulars had been in – Mr and Mrs Faraday for their usual toasted tea cakes and a large pot at ten, Mavis and June with their gossip and gobbling up of lemon cake at eleven, big old Arthur for a chunk of date and walnut on his lunch break, and a few not-so-regulars who came for a slice of the Victoria sponge and a scone with strawberry jam. They also had a few wealthier clientèle who purchased entire cakes regularly, such as Mrs Elsey who ordered a carrot cake each Thursday for collection at 10am on a Saturday, and the Victoria sponge ordered by Mrs Webb and delivered in time for her weekly embroidery circle. They also sold quite a few for special occasions – birthdays, anniversaries, and other celebrations – all lovingly handmade,

iced and decorated by Jesse Prentice. Elizabeth made the scones, rock cakes and the occasional ginger bread men that kept the little ones happy, as well as cleaning and tidying the shop and café. Jack ordered the necessities, took care of the maintenance and bills, and did the deliveries. They'd really enjoyed it at first – the excitement of finding a suitable unit, of tracking down furniture and equipment, hiring someone who could make the most delicious cakes, sourcing the jams and honey and other ingredients. They knew it would take a while to build up their customers, and had expected it to be hard going for the first few months, but they'd banked on business perking up after a while, once they got some regulars and word of mouth spread. They thought by then they'd be breaking even, and then making a profit, enough to pay off the loan Jack had taken out to start this place up, and ideally a bit more to see them through their retirement.

The bell announced Jack's entrance, and as he ambled unevenly down the narrow shop, she noticed how old he was looking. He was still Jack, willowy and coarse and loveable, but his hair was grey and thinning, white ones even sprouted from his ears and nostrils. His forehead was lined like an old map that had been folded over and over for years and then smoothed out, the creases etched deep, and he stooped slightly as he walked. She looked down at her hands, baggy, spotted, chaffed red with unsightly swollen knuckles, and thought of her stiff, aching knees, and knew that she, too, wasn't what she used to be. They'd come a long way, her and Jack. When he'd suggested they go into business together she'd been delighted because she'd been thinking of retiring for a while. She'd stopped teaching a few years ago and had worked part-time as an assistant instead, as it was less demanding, so his proposal had come at the right time. Turned out to be much more than they had bargained for, and she felt that she'd failed. Jack had recently expressed concern about the finances: their debt was increasing. She blamed the extortionate London rent, and regretted their choice of location, but blame didn't make them any money and hindsight was cruel and just as useless.

Jack put his paper and parcel down onto the table, pulled out the chair and sat down. After picking up the cup and gulping down the entire contents, he put it back down, folded his hands and sighed, much in the way Elizabeth had a few minutes previously. Wanting to delay the inevitable, Elizabeth asked what was for supper.

"Pork sausages. Big ones, plenty of them. Thought we could do them with some potatoes and a big splash of gravy."

Elizabeth attempted to smile, but it quickly faded from her mouth as she remembered what they were here to talk about. She reached her hand across the table and took hold of Jack's. Tears were threatening to fall.

"It's all right, lass. Don't be so down," said Jack. "We tried our best, had a bit of fun."

"I know, it's just...I feel like I let you down, let myself down."

“You didn’t fail, Lizzie, you did a grand job! It just wasn’t the right time, the right place.” He picked up the wedge of cake, ignoring the fork that lay next to the plate, and took a large bite. He put the cake down and licked the sweet goo off of his fingers and thumb.

“So that’s it then? There’s nothing we can do?” Elizabeth prodded at her sponge with her fork, but didn’t eat any.

“Afraid so.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“Well, we’ve got two options. We either declare bankruptcy, or we pay it off.”

“Pay it off? How? With what?” Elizabeth had used up most of her meagre savings already, thanks to looking after ailing parents for the last five years. She’d left her headship at the ring, where she was really happy, for a job in Sussex that came with accommodation, as her mother could no longer cope at home and they couldn’t find anywhere suitable in Avebury. After she’d passed away, Elizabeth moved back to London with her Dad, who was still in good health for his age, and supported them both on her reduced wages.

“That’s why I think bankruptcy’s the best option,” said Jack, cautious, all too familiar with Elizabeth’s stubborn pride.

“No. I always pay my way,” she said, indignant. “I didn’t much like the idea of a loan, but we had no choice, I know that. We needed it to make this work, except it didn’t. Fair is fair. We must pay our debts!”

“You sure? This was meant to be our retirement, Lizzie, a rest!”

“I know, Jack, but I can’t...I can’t...” Elizabeth covered her face with her hands, and took a moment to try to compose herself. Jack poured them both some more tea, which was now considerably darker.

Anna

“I was four years old when my mother died.”

Her father worked for the Germans, those men in uniforms they saw parading by the palace just before the fighting started. It only lasted eighteen days, then Belgium surrendered. He kept it secret at first, but after a while the Nazis gave her Father a uniform too, a black one with little lightning bolts on the collar, so then it wasn't a secret any more. He wore it with pride, as if it was a suit of armour that could shield him from the disapproving stares of relatives and neighbours. Their housekeeper, Ida, made the mistake of letting her feelings be known, said she was disappointed in him for not standing up for his country, and worse, working for *them*. Watching from the doorway as her father grew pale, Anna noticed the slight movement of his face as his jaw tensed and his teeth ground, saw the way he clenched the fingers of his right hand into a fist before straightening them as he delivered a backhanded blow to the side of Ida's face. The old woman swayed but did not fall. Drawing herself up to her full height, she spat on the floor at his feet then turned and left the room, her hand resting on Anna's head briefly as she passed. Anna waited, too scared to move, staring at the floor, the table, anywhere but her father. After a few minutes the front door slammed, and the only mother Anna had ever known was gone for good.

Her father retreated to his study, shutting the door. Anna made her way up the stairs, unsure what to do with herself, frightened to be alone in the house with her father and her older brother. Hubert was cruel, he liked to break her toys and nip her, his fingers leaving angry red and purple marks on her skin. She stopped at the door to Ida's room, which the housekeeper had left ajar in her haste to leave. She'd gathered only a few belongings, those most important to her or with the greatest value, and the rest lay strewn across the floor or hung over the iron frame of the little bed – a nightie, an apron, a tattered shawl. Her good dress was gone from the hook by the door and her sewing kit from the foot of the bed. That's why Anna was sure she wouldn't be coming back. Leaving the room, she continued along the corridor to her own, where she took off her clothes and got into her nightdress. She picked the cloth doll Ida had made for her up off the floor and got into bed, pulling the blanket around her and clutching the doll to her chest. It was soon dark. Unable to sleep, she lay there, empty and still, listening as Hubert said goodnight to Father, his footsteps loud on the wooden stairs. A little while later she heard a knock at the front door and a frightened voice shouting for Dr Speyer to hurry. Anna crept to her window and, peering down, saw her father leave the house in his charcoal wool jacket with his black leather bag in hand. He had been called away on business, perhaps to attend a difficult birth. As Anna made her way

quietly along the corridor, she was careful not to wake Hubert and alert him to her presence. She made it to Ida's room, shut the door gently and climbed into the housekeeper's bed where she cried herself to sleep.

Her father appointed a new housekeeper, but this one didn't live in. The woman came to clean and cook, do their laundry, the mending, but she was never there one minute longer than necessary and she never said more than two words to Anna, who did her best to stay out of the way. Anna spent her day trying to avoid people – the housekeeper, her father, Hubert. She became quite good at being invisible, listening in to conversations between neighbours. She heard Marilou telling Mrs Klepfisz even though she was near her time she would not let Dr Speyer anywhere near her, not any more. Anna didn't understand why – her father had delivered lots of babies in the neighbourhood, and was well respected. The other little girls that she used to play with no longer talked to her or invited her to their games. Hilde had braved the whispering and stares and pointing fingers of the others and came to talk to Anna, only to tell her that her mother said she wasn't allowed to play with Anna any more, because of her father and the horrible things people were saying. She knew better than anyone that her father could be mean and cruel, but usually the towns-folk liked him, paid handsomely for his services. She didn't understand, but thought it might have something to do with the Germans.

Anna's mother, Clara, had died giving birth to a sibling that had not survived and her father had been unable to save them. He blamed himself, for failing as a doctor, as a gynaecologist. He did his best to ignore Anna, who strongly resembled her mother, and his silence hurt more than when he shouted at her. He bought her older brother, Hubert, new clothes and books and gifts galore, while Anna wore dresses that were much too short and clogs that were too small, hanging on to a cloth dolly that had faded with wear and amusing herself with books and toys that Hubert had tired of or outgrown.

As the weeks passed, her father spent more and more time away from the house. The Germans in the dark grey uniforms would call for him, and father would collect his black leather bag and leave the house for hours at a time. Sometimes, late at night, the men would gather in her father's surgery, downstairs, then drink in his study afterwards. One night she had crept to the kitchen in search of some water as she had woken up hot, her throat scratchy. She quenched her thirst, returned the cup and turned towards the door to make her way back to bed, but a tall man in a uniform like her father's blocked the doorway. He stood with his hands in his pockets, leaning slightly against the frame, as if he'd been there a while.

“Hallo, kleines mädchen.” The man spoke harsh, unintelligible syllables. Anna stood still, her heart racing. “Kommen Sie hier, hübsches mädchen.” He beckoned to her, and she slowly took a step towards the man, who swayed slightly as he leaned towards her. As he

stepped into the room, he clutched at the rough wooden table for support. He pulled one of the wooden chairs out and sat, then reached for Anna. A large hand clasped her arm and pulled her closer, then lifted her onto his lap. She sat, legs dangling over the side of his left thigh, her body rigid. His hands moved over her, one on her back, the other on her leg, beneath the white cotton of her nightdress that had rucked up when he lifted her. His breath grew heavy and ragged, and he whispered more of those harsh foreign words into her ear. Anna wanted to scream for help, but was so scared she felt as if all the air had left her body – her chest was tight and her lungs burned. The large hand on her leg was moving higher, and rough fingers were stroking at the goose-pimpled skin of her inner thigh.

Before she knew what was happening she was thrust from the German's lap onto the rough, cold stone of the kitchen floor, and her father was there shouting at the man who was holding up his hands as if in surrender, backing towards the door. Anna picked herself up and her father escorted the German out onto the street. The other two emerged from her father's study peering curiously into the kitchen at Anna on their way out. Her father closed the door, returned to the kitchen and stood, looking at Anna, who, after briefly meeting his gaze, stared at the floor holding back tears. She felt as if she had done something wrong, and was waiting for him to shout at her, hit her, but he just stared at her, an odd look on his face that she didn't recognise.

“Go to bed,” he said, and left the room. Confused but relieved, Anna did as she was told.

“My father got remarried. She was not a very nice stepmother, and I had to endure her...When I was twelve or thirteen I asked my Aunt if I could come to England, learn English...I was asked to get married to a doctor and I said no. It was the worst thing I have ever done. He was a surgeon, South African, very nice, very understanding.”

Finally, it was happening. She was going to escape. A kind aunt, on her mother's side, had offered to pay for her to go to London so she could learn English and train to be a nurse. Aunt Lina was aware of the situation, of how badly Anna was treated by her stepmother, Marijke, especially since her father's death. Her stepmother did nothing but talk about her first husband, a cruel looking German called Gerhardt, whose photo was plastered around the house, and treat Anna like a slave, making her do all the chores and never lifting a finger herself. She constantly reminded Anna how grateful she should be for allowing her to remain under that roof. Anna felt just like Cinderella, and now, thanks to Aunt Lina, she also had a fairy godmother. She fastened the buckles of her little suitcase, put on her coat, tied her boots and made her way to the front door. She stood, unsure of what to do. She wanted to

sneak out unobserved, and never have to speak to her stepmother or brother again, to forget them, forget it all, and start a new life. No. She would say goodbye, be the better person. She walked through to the sitting room and over to the armchair where her large stepmother lolled for the best part of every day. She stood directly in front of Marijke, who refused to meet Anna's gaze. After an uncomfortable silence, her stepmother spoke.

"Go. Just go, you ungrateful child."

"But..."

Marijke visibly seethed and in that moment Anna almost felt sorry for the woman. Two dead husbands, no children of her own, now with no one but Anna's spoiled brother to keep her company. Perhaps they would be happy together, or as happy as people like that can ever be.

"Goodbye," Anna said, and hurried from the room.

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She unpacked her meagre belongings, tucking her shoes under the bed and putting her folded clothes into the drawers of the little chest. As she placed the photo of her mother on top, she smiled, then changed into her cotton nightdress. As well as her travel, Aunt Lina had paid for her English lessons, for her black shoes and white blouse, grey skirt and navy cardigan, and Anna was determined not to let her down. She would be a great nurse, the best! To that end, she had vowed to get a good night's sleep so she would be ready for her first day. They were to report to Matron at 6.30 sharp. None of the other girls were back yet, the three remaining beds in the shared room empty, strewn with stockings, curlers, half-unpacked bags. She was woken in the small hours by barely hushed giggles, and again before dawn by muffled crying from Martha who was finding her first night away from home rather difficult.

The next morning, all four reported for duty on time.

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Turns out that being Marijke's skivvy for years was good practice. Anna was adept at taking orders and carrying out tasks to the highest standard. She was quiet, quick and thorough, knew when she was needed and when to stay out of the way. The others complained about the sluice, retched and fainted, yet Anna's confidence grew. She did two years as a cadet, and steadily progressed from trainee to staff nurse. Matron said if she kept up the good work she'd have a ward of her own in no time. That's why she'd had to say no to Ed, the smart young doctor she'd been seeing. She met him in radiography, then again when she was doing a rotation in orthopaedics. She'd noticed him looking at her, as had some of the other girls who found the whole thing hilarious. One evening, as she was leaving the nurse's quarters, she saw him loitering in the corridor. He'd asked her if she would like to go to dinner. It was far too late, but she was intrigued by this shy, awkward man with the kind

brown eyes. A few months later, he proposed. Anna loved him, was sure of it, but she loved nursing more. She'd worked hard for this, to get to where she was. She felt she owed it to Aunt Lina, to herself, to keep going. He presented her with a ring of diamond and sapphire, and cried when she said no.

I married my late husband. He was only after my money. He found another woman and made my life a misery. A few years later I was introduced to another man. He had his own place up north, wanted me to move in with him. He took all my crystals, my tapes and other things...I never got anything back. I miss my music and I miss company, other people, but what will be, will be.

Sandwiched between cardboard boxes, she sat on the carpet amid loose sheets of newspaper and strewn objects. A roll of brown parcel tape and scissors waited patiently by her side. She'd done the books and videos, as well as the few framed photographs and now was moving on to the various knick-knacks she'd picked up over the years – three ceramic cats of different sizes, the porcelain tea-set, a small white vase with a gold rim, a tarnished carriage clock. Then she'd pack up the larger of her crystals. She'd bought some bubble-wrap especially, as she didn't want the amethyst getting damaged during the long journey north in the boot of John's car. She grabbed another sheet, her hands tinged grey from the print, and wrapped the vase, tucking in the excess paper before laying it carefully in the box. John had taken one boot-load last week – mostly clothes, shoes, handbags, her heavy fur coats, the music player and tapes. He was picking up another lot on Sunday, so she was doing a little packing each day, before work, in order to be ready. She'd suggested hiring a van, doing it all at once, but he'd said they'd be better saving the money, and as he would be driving down to see her anyway, they might as well do a little bit at a time. John said he'd put it all in the spare room, and she could sort it all when she got there. He'd been freshening the place up for her – a coat of paint, a spring clean, new curtains and sheets. She'd dipped into her savings to help out, given him a cheque for the new brass bed-frame, the sprung mattress and the sofa they'd chosen from one of the catalogues he'd brought with him the month before. She couldn't wait.

She'd met him at the community centre – they were having a jumble sale to raise money for the hospice – and when she asked him what he did, he'd said he was a collector, and mentioned something about acquisitions, distribution and so on. He said he often travelled the country, attending car boots and fund-raisers such as these, hoping to spot something of value among the tat. He was younger than her by ten years, but did not seem to mind that. It had been so long since anyone had shown an interest that Anna had given

up hope, so she was at first a little suspicious and then, when his attention did not waver, flattered.

He was a great listener, interested in her history, her family, her work, her hobbies. She told him things she had told no one else – things about her father, her brother, her stepmother and Edward. The nightmares she still had. Her regrets. Her hopes. He told her he too had been unlucky in love. He did not give her the gory details, but she understood how hard these things were to talk about, so didn't push him. When John asked her to move in with him, she was thrilled. He'd shown her a photo of his home, a three-bedroom semi with a small garden out the back. He said he used the smallest room as a study, it was where he ran his business. He lived modestly, but comfortably. He brought her flowers and took her out to dinner, bought her gifts, little tokens of his affection. They could be happy together, he said, live a simple, yet pleasurable life, work a little longer then retire, keep each other company during their twilight years. They'd both been alone for long enough. So she handed her notice in. John said she'd have no problem finding part-time work nearby his little town in the east midlands. There was a hospital, a couple of convalescent homes nearby...with years of nursing experience they'd be fighting over her, so he said.

She wrapped the clock and placed it in the box, folding over the flaps and securing them with a long strip of tape. In the bathroom she washed her hands, the suds from the white bar of soap forming a charcoal foam that Anna slowly rinsed away. In the bedroom she shrugged on her crisp, royal blue tunic, pressing the poppers until they clicked closed. Time for work.

*

"I better get going, my love, it's a long journey and you know I don't like driving in the dark," said John, shrugging on his black leather jacket. "Is that everything? You sure I can't take the television too?"

"No, leave the telly," said Anna. "I've nothing to do in the evenings – you've already taken my music player and videos, I can't bear the quiet. You can get it next time. There'll be space – there's not much left. It'll all fit in the car."

"We just better hope there's room left for you too!" said John, stooping to give her cheek a quick kiss, before folding himself into the driver's seat.

*

She sat in the living room with her shoes and coat on, handbag in her lap. A small, brown leather suitcase holding the last of her clothes waited patiently by the door, along with a bag containing toiletries and other bits she needed. A box temporarily housed the pans, cutlery and crockery she'd been using, and the television sat looking blank, its long cord wrapped around its middle, the three-pronged plug tucked into the cable, secured with tape. Maybe there was traffic, an accident or something, Anna pondered. He wasn't usually this late. She

considered rummaging around for a cup and tea-bag, so she could make herself a hot drink, but decided against it – it would mean re-packing the items she'd have to dislodge, and he'd be here any minute, surely?

The watery winter light faded to a bluish grey as dusk came. Still she sat in her chair, waiting. Her ears hurt from straining in anticipation of a heralding sound – a car door slamming, footsteps in the hall, a knock at the door, the ring of the phone. Her eyes stung from holding back tears. She would not cry. She finally forced herself up out of the chair and dug around in the boxes and bags for a cup, the box of Tetley's, the packet of custard creams. There must be a logical explanation, she thought, as she plugged the kettle back in and waited for the water to boil. She was out of milk, but didn't mind drinking it black. Maybe he'd been taken ill, or there'd been a death in the family – he did mention an ailing mother. He'd call tomorrow and explain, she was sure. What was one more day, when they had the rest of their lives to spend together? She opened up the suitcase and took out her silk pyjamas.

By lunchtime the next day, he still hadn't called. Fearing for his safety she rang the police, but they said it was too soon to report him as a missing person. When the woman on the phone asked what her relationship was to the man in question – mother, sister – Anna hesitated. A woman in her sixties describing a man in his fifties as her boyfriend sounded so bizarre Anna had to suppress a hysterical giggle. "We are involved" is what she finally settled upon. When he didn't call the next day, she went to the station.

"Fill these in," said the woman at the desk, handing her a chewed Biro. She was surprised by the number of questions she was unable to answer about John. She had no contact number, did not know the name of his next of kin; he worked from home, so there was no work address. She didn't know his date of birth, or where he was born. It was so frustrating. She handed the forms back in and waited. A little while later, she was called into a dull little room with no furniture other than a laminated table with plastic chairs either side. The officer listened with patience and growing concern as Anna explained the situation, voiced her concerns – was John lying dead of a heart attack, his body undiscovered in his study, or in a ditch somewhere? The officers spoke gently, soothingly, asked how they'd met, asked her to list all of her possessions that John had taken, asked if she'd given him any money, access to her account. They explained that, sadly, this happened quite often – younger men preying on lonely widows, making off with their worldly goods.

"John would never do that! How can you say something like that? You don't know him like I do! He loves me, he does."

"The address you gave us, the house, it belongs to a young Asian couple. The photos he showed you...the property had been put up for sale, there were photos advertising it in the local paper..." Anna's denial turned to rage and she sat there, shaking. The anger

dissipated and was replaced by self-pity, disgust and, worst of all, shame, as certain things began to make sense.

“Gone, all gone. My savings, my furs, my jewellery, my *job*...” She let the tears come now. There was no strength remaining with which to fight them off. It was gone, all gone.

“When I was living on my own in Chiswick I took a crystal course and bought quite a few and wherever I went they went with me and they helped me a hell of a lot.”

Anna knelt by the window in a square of light that made the dingy green carpet look nicer. Dust particles floated then flurried, the mundane made magical by a little sunshine. She poured water from a floral milk jug into a brightly-painted but chipped bowl, then, after adding a few shakes of salt, gave it a gentle stir with her index finger. It was time. Her hands hovered over the crystals while she waited for that feeling, the one that would tell her which one to pick. Amethyst was her favourite, the one that always made her feel better, stronger, but she had to pick the ones that were right for each patient – Susan, this time – and as she focused and tried her best to empty her mind, she felt the familiar pull and sureness. Clear quartz. She picked up the polished, transparent stone and placed it gently into the bowl of salt water, moving the bowl closer to the window so the crystal could absorb the sun's purifying rays. She had to cleanse the crystals before using them to promote healing – this was to get rid of any bad energy left over from their previous use and to recharge them so they could be of most benefit to the next patient.

While the cleansing was taking place, Anna made a sandwich and changed into her tunic ready for her shift at the hospice. Following the incident with John, she'd asked for her job back, but they'd already hired a replacement, a young blonde thing caked in make-up with minimal palliative care experience. After a few weeks they took Anna on part-time but the role was menial and a waste of her skills and experience. She felt she was being punished for her stupidity. She needed the money though, so she did it, took orders from those younger than her, less qualified, tried her best to ignore the gossip and sniggers, the pitying looks. Retirement at sixty-five was mandatory and it seemed as if they were glad to see the back of her, so now she lived on her tiny, inadequate pension and volunteered at a hospice twice a week. She knew they didn't approve of her crystals, had no faith in what they called “alternative medicine.” They only let her continue because they thought it was harmless, and because it was handy having someone with years of nursing experience around, following the cuts. Some of her patients believed, others didn't, not exactly, but many were so desperate they would try anything. A few laughed, some complained. Bill said it was all bollocks, but what he didn't know was that Anna had stashed some crystals under

his mattress at specific points that corresponded with key chakras, and when she asked him on Tuesday he did say the pain had eased. Susan was an eager recruit, had dabbled in home remedies and was keen to try whatever Anna could offer. Today they were going to focus on the heart chakra to unblock the energy channel. Anna was also keen to know if her gem water had had the desired effect.

She dried the cleansed piece of quartz on a blue micro-fibre cloth she kept specifically for this purpose before tucking it carefully into a little velvet drawstring pouch. Picking up her bag and checking she had her bus pass, she headed for the door, then down the hall and into the lift. She didn't have to wait long for the bus. Half an hour later she was sitting on a plastic chair beside Susan's bed, flicking through an outdated copy of *Chat*, while she waited for Susan to wake from her afternoon nap. Susan was thin, all elbows and chin and wispy white hair that grew only in tufts since the failed chemotherapy. It had brought only sickness and shivers; Susan dwindled, the cancer grew, and now she was here, in the hospice, waiting to die like all the others. She sighed and shifted beneath the starched sheets, her eyelids flickering.

“Good afternoon, Susan.”

“Hello,” Susan replied, her filmy eyes settling on Anna.

“How are you feeling today?”

“Tired. Headache’s back.” She yawned and stretched, and as she tried to lift herself up, Anna reached around her bony shoulders and helped her up, lifting the pillows so Susan was supported.

“Would you like some tea? Or how about some juice? Do you think you could manage a bite to eat?”

Susan grimaced and shook her head.

“Just some water, then?”

“Please.”

Anna poured water from a plastic jug into a small cup with a straw. She held it up to Susan, guiding the straw into her mouth. Susan took two small sips.

“Did the tonic help on Tuesday?”

“Tuesday? I...I think so,” said Susan.

“Well, I'm glad it helped a little.” Anna smiled.

“More today? Remind me...” asked Susan, beginning to drift off.

“In there.” Anna placed the little velvet pouch into Susan' left hand.

They couldn't get started right away as the doctor was due for rounds, then the nurses came to replace Susan's drip and check her feeding tube, which had been moved from hand to back of knee to neck, and fill in her chart. After that, they had an hour until visiting time. Sometimes Susan's daughter would come, but the visits were getting less and

less frequent the longer Susan was in here. An hour was long enough. Anna got Susan laying down flat, asked her to close her eyes, relax. Holding the crystal over Susan's chest, Anna closed her eyes and focussed, feeling the life energy flow, visualising the healing force as a bright warm white light travelling between Susan and the crystal...

"Anna, a moment please," called a stern male voice that startled Anna so much she dropped the quartz. "My office. Now." He strode away brusquely.

Anna was concerned by her boss's tone, but was also angry. The miserable old goat had interrupted the session so Anna had no way of knowing if the work she'd done so far was enough to help Susan, or if the interruption would have a negative effect on Susan's well-being. She walked slowly out into the corridor, trying to work out what this was about. She knew he didn't agree with her methods, but he'd turned a blind eye so far, content that she lent a helping hand and cheered up the patients. She braced herself and knocked on his door before entering.

"Mr Burns, what can I do for you?" She made a point of meeting his gaze.

"I would like to thank you for volunteering your time and, er...skills, Sister. However, I think you have done more than enough."

"What do you mean? I love what I do here..." She trailed off, her confidence deserting her.

"One of the patients issued a formal complaint. Found certain, er, items...I have no choice, Sister. You are to be relieved of your duties."

"Bill...but it was working, it was!"

"I'm sorry, Sister. I have to ask you to collect your belongings and leave the premises."

Anna collected her bag, apologised to a confused and sleepy Susan, and left. She would find somewhere else where her talents were more appreciated.

"I meet up with two friends every Wednesday for a cup of coffee, then we go shopping and they go home to Hillingdon. They are older than me and have more commitments, family, grandkids."

As Anna eased herself off the couch, she was pleased to notice that her back did not protest quite as much as usual. Perhaps those new pills and exercises were doing the trick. She picked up her plate with its half-eaten slice of toast and carried it through to the kitchen. A glance at the clock revealed it was quarter to ten. She had better start getting ready. First, she needed to call the girls, check they were still going. Last week Susan didn't turn up and Mary was half an hour late, and neither one thought to let her know! Really, it was so

inconsiderate of them. She made her way over to the telephone, lifted the yellow plastic from its cradle, and typed in a number selected from the list written in thick, large black marker that was taped to the table. After many rings and a bout of static, someone answered.

“Mary? Is that you? It's Anna. Can you hear me? Mary?” Anna had to shout as Mary often forgot to switch on her hearing aid – you never could be too sure.

“Hello? Who is it? What do you want?” said a loud, harassed Mary.

“It's me, Anna!”

“Who? Sorry, you'll have to speak up.”

“It's Anna. A-N-N-A. Turn your ears on!” Anna waited while muffled fiddling noises filtered down the line.

“That's better,” said Mary at a much more reasonable volume.

“Are we meeting for coffee at eleven, as usual?” Anna tried her best not to sound too desperate.

“Of course we are, silly! We always do!”

“Well last week Susan didn't come. If she doesn't want to any more, then she could at least have the decency to tell us to our faces. Thinks she's better than us, does she?”

“Really, Anna, stop being ridiculous. It's her hip, that's all. She had another fall. Been carted off to her eldest daughter's for a while. She rang me on Friday, did she not call you?”

“No.” A stony silence.

“Well, I'm sure she meant to...” Mary gave a nervous laugh.

“So it'll just be the two of us today, then?”

“Yes, and unless you get off the phone so I can get ready, I'll be late again this week too!”

Anna put the phone down, her hand shaking, and took a moment to compose herself before going to the bathroom to comb and spray her hair, daub a little blush onto her cheeks, apply some coral-coloured lipstick she'd got in one of those Avon bargain bags from the woman down the corridor with the three wailing brats. She wrapped a blue patterned scarf around her neck – a gift from the grateful daughter of a patient – in the hope that it would serve a dual purpose of keeping the chill off her chest and bringing out the colour of her eyes, her best feature since her hair had turned into the soft pale wisps of dandelion clocks. Collecting her big black handbag from its spot to the right of her armchair, she made her way into the little hall where she eased stockinged feet into her navy sandals, shrugged on her grey mac and made her way out in to the corridor. Soft sounds seeped from behind closed doors – the murmur of television, the whirring of a washing machine, the drone of a Hoover, everyday conversation – punctuated by sharp sounds that echoed and bounced – doors slamming, chair legs scraping, dishes clattering, kids clamouring. The lift arrived, and she got in, fingers crossed that the cantankerous contraption would make it to the bottom and

then release her. The steel cell smelled of beer and stale cigarette smoke, and she was relieved to be out in the crisp autumn air.

She waited at the bus stop with a young mother jiggling a pushchair containing one child, with another clamped to her left hand.

“Have you been waiting long?” Anna asked.

“A little while. Must be one due,” the girl replied, while the clinging child stared up at Anna, sleep-encrusted lashes framing large, dark eyes and something that may or may not be chocolate decorating his left cheek. A few moments later the bus arrived. It was quite busy, and she had to glare at a young man until he took the hint and offered her the priority seat she was entitled to. He made a right show of it, huffing and sighing like it was such a great inconvenience to have to relocate to a seat two rows further back.

By the time the bus arrived in town, Anna's nerves were jangling. A series of violent fits and starts had been complemented by many tight bends taken at high-speed and a near miss with a nippy little Mini at a junction. The driver needed to go easy on those brakes, slow down and pay attention! Her hands ached from gripping onto the blue railing so tightly. Her knuckles were already swollen as it was; it really can't have done her arthritis any good. She was tempted to report him to TFL, but a quick rummage through her bag revealed she didn't have her little notebook with her, and there was no way she's be able to remember the vehicle number.

She got off the bus and checked her nurse's watch that was pinned below her left collar bone. She still had fifteen minutes – plenty of time to nip to the baker and the butcher for a crusty loaf and some bacon.

She arrived at the café just after eleven with two blue carrier bags dangling from her wrist. She pushed open the door and scanned the little room for Mary, who was a beacon as usual in her colourful, clashing attire. She was wearing that tatty red coat again over a pink jumper long past its best – it was covered in little balls and pulls and loose bits of thread. She wore big suede boots and a forest-green pleated skirt, with a polka-dot scarf tied at her neck and one of those big furry Russian hats perched on her grey, curly bird's nest.

“Yoo-hoo! Over here!” Mary called, even though Anna had already seen her – how could anyone miss her, dressed like that? “I've just this second sat down myself, be a dear and get the tea, would you?” Mary struggled out of her coat.

Anna tried her best to hide her annoyance and made her way to the counter. She supposed she'd have to pay for the tea too, and knew from experience that Mary would not offer any notes or coins to cover her share when they left. Anna hated it, but had no choice. She looked forward to these meetings, even though Mary looked a sight and was a bit soft in the head, and Susan was prim and a bit of a snob and thought she was better than them all. They were the only friends she had and, with no family, she couldn't afford to lose them too.

“How about a piece of that apple strudel, if it's not too much trouble?” Mary called across the room. Anna sighed and ordered a slice, along with an indulgent square of chocolate brownie for herself. The doctor had said she needed to watch her cholesterol, and she felt a moment of glee at defying that self-righteous old goat.

“I love the seaside. My aim – well, I doubt it will ever happen now – is to swim with the dolphins. That would be very nice but I can’t see that coming up.”

Anna sat alone in her flat in the fading twilight, trying to muster the energy to rise, draw the curtains, turn on the lamp. She was having one of her bad days, when her back hurt more than usual and the tablets served only to dull the pain a little, but not enough. She was tired of this, tired of life. Her thoughts turned, as they usually did when she was in one of these moods, to the plastic jar of painkillers she’d been given by that useless young doctor for her arthritis, the blister-packet of something or other a different doctor had prescribed for her blood pressure, the others for her heart. She wondered what would happen if she took them all at once. She’d seen first-hand more often than anyone should what it was like when a terminal patient was high on morphine. If there was a guarantee you could fade away in a blissful dream-like state, then she’d do it in an instant. But she had also witnessed those for whom the morphine brings to life the terrors that can only be found in the darkest nightmare, and Anna had already had enough horror for one lifetime.

Still, she liked to imagine what it would be like to die. Her one regret was that she’d never swum with dolphins, those graceful, intelligent creatures. She fantasised that one day she would be brave enough to take all the pills she could find and drift off into the sea of her imagination. The dolphins would swim beside her, frolic and play in the cool foamy waves, and lead her gently to the next place, wherever that was, if there was a place at all.

Tears slipped quietly from her eyes as the streetlights flickered on, bathing her face in a dappled orange glow. She reached out a shaking hand and rested her fingertips against the glass of the frame that cradled the photograph of her mother, Clara.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, before slowly getting up, closing the curtains and switching on the lamp.

Jacqueline

“I remember walking along the train tracks with Jack, picking up the coal that had been dropped by the trains for the fire at home. If there wasn’t any coal we would climb the trees for the cones and put them in an old pillow case.”

She gathered a sack and an old pillowcase from the pile of stuff on the floor: a jumble of coats, a woollen rug, and various sizes of shoes, many of which had strayed from their partners with a black Mary Jane sitting next to a large brown boot, a sandal nestling against a shiny man’s shoe. Jacqueline looked down at her own feet, at the dull grey at the front of each otherwise black shoe: scuff marks. Not all are hers, some are the fault of the girl whose shoes they were before she had them, and soon they would be passed down to one of Jacqueline’s little sisters, as she had grown again and they were tight: she couldn’t stretch out her toes.

“Edith!” she called. “If you still want tae come with me an’ Jack, then you better hurry up!”

A small, blotchy-faced girl with hair the colour of wheat came shuffling into the back hall and searched through the shoe pile for two that would match and fit. She wasn’t successful.

“Jackie, help!” she whined.

“Och, what’ve you done? Silly wee gurl!”

Edith sat down and stuck both feet out in front of her, towards her sister. Jacqueline bent down and saw that, not only did Edith have the shoes on the wrong feet but that they weren’t a pair. The left shoe fitted, while the other was at least two sizes too big.

“You’ve got Janet’s shoe on!”

Edith let out a giggle and Jacqueline searched through the pile, found the hiding shoe and wiggled her sister’s foot into it.

“Right, hold that.” She gave the girl the pillow case. “And let’s go get Jack.”

They opened the back door and walked into the garden. Jack saw them, put down the bit of wood he was holding and made his way slowly over to them. He looked tired and pale with purplish-grey crescents under each eye. He said he felt better, but it took a lot out of him, the TB. All those weeks spent living down the shed at the bottom of the garden by himself so the others wouldn’t catch it. It was Jackie that brought him his meals, another blanket, and kept him company, talking to him though the thin wood.

They went out the back gate and into the lane, enjoying the feel of the pale autumn sunlight on their faces. It wouldn’t last much longer, though. Soon the cool breeze would turn

into a cold wind, then an icy gale as the weeks drew on. They cut across the field and followed the river. It was the quickest way to the tracks. It took roughly twenty minutes, nothing to a young man like Jack, even given his recent illness, and little more than a stroll to lithe, long-legged Jacqueline, but Edith struggled to keep up, always had been a sickly wee thing. Jack bent down and let her climb onto his back. As he stood up the bones protested with a series of clicks. He put a hand around each skinny leg, over her white knee-high socks and, after Jackie had taken the pillow case from her, Edith buried her hands in his hair, gripping the short tufts as if they were reigns.

“Giddy up,” she shouted, and Jack neighed and made clip clop noises as he walked along the track from sleeper to sleeper. Jackie walked ahead, eyes down, searching for their dark treasure, although it seemed as if others had got there before them, for apart from the odd cracked black piece here and there along the edges, there wasn’t much to be had. Some weeks they came back with a sackful, but today there were just a few meagre pieces. They’d have to try the trees, instead. Jackie loved the smell of burning pine cones, but they didn’t burn as hot or as long as the coal. With thirteen of them at home their Dad’s wages didn’t go very far, and there was less and less work available for a lumberjack, so Jack and Jackie often went out to pick up the stray bits dropped by the trains from the Great North of Scotland Railway as they made their way to and from Banff.

They left the tracks and headed for the woods. Jack put Edith down and she reached for Jackie’s hand, but Jackie held hers out, palms up, so Edith could see they were black from the coal. Edith reached for Jack’s instead, hers small and pink, soon engulfed by his. Jackie could see the angry patches of pinkish-red at the back of Edith’s knees, bright against the white of her socks, and felt a stab of compassion for her wee sister, her recovering brother, glad that she, herself, was fit and healthy. They could make out the crop just beyond the old stone wall. Jackie hopped over it, and waited as Jack lifted Edith up and over and into Jackie’s arms. Some of the stones were loose, others fallen. The grey stone was covered in patches of white and yellow and green, damp, alive, spreading. They walked through the tall grass and weeds until they reached the first tree, a tall, impressive Scots Pine.

“I found one, I found one!” called Edith, holding a cone triumphantly in the air.

“Put it in the pillowcase then, here, and look for more. I bet you can’t find ten,” challenged Jackie.

“I can!” said Edith, and began, earnestly, to search the earth.

Jack sat down, his back against the tree, groaning as he did so. He closed his eyes, content to sit out in the fresh air, while his sisters collect the offerings from each pine. Once they had done, he would give Jackie a leg up so she could pick the cones that were ready from the lower branches. Many were so tall that they could not reach the first branches even

with a ladder, and lots of the cones were too young still, little orange baubles decorating the tree, each cone facing upwards like an offering to the sky. They needed the dull, brown woody ones, the older cones, as they were the ones they could burn on the fire at home when winter came.

“Dad had got a job in Corby, and told us we were going to live in a big black house. He went on ahead with the furniture, and Mum brought all eleven of us down on the train.”

The street was charcoal. Candles were flickering like fairies in the windows of the other inviting homes, yet it was day. The unforgiving grey clouds hovered above, watching. They threatened rain. The children huddled together, all eleven, numerous shapes, sizes and ages, in various stages of disarray. Siblings. In amongst them stood a girl at the awkward age of thirteen. Jacqueline. She was neither the oldest nor the youngest, and to an onlooker would seem unremarkable, indistinguishable from the others surrounding her. She was tall for her age, though not as tall as Jack, the eldest. She shifted nervously and fiddled with the buttons on her dress until their mother, a short, stout and proud looking woman, told her to stop fidgeting. It was impressive, really, how one woman could give the air of never paying attention, yet still manage to know the instant one of them had done something they shouldn't. She had a quiet, enduring strength. One of the older girls was complaining, the others either ignoring her or rolling their eyes at her. A younger boy they called Billy was crying, his tears glistening as if snails had travelled down his face. Their mother disappeared into the small, closed house, checking in case they had forgotten anything – either that or she was saying her own private goodbye. They wouldn't be coming back.

A small crowd had gathered to say goodbye. Neighbours, friends from work and school and a few nosy types they didn't really know. Sheila was talking to a girl who lived a few doors down.

“England”.

“Really?”

“Aye. My Da lost his job in the woods so he had tae get hisself a new one. He's there already, waitin fer us all. We are goin on the train to Corby. Da's gunna work in the steel mill there. He says the hoose is big and black but that it's nice.”

“I like this wee hoose though. We've already moved and now we've tae move again. I'm not sure if I want tae go,” Margaret piped in.

“Billy won’t shut up, though he should, else Mum’ll tell Da when we get there an Da’ll skelp him tae gi him sumthin tae cry about,” Janet said and the boy let out another wail with fresh vigour.

Jacqueline stuck the end of her hair into her thin line of a mouth. It was the colour and texture of straw. Her water-coloured blue eyes shone with unshed tears as she looked imploringly up at Jack. He tenderly reached down and removed the soggy hair from her mouth and ruffled it, prompting a tender smile. Their mother came back out, locking the faded door behind her. Her face, once pretty but now weathered and drawn, gave nothing away. In her hand was a tiny tarnished spoon.

The elder children picked up satchels and bundles – the remainder of their belongings – and each took the hand of a younger sibling in theirs and walked down the gloomy street behind their mother, who was hoping the rain would hold off, at least until her clan were all on the train.

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A man in a blue uniform swung open the door to their carriage before helping them down on to the platform. The excitement they felt at arriving in a new place was dampened by the hours of boredom, hunger and fatigue, and their cramped, aching limbs. The older children stretched and yawned and looked about while the younger ones huddled together, rubbing tired eyes, sucking thumbs or hanging on to the skirts of big sisters. Their mother stood slightly ahead, her eyes scanning the platform, both ways. Finally, she spotted him, standing there in one of his checked flannel shirts and beige trews, braces pulled on hastily so that the material of his shirt had puckered and bunched, talking to an older man who appeared to be covered in soot. She waved and called his name, but the other alighted passengers were making such a din that her calls were lost.

“Jacqueline, go get your Da, he’s deaf!” she said, indignant. Jacqueline squeezed her way through hugging families, arguing siblings and reunited friends, and threw herself at her dad, wrapping her long skinny arms around him and burying her face in his soft shirt.

“Jesus, lassie, you nearly knocked me flyin!” he said. She took his hand and pulled him towards the rest of the family. His wife smiled at him, and he grinned back while the kids all clamoured for his attention.

“Where’s this new hoose then?” she asked her husband.

“It’s no far,” he said, and led the way out of the little station.

“I met him at a football match, Corby Town. I used to love going to see the football. Then we went to the cinema to see *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.”

She stood amidst the clamouring crowd, cheeks dusted pink and florid. Her painted lips gave a sultry smile, the mouth a girlish giggle. Her lids fluttered above shining cornflower eyes like a pair of painted ladies. She could see Wally, the new manager, pacing the side-lines, shouting and gesticulating wildly, alternately praising and cursing the rabble of men that made up his inherited team. The spectators gave out a collective roar punctuated by piercing whistles and cheers as imposing Scot, Jimmy Strathie, scored yet another goal for the Steelmen in their famous black and white jerseys.

During the excitement she caught a glimpse of a specific shade of orange. He'd come again this week. Although he was short, his carrot hair made him easy to spot among the masses. He was pushing his way towards her through the crowd. She lost sight of him and impatiently scanned the many faces, startled by the sense of panic and loss that gripped her heart and the sheer relief when he emerged, no more than two metres away, yet she did not know him.

She glanced at him, trying to appear casual, but he was looking at her, staring, and their eyes meet. She gave an embarrassed smile and averted her gaze. Just then she felt a bony elbow poke uncomfortably into her ribs, and turned to Sheila, frowning.

“Och, Shelia, What'd you do that for?”

“Cuz there a was talkin' away and it turns oot you aint been lissnin' to a wurd a been sayin'! You been gawking again. It's rude to stare, you ken.”

“Aye, but I can't help it.”

“I've no idea why, mind. He's a wee midget carrot top who's old enough to be your daddy!”

Jacqueline sulked, folding her arms tight across her chest.

“Aw, come on, wee sis, a was only having a laugh wi' ya. Explains why you wanted me to put your hair in curlers, wanted to be looking your best for your daddy!”

It was Jacqueline's turn to elbow Sheila as both girls giggled and stole glances in the direction of the unknown carrot-top. Jackie was glad her brothers were elsewhere: she couldn't hack their teasing as well, especially Jack's.

Sheila's friend from work, Carol, a renowned gossip, elbowed her way through the crowd towards them, and for the next while the two were engaged in an exchange of shrieks of laughter, sniggers and whispered confidences they both knew the other would not keep, but that was part of the fun. Sheila has her eye on a laddie from the factory, and Jackie supposed most of their chatter was about him, and about tactics to defeat Sheila's rival, Jeanette, who also fancied the lad. Jackie couldn't stand Carol, and would normally resent her arrival, but today she was glad. While Sheila's attention was diverted, Jackie was free to watch her man in peace.

She looked up at him, then away – shy, teasing. And he, too, was still watching her. A grin crossed his boyish face making him appear, for a moment, younger than he was. He offered her a smile, and beckoned her with the slightest gesture of his head. She floated over to him, oblivious of the jostling bodies that made it difficult to pass, to the cheers as Middlemiss scored.

She watched as, in one swooping movement, he brushed his burnt umber hair from his forehead. His aquamarine eyes sparkled with possibility. He leant up towards her tiny swirling ear and whispered, softly, quietly. Her cheeks flamed fuchsia, her innocence peeping out of her widened eyes, timidly, curiously.

“Adam, what a lovely name! Mine’s awful, stupid mother.”

He offered her his arm. She gracefully accepted, stooping slightly as he was shorter. They drifted away together, melting into the clamorous crowd and appearing, unscathed, out on Occupation Road. They glided along gaily, both too shy at first to break the comfortable silence, but both curious, so eventually questions were asked, answers given less tentatively.

“What! You cycled all the way here from Hamilton! Two whole days! That’s awfully brave.” She was hopping and twittering excitedly; he was smiling indulgently. Upon reaching Rocky Road, they stopped at Tipaldi’s for a cuppa, enjoying the music played from the gramophone as they got to know each other.

“You fancy coming to the pictures?” he asked. “The new one with Kirk Douglas?”

“Aye.” They walked along to the Odeon on the corner before slipping silently into *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

“I used to work in a toy factory, where they made dolls. My job was putting the eyes in the dollies. Always blue, they were.”

Wooden crates were dotted around the dusty, sawdust-strewn cement floor. In one lay many severed babies’ arms, in another chubby little legs with tiny, protruding feet. The box at the base of the next machine contained disembodied heads, neatly cut with hollow eye sockets that seemed, nonetheless, to bore and glare. All of the babies were blonde. A smaller cardboard box sat on a table alongside a conveyor belt. Many glassy blue eyes stared up out of the box, unseeing. There was a bang, a judder and a sudden loud whirring as various pieces of machinery groaned into life. The eyeless heads were placed one after the other on to the conveyor belt, each one lifted from the box by a grasping hand that clutched cheek, temple, hair.

Jacqueline stood hunched over, back bent like an old woman further along the belt. From afar she was indistinguishable from the few other similarly-posed women. They were mannequins, identically dressed in large blue overalls that cover their curving bodies like a collapsing tent. They stood still, in a line, their hands moving monotonously through the same routine with the synchronicity of a shoal of frightened fish. Their robotic arms moved left, clenched, right, stopped, clicked, popped, clicked, popped, left. If you looked into their eyes, all you could see was a glazed expression. The deafening whir of the conveyor belt was so loud that after a while it went unnoticed. After what seemed like an age, after her feet had begun to ache, she turned and glanced at the slothful clock, its inaudible tick reverberating in her head. Her watery eyes stared sadly as if in mourning for the lifeless figures that passed continually by.

Once Jackie, Sylvia and Mabel had put in the eyes, the heads continue down to Joan and Frances who combed the wiry, yellow, hand-stitched curls into a bouffant style. After that, the pieces were assembled by Nancy, Rose and Judith; next Flo and Alice put lovely little lacy cotton dresses in various pastel shades onto them, depending on what the orders were that day. Rosy lips, pale arched brows and a healthy glow were spay-painted on by Irene, Martha and others, using a little mask as a template earlier on in the process before the heads reached the belt.

Clock hands finally reached eleven and the women turned from the belt and made a dash across the factory floor to the area at the back that was used for tea break.

“Och this stupid overall's too big, even with ma belly the way it is an' all. They need to make wee ones,” said Jacqueline, stirring two sugars into her milky tea. Three young women gathered around her, asking about the baby. Had she picked a name yet, did she think it was a girl or a boy, was she scared?

“I remember all the times Mum was expectin. Wouldn't mention it she wouldn't. Such a prude! When we were wee we used to think that you bought babies from the doctor for two an' six! Sounds daft, I know, but Mum would go into a room and we weren't allowed in, then the doctor would come with a big black bag, then a while later Da would pay him, then he'd go an' we'd have a new wee sister or brother. Honest ta God!”

The girls giggled and offered suggestions for names, old wives tales and anecdotes about sisters and friends. The rest of the women were quiet.

“No-one's gabbing, but then it's a Monday mornin I spose. Look at them all, need to cheer their faces up, so they do. Don't exactly feel at ma best either though. Ah well, it's gotta be done, so it has” said Jackie. The girls sipped their tea in companionable silence.

“Funny that, it's always bright blue ones, never any dollies with brown eyes,” mused Sylvia, who had only been working at the Rosebud Doll Factory for a week. “All these little

dollies look awful without their eyes. Will make lots of wee lasses happy though, put a smile on their faces once we're done with them."

Break was soon over, and the women shuffled back to the belt.

"Never mind, it'll be lunch before we know it, nice warm butteries from the baker, least that's summat tae look forward to," said Jackie, trying her best to boost morale.

"I asked Margaret to take her sister for a walk in the pram, and she tipped her out!"

Shirley lay in the pram, greeting and bawling, and Margaret was whingeing. Jacqueline tried her best to ignore both of them, but it had been a long day and her patience was wearing thin.

"Margaret, for Christ's sake, make your sister stop her noise!"

Margaret, still in her school blouse and grey, pleated skirt, held the handle of the pram in one hand and half-heartedly jiggled it, hoping the vague rocking motion would settle the wain, while she glared at her baby sister with contempt. Shirley, who was sitting up in the pram, face covered in tears and snot, showed no signs of ceasing her racket any time soon.

Jacqueline set the plates on the table, and while she was doing so the bubbling from the stove increased and the lid of the pan wobbled ominously. She made a dash for the pan, but didn't make it in time. Starchy water rushed all over the cooker, some of it dribbling down the cupboards.

"Bugger" Jacky exclaimed, hauling the pan over to the sink with one hand, then reaching back to turn off the gas. "Margaret, take your sister for a wee walk round the octagon."

"Do I have to?" said Margaret.

"Aye! Go on. And don't be long, mind. Your Dad'll be home soon and dinner'll be ready."

"Fine," said Margaret, scowling while shoving the pram towards the door and awkwardly manoeuvring it out down the step. She slammed the door behind her.

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Ten minutes later, while Jacqueline was cutting up the chicken pie, Margaret walked past on the way to her room. It was silent. Thank God, thought Jackie; that means Shirley must have fallen asleep, and Margaret has left her in her pram in the shade of the garden. Peace, at last. She had just served the potatoes and was dishing up the peas when Adam came in the front door, Shirley in his arms, bawling louder than ever, her face an angry shade of pink and glistening with yet more snot and tears. Adam's brow was furrowed and he didn't give her a kiss as he usually did when he got home from his shift.

“For Christ’s sake, Jackie, were you not watching her? Did you leave the gate open? You cannae do that now she’s crawling!”

“The gate? No, I didn’t. She was in her pram, sleeping.”

Jackie put her arms out and Adam passed Shirley to her. The child had grass-stains on her clothes, and a grazed right forearm.

“Well, if she was in her pram sleeping, then why did I find her on the lawn, then, all by herself!”

Jackie’s expression changed from confusion to a determined, focused rage. “That little madam!”

“Margaret? I thought the lass had more sense than that!” He marched to her room, determined to find out what had happened, sure it must have been an accident. He opened the door to Margaret’s room and found her lying on her bed, a soggy pillow muffling her sobs. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” she wailed, confessing before she’d even been accused. “She just wouldn’t stop crying! She never does!”

“Did you leave your sister out there on purpose?”

“I’m sorry, I knew I shouldn’t, but...”

“Quiet! Stop your greeting. Do you know what could have happened? We could’ve lost her, she could’ve been hurt, gone into the road...”

“I’m sorry Daddy, is she OK?”

“Aye, except for a few scratches. Don’t suppose you know how she came across them, do you?”

Margaret looked at the floor, refusing to meet her father’s gaze.

“What did you do? Answer me, or I’ll give you a hiding!”

“I...I tipped her,” said Margaret, in barely a whisper. Adam lifted his hand and delivered a swift blow across the side of her head. “You little witch!” he growled, slamming the door as he left the room and walked back down to the kitchen. Jackie had cleaned the graze on Shirley’s arm and dressed her in clean pyjamas, and the girl lay across Jackie’s lap, dozing, a pink beaded necklace clasped in a chubby fist. Adam sat down at the table to a dinner that was barely warm. The pie was burned and the potatoes hard, and he found he’d lost his appetite. He picked the meat out of the pie, eating some of the softer pastry underneath and avoiding the flaky black crust.

Jackie scraped the plates and put them in the sink, removing the silver and garnet ring Adam had bought her for their anniversary before washing the dishes. He’d gone to change out of his work gear. She wondered if, later, he’d play them all a wee tune on his violin to cheer them up. She could make a cup of tea, they could have a bit of fruit cake...

“I was a home help, and sometimes on a Sunday I’d take my granddaughter Emma with me.”

After finishing breakfast Jacqueline rinsed the cup and plate under the tap and placed them in the washing up bowl – she’d do them later, when she got back from Margaret’s, or was it Shirley’s this week? No, it was Margaret’s; she was sure, sort of. Taking her black handbag from the kitchen table, she went into the back hall to put on her shoes and jacket before giving her hair a quick sort in the mirror. She locked up the bungalow and made her way round to the garage. The door was still dented and scratched from where the hooligans had broken in, but she’d had a new lock put on it. They’d taken her yellow scooter, and the police found it a few days later, a damn sight worse for wear and with different plates on it. Worse thing was, it wasn’t the first time. Luigi had found her a nice little car this time, though, also yellow. She always went to Luigi; he was a lovely bloke and cheap too. She opened the door and got in, and drove the short distance to Margaret’s, turning into the little cul-de-sac and parking up behind her son-in-law Steve’s car, as someone had taken her usual spot under the lamp post. The door to the house opened before she’d even turned the engine off, and Emma was running towards her as she got out of the car.

“Nana! Nana!” the girl called as she ran.

The wee girl had her pyjamas on, her blond hair falling out of a lop-sided pony tail, and nothing but socks on her feet. After a big hug they made their way into the house. She hoped Margaret had the kettle on; she could do with another cuppa.

She went to the cupboard under the stairs where they kept her slippers, put them on then took a seat at the kitchen table, tucking her handbag safely beneath it.

“There you go, Mum.” Margaret, clad as usual for a Sunday in her pink dressing gown, hair sticking up “like a duck’s arse” as she called it and without her face on, placed a cup of strong, sweet, milky tea down in front of Jackie.

“Aw, lovely!” Jackie grasped the mug, blew on it a bit, then took a sip. “It’s just Mrs Lawson and Elsie today, so I won’t be long. Do you need a hand with the dinner before I go?”

“Could you peel the potatoes or chop the carrots? But sit and drink your tea first” said Margaret, who was dabbing fat over a chicken with a little brush.

“Aye, give me a pinny then.” Jackie slurped some more tea then made her way over to the sink, and after hauling the potatoes out of the cupboard just to the left of it, ran the tap. Margaret opened a draw and pulled out a folded plastic blue apron and handed it to her mum along with a small black knife. Margaret then placed a silver saucepan next to Jackie, where she would put the potatoes she had peeled and chopped – a familiar routine.

“Are we having mash? Can we have mash? Mash is way better than roasties,” said Emma, who was hovering in the kitchen. When Jackie was there, Emma was her shadow.

Once the dinner was prepared, and nothing else could be done until the chicken was ready so roasties and the yorkie could go in, Jackie retrieved her bag from under the table, located her car keys, put her shoes and coat on then made for the door.

“Can I come with you again this week? Please, Nana, please?” begged Emma, who was still in her pyjamas.

“Well you can’t come looking like that!” said Jackie.

“I’ll get washed and dressed quick, promise!”

“Aye, go on then, hurry up.” Jackie put down her bag and waited. A few minutes later after a suspiciously fast wash in which Jackie doubted any soap was actually used, the girl was dressed in peach ski-pants and a flowery t-shirt, with her hair pulled up into a high, tight pony-tail complete with a bow, courtesy of her mum. Jackie took the girl’s hand and they made their way out to the car.

“We went out for a lovely meal, Margaret, Shirley, Steve, Paul, all my grandkids. And then Bingo!”

She sat up straight, poised and proud. Click! The flash made her wizened eyes blink and twinkle behind large, plastic-framed glasses. She was surrounded by youth. They huddled together, a rainbow of colour, various shapes, sizes and sexes. They were hers. Pride radiated from her like a spell; they were enchanted. Many shades of sky blue, dove grey and chestnut brown, as well as her own fading gaze, were focused on the camera, waiting to see if another would be taken. Even when the photographs were done, the smile still remained fixed on her face. Her glazed lips pinched together in an attempt at composure but sprung back rebelliously into a grin. One girl, Emma, was sitting closer than the rest. She was small and delicate, with elegant straw hair and pale blue eyes. A middle-aged woman approached, a slow, seeking smile emerging on her face: Margaret. She placed one hand on the shoulder of each. Three generations of women: mother, daughter, granddaughter. A gaily-painted badge pinned to Jacqueline’s blouse shouted “sixty-five.”

The waitress brought out soup and melon, breaded mushrooms and prawn cocktail, causing the family to scatter, hurrying to find their allocated seats. By the time they were finishing up desert, Jackie was on her third Bacardi and coke, had eaten much more than she usually did, opened many cards, and was dying for a cup of tea. She noticed that Steve, her son-in-law, had disappeared with two of the grand-kids, Emma and Jodie. “It’s a

surprise,” Shirley teased in response to Jackie's questions about their whereabouts, before polishing off the remainder of her sister's profiteroles. “Just you wait and see.”

Back at the bungalow the clan congregated in the living room, adults cradling blue mugs of tea, the younger ones plastic cups of juice. They watched Jackie, who had pride of place in the armchair, open her presents. She unwrapped gardening gloves, hand cream, a new black handbag, trying to pretend she didn't notice the glances at clocks and watches, that she didn't hear the snatches of whispered conversations that ushered in from kitchen and hall.

“They should be here by now.”

“...might be stuck in traffic...”

“I'll try Steve's mobile...”

Ben and Amy had hauled the games out of the airing cupboard in the hall. Shirley had opened another bottle of white wine that had seemed to materialise out of nowhere. Alan was sitting on the couch, tapping his foot and drumming fingers on his thighs. Paul stood, arms crossed, looking out of the living room window.

“They're here,” Paul announced, and Margaret rushed to the back hall to open the door.

“Put your drink down, Mum,” said Shirley. “Sit there and close your eyes – tight, no peeking!”

Jackie did as she was told, wondering what on earth her daughters were up to this time. After a collective intake of breath, the room was silent. She heard a squeaky rustle as an object was placed on her lap.

“You can open your eyes now, Mum,” said Steve, and she did. Confusion gave way to surprise and sheer joy as she took in the cardboard box hastily wrapped in shiny tartan paper, peered over the rim and beheld the quivering creature within. She reached in with both hands and scooped him up, out of the box, which was whisked away by Steve. She cradled the mess of shivering fur against her chest and smiled and smiled and smiled.

“What are you going to call him?” Emma asked.

They didn't approve of Tuppence, so she called him Bingo instead.

“I told them I'm not spending hours every day sat in a hospital.”

Jacqueline lay on her side on the cream leather couch her grandson had given her when he got a new, bigger one. Bingo was curled up in the space behind her bent knees, his head resting on her leg as he slept. A beige fleece blanket was draped over the dozing pair. The little bungalow was warm and silent – she'd turned the thermostat up, just for a wee while. A

loud rattle at the door startled the pair into consciousness. Bingo flew from the couch into the little entrance hall growling and barking as if he were much larger and more ferocious breed.

“Bingo, be quiet!” Jackie shouted, adding to the noise. She flung the blanket aside and swung her legs over, puffy feet automatically finding her slippers. She hauled herself up with help of the arm of the couch and took the few short steps to the door.

“I’ve got your boxes,” said a young man in a yellow reflective vest. “Shall I stick them in the usual place?”

“Aye, that’ll do.” Jackie watched him unlock the gate and carry them in, all the while using her slippered foot to hold back the growling terrier that was eager to slip through the gap between door and frame.

“That’s the lot of them. See you next week,” called the deliveryman before making his way down the path and into his van.

Jackie closed the door, annoyed that her attempt at sleep had been interrupted. She’d hardly slept in days, and was hoping the new sleeping tablets she’d been prescribed would help. She’d picked them up that morning, along with some milk, bread and chicken pies from Morrisons. She went to her little kitchen and filled the kettle, put a PG Tips pyramid teabag into a mug and added two teaspoonfuls of sugar. A glance at the clock showed that it was nearly time. After making the tea and placing it on the sideboard in the living room, she checked the warmer, took out the plastic bag of sterile cleansing fluid and hung it from the portable metal hook. From an open cardboard box she lifted out another and placed it in the warmer so it would be ready for her next exchange. Pressed the pump on the dresser to dispense anti-bacterial gel into her hand, she rubbed it between her palms, in-between her fingers, over the backs of her hands. Next she got her tray and the other bits she would need – wipes, clamps, caps – and begun.

Continuous Ambulatory Peritoneal Dialysis. That’s what it said on the letter from the doctor. You see, she had a funny kidney – enlarged, they called it. Been causing trouble, on and off, for years, but in the last few it had practically stopped working altogether. They said that she’d have to come to hospital for dialysis four times a week, for hours at a time. They wouldn’t do it at the local hospital, either; she had to go further afield, to a specialist unit. She said she didn’t want to, but they argued, said she didn’t have a choice. It was this, or a slow death. She said she’d rather the latter. What was the point in staying alive if she had to spend most of her time in hospital? No. She wouldn’t do it. Her daughters cried and said to the doctors, there must be something else you can do, surely. And there was. She could do it at home, by herself, but she would have to be trained. It wasn’t ideal, and there would be risks. The possibility of infection. A strict diet.

Jackie unscrewed the cap and attached a tube and waited while the fluid drained into a bucket. Once this was done, she removed that tube and attached the end of the other that

was connected to the warm hanging bag, and with the release of a plastic clamp, she sat back and waited for the bag to drain into her belly. Once the hanging bag was empty, she released the long tube and screwed on a fresh cap, tucking the remainder back into her trousers and zipping them up. Having poured the bucket down the toilet and flushed, then tidied away the rest of the paraphernalia, she returned to the couch and the remainder of her mug of tea when a yipping whine emerged from the kitchen. With a sigh she slowly got up and opened the back door, letting the dog out into the garden. She put a handful of biscuits into Bingo's bowl and put the oven on. She'd have her pie and see if there was anything good on the telly, a quiz show or maybe a cowboy film.

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She got a good night's sleep that night, for the first time in a while. The tablets must have done the trick. The trouble was, she had a horrible headache the next day that she just couldn't shift. Everything felt slow and far away. She'd made a slice of toast for breakfast as usual, but couldn't even manage half. She dozed on the couch with Bingo, and woke needing the toilet. She felt a bit dizzy but figured it was nothing more than the effects of her headache and the fact that she'd just woken up. On her way back from the loo everything went black, and a hot white light exploded inside her skull. When she regained consciousness she was sprawled on the living room floor with Bingo whining and shivering at her side. She struggled to sit up, relieved to find that nothing hurt other than her head and her lower back, but that was nothing new. Pulling herself over to the sideboard, she grabbed the phone and called her daughters.

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A stroke. Just a little one. A blocked artery or bleed, apparently quite common at her age. They also said the dose she'd been prescribed for her sleeping pills was much too high, and needed to be reduced. They kept her in hospital for a few days, then let her go home in time for Christmas. It didn't last long though. She felt more and more tired, could do less and less. They admitted her again, did some tests. She'd got an infection. Then came a stomach ulcer, a loss of appetite, a worsening of her osteoporosis. She was moved from one hospital to another, from one ward to another, and, lastly, to a hospice where her daughters and kind nurses looked after her final needs.

Critical Commentary

1 Introduction

This thesis explores and documents the processes involved in turning lives into stories, with a commentary offering practitioner accounts as a useful resource for the conscientious life writer. It points to historical fiction criticism and practice as a helpful resource for life writers working specifically at the borderlines of fact and fiction. The addition of fiction and techniques of fictionalisation to life writing can enable the sharing of stories that otherwise would not get to be heard. I wanted to offer this opportunity to lone older women, a group that are often isolated, ignored and misrepresented. I aimed to creatively reimagine and open up lives that otherwise would remain invisible, at the same time exploring the question of biographical truth and the boundaries between fact and fiction.

This project attempts to bridge gaps between academic disciplines, between genres and between theory and practice to show that flexibility, negotiation, interaction and innovation is key if a writer wants to effectively execute a portrait in prose. Both the creative and critical components of this thesis blur generic and disciplinary boundaries in an exploration of the complex creative processes and negotiations necessary for the effective rendering of a real life in narrative form. It has been noted across disciplines that representations of older people and their life experiences often do not match lived realities. As a writer hoping to provide a deeper representation of a life in prose narrative, where can one turn for sound advice and a model of best practice? There is often much disparity between life writing critics and practitioners, as well as tensions between disciplines that operate with differing assumptions and approaches. This project explores representations of lone older women across life writing and several related areas, including fictive autobiographies, auto/biographical fiction and historical fiction. Drawing on the work of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and literary gerontologists, it assesses a range of different types of writing related to ageing, alongside the benefits of life story research. The possibilities and problems of merging fact and fiction are discussed, as well as questions of genre and ethical considerations that need to be carefully handled in this sensitive area.

My discussion here begins with an overview of the development of literary gerontology, exploring its contribution and relevancy with reference to literary gerontologists including Barbara Frey Waxman and Kathleen Woodward. A discussion of one of literary gerontology's key concerns will follow – the problem of stereotyped representation – citing the work of scholars in sociology, anthropology and literary studies including Andrew Blaikie,

Mike Hepworth and Mary Morganroth Gullette. I will then explore types of writing linked with ageing, including Gullette's age autobiography, along with the question of motive and motivation when writing in old age, with fictional examples such as Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and Fay Weldon's *Chalcot Crescent* (2010). In section three the merits of reminiscence and life story research will be posited with support from Peter Coleman and other advocates of the practice. Links between gender and ageing will be considered, specifically in relation to how lone older women are depicted in literature and other media. I will then outline the methodology for my own project, from interviewing and working with archive materials to negotiating the ethics and creative processes involved in turning lives into stories, with reference to Roland Barthes, Claire Lynch, Paul John Eakin and Pauline Polkey among others.

I argue that while the use of fiction in life writing has traditionally been viewed contentiously, fiction can be used as a tool with which a life writer can enable the sharing of a life story by providing protection to the owner of the story through anonymity, a view that is supported by Claudia Mills. In section four the implications of utilising fiction within life writing will be considered in terms of the impact on genre categorisation, as will issues regarding truth and authenticity. Case studies will be provided of two authors and texts that successfully navigate the borderlines between fact and fiction in what Gudmundsdottir calls a 'fertile fusion' – Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde: A Novel* (2000) and Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures* (2009). Historical fiction theory and accounts of creative praxis will then be posited as areas able to offer useful models and advice to life writing practitioners when it comes to blending fact with fiction, such as John F Keener's "biographical narratives" model in which he sees historical and other narratives featuring real people situated on a continuum rather than as part of the fact or fiction dichotomy, a term and approach I have adopted for my own project. I also highlight the usefulness of Margaretta Jolly's article "Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice" in which she discusses the disparity that often occurs between life writing critics and practitioners, a situation which is rapidly improving now that more critics are becoming practitioners and more practitioners are becoming critically informed.

2 Literary gerontology

Key moments in the emergence of gerontology as an established academic discipline include the founding of gerontological societies in America and Britain in the 1930s, as well as the publication of certain seminal texts, such as cytologist Edmund Cowdry's book, *Problems of Ageing* (1939). Gerontology as a field of study was dominated by the perspectives of certain disciplines, initially by medical and biological scientists, and then the

social sciences, including psychology. Robert H Binstock, in an article entitled “Handbooks as Gerontological Maps” in the ‘Book Reviews’ section of *The Gerontologist* in 1996 noted that there was a lack of connections between disciplines and that ‘bridge-building is likely to be more successful across various aging research communities if issues shared by disciplines are highlighted.’¹ He concludes the article by stressing that ‘more than ever, gerontologists must undercut discipline-bound thinking and open new possibilities through recombining ideas already present in fragments.’² Gerontology may have been a *multidisciplinary* field in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it was not as *interdisciplinary* as it would go on to be, with texts such as Thomas R Cole’s *Handbook of the Humanities and Ageing* sitting next to, but separate from, those of the sciences and social sciences. *An Introduction to Gerontology* (2011) is a student-focused introduction to the field, edited by Ian Stuart-Hamilton, which demonstrates through its diverse range of chapter topics and contributors that gerontology is now not only a multidisciplinary field covering biology, health and social care, psychology, sociology, gender studies, technology, literature and more, but an interdisciplinary one, too. This development has continued with more texts with a true interdisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary focus making an appearance, and the expansion of the field to include a wider range of perspectives.

2.1 The emergence of literary gerontology

There has been a fairly recent emergence of a specifically *literary* gerontology where, according to the sociologist Mike Hepworth in *Stories of Ageing* (2000), ‘experts in literary criticism and the history of literature have drawn on gerontological research to carry out in-depth analysis of particular texts or writers.’³ In *Stories of Ageing*, Hepworth’s approach to this is to discuss the social and cultural significance of fictional representations of ageing with reference to novels that focus upon protagonists in the stage of life referred to as ‘old age.’ Kathleen Woodward, on the other hand, is a gerontologist with training in literary theory and criticism who has applied psychoanalytic theory to fiction about ageing in her book *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991). She believes that literature ‘can have a potentially salutary social effect. Our reading can help shape the unacknowledged possibilities of our future experience in that largely unexplored realm of our cultural imagination – old age.’⁴ She is also the author and editor of numerous other articles and books on ageing, including *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999), an edited

¹Robert H Binstock, “Handbooks as Gerontological Maps,” *The Gerontologist* (1996): 826.

²Binstock, “Handbooks as Maps,” 826.

³Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2000) 4.

⁴Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 14.

collection that focuses on the invisibility of older women that draws upon a range of subjects including literary and cultural studies, creative writing, performance and visual art. Another key figure, Barbara Frey Waxman, in an article entitled “Nature, Spirituality, and Later Life in Literature: An Essay on the Romanticism of Older Writers” (1999) in *The Gerontologist*, the Journal of The Gerontological Society of America, discusses the growing field of literary gerontology, citing Woodward, among others. She explains her own approach, situating her work: ‘my work in this essay uses literary criticism and literary history to describe the emergence of a new Romanticism in contemporary elders’ nature writing, and it is representative of the growing field of literary gerontology.’⁵ She then offers a justification for not just her work but for literary gerontology as a whole: ‘this essay is grounded in the assumption that reading powerful texts and the literary criticism that intensifies our reading experiences can change our attitudes towards ageing.’⁶ Both Woodward and Waxman explicitly argue for the value of literary gerontology, an area which has continued to grow. Diana Wallace, in a chapter on literary portrayals of ageing in Stuart-Hamilton’s *Introduction to Gerontology*, states that she believes:

artistic representations of older people both shape and have the potential to counter our ideas about age and ageing...A novel, poem, play, painting or photograph, film or television series, or, less obviously, a piece of music may allow us imaginatively to engage with the fact of our own ageing. It may also help us to recognise the subjectivity of those who are already ‘older’ (since age is often understood relationally) and to understand the ways in which age and ageing are culturally contracted.⁷

This echoes Waxman and Woodward’s conceptualisation in which literature has a specific and valuable contribution to make towards the quest in humanistic/social gerontology to understand the “meaning” of ageing. Further proof of the value of literary gerontology, and its subsequent growth, can be found in the recent funding of projects of this nature, such as the Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing project (FCMAP) by Nick Hubble, Jago Morrison and Philip Tew at Brunel University London. The project was funded as part of New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA), a cross-council research programme that aimed to

develop practical policy and implementation guidance and novel scientific, technological and design responses to help older people enjoy better quality lives as they age. This requires integrating understandings of the changing meanings, representations and experiences of ageing and the key factors shaping them [...] through direct engagement with older people and user organisations.⁸

⁵Barbara Frey Waxman, “Nature, Spirituality and Later Life in Literature: An Essay on the Romanticism of Older Writers,” *The Gerontologist* vol. 39, no. 5 (1999): 516.

⁶Waxman, “Nature, Spirituality and Later Life,” 516.

⁷Diana Wallace, “Literary Portrayals of Ageing” in *An Introduction to Gerontology*, ed. Ian Stuart-Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 389.

⁸“About the Programme,” last modified February, 2014, <http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/about-the-programme.html>

This project, while its base was in literature, drew on methods of other disciplines, including the social sciences, and involved, as the NDA required, direct engagement with older people through a variety of methods including working with The Third Age Trust (U3A) members, analysing reader response diaries and the responses to related commissioned Mass Observation directives on social attitudes to books and representations of ageing. The project culminated in the production of a report with the “think tank” Demos, aimed at using the project’s findings to inform public policy, entitled *Coming of Age* (2011).

2.2 The problem of representation

The issue of representation is a key focus of gerontology, particularly literary gerontology. As Andrew Blaikie discusses in *Ageing and Popular Culture: New Agendas in Social Theory and Practice* (1999), ‘much has been written and said on the negative stereotyping of older adults in various media,’⁹ indicating that this is a problem not limited to literature, but is also prevalent in other types of narrative and visual representations of older people, such as film and photography. Indeed, Hepworth, who has collaborated with Mike Featherstone and, more recently, Blaikie himself, dedicated a great deal of time to the study of images and, in particular, what he called the mask of age. Anthropologist Haim Hazan in *Old Age Constructions and Deconstructions* (1994) discusses this ongoing problem of representation that has occupied gerontologists working in many disciplines, arguing that the literature ‘treats older people as an object, rather than subject.’ He continues by saying that there is ‘only a “smattering of research” dedicated to deciphering the world of old people as subjects.’¹⁰ It seems clear that since the publication of Haim’s text, some degree of progress has been made – the NDA programme referenced the significance of integrating understandings of the changing meanings, representations and experiences of ageing, showing an awareness of the value of interdisciplinary work in this field, and FCMAP aimed to explore how representations of ageing circulate in culture and society, particularly by examining literary representations and how older people engage with these. The NDA’s requirement that research into the meanings, representations and experiences of ageing *must* involve direct engagement with older people themselves is surely a sign that work is being done to address this issue of objectification. By engaging with older people and working directly with them, we can go some way to deciphering the world of older people as subjects rather than objects, and hopefully make an attempt to avoid reducing older people to stereotypes. Before examining different literary representations both positive and negative

⁹Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture: New Agendas in Social Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 85.

¹⁰Haim Hazan, *Old Age Constructions and Deconstructions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 3.

and taking a further look at the potential of literature, if handled correctly, to present subjective, complex and transformative images of ageing, a closer exploration of the various concerns surrounding visual representation of older people more generally is needed. Andrew Blaikie has published widely in the field of social gerontology, however he is not currently researching in this area. It is in the fourth chapter of *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 'Altered Images', that he discusses the power of visual representations of ageing, stating that they 'indicate the immediacy of popular understandings.'¹¹ He speaks of a lack of 'goodness of fit' between images of ageing (in this instance, a series of photographs) and what he terms 'lived realities,' an idea that can also be said to be true of literary and other representations.¹² He moves on to discuss representations of older people in film and television, considering the problematic nature of the values promoted by early Hollywood role models who extolled the virtues of youth: 'to be young and slim was to be beautiful; signs of ageing, such as flabbiness and wrinkles, were emblems of ugliness.'¹³ In post-war films, older people were reduced to playing fools, figures of fun and paragons of virtue, and in soap operas older people often play the role of community watchdog, 'but were often crotchety, interfering nuisances.'¹⁴ Blaikie discusses challenges to these reduced roles and stereotypes, mentioning a Levi's advert featuring a topless woman in her sixties, and Germaine Greer, whose 'disavowal of hormone replacement therapy has codified a feminist strand which seeks to rehabilitate the crone.'¹⁵ He argues that the resultant shift in imagery was due to the emergence of consumer culture, and because expectations have changed. This is a very positive view of what was then the current state of representations of ageing in popular culture (late 90s), but it seems that while things may have improved, the problem has not disappeared altogether. We may no longer 'draw in our breath as we read about marathon-running grannies'¹⁶ but these are by no means the norm. We are now often presented with pictures of running grannies, skydiving granddads and older people decked out in sports gear, smiling and adopting yoga poses, but again, this image does not necessarily 'fit' with lived experience any more than the earlier stereotypical representations did.

In *Stories of Ageing*, Hepworth begins by setting out his aim, 'to encourage you as readers to explore fiction as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of

¹¹Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 85.

¹²Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 85-86.

¹³Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 93.

¹⁴Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 95-97.

¹⁵Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 106.

¹⁶Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, 107.

the experience of ageing in society.¹⁷ He reinforces this by stating that ‘gerontologists with an interest in fiction increasingly regard novels as an important source of information about the meanings of ageing.’¹⁸ While it is nice to see social gerontologists such as Hepworth reaching outside of their comfort zones to borrow from another discipline, attempting to embrace the multidisciplinary that gerontology as a field seems increasingly to demand, Hepworth’s approach to doing so undermines the significance of literature and literary criticism. This is made even more apparent when he continues by saying that ‘gerontologists occasionally draw on fiction to illustrate the findings of empirical research or to interweave gerontology and fiction in order to enhance our understanding of ageing...fiction is sampled to illustrate the ageing process.’¹⁹ It seems as though here, Hepworth is claiming that the purpose and value of literature, and its representations of ageing and constructions of meanings, is solely to bolster research by social scientists and to help them illustrate their findings, rather than being capable of yielding insights into ageing and its cultural construction. The role of the literary critic is, again, dismissed. As quoted above, Hepworth does mention the literary critic, insofar as to state that literary critics draw on gerontological research to carry out analyses of texts and writers, but this does not appear to interest Hepworth. His concerns seem to focus on the usefulness of fiction in providing social gerontologists with examples, and the potential of fictional representations of ageing to engage the reader’s interest: ‘novels are in the advantageous position of admitting readers to a variety of different perspectives on the situation of an ageing individual.’²⁰ The interesting thing about Hepworth’s approach in *Stories*, though, despite his rather limited view on literature, is that he views ageing in terms of a series of interactions between body, self and society, and this symbolic interactionist framework can be a useful tool for analysing the various facets of experiences of ageing in fiction.²¹

Haim Hazan’s *Old Age Constructions and Deconstructions* focuses on the role of language in constructing images of age, with different sections of the book examining languages *about* old age and languages *of* the old. Hazan is in agreement with Blaikie that there is not always a good ‘fit’ between images of ageing and real lived experience. Hazan discusses this in terms of ‘paradoxes emanating from irreconcilable tensions between images of the old, their own will and desire, and the facilities offered to them.’²² Society’s provision for older people is based on images and understandings of older people that are not accurate, that do not ‘fit’

¹⁷Hepworth, *Stories*, 1.

¹⁸Hepworth, *Stories*, 2.

¹⁹Hepworth, *Stories*, 3.

²⁰Hepworth, *Stories*, 5.

²¹Hepworth, *Stories*, 1.

²²Hazan, *Constructions and Deconstructions*, 1-2.

with their experiences or needs. Again, here, we can see the problem of objectification – provision is being offered that does not take into consideration the ‘will and desire’ of older people themselves. As Hazan makes clear, ‘communication about ageing does not necessarily rely on communication with the ageing, much less communication amongst the aged.’²³ Like Hepworth, Hazan acknowledges to some extent the part the arts and humanities has to play in terms of representations of ageing, but, like Hepworth, he sees its use as fulfilling a particular, but limited function: ‘Philosophy, literature, music, the fine arts and popular culture furnish the social sciences with insights into the concepts they set out to understand and develop.’²⁴ This view – that the purpose of the arts is to provide handy insights to social scientists – is very reductive, altogether dismissing the role of the literary critic and ignoring the power of art to both shape and subvert meanings and understandings.

In *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011) Mary Morganroth Gullette draws on biomedicine, literature, economics and personal stories to ‘probe the ageism that drives discontent with our bodies, our selves and our accomplishments,’²⁵ and to set out an ambitious call to arms and agenda for change, such as by teaching children about ageism to help combat it. The third section of the book focuses on story, and the idea that there might be a ‘better’ way to tell ‘Our Saddest Later-Life Stories’.²⁶ She gives an overview in the introduction of the way ageing narratives, and the specific language related to age, aids ageism through the construction of stereotypes: ‘If wicked cultural stereotypes like racist epithets cannot linger without tending, bizarre age epithets do not emerge in common speech without malice aforethought. Like ethnic hostility, like rape in war, decline culture is insidiously promoted. “Burden” is not a term our grandparents use about themselves. “Elders” used to go with betters.’²⁷

In the first chapter of *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette discusses visual representations of ageing from alarming face ageing software booths at various museums to series of photographs and phototherapy. Gullette argues that visual representations, especially those of series, act as narratives on ageing: ‘what these three ways of representing age visually have in common is that they are all narratives of aging. But the stories they offer are quite

²³Hazan, *Constructions and Deconstructions*, 3.

²⁴Hazan, *Constructions and Deconstructions*, 3.

²⁵“Agewise,” *The University of Chicago Press*, accessed 12 June, 2014.

<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo10385719.html>

²⁶“Agewise,” *The University of Chicago Press*, accessed 12 June, 2014.

<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo10385719.html>

²⁷Mary Morganroth Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting New Ageism in America* (London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 2011) 5.

different—in technique, in affect, in ethical and psychological effects.²⁸ In chapter eight, Gullette discusses literary representations of ageing, but unlike Blaikie, Hepworth and Hazan, she does not focus on novels and fiction, but instead turns to reflective writing in the form of autobiography. She believes that ‘age consciousness gets deepened by the reflectiveness of writing’²⁹ and argues for the value of first person accounts from experience because, as she highlights, the self has the best access to the past.³⁰ Interestingly, Gullette describes herself not as a gerontologist, but as a ‘writer and cultural critic who studies age issues – call me an age critic.’³¹ Gullette, in a study on ageing, creativity and gender, recognises the usefulness of fiction, arguing that ‘a critically engaged reading encourages readers to investigate the potential of other representations of ageing.’³² This aligns her more with the literary gerontologists discussed below, rather than with the social scientists above – Gullette, as writer and cultural critic, rather than gerontologist, is able to bridge the gap between social gerontologists and those literary critics currently exploring gerontology.

2.3 Literary representation – problems and possibilities

As outlined above, various social scientists, notably Blaikie, Hepworth, and Hazan, have examined issues surrounding the representation of older people in culture, particularly the problem of stereotyping. They have also commented on what they see the role of literature and literary representations of older people to be, whether to engage a reader and encourage empathy, illustrate experience or someone else’s findings, or as a resource. Literary gerontologists Barbara Waxman, Kathleen Woodward and Diana Wallace – who are either social scientists with training in literary history and criticism, or first and foremost literary critics with an interest in social gerontology – have interesting contributions to make regarding the role of literature in gerontology more broadly as well as on the issue at hand: the problem of stereotyped representations of older people in literature. The work of Lorna L Doan, who charts one particular stereotype – the spinster – through twentieth century novels, will also be discussed.

Stereotyped representations of older people exist in literature as much as in the film, television and photography discussed by Blaikie in *Ageing and Popular Culture*. Barbara Waxman, however, as previously mentioned, believes that while some texts may uphold and cement stereotypes, powerful texts are also able to change our attitudes towards ageing. For

²⁸Mary Morganroth Gullette, *Aged By Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press , 2004) 10.

²⁹Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 142.

³⁰Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 142.

³¹Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 5.

³²Mary Morganroth Gullette, “Creativity, Ageing and Gender: A Study of Their Intersections” in Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (eds.) *Ageing and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (The University of Virginia Press, 1993) 46.

her, the role of literature is not just to reflect and illustrate, but to challenge and transform. It does not simply define, but can redefine. Literature can be a tool with which we can tackle the problem of the perpetuation of stereotyped representations of older people: 'reading a powerful text can transform a reader's outlook [...] a positive attitude towards aging can influence how we age and how we define successful aging.'³³ Here, Waxman argues that not only can literature change a reader's attitude, the offering of a more positive view has the potential to improve quality of life. In reference to the work of elder nature writers specifically, Waxman argues that 'writing humanizes individual elders, complicates readers' notions of later life, and is evidence of the intellectual and spiritual contributions people can make to society, well beyond midlife. These authors [eg May Sarton, Doris Lessing] offer guidance to their peers as well as juniors.'³⁴ The idea that powerful texts should complicate readers' notions of later life is interesting, as surely it is the simple and uncomplicated which is the stereotype, and the complex representations of ageing and later life the ones that are perhaps most accurate, that demonstrate a neater 'fit' with lived experience, to return to Blaikie's concept. The offering of a more complex view also fits with how Hepworth defined ageing – if ageing is a complex set of interactions between the body, self and society, then literature that complicates the reader's notions is likely to be providing a truer representation of the ageing experience. That writers and their works can offer guidance to peers and younger generations also adds a further dimension to the value of literature and literary gerontology, one that pushes past the boundaries set out for it by social gerontologists such as Hepworth and Hazan. Waxman is also noted for coining the term "reifungsroman" to describe a novel that depicts the notion of fruitfully ripening towards death in *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature*.³⁵

Like Blaikie, who spoke of a lack of goodness of fit between images of ageing and actual lived realities, and Hazan who discusses what he sees as an irreconcilable tension between images of the old and their own will and desire, Kathleen Woodward agrees that 'the tension between discourses of age and experiences of ageing requires exploration.'³⁶ Woodward narrows her focus from the ageing experience more generally to the ageing experience of women. In the introduction to *Figuring Age*, Woodward references Virginia Woolf who, in *A Room of One's Own*, lamented the lack of stories about women's everyday lives. Woodward says that since the time in which Woolf was writing, we now have plenty of stories about

³³Waxman, "Nature, Spirituality and Later Life," 517.

³⁴Waxman, "Nature, Spirituality and Later Life," 523.

³⁵Barbara Frey Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (London: Greenwood Press, 1990) 15.

³⁶Woodward, *Figuring Age*, x.

younger women's lives, but that 'we still know precious little about the later years.'³⁷

Woodward believes that older women are invisible in our culture, and argues for the need of an arena of visibility for 'the virtually invisible subject of older women.'³⁸ She offers her book as one such 'arena.' It seems, however, that old women have not entirely been invisible, but their visibility has been restricted to an occasional cameo appearance as the stereotype, eg the witch, the interfering watchdog. Issues surrounding gender and ageing – specifically older women – will be explored in more detail further on in section 2.6.

Diana Wallace agrees with Hepworth that literature and other art forms allow us to imaginatively engage with experiences of ageing. She takes this further, arguing that they may also help us to recognise the subjectivity of those who are older, which fits with what Hazan noted regarding the need to view and represent older people as subjects rather than objects. Wallace agrees with Waxman and Hepworth regarding literature's ability to allow the reader access to an experience: 'voice and point of view can be manipulated in a literary text so that we see through the eyes of, for instance, the seventy-six-year-old first-person narrator of May Sarton's novel *As We Are Now* (1973) and identify with her description of being trapped in a "concentration camp for the old."³⁹ She also argues for why literary gerontology in particular is well developed: 'this capacity to evoke sympathetic response together with the sheer range of representations of ageing in literature... may be one reason why the field of literary gerontology is comparatively more developed than the study of ageing in other areas of the arts and humanities.'⁴⁰ She discusses a particular shift that occurred in the early 1970s that marked a turning point regarding representations of ageing in literature. This shift took the form of the emergence of a new type of fiction that 'self-consciously interrogated the processes of ageing.'⁴¹ These texts offered older people as complex and interesting protagonists. Prior to this, the 'literature of senescence' as it was also known, tended to focus on ageing in terms of a process of decay and degeneration, as a motif of death and mortality. Wallace also acknowledges the tension that exists between gerontology and literature, stating that fiction, while most definitely a valuable resource, is not 'evidence' and should not be treated as such by social gerontologists. She argues that 'the complex interface between gerontology and literature needs to be handled in an informed and sensitive way, then, but it has the potential to enrich both fields.'⁴²

³⁷ Woodward, *Figuring Age*, viii - x.

³⁸ Woodward, *Figuring Age*, viii - x.

³⁹ Wallace, "Literary Portrayals," 390.

⁴⁰ Wallace, "Literary Portrayals," 391.

⁴¹ Wallace, "Literary Portrayals," 393.

⁴² Wallace, "Literary Portrayals," 405.

Wallace states that ‘one of the most energetic motors behind literary gerontology has been feminist theory.’⁴³ This definitely seems to be the case, with the likes of Woodward focusing exclusively on older women and Doan, who will be discussed below, focusing on representations of unmarried women. Wallace attributes some of this to the second wave feminists who, as they have aged themselves, have turned to writing about age, notable examples being Germaine Greer and her book on the menopause entitled *The Change* (1991) and Betty Freidman’s *The Fountain of Age* (1993). Wallace argues that this goes some way to accounting for literary gerontology’s tendency to focus on women in particular, especially images, and to interrogate stereotypes such as the witch, hag and crone. Indeed, Wallace states that many have argued for the need for anocriticism (from the Latin ‘anus’ for old woman), criticism that links theories of gender and ageing to search for a female culture of ageing.⁴⁴

Lorna L Doan discusses the sheer extent of the problem of stereotyped representation of older people with specific focus on images of unmarried older women in fiction in *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel* (1991). Doan states that ‘the spinster is so enmeshed in cultural stereotyping that it is difficult to extricate her from negative connotation.’⁴⁵ In the foreword to the collection, Nina Auerbach directly addresses the problem of stereotype in reference to this group of women: ‘old maids will continue to be dynamic presences in our literature and our culture, but there has never been one essential old maid, and there never will be.’⁴⁶ Auerbach is arguing for the acknowledgement of subjectivity and plurality. Doan demonstrates in her introduction to the collection that the term (or label) ‘spinster’, for example, is ‘as ambiguous as it is ambivalent.’⁴⁷ She makes her point by asking if all women without men – lesbians, widows, divorcees, nuns – should be considered spinsters. These women are obviously likely to have very different life experiences, and the stereotype or label may fit some better than others, if it fits any at all. Doan describes her aim in the book to chart the portrayal of these women throughout the twentieth century ‘from old maid to excellent woman [referencing author, Barbara Pym, here], from excellent woman to a new, radical spinster.’⁴⁸ These shifts in perception match the shift acknowledged by Wallace that occurred in the 1970s, when there

⁴³Wallace, “Literary Portrayals” 400.

⁴⁴Wallace, “Literary Portrayals,” 406.

⁴⁵Lorna L Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 1.

⁴⁶Nina Auerbach, ‘Foreword’ in Lorna L Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991) xii.

⁴⁷Lorna L Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth Century Novel* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 1.

⁴⁸Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, 2.

was a resurgence of novels featuring older people, including lone older women, as interesting protagonists (there had, of course, been notable examples of popular texts featuring lone older female protagonists prior to these, such as Christie's Miss Marple who first appeared in 1926 and remains popular today, but the seventies saw a noticeable increase and renewed interest). Doan makes clear her belief that, rather than stigmatising the spinster for her threat to patriarchy, we should celebrate the fact that rather than committing herself to partnership, she commits herself to independence and autonomy. Doan makes a big deal of celebrating these women who have chosen *not* to define themselves in relation to a male significant other, but it seems important here to note that a lot of women are not spinsters out of choice, a point that is made rather well by Virginia Nicholson in her book *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War* (2008).

Doan charts the development of the literary stereotype of the spinster, tracing its emergence, or, rather, 'creation' to eighteenth century British novelists, 'a model that later British writers enhance and develop.'⁴⁹ She shows that, upon reaching the twentieth century, the improved social position of women should have resulted in more positive images of the single woman, 'but, paradoxically, the old stereotype persists.'⁵⁰ She believes that this is because 'the literary spinster – a figure who 'cannot be accommodated by the ideology of the traditional romance plot – breaks out of the confines of conventional narrative strategies and demands that both the writer and reader invent new, alternative literary forms.'⁵¹ This supports Hepworth, who, in *Stories of Ageing*, states that 'old age had been described as the ultimate challenge for the novelist,'⁵² as well as Gullette, who argued for the development of new ways of telling later life stories. Writers have been issued with a challenge, and great responsibility, to devise new techniques with which to effectively represent older people, and more specifically, older women, and it seems as if, finally, many are doing so, one example being Margaret Atwood, discussed below. Atwood is one of a few key contemporary women writers identified by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis in her collection *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Women Writers*. According to Perrakis, the work 'suggests that Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and other contemporary women writers illuminate a new kind of midlife and older

⁴⁹Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, 7.

⁵⁰Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, 8.

⁵¹Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, 10.

⁵²Hepworth, *Stories*, 3.

woman's adventure, one that is spiritual in nature, enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice.¹⁵³

In Atwood's complex novel *The Blind Assassin*, eighty-two year old Iris is writing her memoir in a race against time due to a heart condition that 'nothing short of a whole new unit'⁵⁴ will fix. The novel is a fictive autobiography, the fictional protagonist imparting her tale to us in the form of a memoir. This novel explores the themes of ageing, memory and reliability and contains many depictions of old age, musings on the function of memory and the processes of remembering and writing linked through various metaphors, images and descriptions. According to Alex Clark in review of *The Blind Assassin* in *The Guardian*: 'Margaret Atwood again demonstrates that she has mastered the art of creating dense, complex fictions from carefully layered narratives, making use of an array of literary devices – flashbacks, multiple time schemes, ambiguous, indeterminate plots.' He continues later on: 'yet at times there are simply too many threads for Atwood to weave into the carpet, as she muses on themes of authorship and confession, the simultaneous empowerment and impotence of secret storytelling, and the hopeless position of women.'⁵⁵ This review, as well as others, state that in relation to the complex 'novel within a novel' narrative, she does not quite pull it off or, if she does, it is at the expense of the characters, of making the reader care. As Clark says, 'it falls short of making the emotional impact that its suggestive and slippery plot at times promises.' He later continues, 'What we have, at the end, is a mystery story whose chief character is absent.'⁵⁶ Apparently the judges of the Booker Prize disagreed, as it won in 2000. It could be argued, however, that while this novel may be complicated, this does not detract in any way from the characters or the reader's ability to engage with the narrator. It is complex, and the reader has to work to piece the story together, but it seems as if Atwood, through experimenting with plot and narrative, has managed to create a space for Doan's spinster who could not be contained within the bounds of a traditional plot, and her many layers and threads also allowed her to portray the complexities and subjectivities of old age and the ageing process. The 'absent' character to whom Clark was referring is Iris's dead sister, illustrating that despite Atwood's efforts in producing what could be viewed as a deep, thorough and considered novel exploring the many facets of growing older, some readers are still having difficulty acknowledging lone older women as protagonists. Evidently, there is still much work to be done, but novels such as this one show that writers are taking up the challenge and making bold steps in the right direction. Reviewers of *The Blind Assassin*

⁵³Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Women Writers*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007) 1.

⁵⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London: Virago, 2000) 579.

⁵⁵Alex Clark, 'Vanishing Act: Atwood's Ambiguous Magic in *The Blind Assassin*', *The Guardian*, 30 Sept 2000.

⁵⁶Clark, 'Vanishing Act', *The Guardian*.

often agree on Atwood's wonderful evocations of childhood but neglect to mention her depictions of old age with the perfect combination of humour and sadness, her ability to capture and to make the reader feel what it is like to be an eighty-two-year-old widow engulfed in memory and regret.

The novel spans most of a century, and references are continually made to personal history, the history of the nation and world history through its chronicling of events, from those as large-scale as the world wars, to things as small as picnics and fashion trends. Iris muses on the growing relevance of history in later life, where she herself has become part of it: 'I am after all a local fixture, like a brick-strewn vacant lot where some important building used to stand.'⁵⁷ She again links the nature of history to her present state: 'my bones have been aching again...they ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain.'⁵⁸ Significant historical events tend to mirror events in Iris's personal history too, though. As is the case with history, it is only through hindsight that all becomes clear, hence the advantage of Iris's position as an older narrator, as stated by Coral Ann Howells: 'as a very old person, Iris lives in a permanent condition of double vision, where the boundaries between the present and the past are frequently blurred.'⁵⁹

This novel fits with what Hepworth calls 'stories of ageing': 'full-length novels which are about ageing as experienced by a central character [...including] stories where ageing may not be the main interest of the writer but which include significant references to aspects of the ageing process or to older people.'⁶⁰ *The Blind Assassin* also falls into the category of what Gullette calls 'Age Autobiography': 'like any autobiography, Age Autobiography starts with the Oldest Self's strong present feelings about its past selves.'⁶¹ *The Blind Assassin* may not be an autobiography *per se*, but it *is* an autobiographical discourse. As previously mentioned, Hepworth in *Stories of Ageing* says that old age is the ultimate challenge for the novelist. He elaborates, arguing that this is because 'it is about people who are living through the final period of their lives; a time when those who live long enough have to come to terms with changes in their bodies and the attitudes of society to growing older.' He continues: 'stories of ageing are faced with the problem of describing a character and his or her relationships with other people when she or he has apparently little distance left to travel in

⁵⁷ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 54.

⁵⁸ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 70.

⁵⁹ Coral Ann Howells, Margaret Atwood (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 157.

⁶⁰ Hepworth, *Stories*, 1.

⁶¹ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 150.

the “journey of life.”⁶² This could be why many novels featuring an older narrator or protagonist tend to spend only a little time in the narrative present with the ageing protagonist or narrator and instead rely heavily on flashbacks, memories and reminiscence of childhood and youth. This is often the case in *The Blind Assassin*, yet as the novel is lengthy, there is still plenty of time spent with eighty-two year old Iris in her present. Hepworth believes that the space opened up by novelists who represent ageing ‘enhances the reader’s appreciation of the subjective experiences of someone who is consciously aware of the process of growing older’⁶³ as, indeed, is Iris. This links to what Laura Marcus describes in *Auto/biographical Discourses* as the impossibility of self-presence – the radical split between the self that writes (ageing, old, dying) and the self that is written (young, beautiful) and ‘the crucial role of language in the construction of the subject.’⁶⁴ Atwood structures the novel in such a way that this split between past and present selves is apparent and contrasting. An image of Iris in the present, tiny, wrinkled, hunched and poor will be laid next to a snapshot of Iris in her twenties, beautiful, rich and glamorous. This reinforces Marcus’ view that in autobiography subject-object fusion is the ideal, but not the reality.

Despite all of this, relatively little attention has been paid to the text in terms of its depictions of ageing, although a few critics who read the text from a feminist point of view, such as Madeleine Davies in her article “Margaret Atwood’s female bodies,” devote a few paragraphs to the novel’s depictions of the ageing female body, yet in the case of Davies, this entails a reading of *The Blind Assassin* and its female bodies according to Cixous’ “l’écriture feminine,” and others mostly focus on the depiction of the female body in relation to domestic abuse and wider power-struggles within a patriarchal society.

The functions of representations of ageing in this novel are varied, from the depictions offered by Atwood of the ageing female body, the psychology of growing old and attitudes to mortality, to the many stereotypes and prejudices, the discrimination and ageism (not always consciously so) of society as a whole towards older people, especially single women. Gerontologists divide the ageing process into various differing stages and categories, which can provide a helpful framework for examining representations of ageing in literature. Laslett divides the ageing process into four stages, the latter two of relevance here – the third being that of active leisure between retirement and the onset of frailty, and the fourth stage that of

⁶²Hepworth, *Stories*, 3.

⁶³Hepworth, *Stories*, 5.

⁶⁴Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 183.

dependence, decrepitude and death (the stage Iris is at).⁶⁵ Sara Arber and Jay Ginn in *Connecting Gender and Ageing* divide ageing up into a number of facets: chronological age, physiological age and social age. Mike Hepworth in *Stories of Ageing* splits ageing into biological, psychological and social – the body, self and society. Hepworth’s categorisation and approach to ageing is especially useful in relation to *The Blind Assassin* as Atwood explores these interactions through Iris’ present tense narration of her everyday life. The first indication of the age of the narrator that the reader encounters is on page forty-three, and this fits Hepworth’s ‘body’ category: ‘I stepped into the shower, holding on to the grip bar Myra’s bullied me in to, careful not to drop the soap: I am apprehensive of slipping’ and: ‘getting my clothes on helped. I am not at my best without scaffolding (yet what has become of my real clothes? Surely these shapeless pastels and orthopaedic shoes belong to someone else?’⁶⁶ The grip bar, the pastel clothes and orthopaedic shoes make it clear that she is old and not too happy about the fact – she sees this version of herself as not her ‘real’ self. This notion recurs throughout the text: ‘when I look in the mirror I see an old woman; or not old, because nobody is allowed to be old any more. *Older* then...sometimes I see instead the young girl’s face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face.’⁶⁷ Here, as Hepworth stated, the body and the self interact and often juxtapose – the psychological self and the body are not a unified whole – Iris’s identity is fragmented, her past self and present self contradict. This identity crisis caused by old age matches Madeleine Davies’ account of female bodies in Atwood’s work in general, which always show signs of unease: ‘female bodies become battle fields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh.’⁶⁸ What are these worries, and what are these power structures? Iris expresses concern at having to leave the house, as, due to a heart condition, the doctor has prescribed gentle walks, but after worrying about the inevitable (death) – ‘it seems I will not after all keep on living forever, merely getting smaller and greyer’⁶⁹ – she worries about going out: ‘it isn’t the idea of the walking that bothers me, it’s the going out: I feel too much on show. Do I imagine it, the staring, the whispering?’⁷⁰ This reveals how Iris believes she is viewed by society – as a spectacle, the object of gossip, and fits with Hepworth’s third ageing facet – society. At another point in the text, she also mentions what she thinks society expects of her, and how she is viewed by the younger generation: ‘I knew enough to know that the only thing

⁶⁵ Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of The Third Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991) x.

⁶⁶ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 43-44.

⁶⁷ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 53.

⁶⁸ Madeleine Davies, ‘Margaret Atwood’s Female Bodies’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Coral Ann Howells ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 58.

⁶⁹ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 52.

⁷⁰ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 53.

expected of me was that I not disgrace myself...to them I must have seemed quaint, but I suppose it's everyone's fate to be reduced to quaintness by those younger than themselves.⁷¹ There are other stereotypes that persist and have a damaging effect on those who are burdened with their weight: '[of Halloween] as usual I will turn out the lights and pretend not to be home. It's not dislike of them as such, but self-defence – should any of the wee ones disappear, I don't want to be accused of having lured them in and eaten them.'⁷² This is a reference to the classic fairy-tale 'Hansel and Gretel,' in which a cannibalistic witch lures two children into her house with the intention of eating them. It is hard to tell here, though, if Iris is joking or not, which in itself is quite sad. She also speaks of the way she is treated by those younger than herself: 'they're in the habit of speaking of me in the third person, as if I'm a child or pet';⁷³ and: 'more and more I feel like a letter – deposited here, collected there. But a letter addressed to no one.'⁷⁴ She has no autonomy any more, is subjected to the whims of others, dependent upon them, and is alone.

Iris describes her body using very negative, yet imaginative imagery – she describes her arm as 'a brittle radius covered slackly in porridge and string'⁷⁵ and says of her face: 'if I could see my face in the mirror, – if I could only get close enough, or far enough away – it would be crisscrossed with tiny lines, in between the main wrinkles.'⁷⁶ There are many such descriptions in the text, some revealing a playfulness, a sarcastic acceptance, others a disappointment or, worse, frustration: 'it's an affront, all that. Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities – they aren't ours, we never wanted or claimed them. Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected.'⁷⁷ This displays Hepworth's proposed interaction between bodily ageing and psychological ageing, and the problems that arise, including issues of identity resulting from a disparity between mind and body that has to be negotiated, if not reconciled. This is supported by Perrakis who comments that 'these journeys of the spirit do not leave behind the body; indeed, they are often posited on the variations in the body as it ages and decays, forcing the protagonists to confront the slippage between what they can imagine of, and for, themselves and their painful reality.'⁷⁸ Another way ageing is represented in this text is through Iris's thoughts and musings upon her own mortality, on impending death, which she seems to have accepted with little trouble, as long

⁷¹Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 47.

⁷²Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 246.

⁷³Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 45.

⁷⁴Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 206.

⁷⁵Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 45.

⁷⁶Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 271.

⁷⁷Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 381.

⁷⁸Perrakis, *Adventures of the Spirit*, 1.

as she has time to finish her memoir: 'I hasten on, making my way crabwise across the paper. It's a slow race now, between me and my heart, but I intend to get there first. Where is there? The end or *The End*. One or the other. Both are destinations, of a sort.'⁷⁹ And later: 'keep my leaky heart afloat for just a few more days, until I set things in order.'⁸⁰ What 'things,' exactly? The truth, or Iris's version of it. These motivations, and the types of writing specifically linked with ageing, will be explored in more detail below, including reminiscence, life story narratives, autobiography and memoir.

2.4 Writing in old age: motive, motivation and process

As we have seen, there are various types of writing specifically linked to ageing that have been identified, from Gullette's 'Age Autobiography' and Hepworth's 'stories of ageing' to Waxman's 'reifungsroman'. *The Blind Assassin*, as a fictional autobiography, can be classed as both a story of ageing and an age autobiography. This mode of writing has enjoyed recent popularity, with many authors of fiction, both literary and popular, borrowing from autobiography in order to construct interesting, layered texts that often begin and end with a frame in which an older narrator is deciding to write or record their life story, or memoir. They tend to feature subsequent chapters that dip in and out of the narrator's earlier life, not necessarily chronologically, often returning to the 'present' to address issues such as motive, memory, regret, and mortality, as well as the writing process itself. They also feature 'the oldest self's strong present feelings about its past selves',⁸¹ to return to Gullette. As Laura Marcus summarises in *Auto/biographical Discourses*, recent concerns in autobiographical criticism include 'the nature and expression of subjectivity; the generic specificity of autobiography; the truth-status and referentiality of autobiography in relation to the fact-fiction dichotomy and the status of fictional entities.'⁸² She later discusses the fact-fiction issue in autobiography, arguing that: 'autobiography lies between "literature" and "history" or, perhaps, philosophy, and between fiction and non-fiction; it becomes an acute expression of the already contested distinction between fact and fiction.'⁸³ Writers of fictive autobiography extrapolate and interrogate these concerns through the very act of creating obviously fictional autobiographies. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, although writing around half a century earlier, expressed the opinion that all autobiographies are fictional anyway: 'most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only

⁷⁹Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 272.

⁸⁰Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 607.

⁸¹Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 150.

⁸²Marcus, *Discourses*, 179.

⁸³Marcus, *Discourses*, 229.

those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern...that mixture produces the fictional autobiography.¹⁸⁴ Barbara Hernstein Smith, as discussed by Marcus, also mentions the similarities between the novel and life writing: 'the writer of fiction is pretending to be writing a biography, while actually fabricating one.'¹⁸⁵ Marcus then offers some context: 'in the last decade or so, generic and disciplinary borders and boundaries have started to break down. The most interesting auto/biographical theory and practice are being written across traditional conceptual and disciplinary divides.'¹⁸⁶ Fictive autobiographies such as *The Blind Assassin* are examples of the current practice bridging these divides. Marcus takes this further, stating that she believes it is feminist autobiography in particular that is an exemplar of the current boundary dissolution in autobiographical practice: 'women autobiographers subvert the 'autobiographical pact' [the reader of an autobiography's implicit belief that the author, narrator and protagonist are one and the same, as formulated by Philippe Lejeune] by introducing problematic or ambiguous signals which trouble rather than confirm the distinction between autobiography and fiction.'¹⁸⁷ It seems that while this sub-genre does appear to be dominated by women, there are some male authors doing similar things, such as Ian McEwan and Sebastian Barry, who will be discussed briefly below. Marcus also acknowledges the aspect of autobiography's history that involves the incorporation of 'non-fictional literatures' (conversion narratives, memoirs, letters etc.) into the novel form.¹⁸⁸ Most histories of the novel discuss an obvious starting link between autobiography and the novel in the 1800s, such as Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), with reference to Defoe, Fielding and Richardson, and the same is true of biography. Richard Holmes in his article "Biography: Inventing the Truth" (1995) discusses the birth of biography using a colourful metaphor: 'Fiction married Fact...Invention formed a love match with Truth.'¹⁸⁹ This is not a new trend, but is enjoying a recent boom – Atwood is one of many. Other authors and works that take the form of fictional autobiographies that specifically feature an older, 'present day' narrator looking back on their life include *Wise Children* (1991) by Angela Carter, *The House at Riverton* (2006) by Kate Morton, and *Chalcot Crescent* (2010) by Fay Weldon. These texts, whilst fictional, explore the act of reminiscence in order to construct life story narratives and to probe related issues, such as memory, reliability and the writing process. *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan and *The Secret Scripture* (2008) by Sebastian Barry also feature older women writing about their

¹⁸⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1990) 307.

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Hernstein cited in Marcus, *Discourses*, 240.

¹⁸⁶ Marcus, *Discourses*, 273.

¹⁸⁷ Marcus, *Discourses*, 280.

¹⁸⁸ Marcus, *Discourses*, 230.

¹⁸⁹ Richard Holmes, "Biography: Inventing the Truth" in *The Art of Literary Biography*, John Bachelor, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 15.

lives, but the narrative structures differ from the others mentioned above. I will discuss these briefly in turn.

In *Wise Children* the seventy-five year old narrator, Dora Chance, is writing her 'memoirs,' and the text alternates between her current situation and her past. This is established early on in the novel when Dora writes: 'I am at present working on my memoirs and researching family history – see the word processor, the filing cabinet, the card indexes...all the dirt on everybody.'⁹⁰ Her unreliability as a narrator is something that is also made apparent from the start, and the novel is littered with constant reminders. "Dirt" implies gossip and rumour, rather than fact, and Dora often refers to her own 'deficiencies' as a narrator and their probable cause, such as: 'There I go Again! Can't keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative.'⁹¹ It is also clear that what we are reading is a draft, Dora's notes, not the finished product. Dora writes 'sometimes I think, if I look hard enough, I can see back into the past.'⁹² Reminiscence is, once again, central. In *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line*, Sarah Gamble states that 'in a text which specialises in dismantling boundaries, the line that divides the past from the present is very firmly established as one that cannot be crossed, except in reminiscence.'⁹³ Later, Dora's writing process and its results are discussed: 'she [Dora] struggles to place events in their proper order, or merely even to recall them accurately. All of this is absorbed within her narrative, with the result that the reader is drawn not only to contemplate the means by which the text is being formulated, but also, crucially, to doubt the entire process.'⁹⁴ As with Iris, Dora describes her own ageing body, as well as her twin sister's, and the narrative structure of a present day frame interspersed with forays into the past allows the reader to directly compare present Dora with many of her younger selves. Like with Iris, the descriptions she offers of her ageing body are humorous and, at times, sad. She describes herself and her sister as 'two batty old hags',⁹⁵ and laughs at their attempts to make themselves look as glamorous as they once did: 'I spotted us both in the big gilt mirror at the top – two funny old girls, paint an inch thick, clothes sixty years too young, starts on their stockings and little wee skirts skimming their buttocks. Parodies...we had to laugh at the spectacle we'd made of ourselves.'⁹⁶ What is perhaps most interesting about *Wise Children* is Carter's manipulation of point of view in order to recant the reader's perspective on ageing women.

⁹⁰Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (London: Vintage, 1992) 3.

⁹¹Carter, *Wise Children*, 158.

⁹²Carter, *Wise Children*, 5.

⁹³Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 182.

⁹⁴Gamble, *Angela Carter*, 171.

⁹⁵Carter, *Wise Children*, 5.

⁹⁶Carter, *Wise Children*, 197 - 198.

The House at Riverton is a novel narrated by Grace, a ninety-nine-year-old woman who lives in a care-home. Like Iris and Dora, Grace makes many references to her present appearance and how it differs from her younger self – she mentions her hair, always pale but ‘now flossy white and very, very long. It is fine too, finer it seems with each passing day. It is my one vanity – Lord knows I haven’t much else to be vain about. Not anymore,’⁹⁷ and her hands which were ‘busy in the past’ but now ‘sat grey, flaccid and inert.’⁹⁸ She also mentions the way she is treated by various members of society – the help in the care-home, her daughter, the young woman making the film about events from Grace’s past. She mentions one member of care-home staff that she likes because ‘[Sylvia]’s one of the few people able to look beyond the lines on my face to see the twenty-year-old who lives inside.’⁹⁹ She then references another, who ‘bundled me into the shower, gripping my arm to steady me, mulberry fingernails burrowing...with Helen’s assistance I was dried and dressed, thoroughly processed and seated in the morning room by seven-thirty.’¹⁰⁰ When her daughter Ruth checks her watch and asks Grace if she needs the loo, Grace wonders at the role reversal.

During the novel Grace decides to tell her story, but, unlike Iris, Dora and Briony (discussed below), she does not write or type, but speaks aloud and records her voice onto tape, which she posts to her elusive grandson. She feels the need to record her story after being approached by a woman wanting to make a *Downton Abbey*-esque film about the goings-on in a big house. They want to raid Grace’s memory for details and ‘titbits’ to make their show more authentic:

I prised the letter from its envelope, hands shaking the way they do...it was from a young woman making a film about the past. She wanted me to look at her sets, to remember things and places from long ago. As if I hadn’t spent a lifetime pretending to forget.¹⁰¹

The story Grace tells is a confession of sorts, a telling of secrets, both her own and others’: ‘I find myself in time’s cold waiting room, shivering as ancient ghosts and echoing voices recede. That is why I have decided to make him a tape. Maybe more than one. I am going to tell him a secret, an old secret, long kept.’¹⁰² Grace talks about memory and the process of remembering at great length, discussing moth-holes and gaps in history, the ghosts that visit her, how the past seems more ‘real’ than the present. Like Atwood in *The Blind Assassin*, Morton uses many metaphors and images to discuss the process of remembering, of the

⁹⁷Kate Morton, *The House at Riverton* (London: Pan Books, 2007) 8.

⁹⁸Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 11.

⁹⁹Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 5.

¹⁰⁰Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 92.

¹⁰¹Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 5.

¹⁰²Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 102.

difficulty of recollecting certain things, the inability to forget others: ‘memories, long consigned to the dark reaches of my mind, began to sneak through cracks. Images were tossed up high and dry, picture-perfect, as if a lifetime hadn’t passed between. And, after the first tentative drops, the deluge. Whole conversations, word for word, nuance for nuance.’¹⁰³ Once she has told the secret, she can die: ‘Finally. After ninety-nine years my end has come for me. The final thread that tethered me had released and the north wind blows me away. I am fading at last to nothing.’¹⁰⁴ Morton’s portrayal of ‘ageing towards death’ through the protagonist Grace is particularly touching and well-handled. The sharing of her secrets with the reader, of her past, her history, creates a bond and allows the reader to better understand the older Grace and how she feels in her present situation.

Chalcot Crescent, first published in 2010 but set in 2013, is narrated by Weldon’s eightyish year-old might-have-been younger sister Frances who is writing her memoirs set against a backdrop of a speculative, dystopian near-future Britain. Amanda Craig describes the novel and its narrator in a review in *The Independent*: ‘a suspicious and shrewd old woman, Frances interweaves her memories over five decades with speculative chapters and mini-scripts about the way her children live, and many quips concerning biology, age, fate and the nature of fiction.’¹⁰⁵ Weldon created an autobiography for the sister she almost had, so this novel, too, is a fictive autobiography. It is autobiographical in another sense, too, in that it draws heavily on events and characters from Weldon’s own life: ‘Two years after I was born, my mother had a miscarriage. Had she not, I would have grown up with a younger sister. This is the sister’s story, set in an alternative universe that closely mirrors our own.’¹⁰⁶ While many dystopian novels feature young, active protagonists rebelling against his/her oppressor/s, *Chalcot’s* narrator and protagonist is an octogenarian who can barely negotiate her way up the stairs. I was able to briefly interview Weldon, and when asked about her choice of protagonist for such a novel, a lone older woman, Fay replied, commenting on the pros and cons of her choice of protagonist:

It is true marketing departments hate one to write about older women and older women do prefer to read about younger protagonists with whom they understandably like to identify – who wants to be old when they could be so young? So I prudently put in a young man on the stair with Frances when the book opens, and spend quite a time with her when she’s young. On the other hand the longer you’ve been around the more you know and one might as well hand one’s knowledge on.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Morton, *The House at Riverton*, 569.

¹⁰⁵ Amanda Craig, *The Independent*, 18 September 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Fay Weldon, foreword to *Chalcot Crescent* (London: Quercus, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ Fay Weldon, email message to author (8 June, 2011).

From the first page the reader is made aware of Frances's age and her single status when she tells us that life has not worked out as it is meant to, that by a certain age one is meant to have a husband and a home, and she does not. She directly refers to herself as 'old' on page seven: 'when people complain that I am cynical I say, but I am not cynical, I am just old, I know what is going to happen next.'¹⁰⁸ Weldon, like Atwood, Carter and Morton, offers depictions of old age both in terms of physicality and psychology as well as showing how older women are viewed and treated by society. In a manner reminiscent of Carter, Weldon uses dark humour often in her portrayals, such as by referring to herself as an "LOL" – Little Old Lady. Like Iris, Frances also expresses frustration at her ageing body, directed at Mother Nature, who 'discards us after we are of childbearing age and withers us up, in spite of what we do to stop her with pills and potions, and makes our knees ache and chill get into our bones, and gave us the ability to bear witness to our winding down.'¹⁰⁹ Her own daughter calls her Gran instead of Mum, and Frances feels as if the young 'cannot see why the old should exist at all.'¹¹⁰

On page nine she tells us that she is a writer of fiction, perhaps the first clue that she may be unreliable. Throughout the novel Frances draws attention to herself as an unreliable narrator and this is due to a number of different factors: her age, resulting in a 'faulty' memory and paranoia; the fact that she is a fiction writer who frequently admits to making things up, to speculating and indulging in rumour; the harbouring of many secrets and the telling of lies, as well as the many duplicitous actions of her past; and her general contrary nature. Frances admits that her motive for writing 'this novel, diary, or memoir or whatever you want to call it'¹¹¹ is not simply to document her life, or to create a memorial, but revenge: 'perhaps it is my revenge upon my family, thus to let loose my fantasies in fictional form.'¹¹² Here she is justifying or perhaps excusing her intentional forays away from 'truth' and into pure speculation, yet at other times seems unaware of the difference, as the boundaries often blur. She also admits that at times she can no longer recall what is real and what she, herself, has invented. Weldon presents a surprising and unlikely heroine for her speculative narrative – an extremely unreliable, mischievous yet likeable octogenarian – challenging the reader's expectations, using Frances' unique point of view and approach to life story-telling to encourage the reader to reimagine ageing in a similar manner to Carter discussed above.

¹⁰⁸Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, 7.

¹⁰⁹Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, 61.

¹¹⁰Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, 111.

¹¹¹Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, 17.

¹¹²Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, 112.

In McEwan's *Atonement*, it is only revealed in the final section of the text, a postscript of sorts, that the previous three sections are a version of past events written by one of the characters – a 77-year-old novelist Briony Tallis writing about herself and her family – a semi-fictional memoir. James Wood in his review of the novel entitled “A Trick of Truth” published in 2002 describes the revelation as a ‘devastating twist’ where ‘a piece of information changes our sense of everything we have just read...we learn that Briony, now a distinguished old novelist, wrote the three sections [...] that we have just read. Moreover, Robbie and Cecilia were never together, as the third section suggested.’¹¹³ This reveals that Briony is an unreliable narrator, and makes us question other aspects of the novel, too, which, as Peter Childs shows, ‘has been reworked in the light of [a] magazine editor’s comments.’¹¹⁴

Briony’s actions in childhood had terrible consequences that impacted on the lives of her family, notably her sister, and this final ‘rewrite,’ one of many, is Briony’s attempt to atone for her crimes and to give the lovers (Briony’s sister Cecilia and her partner Robbie) the happy ending she denied them in real life. ‘There was our crime,’ Briony writes, ‘Lola’s, Marshall’s, mine – and from the second version onwards I set out to describe it. I put it all there as a matter of historical record.’¹¹⁵ She describes her account of the crime as a ‘forensic memoir’ which makes it clear that she views this section of the story to be true. The second section, with Robbie in the war, needed research and advice from experts at the Imperial War Museum, and Briony herself admits that the third section is made up:

There was a crime. But there were also the lovers. Lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long [...] It is only in this last version that my lovers end well [...] I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of Septicaemia at Bry Dunes on 1 June 1940.¹¹⁶

Briony wants to make herself feel better before she succumbs to the vascular dementia she has been diagnosed with. Writing the events over and over have been a form of atonement, of penance, but she does not expect true atonement or forgiveness, as ‘it was always an impossible task.’¹¹⁷ Instead, the best she can hope for is the ‘fading into unknowing’¹¹⁸ that will come with the advancement of her illness.

¹¹³James Wood, “A Trick of Truth” in *The Fiction of Ian McEwan: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism*, ed. Peter Childs (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 140.

¹¹⁴Childs, *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*, 131.

¹¹⁵Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002) 369-370.

¹¹⁶McEwan, *Atonement*, 370.

¹¹⁷McEwan, *Atonement*, 371.

¹¹⁸McEwan, *Atonement*, 355.

Again, as in *The Blind Assassin* and *Wise Children*, the author was drawing attention to the process of construction of autobiographical texts, exploring issues pertaining to reliability, memory and motive and the veil between fact and fiction. In an interview with Jonathan Noakes in 2001, McEwan discussed his intentions when writing *Atonement*, stating that ‘part of the intention of *Atonement* was to look at storytelling itself. And to examine the relationship between what is imagined and what is true.’¹¹⁹ He discusses the danger of an imagination that ‘can’t quite see the boundaries of what is real and what is unreal,’ and says that he wished to “play” with the notion of storytelling as a form of self-justification, of how much courage is involved in telling the truth to oneself.¹²⁰ It is perhaps through Briony that McEwan best sums up the themes he was exploring in the novel, when Briony says ‘no one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel.’¹²¹ I have a feeling that she is not quite correct, though. As a novelist, as the owner of a vivid imagination, she could not resist giving in to the urge to provide a happy ending, even in a work that began as a ‘forensic memoir.’

In *The Secret Scripture*, Roseanne McNulty, approaching a hundred, is keeping a journal, which she calls ‘Roseanne’s Testimony of Herself.’¹²² The choice of the word testimony, rather than autobiography, memoir or even confession is interesting and telling, and gives the reader an idea of motive, of why she is telling her story. Her psychiatrist from the mental hospital where she resides – Dr Grene – is also keeping a diary, this time a ‘Commonplace Book’¹²³ in which he reflects on Roseanne. The reader is offered two alternating accounts of Roseanne, as we, along with Dr Grene, try to work out why she was committed in the first place, and if she was ‘sectioned for social rather than medical reasons,’¹²⁴ as was sadly often the case at the time (1957). As in the other texts discussed above, descriptions of Roseanne in the present are offered before she drifts back into her past:

I am an old, old woman now, I may be as much as a hundred, though I do not know, and no one knows. I am only a thing left over, a remnant woman, and I do not even look like a human being no more, but a scraggy stretch of skin and bone.¹²⁵

Ideas of truth, accuracy and reliability are foregrounded in the novel. Roseanne claims to strive for clarity, ‘accuracy’ and ‘rightness’¹²⁶ in her account of events, but her inability to

¹¹⁹Ian McEwan cited in Jonathan Noakes, “An Interview with Ian McEwan,” in *Conversations with Ian McEwan* ed. Ryan Roberts. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 85.

¹²⁰Ian McEwan cited in Jonathan Noakes, “An Interview with Ian McEwan,” 85.

¹²¹McEwan, *Atonement*, 371

¹²²Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London; Faber and Faber, 2008) 3.

¹²³Barry, *Secret Scripture*, 15.

¹²⁴Barry, *Secret Scripture*, 17.

¹²⁵Barry, *Secret Scripture*, 4.

¹²⁶Barry, *Secret Scripture*, 32.

remember things, such as her age, and her lies (and omissions) to Dr Grene about what she does remember, cause the reader to doubt her. We cannot entirely trust Dr Grene either, not his “professional” opinion of Roseanne as a psychiatrist, as in his book he often makes claims such as ‘it would be a very good thing if occasionally I thought I knew what I was doing.’¹²⁷

Before taking a closer look at reminiscence and the life story, it is worth taking a moment to further consider motives, as they can often serve to illuminate the text in new and interesting ways, especially in relation to those writing towards the end of life. The novels discussed above document the writing process, the act of reminiscence, the function of memory, and they also focus on motive – why people want to or even feel compelled to write in the first place, especially older people, as well as exploring some of the issues around choosing to do so. In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), Atwood explores the role of the writer, considers metaphors used by writers to explain their activities, and muses on the notion of writing as a gift. In the introduction to the book, she sets out her agenda, asking ‘what is this *writing* anyway, as a human activity or as a vocation, or as a profession, or as a back job, or perhaps even as an art, and why do so many people feel compelled to do it?’¹²⁸ She takes the three most common questions posed to writers – Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from? – as a starting point for exploring the purpose and, initially, the motive behind writing.¹²⁹ Atwood then explains the methodology behind the list of responses to ‘motive’ – the ‘why’ question – that follows: all answers are real, directly from the mouths/pens/keyboards of writers themselves, or from fictional writers ‘all written of course by writers.’¹³⁰ The list includes many reasons, the most telling and relevant here, being: ‘to set down the past before it is all forgotten,’ ‘to thumb my nose at death,’ ‘to show the bastards,’ ‘to justify my own view of myself and my life,’ ‘because I had books instead of children,’ ‘to make a name that would survive death,’ ‘to speak for the dead,’ and ‘to record the times through which I have lived.’¹³¹ Revenge and memorial are two motives that stand out here, the burning desire to get your own back, and the fear of forgetting or of being forgotten, and these are explored in some of the fictive autobiographies mentioned above, notably in *The Blind Assassin* and *Chalcot Crescent*. Life writing subgenres often include ‘confessions’ and ‘testimonies’, which also hint at unique, strong motives – to make yourself feel better, by ‘purging’ and confessing, as in *The House at Riverton*, often despite the ethics

¹²⁷ Barry, *Secret Scripture*, 45.

¹²⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2005) xvii.

¹²⁹ Atwood, *Negotiating*, xix.

¹³⁰ Atwood, *Negotiating*, xix.

¹³¹ Atwood, *Negotiating*, xix - xxi.

or whether or not the person deserves to feel better, such as McEwan's *Atonement*, and the idea of a wronged party telling their side of the story, such as *The Blind Assassin* and *The Secret Scripture*.

In the novels discussed above, the writers, after making the initial decision to write, find that the process fluctuates between something that happens automatically, that they feel compelled to do, and something that is a struggle, a difficulty, a journey during which one gets lost, detours, and retraces steps before getting back on track. This fits with Atwood's research into writers' descriptions of the writing process that she summarises in *Negotiating with the Dead*:

Obstruction, obscurity, emptiness, disorientation, twilight, blackout, often combined with a struggle or path or journey – an inability to see one's way forward, but a feeling that there was a way forward, and that the act of going forward would eventually bring about the conditions for vision – these were the common elements in many descriptions of the process of writing.¹³²

This also matches what Marcus describes as another of the major tenets of autobiographical fiction, 'that the true autobiographer is in some way driven by an inner compulsion to write of the self, and that the autobiographical act must involve a degree of difficulty and struggle both in 'grasping' the self and in communicating it.'¹³³ Let us return to Iris in *The Blind Assassin* to consider her motives, motivations and descriptions of the writing process. Atwood chooses to explicitly depict the creative process involved in writing an autobiography or memoir in the narrative present of *The Blind Assassin* in which the past is recalled and reconstructed, rather than simply presenting the memories as a first person past tense narrative or a first person present tense tale in which the memories are 'lived.' It is this very split between the self that writes and the self that is written about that is most enlightening – the distinction between present and past selves, and the insight it gives us into motive and the workings of memory.

Iris' motives seem to shift throughout. She discusses history and the importance of memorial, and reflects on our need to remember and be remembered:

why is it we want so badly to memorialise ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire-hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It's all the same impulse. What do we hope from it? Applause, envy, respect? Or simply attention, of any kind we can get?

¹³²Atwood, *Negotiating*, xxii.

¹³³Marcus, *Discourses*, 3-4.

At the very least we want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down.¹³⁴

Another motive is the need to tell her side of the story and it also, at times, functions as a confession. It acts as a way for her to set things in order, and to get revenge: 'what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge.'¹³⁵

Iris discusses her need to write often in her narrative with Atwood using various images and descriptions symbolic of or related to the act of writing throughout. Iris, like the true autobiographer Marcus speaks of, feels compelled to write. Writing for her becomes, at times, an almost unconscious, automatic act:

To the task at hand. At hand is appropriate: sometimes it seems to me that it's only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me...despite the arthritis in my fingers, this hand of mine has been displaying an unusual amount of friskiness lately, as if tossing restraint to the dogs. Certainly it has been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgement.¹³⁶

Yet although unconscious, it is still often a painful struggle for Iris to write, both physically and emotionally: 'I've written nothing for the past week. I've lost the heart for it. Why set down such melancholy events? But I've begun again, I notice. I've taken up my black scrawl; it unwinds in a long dark thread of ink across the page, tangled but legible.'¹³⁷ Iris writes despite the pain. Even though she does not want to, she has to. She describes writing as a painstaking, laborious process both in terms of physically pushing the pen across the page – 'my fingers are stiff and clumsy, the pen waves and rambles, it takes me a long time to form the words,'¹³⁸ – and in terms of finding the words – 'it is getting them to flow down the arm, it's squeezing them out through the fingers that's so difficult.'¹³⁹

Marcus, using the example of Rousseau and his *Confessions*, shows that subjectivity combines with an interrogation of the nature of writing, problematizing both components and the relationship between them – this relationship being the construction of identity *through* the act of writing.¹⁴⁰ Iris often links her identity, her sense of self, directly to the act of writing, either of writing herself or of being written upon, and uses writing often as a metaphor for describing herself, her sister and other women, one striking example being the metaphor

¹³⁴ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 118.

¹³⁵ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 621.

¹³⁶ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 457.

¹³⁷ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 118.

¹³⁸ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 53.

¹³⁹ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 82.

¹⁴⁰ Marcus, *Discourses*, 180.

used by Atwood (via Iris) to describe the desperate acts of girls “in trouble” who used to go on rollercoasters to try and induce a miscarriage:

what I pictured when she said this was one of those red streamers they used to throw from ocean liners...cascading down over the spectators below; or a series of lines, long thick lines of red, scrolling out from the roller coaster and from the girls in it like paint thrown from a bucket. Like long scrawls of vermilion cloud. Like skywriting.

Now I think: but if writing, what kind of writing? Diaries, novels, autobiographies? Or simply graffiti: *Mary loves John*. But John does not love Mary, or not enough to stop her emptying herself out like that, scribbling all over everyone in such red, red letters.¹⁴¹

The reference to the ‘kinds’ of writing are a way of showing that these women all have stories to tell, and that there are a number of forms these stories could take. Iris’ sister Laura is described in a photograph as a *tabula rasa*, waiting not to write, but to be written upon, a passive, rather than active role in the process. Iris also describes how her husband ‘wrote’ upon her body in a colourful code of bruises ‘like invisible ink held to a candle...I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over.’¹⁴² This series of images contrasts greatly with Iris’ older, present writing self, where the choice to write and the act of writing is active and often empowering. Iris’ identity is further linked to the act of writing when she states near the end of the novel that ‘by the time you read this last page that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be.’¹⁴³ She equates the end of her autobiography with the end of her life, and both are imminent.

2.5 The value of reminiscence and the life story

As the novels discussed above illustrate, reminiscence is central to autobiography and to the telling of a life story. Reminiscence work and life story research, along with related qualitative research methods, are often used by disciplines within the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. Transcripts from life story interviews and first person written accounts are often viewed as valuable historical documents, such as The Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies, a collection of written accounts of working class life gathered by anthropologist John Burnett et al. In life story research there are three main ways to gather ‘data’: the first is to encourage people to write following a guideline or directive (like the *Burnett* archive and the *Mass Observation* archive); the second is to record and transcribe interviews; the third to observe, chat and take notes. My project, which will be discussed in more detail from section 3.2 onwards, makes use of two

¹⁴¹ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 399.

¹⁴² Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 454-455.

¹⁴³ Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 637.

of these methods primarily: writing following a directive; and recorded and transcribed interviews, as well as a little of the third method – chatting and note-taking – where possible.

Ken Plummer, in a chapter on life story research in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (1995), discusses what he sees as the goal of life story research, stating that '[it] aims to investigate the subjective meanings of lives as they are told in the narratives of participants.'¹⁴⁴ This neatly fits Hazan's views mentioned earlier that older people need to be treated as subjects rather than objects in order for us to truly understand real lived experience, and with Hepworth who calls for the need to better understand the meanings of ageing and how this can be aided by 'stories of ageing.' Peter Coleman's article in *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* specifically considers reminiscence within the context of the study of ageing. He begins with a bold and interesting statement: '[r]eflection on the nature and purpose of reminiscence in later life takes one to the heart of social gerontology. Moreover, it touches many of the central issues in the study of the life-span as a whole.'¹⁴⁵ Again, this neatly correlates the understanding of the meaning of lives with the meaning of ageing, specifically. Two main reasons are offered for why people feel the need, as they grow older, to draw out meaning from their life-story for the benefit of themselves and others. The first is to reconcile themselves with its limitations and failings, the second and perhaps more pressing reason to 'try to hang on to a sense of who they are amidst life circumstances which have changed out of all recognition.'¹⁴⁶ These life circumstances could include illness, which could soon result in death, as is the case with Iris, or dementia, as with Briony, meaning she will soon forget. They could also refer to widowhood, to being put in a home, to becoming dependent on others. Clare Gillies and Anne James in *Reminiscence Work with Old People* (1994) discuss these changes in circumstance often experienced by the very old in terms of a series of losses 'of autonomy; the inability to cope unaided with the tasks of daily living, and increasing physical and mental frailty...the diminished self-confidence that some old people feel at this time may be compounded by personal loss and financial difficulties; enforced changes in their lifestyles may also add to their confusion.'¹⁴⁷ At such a difficult time, recounting life stories 'can be immensely pleasurable both to the raconteur and to the listener; it can also be cathartic or

¹⁴⁴Ken Plummer, "Life Story Research," in *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, ed. Johnathan A Smith et al. (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1995) 50.

¹⁴⁵Peter Coleman, "Reminiscence within the study of ageing: The social significance of story" in Joanna Bornat (ed) *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994) 8.

¹⁴⁶Coleman, "Reminiscence within the study of ageing," 8.

¹⁴⁷Clare Gillies and Anne James, *Reminiscence Work with Old People* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1994) vii.

therapeutic.¹⁴⁸ Previously, reminiscence and life story research was frowned upon and even discouraged, as they were seen to further disconnect an old person from their present. They have, in recent decades, regained popularity and are often used today in clinical practice. Coleman in *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes: Social and Clinical Implications* (1989) believes that rather than disconnecting one from the present, it actually enables the old person, and those around them, to make sense of the present: 'to understand an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours in later life, one must also know something about his or her past experiences.'¹⁴⁹ He shows here that reminiscence and the life story are integral to understanding experiences of ageing, as 'individuals will differ in their reactions to the experiences they encounter in old age according to their own personal life history. Such awareness has given birth to the term 'differential gerontology'.¹⁵⁰ This shows that not only are reminiscence and life story research effective methods for attempting to understand subjective life experiences and experiences of ageing specifically, but the act itself can also be beneficial to the individual concerned, allowing them to make sense of their current situation as well as enabling those close to them, whether this be family members, carers or clinicians, to best understand the person, their behaviours and emotions. This attempt to grasp subjective experience should, as Hazan proposed, allow better provision to be offered to older people.

Bruce M Ross in *Remembering the Personal Past: Descriptions of Autobiographical Memory* (1991) takes a slightly different approach to reminiscence. 'Rumour has it that the unexamined life is not worth living,' he begins, 'but what from one's past can reasonably be known and subjected to examination?'¹⁵¹ He examines memory and the challenges faced by anyone attempting to access their past during which he utilises metaphors to illustrate his points in a similar manner to those used by the authors of the fictional autobiographies discussed above:

every person possesses not only a waiting room of memories where old favourites are recalled but also a Lost and Found where recollections from the past appear without being recognised, other less accessible memories are hidden in mental suitcases to which we have misplaced the keys; elsewhere suitcases are discovered empty that we thought were full. Piled in with the rest are convenient imitation packages of memories constructed from dreams and fantasies that were never paid for with experience.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸Gillies and James, *Reminiscence Work*, 13.

¹⁴⁹Peter G. Coleman, *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes: Social and Clinical Implications* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1989) 6.

¹⁵⁰Coleman, *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes*, 6.

¹⁵¹Bruce M Ross, *Remembering the Personal Past: Descriptions of Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) vii.

¹⁵²Ross, *Remembering the Personal Past*, vii.

Ross is calling attention to the problems of memory and the consequential impact on reliability that they pose, issues that cannot be ignored by anyone conducting reminiscence or life story research or working with auto/biographical materials.

Andrea Salter in *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Narratology for a Twenty-first-Century Critical Humanism* edited by Liz Stanley (2013) emphasises the social significance of story, stating that ‘stories are a familiar feature of everyday life, told in different situations for various purposes, and are complicated social phenomena.’¹⁵³

Plummer, in the final chapter of the book, puts forth a manifesto for social stories, in which he talks of the moral and political significance of not just stories, but life stories specifically: ‘ultimately, stories, and especially, life stories, can provide a quiet catharsis of comprehension, helping us to appreciate the lives of others and enabling us to overcome that dreadful “certain blindness” – our dreadful ignorance of these others.’¹⁵⁴ He is in agreement with Coleman that stories can enable an understanding of the lives of others. His view is also aligned with those literary gerontologists mentioned earlier, as he often talks at length about the power of the story:

stories have important roles to play in all cultures [...] They can foster our imaginations. They can stimulate empathy, develop dialogues and create connecting bonds with others. They can mark our moral landscapes and their boundaries [...] yet they can also raise challenges, provoke change and set new agendas. They can galvanise social movements.¹⁵⁵

Existing methodologies of the social sciences are challenged and new approaches to thinking and writing are argued for:

Social analysis and research is not something outside of social life and hence not something outside of stories. Social Science needs to take more seriously its narrative forms and its humanistic foundations. It needs to foster styles of thinking and writing that question and interrogate the documents of our lives, and which encourage the creative, interpretive story-tellings of lives, with all the ethical, political and self-reflective engagements this will bring.¹⁵⁶

Some projects that do just that will be discussed further on in section 3.2: creative, interpretative approaches to the life story, considerations of the politics and ethics involved, and reflexive accounts of this type of research, including work by life writers and life writing critics Liz Stanley and Jo Stanley, and life history researchers Lesley Forest and Judy Giles.

¹⁵³ Andrea Salter, “Someone Telling Something to Someone about Something?” in *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a Twenty-first Century Critical Humanism*, ed. Liz Stanley. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 93.

¹⁵⁴ Ken Plummer, “A Manifesto for Social Stories,” in *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a Twenty-first Century Critical Humanism*, ed. Liz Stanley. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 217.

¹⁵⁵ Plummer, *A Manifesto*, 211.

¹⁵⁶ Plummer, *A Manifesto*, 216.

2.6 Gender and ageing: lone older women

Before moving on to discuss my project in detail, I first want to say a little more about the significance of gender in relation to ageing, as a way of providing context and justification for my chosen focus on lone older women specifically. As Arber and Ginn state in *Connecting Gender and Ageing* (1995) 'gender and ageing are inextricably intertwined in social life; each can only be fully understood with reference to the other [...] as we age, we are influenced by the societal, cultural, economic and political context prevailing at different times in our life course.'¹⁵⁷ In the study of gerontology, gender was at first seen merely as one of many variables to be borne in mind. Even feminist sociologists didn't explicitly address the significance of the connection between gender and ageing until more recently. Approximately half of older women are widows, and three-quarters of older men are married.¹⁵⁸ This, of course, has consequences for gender identity, relationships and roles in later life. For care in old age men rely mostly on their wives, but because women often outlive their husbands and they have to rely on adult children and/or the community for care and support – hence more women than men are likely to end up in an institution. Also, 'because women outlive men by an average of six years there are fifty per cent more women than men over sixty-five,' and this also has consequences: negative and stereotyped portrayals of older people have already been discussed in section 2.2, and these negative portrayals 'reflect not only ageism but since the majority of old people are women, sexism as well.'¹⁵⁹ As we have seen, our culture is littered with stereotypical and often negative representations of older women, from classics and bestsellers to soaps and Disney films, with lone older women bearing the brunt of these negative, reductive and often demeaning misrepresentations – particularly spinsters. Doan's study of the spinster in twentieth century literature has already been discussed, as has Woodward's work on the invisibility of older women, and I would now like to take a closer look at Virginia Nicholson's work *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After the First World War*.

In the introduction to her book, Nicholson sets out her aims, beginning with some interesting statistics:

Three-quarter of a million soldiers died during World War One. Women born between 1885 and 1905 had no-one to marry [...] in the 1920s when the phenomenon first

¹⁵⁷Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, eds, *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 1995) 1.

¹⁵⁸Arber and Ginn, *Connecting Gender and Ageing*, 11.

¹⁵⁹Arber and Ginn, *Connecting Gender and Ageing*, 6.

arose they were known collectively as the Surplus Women, and according to the 1921 census there were one and three-quarter million of them.¹⁶⁰

It is made clear that war was not the only reason for the increase in the number of unmarried women, but also the rise of feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Spinsterhood may have been forced on many, but for some it was a choice. Nicholson, discussing her approach to the book, talks of the significance of telling 'individual stories, and [the attempt] to emphasise personal details that [she] found fascinating, however seemingly irrelevant. When we reach into the past, we look for point of contact.'¹⁶¹ Like Coleman and Plummer, Nicholson believes in the significance of stories as a mode of sharing subjective experience in order to aid the understanding of lives, and applies this to a particularly invisible and misrepresented group. She is also clear about the need to represent a range of women and their experiences, including those of different classes. She draws on a variety of material in order to tell these women's stories, including diaries and both published and unpublished autobiographies and memoirs, providing quotes and extracts from the original materials, followed by explanations of the context in which each was produced. She recounts heart-breaking descriptions of the loss of boyfriends, fiancés and new husbands in the war, but also other issues faced by the single woman following the war, such as employment.

Arber and Ginn in *Gender and Later Life: A Sociological Analysis of Resources and Constraints* (1991) confirm Woodward's observations on the lack of knowledge about the everyday lives of older women, in this case widows, in that 'we know very little about how women manage their lives following widowhood...how the material basis of their lives alters.'¹⁶² They also issued a call-to-arms, believing that we 'must raise our awareness of the diversity of elderly people's experiences and present circumstances and suggest how these relate to social divisions and to social, economic and political changes.'¹⁶³ Nicholson's book is one such attempt, as was Woodward's *Figuring Age*, and the previous section saw Coleman and Plummer arguing for the importance of life stories in helping us to understand a person's present, and their moral and political power. In the following section I will discuss the significance of story, or narrative, and the benefit of working directly with older people, particularly lone older women, in order to ensure a subjective and more authentic representation of older women's experiences in my own writing project, along with an

¹⁶⁰Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2008) xi.

¹⁶¹Nicholson, *Singled Out*, xii.

¹⁶²Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, *Gender and Later Life: A Sociological Analysis of Resources and Constraints* (London: Sage Publications, 1991) 21

¹⁶³Arber and Ginn, *Gender and Later Life*, 25.

overview of my methodology and process whilst interviewing and working with archive materials. I will then move on to explore ethical issues in life writing, addressing those that were raised during my project, and how they were negotiated.

3 Representing real people

The potential of stories of ageing both real and fictional – whether to encourage empathy, to aid our understanding of the ageing experience and to challenge stereotypes or offer alternative images of ageing – has been discussed previously with reference to many leading social and literary gerontologists. The moral and political impact that life stories and stories of ageing can have has also been explored. The significance of narrative and the act of reminiscence has been discussed both in terms of the benefits it can bring to the person sharing the story but also to the listener and society as a whole (as supported by Plummer, Ross and others). I would like to return to Coleman and take a closer look at reminiscence and the sharing of a life story, in order to provide some context for my own project. I will then outline and discuss my methodology and creative process, with reference to working with archives and conducting interviews, as well as ethical considerations and negotiations that occurred throughout the project. Finally in this section I will explore the nature and meaning of truth in life writing, and its implications for practice.

3.1 The significance of narrative

Based on his study, Coleman shows that nearly a third of very old people feel that they would like to tell their life story but do not have available listeners.¹⁶⁴ Socially and ethically this is quite concerning given the benefits of reminiscence and the sharing of life stories discussed above in section 2.5. Coleman believes that it is, in some instances, up to us to enable the sharing and dissemination of stories in order for them to retain meaning.

The life-story that is created [...] has to be communicated to a wider audience if it is to have continued meaning. This I would suggest is one of the essential tasks of ageing, and one which we may at times need to help people to achieve, or even stand in their place to create for them if frailty has taken away their mental powers.¹⁶⁵

Some people also may not feel they have a story to tell: this could be because ‘they have never valued their experience of life or realised its value to others, and have therefore never learned to recount it.’¹⁶⁶ This does not mean they would not derive some benefit from doing so; on the contrary, it is perhaps this group who would most value and have much to gain

¹⁶⁴ Coleman, “Reminiscence within the study of ageing,” 9.

¹⁶⁵ Coleman, “Reminiscence within the study of ageing,” 9.

¹⁶⁶ Coleman, “Reminiscence within the study of ageing,” 9.

from the experience. As summed up by Gillies and James, 'working with someone to review details of their life is in itself a healing process and evidence of interest and respect.'¹⁶⁷

Coleman elaborates on this, arguing that 'allowing a person to have a voice and the opportunity for genuine self-expression are prerequisites for achieving a sense of control over life,' which is likely to be greatly beneficial to many older people finding themselves faced with, or in the midst of, the series of losses set out by Gillies and James, as previously mentioned.

In my own project I worked with three pre-existing life-stories in the form of autobiographies written and/or sent in response to the call by John Burnett and his team for working class autobiographies, but for the other three I chose to seek out some of Coleman's "third" – people who wanted to tell their story but did not, until now, have an available audience. I selected lone older women from both the Burnett Archive and the "third" because, as discussed in the previous section, these are a group of women often invisible and especially misrepresented. I felt they could benefit from the chance to "have a voice," an audience, and some help in sharing their stories to enable them to have continued meaning, as Coleman believes to be key. In the following section I will outline my approach, covering methodologies for interviewing and working with archive material to source life stories, then detail the creative processes used to enable the telling and sharing of these stories as biographical narratives, drawing on works such as Paul J Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) and Pauline Polkey's *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/biography* (1999).

3.2 Methodology: interviews, archives, ethics and creative process

This project began with a telephone interview during which I asked my grandmother Jacqueline to tell me about her life. I had written about her previously, and kept finding myself inexplicably and unintentionally returning to her again and again in poetry and prose, exploring my time with her when I was younger, and how I saw her at the time of writing. I decided to speak to her, let her know I was writing about her, ask her if she minded at all. She was thrilled, and was keen to tell me about her childhood, her adolescence, and her time as a mother – her life before becoming a grandmother, before me. She had married a man twenty years older than her, who had then died of cancer; for my whole life, she was a widow, I never knew her any other way. She had many siblings, but did not see any of them, and two daughters she visited a couple of days a week, for a few hours at a time. She had a car, and a dog, and was fiercely independent, spending hours alone in her bungalow

¹⁶⁷Gillies and James, *Reminiscence Work*, 55.

watching snooker, bowls and westerns, agonising over rent rates, bills and tax, subsisting on tea, toast and chicken pies. At sixty five, she retired from work as a home help, but still kept a couple of clients on, cleaning for them a few hours a week until it became too much for her. After some time on kidney dialysis, she suffered a series of little strokes that left her hospitalised for some months until she passed away. I am pleased I called her to ask about her life: if not, I would not know many of the things I now do about her. Following on from my reading of Coleman, Gillies and James, Plummer and others, I am pleased I was able to offer her the opportunity to share her story and have it written down, and I believe that she benefited from it as much as we did (myself and my family, the audience of the resulting series of stories so far).

It seemed as if there was the opportunity here to offer the same experience to others in a similar position to my grandmother – lone older women who had not thought to tell their story or who did not have a suitable audience or the required help to do so. It would benefit the person who gets to tell their tale for some of the reasons discussed above in sections 2.5 and 3.1, and provide me, as a writer, with a wealth of source material for my prose. The finished pieces would then hopefully serve to illustrate a life, to engage and entertain readers and also to allow insight into the subjectivity of ageing experience. At the time, I did not consider myself as writing biography, rather I saw myself as using my skills as a creative writer, usually of fiction, to produce a series of stories *based on* the lives of real lone older women. As with the first stories I wrote exploring my grandmother's childhood, I used the techniques of fiction (to varying degrees) to fill in the blanks, to bring characters and places and events to life, to tell the story in an engaging and enjoyable manner. Working with first person accounts adds degrees of autonomy, subjectivity and authenticity to the prose that would have been difficult to achieve if writing purely fiction and relying only on imagination bolstered by research. It would be less personal, less significant, if I just made it up. The creative process, ethical issues that arose from the chosen mode of writing and discrepancies concerning genre will be discussed further below and in section 4.

The telephone interview that was conducted with my grandmother was straightforward. We were close, and I already knew of most of the people she was referring to, and often remembered hearing bits of some stories before. A pre-existing contextual knowledge-base meant I could spend time prompting and encouraging and finding out more, rather than having to ask her to explain who everyone was, where events took place and so on. I was aware that conducting interviews with strangers would be very different, and that I needed to do some research to ensure I was prepared and that my approach and the experience was as professional and beneficial to both parties as it could be. This led to research into the

ethics of life writing practice and theories behind interviewing approaches and techniques, evidenced below.

My first full consideration of ethics and legality led me to seek approval for my project from the University's Ethics Committee. This was a helpful exercise as it required a full, considered exploration of various facets of the project, its aims and the implications for my methodology, process and intended output. I also sought information on libel and defamation to safeguard against any negative backlash as a result of the potential publication of stories featuring real individuals and events. As Cline and Angier state in the section on ethics and legality in *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*:

We owe regard to the dead, and even more to the living, and we must keep all our charities about us. But we also owe regard to the truth, and a book that airbrushes out of the picture anything inconvenient to anyone is of no more use than polite conversation.¹⁶⁸

This advice, which sums up the major ethical concerns that need to be addressed by anyone embarking on a life writing project, demonstrates the need for balance in life writing – be conscientious, even charitable, but also be honest and truthful. This is no mean feat, requiring negotiation and compromise, among other skills. In terms of legality, it is imperative that one be aware of defamation and libel law. Defamation has been defined as ‘any published material that damages the reputation of an individual or an organisation.’¹⁶⁹ You can, of course, publish defamatory material if it is covered by one of the recognised legal defences, such as the information has been proved to be true; it is fair comment, such as an opinion made in good faith, based on fact and published without malice; or is a matter of public interest. Defamatory material may also be published with the defence that individuals should be free to speak their minds without fear of being sued even if you get your facts wrong.¹⁷⁰ There is, however, always an element of risk with any of these defences, and if you lose, libel law, which is designed to protect individuals from unwarranted, mistaken or untruthful attacks on their reputation, means that the writer could end up having to pay up a substantial fee. Libel laws differ across the globe, and are often changing, so it is important that all writers consider whether their project puts them at risk. This may place certain restrictions and other limitations on the work, which could require a writer to alter identity, anonymise people, alter contexts and other distinguishing features, or could mean that the work cannot be published until a later date, such as the case with Briony in McEwan's

¹⁶⁸Sally Cline and Carole Angier, *The Arvon Book of Life Writing: Writing Biography, Autobiography and Memoir* (London: Methuen Drama, 2010) Kindle Edition.

¹⁶⁹“How to avoid libel and defamation,” BBC, accessed 10/07/14.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A1183394>

¹⁷⁰“How to avoid libel and defamation,” BBC.

Atonement who, while a fictional writer of a made-up memoir, still accurately describes the restrictions placed upon her as a writer (she cannot publish her book until she and her cousin are both dead) and from whom much can be learned about the dangers of writing, especially life writing:

I put it there as a matter of historical record. But as a matter of legal reality, so various editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir could never be published while my fellow criminals were alive. You may only libel yourself and the dead [...] The obvious suggestions were made – displace, transmute, dissemble. Bring down the fogs of imagination! What are novelists for? Go just so far as is necessary, set up camp inches beyond the reach, the fingertips, of the law. But no one knows these precise distances until a judgement is handed down. To be safe, one would have to be bland and obscure.¹⁷¹

Once my project received ethical approval from the University and I had considered the legal implications of my practice, interviews were scheduled with two local women who had volunteered to take part. The university has a pool of local people who take part in research, many of them older due to the range of ageing-related research that takes place at Brunel. The Brunel Institute of Bioengineering were due to send out a mail request for older participants to take part in a focus group exploring attitudes to and experiences of incontinence, and the various devices and products available to those who experience it. They allowed me to write a brief blurb about my project that was circulated along with their call for participants. Within a week I had received two calls; one from Anna, the other from Emmeline.

Interpreting Interviews by Mats Alvesson (2011) proved to be a very useful resource when attempting to learn more about the theory behind interviewing as a qualitative research method used for gathering data. Alvesson begins by outlining some concerns with interviewing and the interpretation of data gathered by interviewing.

When researchers interact with subjects – undertaking interviews, making observations, requiring responses to questionnaires – they are not just revealing the truth about social conditions and people’s experiences through accessing data, they are also producing specific representations of something. These representations are then sometimes naïvely taken for granted as mirrors of ‘reality’.¹⁷²

Along with this problem of representation, another issue with interviewing is that ‘interview talk may say more about role playing and adapting to social standards in the name of impression management – including how to appear authentic – than about how people really feel or what social reality is really like.’¹⁷³ There are many different approaches to interviewing and interview research, with Alvesson advocating a reflexivity approach: ‘this

¹⁷¹McEwan, *Atonement*, 370

¹⁷²Mats Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews* (London: Sage, 2011) 1.

¹⁷³Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 3.

means that I think we should avoid giving interview material an a priori status (as indicative of reality or meaning) and instead think through a set of interpretive possibilities for assessing what the material is about and for what purposes it can be used.¹⁷⁴ Alvesson summarises and assesses the major positions pertaining to approaches to interview research in order to then position his own, preferred approach. Neo-positivism is the traditional and still dominating position in which ‘advocates are eager to establish a context-free truth about what is really ‘out there’ by following a research protocol and gathering responses relevant to it, minimizing researcher influence and other sources of ‘bias.’ There is an interest in ‘facts.’¹⁷⁵ Such interviews are carefully planned and tightly structured, and strive for objectivity, neutrality, transparency; the problem with this approach is that respondents may provide only superficial and cautious responses.

Interactive rationalism was an attempt to rectify the problems of the neo-positivist approach by conducting repeat interviews, giving participants the chance to reflect and establishing better contact. The aim was to gain trust and build a rapport to minimise the chance of the responses being cautious and superficial. Romanticism takes this further: ‘the nearer we come to the respondent, the closer we are to apprehending the real self. Through closeness and depth we can find the authentic and true.’¹⁷⁶ This approach, similar to the style of eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature of the same name that emphasised imagination and emotion, is similar to emotionalism, where the data should be about authentic subjective experiences revealed through unstructured, open-ended interviews.¹⁷⁷ These approaches emphasise interactivity and closeness, empathy and trust, resulting in authentic, rich and trustworthy talk, and seemed better suited to my project. Alvesson advocates the need to adopt a mixed approach or even to go beyond conventional approaches altogether. He believes that the best interviewers are reflexive; they have an awareness of the discourse and theory that underpins approaches to interviewing. The reflexive interviewer will be able to assess which method will work best based on the type of data they need, and what they will be using it for, and has the ability to consciously and consistently ‘view the subject matter from different angles.’¹⁷⁸

In his conclusion, Alvesson briefly discusses the ethics of interpreting interviews in relation to voice.

At one extreme, the researcher reduces him or herself to someone plying a microphone, repeating what people say without imposing anything or asking

¹⁷⁴ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 5.

¹⁷⁵ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 13.

¹⁷⁷ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 14.

¹⁷⁸ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 106.

questions regarding what the statements are about. At another extreme, the researcher intensively analyses and interprets interview material and may give this material a completely different meaning than that possibly intended by the interviewee.¹⁷⁹

Alvesson states that while most books on interviewing will have a section or chapter on ethics, covering consent, confidentiality and truthful reporting, 'in practice there may always be complications and dilemmas and life, including research life, is full of ethical compromise.'¹⁸⁰ He also states that while problems of representation and language are now common topics in philosophy and social theory, along with the calls for new methodologies, relatively little of this addresses interviews more specifically.¹⁸¹ Ethics will, therefore, have to be negotiated anew with each subject, making Alvesson's call for reflexive interviewers all the more significant. Ethics in relation to life writing theory and practice will be discussed in more detail further on.

In terms of the logistics of planning and conducting the interview I identified that approaching from a romanticism/emotionalism position seemed to best suit the type of data I required – rich and truthful talk. I drew on various methodologies in order to develop a tailored approach that best suited my project's aims, and another resource I found useful for this process was "Semi-structured interviewing and Qualitative Analysis" by Jonathan A Smith (1995), in which the benefits of this type of interview are discussed along with information that enables an effective schedule to be developed, with appropriate questions and tips for conducting the interview. In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has a set of questions or schedule, but will be guided rather than dictated by it. This allows the interviewer the opportunity to probe interesting areas that arise and follow the respondent's interests or concerns, rather than being limited by pursuing particular lines of enquiry in a particular order. The interviewer needs to be flexible; it is best to have an idea of the area of interest, but to acknowledge that it should be the respondent who has control over the direction the interview takes, as "the respondent should be perceived as the expert on the subject (the self) and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell his or her own story."¹⁸² The benefits of this type of interview are that it facilitates rapport and empathy, as well as allowing for greater coverage. The disadvantages are that it takes much longer to carry out than a structured interview and is harder to analyse.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 147.

¹⁸⁰ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 147.

¹⁸¹ Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews*, 141.

¹⁸² Jonathan A Smith, "Semi-structured Interviewing and Qualitative Analysis" in Jonathan A Smith, Rom Harre and Luk Van Langenhove (eds) *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (London: Sage, 1995) 12.

¹⁸³ Smith, "Semi-structured Interviewing," 12.

One benefit of constructing an interview schedule, as opposed to conducting an unstructured interview, is that it ‘force[s] you to think explicitly about what you think/hope the interview might cover [...] it enables you to think of the difficulties that might be encountered, eg in terms of a question wording or sensitive areas and to give some thought to how these difficulties might be handled.’¹⁸⁴ This allows the opportunity for the interviewer to plan some prompts and probes to accompany the questions, to encourage the respondent to say more on a particular topic. In terms of questions, they need to be neutral, open and jargon-free. Another recommendation was to practice interview questions on a colleague as an effective way of gauging whether they are too explicit, hard to interpret or fail to illicit a satisfactory response. Funnelling is also shown to be a useful method for trying to find out the respondent’s views or more details on a specific issue or topic – this is achieved by beginning with a general open question, followed-up with a series of more specific, directed questions.¹⁸⁵ When conducting the interview, it is important to consider the role of the interviewer. Smith reinforces that the interviewer is a facilitator and guide, rather than dictator or director. He suggests learning the schedule in advance, so only minimal glancing at a sheet of paper is required, and more of the interviewer’s attention can be invested elsewhere, such as on ‘monitor[ing] the effect of the interview on the respondent’ and ‘watch[ing] non-verbal behaviour.’¹⁸⁶

For the interviews with Emmeline and Anna, I asked them where they wanted the interview to take place – did they want to come to the university, did they want me to come to their homes, or would they rather meet in a neutral public space, such as a local library, community centre or café? Both asked me to come to their homes, and I was pleased with this as I believed they would feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings, and would have access to photos and trinkets that might spark memories or aid in the telling of a particular story. I met with Anna twice and Emmeline once. The reasons for this are that during the first interview, Anna became slightly upset and requested some time to think about whether or not she was still happy to contribute – sharing her life story was more difficult than she had anticipated, opening up old wounds. While she understood the purpose of the interview as well as what I would be hoping to do with the data as a writer, as certain parts of her tale emerged she realised that she had some concerns, and wished to censor some of the things she had told me. I gave her some time, and we met again a few weeks later. After some discussion, Anna said she was still happy to participate, and the interview continued. She wanted to tell her story, but was concerned that if I published it, people would be able to

¹⁸⁴Smith, “Semi-structured Interviewing,” 12.

¹⁸⁵Smith, “Semi-structured Interviewing,” 14.

¹⁸⁶Smith, “Semi-structured Interviewing,” 15.

identify her and her family. She was worried that this might change how people viewed her, might encourage people to judge her or – worse – pity her. Together we came up with a solution – I would fictionalise elements of her story in order to provide anonymity. The first thing we did was select a pseudonym for her, and she chose “Anna” because it was a name she liked and knew her mother had liked too. She asked me also to rename other people that appear in her story, so I looked up popular names of people of the same nationality as each person and gave them a name that I felt suited them, much like one would for fictional characters. Some events in her life are hinted at in my story, rather than fully disclosed, and locations are changed or intentionally vague. This is because while she obviously wanted or perhaps even needed to talk to someone about certain instances in her life, she did not necessarily want to see them in print, as Coleman states, ‘there may be particular episodes in some people’s lives which they have deliberately and successfully shut out of consciousness because they were unable to come to terms with them. Yet now they may feel the need to tell the whole story.’¹⁸⁷ Fiction became a tool that could be employed in life writing to enable Anna to share her story with a wider audience. Some events of Anna’s life were harrowing and I found that I had to distance myself from them initially and let some time pass before I felt ready to begin the process of representing her life on the page in a manner that met with her requirements for sharing and captured the essence of her life. This situation and the resultant approach that I chose to take is neatly explained by Sarah Haslam and Derek Neale in their book *Life Writing* (2009)

Imagination isn’t just a whimsical activity, but often a necessary approach taken with material that is too close, or too distant in time, to see. Imagination is a way of opening up areas of life experience that otherwise would remain shuttered and confined; a way of widening the perspective.¹⁸⁸

This situation did, however, prompt a deeper exploration into the ethics of life writing in terms of both theory and practice. As Eakin explains, the main ethical concerns pertaining to life writing tend to be privacy-based and can be divided into two types, one being legal and two being experiential. The legal side covers issues such as libel and defamation as already mentioned, plus the right to privacy. Experiential issues arise because, as Eakin eloquently summarises, ‘because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate a boundary where one life leaves off and another begins.’¹⁸⁹ An individual’s life and their memories of that life belong to them, but memories and lives overlap with the lives of others, and as a result of these relational identities, ‘autobiographies have become increasingly *biographical*, featuring those others in our lives – parents,

¹⁸⁷ Coleman, “Reminiscence within the study of ageing,” 9.

¹⁸⁸ Sarah Haslam and Derek Neale, *Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 2009) 126.

¹⁸⁹ Paul John Eakin, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 8.

siblings, lovers, friends and mentors who have shaped us.¹⁹⁰ Eakin acknowledges that in practice, both 'life and life writing are messier than a traditional model of ethics centred on privacy and property can handle.¹⁹¹ There is not one model that can account for the plethora of issues that can arise during a project – the ethics, both legal and experiential, need to be considered anew for each subject and/or project, and an appropriate approach tailored to suit each. As Cline and Angier state in relation to experiential ethical concerns, 'we must all decide for ourselves what our conscience will bear.'¹⁹² Claudia Mills in her chapter on trust and betrayal in *The Ethics of Life Writing* offers some salient advice to other writers when she states that 'our goal must be to achieve the great benefits of the sharing of stories while minimizing the cost to those whose stories are shared.'¹⁹³ She defines these "costs" as a lack of respect, sensitivity or kindness in certain modes of storytelling, the pain a person may experience from embarrassment, the pain she may experience from discovering what the writer really thinks about her, and loss of standing in another's eyes.¹⁹⁴ The best way to reduce these costs, according to Mills, is to 'simply be a great writer, with a wise, compassionate view of your characters in all their enormous complexity.'¹⁹⁵ Acknowledging the difficulty, or perhaps even the impossibility of such a feat, she offers an alternative way of reducing costs – by protecting the identity of those we are writing about, which can be done by withholding their name and changing revelatory but irrelevant details whenever possible, which 'points us toward sharing stories through fiction rather than through non-fiction'¹⁹⁶ – the conclusion I came to in relation to sharing Anna's story. Non-fiction becomes fiction in order to protect the person being represented on the page.

To return to my interviews, things with Emmeline were much smoother than with Anna – I spent a long yet pleasant afternoon with her, during which she told me of her love of literature and how pleased she was to be involved in a project of this nature. She told her story with a smile, and had no anxiety about sharing her story or what I would be doing with it. All were provided with a briefing form, summarising my project, its aims and so on, and all signed a consent form, allowing me to use their life stories as the basis for a series of possibly fictionalised short stories. For all three face-to-face interviews I took a notepad and pen as well as a laptop so I could record the session and be able to listen back to the audio files at a later stage. I used the notebook to write down things that stood out, or to note

¹⁹⁰Eakin, *Ethics of Life Writing*, 9.

¹⁹¹Eakin, *Ethics of Life Writing*, 9.

¹⁹²Cline and Angier, *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

¹⁹³Claudia Mills, "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life" in Paul John Eakin, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing* (London: Cornell University Press, 2004) 111.

¹⁹⁴Mills, "Friendship, Fiction and Memoir," 114.

¹⁹⁵Mills, "Friendship, Fiction and Memoir," 114.

¹⁹⁶Mills, "Friendship, Fiction and Memoir," 115.

things I wanted to ask for more detail on later, during a natural pause, rather than interrupting the current story.

Post-interview, Smith believes the role of the interviewer is to 'engag[e] in an interpretive relationship with the transcript' as 'the respondent's story can itself be said to represent a piece of his or her identity' and may offer insight into the psychological world of the respondent.¹⁹⁷ Robert Atkinson's *The Life Story Interview* (1998) covers the contexts and uses of life stories as well as offering guidelines on process in line with those used and endorsed by The Centre for the Study of Lives at the University of Southern Maine. The Centre's approach is distinguished from others such as Smith's in that it 'keeps the presentation of the life story in the words of the person telling the story. The finished product is entirely a first-person narrative, with the researcher removed as much as possible from the text.'¹⁹⁸ Keeping the transcript in first person allows it to function as a primary document and as a 'research tool for other researchers who look to the life story for narrative information or data that they may be seeking.'¹⁹⁹ This is the way I have used the data that resulted from my interviews, as a primary resource which can then be used to aid further research, in my case through creative writing.

Atkinson discusses the nature and form of the narratives that result from an oral interview that focuses on a person's entire life, usually referred to as a life story or life history. Life stories can take many forms, including factual, metaphorical, poetic or any other creatively expressive form. What is important, he adds, is that 'the life story be told in the form, shape and style that is most comfortable to the person telling it.'²⁰⁰ The phrase 'creatively expressive' is particularly interesting when considering the life story. Is the life story not also, if written down, an autobiography? From Atkinson's perspective, a life story may contain metaphor and perhaps even elements of fiction, and still be an authentic and valid record of a life that holds value for the reasons discussed previously. Therefore, an autobiography is not only restricted to the realms of fact. Here we begin to see some concerns around genre emerge in relation to life writing and how it is approached by those in different disciplines. Such concerns will be discussed in more detail in section 4. In terms of writing stories based on the lives of the women I interviewed, I also tailored my approach in terms of the form, shape and style to suit that which was most comfortable to the participants who had kindly shared their stories with me, as well as for the autobiographies I used from the Burnett Archive.

¹⁹⁷Smith, "Semi-structured Interviewing," 18.

¹⁹⁸Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (London: Sage Publications, Inc, 1998) 2.

¹⁹⁹Atkinson, *Life Story Interview*, 2.

²⁰⁰Atkinson, *Life Story Interview*, 8.

According to the editors of *Past or Portal* – a text detailing various approaches to enhancing higher education (HE) learning through the use of archives and special collections – ‘the old stereotype of the off-limits treasure room and the inaccessible archives are now long gone.’²⁰¹ The editors also discuss the potential inherent in this sort of material: ‘all the “stuff” of special collections and archives – archival collections, rare books, photographs, ephemera, realia, artists’ books, scrapbooks and more – offers a wealth of possibilities [...] these materials are far more than mere survivors of the past; they are truly portals to new ways of learning and thinking.’²⁰² *Past or Portal*, which aimed to address the need for models of best practices and creative approaches to working with archives and collections in HE, contains only one article out of tens that directly addresses the use of these materials to inspire/aid creative writing. In “Lighting Fires in Creative Minds: Teaching Creative Writing in Special Collections,” David Pavelich states that ‘Creative Writing programs offer special collections librarians unique outreach and instruction opportunities.’²⁰³ This was the case here at Brunel: two staff members and a group of taught postgraduate Creative Writing students explored one of Brunel’s archives – The Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography – to use it as a springboard for creativity. The sessions were run by the innovative author and creative writing tutor Tony White and Claire Lynch from the English Department who has experience of working with the archive. I was intrigued as I was in the process of sourcing life stories on which to base my writing, and thought that the archive might contain some viable subjects. I asked if I could audit the module and was welcomed to the project. Following initial sessions on the history of the archive, the appropriate manner in which to access the materials, and discussions on ethical considerations, we each selected items that interested us from a rather crude and extremely reductive index that merely noted a name, a title of the autobiography/memoir if one was provided, locations, occupations and a couple of interesting snippets at most (see appendix A). I scanned entries, looking for signs that the writers of the autobiographies I had selected met my criteria – lone older women. The first one I found that was viable was entry 2-606, Margaret Perry. Whilst married happily again in the end, she left her first husband and spent a large portion of her life as a single woman out of choice.

As Claire Lynch states in the essay “Critical Humanist Thoughts on the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography: ‘Nobody wages war with Dostoevsky or Dickens,’” ‘The

²⁰¹Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden and Suzy Taraba, *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning Through Special Collections and Archives* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012) ix.

²⁰²Mitchell et al, *Past or Portal*, ix.

²⁰³David Pavelich, “Lighting Fires in Creative Minds: Teaching Creative Writing in Special Collections,” in *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning Through Special Collections and Archives* ed. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden and Suzy Taraba (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012) 133.

Burnett Archive is [...] a collection of documents of life, which might also variously be described as historical sources, literary works and autobiographical manuscripts.²⁰⁴ The archive is home to over two hundred autobiographies by working class authors resident in England, Scotland and Wales between 1790 and 1945. The archive – a result of a social research project led by John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall – was compiled by the gathering of autobiographical documents in libraries and record offices as well as private memoirs hidden in attics along with calls in the national press and via the BBC's *Woman's Hour*. As Lynch makes clear, the compilers' focus 'is on the (social) subject, not the (human) document, since they were primarily concerned with the text as evidence of the author as a working-class subject.'²⁰⁵ The compilers do not see writing as work, and regard it as fulfilling a social rather than artistic function. Lynch sees this distinction as disciplinary, with the autobiographies viewed by the compilers as valuable source materials for historians, but not works of literature: 'detail over embellishment, people over characters, historical fact over literary fiction.'²⁰⁶ Burnett and the team discuss their unease at working with such slippery, unfamiliar documents as historians concerned with determining the veracity and authenticity of evidence, as 'if these texts are to be valued for the privacy of their contents, how may their accuracy be checked?'²⁰⁷ They conclude that, due to the subjective and often unverifiable nature of autobiography, the documents will never be able to be seen as an accurate cross-section of the population as they are not generalisable. Lynch discusses the limitations of approaching the documents from a narrow viewpoint:

It is clear from the systematic way in which these texts were collected and anthologised that historical and social concerns were paramount. The plot of the unfolding life was enticing to be sure, but the need to record and organise data in print curtailed any creative re-telling of these stories.²⁰⁸

This is especially evident in the information recorded about each autobiography in the index and in the resulting volumes. For example, in the index, all we learn about Margaret Perry is this: 'Nottingham (1922-50); various RAF barracks at home and abroad. Frank account on family experiences of drunkenness, annual pregnancies, infant deaths, abortions.'²⁰⁹ While the documents may have disappointed their compilers in their inability to offer 'statistically

²⁰⁴Claire Lynch, "Critical Humanist Thoughts on the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography: 'Nobody wages war with Dostoevsky or Dickens,'" in *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a Twenty-first Century Critical Humanism*, ed. Liz Stanley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 32.

²⁰⁵Lynch, "Thoughts on the Burnett Archive," 34.

²⁰⁶Lynch, "Thoughts on the Burnett Archive," 34.

²⁰⁷John Burnett, David Mayall and David Vincent eds. *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Biography* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984) xviii.

²⁰⁸Lynch, "Thoughts on the Burnett Archive," 35.

²⁰⁹"Index to the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies," Brunel Library Special Collections, accessed 26 July 14. http://www.brunel.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/139278/BurnettArchive.pdf

accurate' and generalizable information,²¹⁰ they have a great deal to offer those willing to view them as works of literature or documents of life. Lynch's own approach to re-interpreting the archive was to

excavate not what a particular autobiography might tell about bricklaying or train driving, as had previously been focused on by social historians, but rather, what it meant to that individual to be a bricklayer or train driver in the context of their own life...my approach focused on the exact way in which the experience had been put into words and represented.²¹¹

Lynch champions the view that 'innovation and creativity expands the potential of documents of life,' and puts this into practice hence her key role in enabling creative writing students to engage with the archive:

While traditional research methodologies may limit us to being cautiously reverential (thereby understanding too little) or recklessly high-handed (thereby assuming too much), creative research methods stand alongside the original documents. In other words, working with documents of life in a way which leads to interrogation, adaptation and interpretation provides us with pertinent re-readings through the very process of re-writing.²¹²

With audio recordings of life stories in addition to autobiographies as source material, it seemed pertinent to examine what other writers and critics had to say about considerations relating to the process of turning lives into stories, or 're-writing,' in Lynch's formulation. Four works were particularly relevant and insightful: the Personal Narratives Group's *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (1989), Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Polkey's *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/biography* (1999) and Duffin's "Turning Talking Into Writing" in *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* (2004).

In "Turning Talking into Writing," Patricia Duffin begins by outlining what she sees as the key achievements of reminiscence work in the last decade, stating that 'perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of the last ten years of reminiscence work has been the value that has come to be given to the memories of ordinary people,²¹³ as, previously, it was primarily an area dominated by the rich, famous, predominantly white and male as well as those deemed to have led extraordinary lives. 'The stream of published work, both from groups themselves as well as by those who act as facilitators,' she continues, 'speaks very powerfully of people engaging afresh with their lives. [...] Reminiscence has led to taping, writing, editing,

²¹⁰John Burnett et al. *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, xix.

²¹¹Lynch, "Thoughts on the Burnett Archive," 36.

²¹²Lynch, "Thoughts on the Burnett Archive," 41.

²¹³Patricia Duffin, "Turning Talking into Writing" in *Reminiscence Reviewed: Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements*, ed. Joanna Bornat (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004) 116.

publishing and performing something of their lives for others.²¹⁴ She believes that the act of writing specifically allows for a more concentrated look at the past than just reminiscence as it entails ‘thinking and sifting’ as well as simply remembering. Paul John Eakin in *How Our Lives Become Stories* also discusses the textual representation of lives, linking identity and story: ‘life writing – whatever else it is or may be – certainly involves the assumption that the self and its experiences may somehow be represented in a text.’²¹⁵ The Personal Narratives Group also addresses the process of transforming a life into a text:

The very act of giving form to a whole life – or a considerable portion of it – requires, at least implicitly, considering the meaning of the individual and social dynamics which seem to have been most significant in shaping the life. The act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did.²¹⁶

These accounts of discrete experiences are, most likely, what first appear when someone reminisces. In order to turn these discrete experiences into a life story narrative, one needs to “sift” and arrange these in order to begin to find this meaning – the how and why – by ‘illuminating the course of a life over time.’²¹⁷ This was my role, particularly with regard to the women I interviewed, as I guided their reminiscence then sifted through their accounts of discrete experiences and arranged them in order to produce a personal narrative that illuminates a life over time. For my work with entries from the Burnett Archive, an amount of sifting and arranging had already been done by the women in the act of writing themselves, so in these instances it was left to me to re-write, and, through the process of re-writing, to illuminate.

Pauline Polkey identifies a recent shift in the approach to life-writing as a result of the impact of the last two decades of feminist scholarship on academia. ‘Theoretically, practically and creatively, the parameters of life-writing have been reshaped, interest in its various representations has been substantially reinvigorated, and the sheer quantity of work produced by feminists is evidence of a very full larder indeed.’²¹⁸ Her collection offers essays by researchers and writers who explore the various ways women’s lives are ‘put into print’. Polkey’s aim was to raise questions about various configurations of life-writing practice, such as by examining the significance of and difference between auto/biographical forms, including letters, diaries, oral history, fictional autobiography and the proximity between autobiography and biography. Various narratological facets were also considered, including

²¹⁴Duffin, “Turning Talking into Writing,” 116.

²¹⁵Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 99.

²¹⁶The Personal Narratives Group ed. *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 4.

²¹⁷The Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women’s Lives*, 4.

²¹⁸Pauline Polkey, ed. *Women’s Lives Into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Autobiography* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press LTD, 1999) xiii.

tone, mood, focus and atmosphere, as well as voice, authentication and truth.²¹⁹ I was particularly interested in this idea of the proximity between autobiography and biography given the nature of my creative output. Both Liz Stanley and Jo Stanley, in their essays in this collection, discuss how biography can often be usefully framed by autobiography, in terms of the writer/researcher's relationship with the biographical subject. For Liz Stanley, this was articulated as self-reflexivity, where the researcher becomes bound up in the project, and for Jo Stanley it was in terms of how the lives of those that we uncover and reconfigure can impinge upon our own, because, as Stanley helpfully articulates, 'other lives influence how we see and understand our own and that understandings of our own lives will impact upon how we interpret other lives.'²²⁰ This notion of reciprocity is taken even further by Lesley Forrest and Judy Giles, who advocate the necessity for the researcher to 'give back' to the community what that community has shared with the researcher.²²¹

Once I had read Margaret Perry's autobiography and ascertained that it fitted my criteria, I began what Duffin described as 'thinking and sifting.' I received useful advice on how to go about this from the author Tony White, who loaned me a translated copy of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1982). In relation to the study of photographs, Barthes identifies the initial attraction that draws one to choose a certain photograph, along with two key elements: the first is the studium, 'the order of liking, not of loving,'²²² to have an interest in something, an enthusiasm; the second element breaks or punctuates the studium; it 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.'²²³ Barthes appropriates the Latin word 'punctum' to refer to these little sensitive wounds or marks that speckle a particular photograph that seem to grab the attention of the viewer and emotionally resonate in some way. Barthes then applies this same approach to life writing: 'in the same way, I like certain biographical features which, in a writer's life, delight me as much as certain photographs; I have called these features "biographemes"; photography has the same relation to history that the Biographeme has to biography.'²²⁴

Using this approach, after already establishing a liking for Margaret's life story, finding enjoyment and interest in it, I then looked for those little wounds, those speckles, the instances that jumped out at me, grabbed and pierced – biographemes – from the numerous

²¹⁹Polkey, *Women's Lives Into Print*, xiii-xiv.

²²⁰Liz Stanley as cited in Polkey, ed. *Women's Lives Into Print: The Theory Practice and Writing of Feminist Autobiography* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press LTD, 1999) xiii.

²²¹Lesley Forest and Judy Giles, 'Feminist Ethics and Issues in the Production and Use of Life History Research' in Polkey, ed. *Women's Lives Into Print: The Theory Practice and Writing of Feminist Autobiography* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press LTD, 1999) 49.

²²²Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1982) 27.

²²³Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

²²⁴Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 30.

people, places and experiences recounted. Considering the Personal Narratives Group's emphasis on the importance of illuminating the course of a life over time, I also made sure to select some events, experiences and memories from differing periods of Margaret's life from early childhood through to the end of her account, which I added to my original list to form a chronological life summary of sorts, listed below:

- Her mother's botched abortion attempt
- Her description of her bronchial father
- Her German school teacher
- A visit to her gay uncle
- Her friendship with her fifty-year old piano teacher
- Her string of boyfriends and an instance of rape
- Meeting her first husband
- Her political awakening
- An account of adultery
- Moving back in with her mother

Then, taking on board Atkinson's insistence that the form, shape and style of the life story should reflect that which was most comfortable for the original story-teller, I thought about how best to 're-tell' through re-writing Margaret's tale. I noticed that while her entry is undoubtedly an autobiography, it was rather more complex than that, as it was not really about Margaret, or at least, not directly – it was dominated by other people. The reader can learn a lot about her and the main events and experiences of her life from reading the manuscript, but what is most interesting is that Margaret spends most of her time providing the reader with short biographies of family members, friends, and acquaintances over the years, more in the style of a relational autobiography with the writer fulfilling the role of 'family archivist.'²²⁵ We learn about Margaret through what she tells us about her interactions with the people in her life. Each time-period or section of her autobiography can be identified by the person she spends the most time talking about, or the person who holds the most influence over her at that time. I decided, therefore, that it would be most revealing to write each section of Margaret's story from the point of view of the person who dominates each part of her narrative. Close family and a particularly cruel teacher dominate her childhood, a string of boyfriends her teens, politically-minded men her adult years, with an unlikely

²²⁵ Anne Ruggemeier, "The Autobiographer as Family Archivist: Relational Autobiographies and the Many Modes of Writing a Life," in *Amsterdam International Electronic Journal For Cultural Narratology*, No 6, Autumn 2010/Autumn 2011, accessed 23 June 2014 (http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/a11_anne_ruggemeier.htm)

friendship with a much older woman in there, too. The manuscript begins and ends, however, with her mother.

I went through the same process with the other two archive manuscripts and my one telephone interview and two face-to-face interview transcripts, identifying biographemes, insuring I had included recollections of events and experiences across the life course, choosing the right form and tone that best represented the owner and teller of the original tales. Some of these choices were made for ethical reasons, as discussed above, and this can have implications for genre, which will be explored further on in section 4. Before beginning the actual rewriting of the instances selected, I searched for advice and information on biographical praxis, in terms of practical creative process. A book that proved particularly relevant was the previously mentioned *The Arvon Book of Life Writing: Writing Biography, Autobiography and Memoir* (2010) by Sally Cline and Carole Angier. I also found certain journal articles, essays, reflective accounts and case studies to be particularly useful, in which the practicalities of writing biography are discussed in detail, such as Rachel Morley's "Writing Intimate Lives: Mediations in Biographical Praxis" (2011) from *Literature Compass* and "Fighting Feeling: Re-thinking Biographical Praxis" in *Life Writing* (2012), as well as Ann Oakley's article "The Social Science of Biographical Life-writing: Some Methodological and Ethical Issues" (2010) in the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.

Morley begins by discussing the complexity of biographical praxis, echoing Liz and Jo Stanley's positions in regards to the significance of the relationship between biographer and subject:

Over the last few years I have sought to find a method, a form and a language that might allow me to bring to life the fullness of the research experience. For biography, I suggest, is not only the rendering of a life of one individual on the page, it is also about a relationship between two human-beings – the subject and the biographer. This relationship is made problematic, of course, by the necessary distances of time and space, and the complexity of intimacies that arise when one delves into the tender spaces of another life.²²⁶

Oakley agrees with Morley, stating that '[b]iographers, in particular, are agents who turn encyclopaedias of material into readable accounts, so their subjectivity must contribute to the product.'²²⁷ Oakley's view is also confirming the role of the biographer as sifters and organisers of vast amounts of material. The two main metaphors used to illustrate

²²⁶Rachel Morley, "Writing Intimate Lives: Mediations in Biographical Praxis" in *Literature Compass*, 8/12 (2011) 962.

²²⁷Ann Oakley, "The Social Science of Biographical Life Writing: Some Methodological and Ethical Issues" in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13:5 (2010) 426.

biographical writing are portrait painting and sculpting, as 'both are about creating vivid impressions; artefacts that can be recognised as likenesses, but which, more importantly, are experienced as transmitting the essence of a person.'²²⁸ This 'paring down' as Oakley calls it raises questions relating to bias in terms of how one makes particular selections from the available material, and what framework is chosen to do so and why. Different frameworks, used by different individuals, would understandably result in very different renderings of the same life – this is often the case with major celebrities, some of whom have multiple biographies written about them, each showing the subject in a different light. This should not be seen as a problem, but as confirmation that lives are complex and people are multi-faceted, and that through biographical writing we can attempt to render a life in order to illuminate it and find meaning.

A naïve view of biography is that it is easier than fiction because it comes with 'ready-made plots.'²²⁹ Delve a little into accounts of biographical praxis, however, and it instantly becomes clear that biography is as complex as Morley stated, because, as Oakley helpfully summarises, the biographer is explorer, inquirer, hypothesizer, compiler, researcher, selector and writer, as well as a 'guide, companion, interpreter, critic, propagandist and aggressive competitor (with the 'subject'). Above and beyond everything else, biographers are decision-makers whose decisions matter, because the act of interpretation, of judging and evaluating, is ever-present.'²³⁰

Cline and Angier in *The Arvon Book of Life Writing* discuss the history of biography, current trends and ethics and legality as well as covering considerations, issues and concerns that a writer needs to be aware of. They have collated practical advice from a range of writers, use examples of traditional and famous works as well as the more experimental, and draw upon their own experiences as award-winning writers of biography. They begin by articulating many of the main theoretical and practical challenges of Life Writing:

Is life writing art or craft, history or literature, objective or subjective? Can it ever be 'true', adequate to a lived life, even possible at all? Should life writers tell a story, or should they just tell facts? How much interpretation is allowable, how much speculation, how much fictionalisation? What are the ethical and legal problems of writing about real people – even sometimes members of one's own family? What are the problems of memory, of evidence, of myth-making? What is the role of the life writer?²³¹

²²⁸ Oakley, "Social Science of Life Writing," 426.

²²⁹ Oakley, "Social Science of Life Writing," 428.

²³⁰ Oakley, "Social Science of Life Writing," 428.

²³¹ Cline and Angier, *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle edition.

The liminal position occupied by life writing is made explicit here, as well as the need for a writer to find a balance between many of the either/or statements above: ‘we must find the rare, right balance between empathy and detachment, emotion and tranquillity; between imaginative recreation of what it was like to be *me* or *him* or *her*, and the distance to see them, or myself, in the round.’²³² There are the traditionalists who feel that a biography should consist only of hard facts, no reinventing, speculating or recreation allowed. Those at the other end of the spectrum ‘invent colourful scenes’²³³ such as Ackroyd’s conversations with Dickens in the eponymous biography, with those like Cline and Angier arguing for a half-way house between the two extremes as a useful starting point for would-be life writers. As Cline and Angier note, ‘things are changing [...] the boundaries between fact and fiction are being blurred. But there will always be limits, especially in biography. Respect will still be due to the living and the dead; and readers will still want to know what they are reading.’²³⁴ Many of these concerns will be discussed in detail further on, with the focus on truth (section 3.3) and problems concerning genre (section 4).

3.3 ‘Truth’ and other concerns

In *The Ethics of Life Writing*, a salient point made early on by Eakin is that biography is a “documentary genre” and that writers use it “to make imaginative interventions in order to fill gaps in documented events, and to create plausible inner lives for the protagonists in significant historical situations.’ These interventions are, he continues, ‘governed by the non-fiction novelist’s ultimate obligation to the truth.’²³⁵ This idea of imaginative interventions is picked up again later in the text by Nancy K Miller in her chapter “The Ethics of Betrayal.” Miller elaborates on her own enlightening transition from theorist to practitioner:

As a theorist of autobiography, I was always kind of a literalist. Naïve, even. I took the “autobiographical pact” seriously, to the letter. I believed that autobiographers could and should reach unequivocally for the verifiable truth that corresponds to the events they signed their names to; that strategies of fictionalisation were antithetical to autobiography. When I began my memoir, I still believed in telling a true story, but I also began to realise that there were [...] scenes that I could recreate through dialogues that were anything but verifiable. I could write down what I remembered; or I could craft a memoir. One *might* be the truth; the other, a good story.²³⁶

Using imagination may enable writers to fill in the gaps, illuminate a life and craft a good story, but this leads to issues regarding truth, veracity, reliability and authenticity. Miller’s

²³²Cline and Angier, *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle edition.

²³³Cline and Angier, *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle edition.

²³⁴Cline and Angier, *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle edition.

²³⁵Eakin, *The Ethics of Life Writing*, 2.

²³⁶Nancy K Miller, “The Ethics of Betrayal: Diary of a Memoirist” in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. Paul J Eakin (London: Cornell University Press, 2004) 149.

views altered drastically as she transitioned from theorist to practitioner, but in both the worlds of life writing theory and practice, the fact/fiction dichotomy is one that radically divides people, with many more falling somewhere between the two extremes. As Cline and Angier note in their section on truth and objectivity in *The Arvon Book of Life Writing*, some biographers are ‘not much concerned with what went on. They use dialogue like a play script.’²³⁷ Others take the view that Miller extolled initially – that life writing should contain only verifiable truth. If this were the case, biography would be reduced to nothing but information retrieval, a list of facts. Recently though, these extremes are breaking down and there is a noticeable blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction in contemporary life writing, but there will always be restrictions, especially in biography because ‘if [invention] is allowed at all, it must be made clear, and usually is [...] In the autobiographical genres the restriction is loose, because “how it seemed to me” is a more legitimate way to tell your own story than someone else’s.’²³⁸ Despite this tighter restriction, new forms of biographical writing are manifesting, and ‘the search for truth has been widened to include a search for the imaginative truth of a life.’²³⁹ A useful metaphor that has been used to explain this combination of fact and imaginative intervention is to see the facts as the foundation from which we can build up a picture of how each person became who he or she did.²⁴⁰ In my project, the opening of each ‘story’ contains a quotation from the original archive manuscript or interview transcript – these first-person snippets serve to reveal the recollection that inspired the following biographical narrative, but the pieces also weave in other ‘true’ details picked up from the full manuscripts or transcripts. The first-person quotation represents this foundation, as do other details contained throughout that were taken from the original first person accounts. The rest is the illuminating and gap-filling.

Margaretta Jolly, in an article entitled “Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice,” discusses the schism between life writing critics and life writers, a result of the separate development of life writing scholarship from practice, historically. Like Miller, Jolly notes the disagreements that can arise between theory and practice as well as the different emphases, approaches and concerns the two camps take:

It is generalised debates about “truth versus fiction” and the psychology of writing from life that dominate the terms of analysis for the practitioner, while for critics, everything on these subjects had already been said by the 1980s. This is doubtless because writers have to face the problem of “designing truth” as a fresh technical and emotional challenge each time they write. Equally, the ethical conundrum of how to write a true story for a public audience without insulting friends and acquaintances

²³⁷Cline and Angier, “Truth and Objectivity,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

²³⁸Cline and Angier, “Art and Evidence,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

²³⁹Cline and Angier, “Art and Evidence,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

²⁴⁰Cline and Angier, “Art and Evidence,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

must be negotiated anew for each contract, however neatly it may have been resolved theoretically.²⁴¹

Jolly acknowledges that there is a recent overlap and blurring of the two, as ‘critics are increasingly experimenting with more personal forms of voice’ and ‘at the same time, life writers are stepping into the world of academic criticism...two sometimes hostile groups are therefore now at the same party.’²⁴² She argues that this overlap is reinvigorating the genre, leading to ‘new and interesting dialogues in which creative and critical skills are exchanged.’²⁴³ Life writing is now ‘a field that is theory, practice and a hybrid of the two.’²⁴⁴ I would like to think that my project is one of these hybrids. Cline and Angier outline what they see as the theoretical problem of truth in relation to life writing practice: ‘accounts of life writers – and historians – aren’t simple statements of fact. They are visions and views; they include the giving of meaning.’²⁴⁵ It becomes apparent that non-fiction does not equal fact or truth, so perhaps instead of asking whether or not something is true, the correct questions to ask would be ‘is it convincing? Is it illuminating?’²⁴⁶ As I noted regarding my negotiations with Anna, fiction can be used as a tool that can enable the sharing of a life story. Claudia Mills describes this particular use of fiction in life writing in her article on friendship, fiction and memoir, believing that ‘fiction is a choice for story sharing that provides more protection for those whose stories are told.’²⁴⁷ These stories still contain truth of a sort, and indeed serve to illuminate a life, although that truth may not be literal. For Mills, being a writer involves a commitment to telling the truth, often literal but sometimes a deeper truth which is ‘more than factual accuracy but a kind of fidelity to what is.’²⁴⁸

Eakin accurately summarises the problem of truth when he notes that not only are life writers criticised for not telling the personal and historical truth, they are criticised for telling ‘too much truth.’²⁴⁹ How does a life writing practitioner attempt, then, to strike the right balance? Striving for authenticity, being governed by Eakin’s ‘obligation to the truth,’ and taking Mills’ advice to aspire for a deeper truth in which you remain faithful to your subject, their life and times seems like the best option, and was the approach I took for my project. As previously mentioned, I initially thought I would be writing what was predominantly fiction *based on* the life stories of real women. As I began working, however, I found myself resisting outright

²⁴¹Margaretta Jolly, “Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice,” in *Literature Compass*, 8/12 (2011) 878.

²⁴²Jolly, “Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice,” 881.

²⁴³Jolly, “Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice,” 884.

²⁴⁴Jolly, “Life Writing as Critical Creative Practice,” 887.

²⁴⁵Cline and Angier, “Truth and Objectivity,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

²⁴⁶Cline and Angier, “Truth and Objectivity,” *Arvon Book of Life Writing*, Kindle Edition.

²⁴⁷Mills, “Friendship, Fiction and Memoir,” 116.

²⁴⁸Mills, “Friendship, Fiction and Memoir,” 104.

²⁴⁹Eakin, *Ethics of Life Writing*, 3.

fabrication, even if it could mean a “better” story – to do so felt almost as if I would be betraying my subjects. Working with only the “facts” was restricting for a writer such as myself who was used to the freedoms offered by fiction, but taking the advice of Eakin and Mills helped me to negotiate and develop an effective compromise that worked for each of my subjects. I was happy to embellish insofar as this would allow me to fill in the gaps and animate inner lives, but the extent to which I employed fictionalisation varied depending on the needs of the subject, as previously mentioned. For Anna, fictionalisation gave her the protection and distance necessary to enable her to share her story. Emmeline, on the other hand, told me to embellish, elaborate, make things up, have some fun – she encouraged fictionalisation, favoured sensationalising her story, which seemed to fit with her merry, exuberant character. I felt that, therefore, even a more heavily fictionalised or embellished tale would still serve, in this instance, to accurately reflect the subject. All instances in her stories may not be true in terms of verifiable fact, but do represent what Cline and Angier called the imaginative truth of a life, or Mill’s deeper truth, and all are grounded in events and instances relayed to me by Emmeline. With my other subjects, elements of verisimilitude and techniques of fictionalisation were also used to varying degrees in careful yet flexible ways, allowing me to maintain my obligation to “the truth” and remain faithful to the subjects yet also tell a good story and illuminate lives. Working with six different life stories allowed me the opportunities to test, push and possibly even cross, at times, the boundaries between fact and fiction in an exploration of the relationship between fact and fiction in biographical life writing to various extents.

Introducing techniques of fictionalisation, however justifiable, into life writing does have serious implications in terms of genre. If a text contains sections that have been imaginatively reinvented, gaps that have been filled in, names and places that have been altered, can the work still be considered as a work of non-fiction? Why does this matter? These implications will be discussed in detail below.

4 Genre: biographical fiction?

As Catherine N Parke emphasised in *Biography: Writing Lives*, part of Routledge’s ‘Genres in Context’ series, ‘the relation between art and fact, imagination and truth, fiction and non-fiction became the preoccupying issues of the twentieth century’s ways of thinking about biography.’²⁵⁰ Parke’s views echo that of Cline and Angier above when she says that ‘while the origins of biography and the novel are substantially allied, the use of fictional techniques and the possibility of soundly interweaving the two forms have been points of chronic

²⁵⁰Catherine N Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (London: Routledge, 2002) 19.

dispute.²⁵¹ What follows is a discussion of issues relating to genre categorisation when techniques of fictionalisation are used within biographical praxis to varying degrees. A discussion of disclaimers and hooks often used in books and film to make the audience aware that the text is, or is not, based on a true story will be accompanied by a closer look at Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde: A Novel*. An examination of theory and practice pertaining to the blurring of genre boundaries in life writing will occur with reference to Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir's *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (2003). Interviews with, and insights offered by, writers of texts that blur or cross genre boundaries will be drawn upon as a method for understanding genre considerations and negotiations in practice including Margaret Atwood and Tracy Chevalier, whose striking and considered portrayals of historical figures and events within the novel form arguably offer a more useful model for the successful weaving of fact and fiction in order to effectively illuminate a life.

4.1 The legalities

Many novels and films declare on covers, posters and opening credits that they are “based on a true story.” In these instances this information is meant to help sell the book or film, provide it with weight, entice an audience. A recent popular example is the film *127 Hours* (2010), whose posters advertising the film declared was a ‘triumphant true story,’ based on an incident in the life of Aaron Rahlston who fell in a canyon, got his arm stuck and amputated it himself with a tiny knife in order to survive. At other times, the opposite occurs. We are told that people and events depicted in a film or a book are *not* based on real people and events, but are made up. This does nothing but raise suspicions. If a film doesn't say either way, I assume it is fiction. If it tells me it is based on a true story, I believe that it probably is, however loosely. If I see something telling me that events in this movie are fictitious, and that any likeness to any person living or dead is coincidental, it is a cue for me to start working out which real life person is being represented in the film, as I think there must be a reason they had to add that disclaimer. A great parody of this is used in the opening credits of the controversial and infamous animated television show *South Park*, which declares ‘all characters and events in this show – even those based on real people – are entirely fictional. All celebrity voices are impersonated...poorly. The following program contains course language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone.’²⁵² On a more serious note, biographies often feature disclaimers that alert the audience to the fact that certain names and other identifying marks have been altered in order to protect people's

²⁵¹Parke, *Biography*, 28.

²⁵²*South Park*. Created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. 1991. New York: Comedy Central, 2011. DVD.

identities. The following disclaimer is an interesting example from *Blonde: A Novel* by acclaimed American writer Joyce Carol Oates:

Blonde is a work of fiction. While many of the characters portrayed here have some counterparts in the life and time of Marilyn Monroe, the characterizations and incidents presented are totally the products of the author's imagination. Accordingly, *Blonde* should be read solely as a work of fiction, not as a biography of Marilyn Monroe.²⁵³

The disclaimer goes beyond the usual “based on a true story” that we are all familiar with in many books and films from mainstream media. The inclusion of the words “a novel” after the title, along with the specificity of the disclaimer makes doubly sure the reader is aware that this is fiction, not biography. The disclaimer smacks of legalese designed to protect the author and/or publisher from defamation claims and ensuing lawsuits. This disclaimer is particularly interesting in that it acknowledges that many of the characters and events *do* have real life counterparts, but emphasises that it should be read “totally” and “solely” as fiction. This ensures that the book will be placed in the fiction sections of libraries and bookshops, and seems to undermine the wealth of research into the life and time of Marilyn that Oates obviously undertook. The book contains many instances that actually occurred and are verifiable, but it also contains many others that are approximations, speculations or even outright fabrications. Oates fills in the gaps and creates plausible inner lives for Marilyn, often changing point of view, interweaving poetry, script and other forms. It seems clear that while Oates was not writing a traditional biography as not all instances are verifiable, she was writing a text that captures the *imaginative truth of a life*, which, according to Cline and Angier, is what many contemporary biographies are now seeking to do. It is clear, then, that while the text could still be considered a biography of sorts, it has been labelled as a novel, as fiction and imagination, for other reasons, including legal. Many of the individuals mentioned or implied in the book, given the nature of Marilyn's status and career, are rich, powerful and well-connected. Some of these “characters” are not presented in a positive light, are revealed to be involved in activities that could damage the image they have cultivated for themselves in the media. Many are dead, but will have descendants who could still pose a threat and decide to sue an author for damaging their reputation – defamation. As well as using the disclaimer, Oates also resorts to using first names, pseudonyms, roles and initials when referring to certain characters in the novel, even though it is often easy enough to work out who the real life counterpart is. This obviously thin veiling of characters seems intentional, revealing a playfulness which captures the approach Oates takes more widely to genre in her work – she is constantly breaking rules, changing form and style and tone, switching between genres and blurring boundaries. In an interview with Greg Johnson,

²⁵³Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde: A Novel* (London: Quality Paperbacks Direct, 2000).

originally published in Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 2000, Oates explains that 'Norma Jeane marries mythic individuals, not "historic" figures. Her husbands include the Ex-Athlete and the Playwright. (If I wanted to write about Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller, I would need to write about these complex men in a different mode).'²⁵⁴

As well as the disclaimer, the book also contains an author's note that seems to provide a much more accurate overview of the work in question than the disclaimer at the front, while also allowing insight into Oates' creative process:

Blonde is a radically distilled 'life' in the form of fiction, and, for all its length, synecdoche is the principle of appropriation. In place of numerous foster homes in which the child Norma Jean lived, for instance, *Blonde* explores only one, and that fictitious; in place of numerous lovers, medical crises, abortions and suicide attempts and screen performances, *Blonde* explores only a selected, symbolic few.²⁵⁵

This note makes it clear that while "fiction" may be the form the story takes, *Blonde* still represents a life, albeit imaginatively. As for the distilling, this is not a result of fictionalisation, but something that can be found even in the most traditional, factually verifiable biography – when we tell stories, even ones that are true, we summarise, condense, omit the boring or repetitive bits (or at least we do if we want to tell a good, engaging story and not bore our audience). We skip the years where nothing interesting happened and gloss over certain events to shape our narrative. As Parke confirms, 'the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life.'²⁵⁶

Oates also discusses her aims and ambitions when writing *Blonde* with Johnson:

I happened to see a photograph of the 17-year-old Norma Jeane Baker [...] she looked nothing like the iconic "Marilyn Monroe." [...] For days I felt an almost rapturous sense of excitement, that I might give life to this lost, lone girl, whom the iconic consumer-product "Marilyn Monroe" would soon overwhelm and obliterate.²⁵⁷

Here Oates states that she wanted to 'give life' to Norma Jean, a young woman whose own story has been eclipsed or buried by Marilyn's. After realising the life she was trying to represent was too big for the novella she had planned, she instead 'created an "epic" form to accommodate the complexities of the life.'²⁵⁸ This fits with what Atkinson advises in terms of the form, shape and style of the narrative needing to fit comfortably with the owner of the tale. Oates seems quite clear on what the novel is and is not, stating that 'so much of *Blonde*

²⁵⁴Greg Johnson, "Interview" on *Celestial Timepiece – The Joyce Carol Oates Homepage*, accessed 29 August 2014. <http://www.usfca.edu/jco/blonde/>

²⁵⁵Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde: A Novel* (London: Quality Paperbacks Direct, 2000).

²⁵⁶Parke, *Biography*, 28.

²⁵⁷Greg Johnson, "Interview."

²⁵⁸Greg Johnson, "Interview."

is obviously fiction, to call it "nonfiction" would be misleading [...] If you want historical veracity, you must go to the biographies. Even while perhaps not one hundred percent accurate, they are at least predicated upon literal truth, while the novel aspires to a spiritual/poetic truth.' Elaborating on this, she states 'I'd hoped to evoke a poetic, spiritual, "inner" truth by selecting incidents, images, representative figures from the life, and had absolutely no interest in a purely biographical or historic book.' For Oates, it seems, fiction offered her the opportunity to bring her subject to life in a way that would not have been possible with traditional biography. Here, fiction allows for a further opening up of a life, and serves to protect the author and publishers, enabling the telling of this particular version of Norma Jeane's life.

Whether novel or biography, it quickly becomes clear that these categories are not discreet and that there is inevitable overlap and blurring of boundaries to varying degrees – *Blonde* is merely one text of many that seems to simultaneously sit partly with biography and partly with fiction, yet comfortably belong to neither. Texts that work at the intersection of fiction and lived experience are often pushed one way or the other for various agendas. Recent blurring of boundaries in life writing will be discussed in more detail below.

4.2 Crossing boundaries

Oakley defines the enterprise of biography as inhabiting a 'liminal world at the intersection of fact and fiction, (social) science and art, objective narrative and personal life story.'²⁵⁹ It has been made apparent that more and more writers are choosing to work specifically at these intersections with differing results in terms of genre categorisation, some belonging, still, to the categories of biography and life writing (however controversial), others either pushed or choosing to place their work as novels, works of fiction. It seems that this recent surge in texts that inhabit this liminal space mean that a place needs to be carved specifically for texts that sit between traditionally-conceived genre categories. In *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (2003), Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir locates and examines the borders between autobiography and fiction. The relationship between autobiography and fiction in autobiographical works is explored, but this text does not attempt to extract the autobiographical from fiction.²⁶⁰ While the focus is on autobiography, biography does get mentioned often and many of the concerns explored are applicable to life writing more generally.

²⁵⁹Oakley, "Social Science of Life Writing," 425.

²⁶⁰Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (New York: Rodopi, 2003) 3.

The author argues that the traditional “fact or fiction” debate in life writing is too simple, that instead we should be looking at *how* a text navigates such borders according to the following, less simplistic, definition in which ‘the word “fictional” is used [...] to designate conventions and practices associated with creative writing – such as structure, poetics or literary descriptions of people and places, ordering of events to create certain effects – rather than simply things that are “made-up”.’²⁶¹ The author further widens the definition of fiction by noting that life writers ‘attempt to retrieve a sense of the past, and the method they choose for that retrieval can involve a degree of fictionality.’²⁶² Here the author is linking fiction with memory, as memories can be remembered, misremembered, embellished or forgotten, with certain memories chosen to be featured, others discarded. With the process of remembering comes ‘stumbles, hesitations, doubt, where it seems the forgotten has become visible.’²⁶³ The author points out that the areas of forgetting in particular ‘point to the fictional process at work’²⁶⁴ in autobiography. The fragmentary nature of my project reflects these areas of forgetting and omission. Other gaps exist in biography that seem to encourage or even require filling in with fiction. As Gudmundsdottir explains, ‘when writing another’s life [...] the writers inevitably have to deal with the borderline between biographical writing and fiction, as they face the difficulty of the ultimate “unknowability” of others.’²⁶⁵ It seems that in auto/biography, some level of fictionalisation is inevitable and perhaps even intrinsic. Gudmundsdottir suggests that ‘texts that leave the struggle for objectivity behind, or show an awareness of the problematics of such objectivity, can move auto/biography to a different level, and create a fertile fusion of two modes of writing based on both memory and history.’²⁶⁶ This “fertile fusion”, then, is key, and is one theorist’s view of the future of life writing. The author is also keen to state the belief that fiction should not be considered as a negative term in auto/biography as ‘it does not diminish autobiography’s truth-value, or the referential aspect of autobiography. Rather, fiction is used [...] as a vehicle for the telling of a life, as a tool for making memories come alive.’²⁶⁷ Once again we have returned to the idea that fiction is a useful tool for life writers, it is an enabler that, ‘when used effectively, successful negotiation between the auto/biographical and fictional strands of life-writing can open up the past by acknowledging the impossibility of giving a definite version of a life.’²⁶⁸

²⁶¹Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 5.

²⁶²Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 6.

²⁶³Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 32.

²⁶⁴Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 54.

²⁶⁵Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 184.

²⁶⁶Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 219.

²⁶⁷Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 273.

²⁶⁸Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 273.

Gudmundsdottir, speaking directly of biography, notes that ‘for some time now autobiography has been a space for experimentation and new voices, whereas biography has largely remained outside that field of experimentation.’²⁶⁹ There are some interesting examples of a more experimental approach to biography, such as the previously mentioned *Blonde*, but many of these, due to their experimental nature, tend to be placed, like *Blonde*, as fiction. A lot of experimental biographical texts, or those perhaps best described as biographical fiction (which is where I would locate my own work if made to choose only one catch-all category for my project) tend to fall more specifically into the category of historical fiction or the historical novel, a genre very familiar with that “fertile blend” of fact, history and fiction recommended by Gudmundsdottir. As Gudmundsdottir notes in *Borderlines*, ‘biography is a branch of history and hence it often involves a fair amount of research,’²⁷⁰ revealing that biography, and especially biographical fiction, actually has quite a lot in common with historical fiction in terms of praxis. In the following sections I will explore what writers of what could be considered as both historical fiction and biographical fiction have to say about their creative processes and genre in relation to selected works. I will then explore what use historical fiction can be, with regards to its praxis, to a burgeoning life writer, in terms of advice offered regarding achievement of the “fertile blend.”

4.3 Case study: Tracy Chevalier’s *Remarkable Creatures*

As revealed in her interview with Greg Johnson, Oates was clear about what she wanted to achieve – the imaginative truth of Norma Jeane’s life – and why she needed to weave fact and fiction to meet her goals – because biography alone was not enough to capture the complexities of the life, a notion supported by Marcus in *Auto/biographical Discourses* who argues that ‘very few critics would demand that auto/biographical truth should be literally verifiable – this would, after all, undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than fact.’²⁷¹ It seemed wise to turn to other established authors of texts featuring ‘real’ subjects that are considered to be fiction to see what insights they were able to provide into the creative processes used to successfully work at this intersection. The following text and author was chosen, along with Oates, as an exemplar of this: *Remarkable Creatures* by Tracy Chevalier.

Remarkable Creatures is a work of historical fiction focusing on the life of Mary Anning and Elizabeth Phillpots in Lyme Regis. In the novel’s postscript, Chevalier discusses the “real”

²⁶⁹Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 185.

²⁷⁰Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines*, 200.

²⁷¹Marcus, *Autobiographical Discourses*, 3.

Mary Anning, the “real” Elizabeth Philpotts, and a little about other characters in the novel that are based on real people. She includes a brief biographical overview of Mary, including where she lived and when, and how and when she died, along with scientific papers that mention her by name, and other information such as that she never married. The postscript also contains a disclaimer of sorts:

Remarkable Creatures is a work of fiction, but many of the people existed, and events such as Colonel Birch’s auction and the Geological Society meeting where Conybeare talked about the plesiosaur did take place. And Mary did indeed write at the bottom on a scientific paper she had copied out: “When I write a paper there shall not be but one preface.” Sadly she never did write her own scientific paper.²⁷²

Like Oates, Chevalier makes a point of mentioning examples of the facts that underpin the text. In the postscript, Chevalier comments upon the writing process in terms of weaving history, biography and fiction in order to produce the work:

Twenty-first-century attitudes towards time and our expectations of story are very different from the shape of Mary Anning’s life. She spent day after day, year after year, doing the same thing on the beach. I have taken the events of her life and condensed them to fit into a narrative that is not stretched beyond the reader’s patience. Hence events, while in order, do not always coincide exactly with actual dates and time spans. Plus, of course, I made up plenty. For instance, while there was gossip about Mary and Buckland and Mary and Birch, there was no proof. This is where only a novelist can step in.²⁷³

Chevalier acknowledges the narrative shaping that is necessary to create a good story, one that will be interesting and engaging to read, as well as the gaps that provide perfect opportunities for an author to step in with imaginative intervention. Chevalier’s approach fits nicely with the idea championed by Lynch that innovation and creativity can expand the potential of documents of life. Chevalier provides a list of resources including books, scientific papers, museums, experts, sources both primary and secondary and thanks those who contributed their knowledge on Anning, “monster hunting” and the region, showing the wealth of research conducted and source materials drawn upon in order to bring Anning to life. Where the documents failed or faltered, providing information but not verifiable fact, such as the rumours about Anning’s relationships with Buckland and Birch, Chevalier the researcher and biographer left off and Chevalier the creative writer and historical novelist took over.

Chevalier has featured real people in her historical fiction before, such as Johannes Vermeer and William Blake, but *Remarkable Creatures* was the first of her works in which real people took centre stage. When asked in an interview with Felicity Librie for the *Fiction Writers Review* if writing about a real person was a constraint, Chevalier replied that ‘the advantage

²⁷²Tracy Chevalier, *Remarkable Creatures* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009) 351.

²⁷³Chevalier, *Remarkable Creatures*, 352.

is that you don't have to make it up [...] I had the skeleton structure of her life, where she was at more or less any given period; she didn't move around much, and lived in Lyme Regis all her life. There were highlights of her life, so the peaks of the story are built in, and that's great.²⁷⁴ Of the disadvantages, she stated that 'those peaks don't always happen the way we as readers would like them to. I had to fudge the chronology a little bit, more in this book than in other books.'²⁷⁵ This matches the approach recommended by Cline and Angier in the *Arvon Book of Life Writing* aimed at offering advice to burgeoning life writing practitioners, that the verifiable facts of the life provide the foundation for a biography or biographical fiction. Chevalier also noted the liberation she felt once she dispensed with dates after the realisation that they were not essential and made the narrative drag.²⁷⁶ She retained chronology, but skipped periods of time in which not much happened in order to maintain pace. Whether biographer or novelist, a life needs to be packaged into an accessible, engaging form, therefore selection and omission are essential, much like the sorting and sifting process explained by Duffin in "Turning Talking into Writing" regarding the capturing of the life story.

The above has served to illustrate the often shared processes and practices of life story researchers, biographers and fiction writers, especially historical fiction writers who are well versed in the rigours of research as well as achieving the fertile blend necessary for the successful rendering of a life. The final genre categorisation of the texts may differ, but all combine fact with techniques of fictionalisation to varying degrees to achieve the desired effect – to illuminate a life.

4.4 A useful model: historical fiction

In *Biography: Writing Lives* Parke describes biography as being in the middle of a tug-of-war between history and fiction.²⁷⁷ With this in mind, along with what was shown above – that historical fiction and biography have much in common in terms of praxis and aims – it seems that historical fiction could indeed provide a useful model for the biographer who plans to fill in the gaps or create a plausible inner life for their featured individuals, or writer producing biographical fiction.

²⁷⁴Felicity Librie, "Many Voices: An Interview with Tracy Chevalier," in *Fiction Writers Review*, accessed 6 January, 2011. <http://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/many-voices-an-interview-with-tracy-chevalier/>

²⁷⁵Librie, "Many Voices."

²⁷⁶Librie, "Many Voices."

²⁷⁷Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives*, xvi.

John F Keener in *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel* (2001) argues for ‘a continuum rather than a dichotomy’²⁷⁸ of biographical narratives from factual to fictional, a much more accurate and less reductive view than the traditional binary of fact or fiction. Recent years have produced a ‘great deal of contentious discussion about “real” versus “fictive” historical subjects,’²⁷⁹ and Keener argues that this is because critics do not know how to assess work that blurs boundaries. ‘The interplay between biographical history and biographical fiction is intensifying,’²⁸⁰ states Keener, and this has implications for our sense of history: ‘with fictions looking so often like histories and histories looking so often like fictions, there is usually equal evidence to condemn and censure the same text, depending on one’s perspective.’²⁸¹ The result of this is that the distinction between true and false regarding both historical events and biographical figures becomes situational, as rather than vanishing, the borderline between fact and fiction ‘is being crossed at so many new locations, in so many new ways, and with such covert dexterity.’²⁸² Keener proposes that instead of seeing history and biography as separate genres from fiction, it is best to view the border between them in terms of ‘biographical histories and fictions that share an impulse to reveal an historically situated self.’²⁸³ Keener argues instead for the term ‘biographical narrative’ which encompasses the continuum model that he recommends, including any narrative in any discipline or genre ‘whose subject is the life of an historical (or “real”) individual.’²⁸⁴ Here, Keener is accounting for any representation of real people in narrative form, aligning the aims of historical fiction and biography – the shared impulse – to reveal a situated self.

In *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (1997), Frederick M Holmes discusses the value that fiction can add to history in traditional historical fiction, where ‘the pretence of supplying direct access to the past in all of its fullness and particularity’²⁸⁵ is sustained throughout, much in the same way applying fiction to biography can serve to illuminate and open up a life. He compares traditional historical fiction with postmodern historical novels that ‘create a vivid illusion of the unfolding of historical events, involving people who actually existed, only to dispel the illusion

²⁷⁸John F Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel* (New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001) 1.

²⁷⁹Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, iii.

²⁸⁰Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, v.

²⁸¹Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, v.

²⁸²Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, v-vi.

²⁸³Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, 1.

²⁸⁴Keener, *Biography and the Postmodern Historical Novel*, 1-2.

²⁸⁵Frederick M Holmes, *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (Canada: The University of Victoria, 1997) 11.

by laying bare the artifices that give rise to it.²⁸⁶ Such novels aim to stimulate an interest in the methods by which we know the past, and do so by demonstrating a self-awareness and reflexivity, much like Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* and how it draws attention to the nature of autobiography and the impact of motive and memory on truth and reliability. I intended for my project to do both of these: to supply direct access to the past through techniques of fictionalisation as well as drawing attention to the "real" aspects of the story, the source material on which my narratives are based. This was done through the placement of a sentence or two taken verbatim from my interview transcripts and selected archive manuscripts in which the subject, in their own words, discusses the moment, life event or memory depicted by me below, the initial punctum or biographeme, to return to Barthes, that inspired me during the sifting and arranging phase of the creative process.

In relation to the ethical implications of fictionalising history, Holmes states that 'while it might be consoling in some situations to pretend that we can fabricate the past in any way that we like, abandoning the quest for historical truths – however multiple and provisional – can have implications that are morally disturbing.'²⁸⁷ This view echoes that of Cline, Angier, Eakin and others discussed previously that, while it is often acceptable or even necessary to fictionalise, one must be guided by a moral obligation to a higher truth. Once again it is possible to note multiple parallels between biographical and historical fiction in terms of ethics and praxis.

Jerome de Groot in *The Historical Novel* (2010) comments on why readers of historical fiction are more forgiving than readers of, for instance, biography, noting that 'an historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work that strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past.'²⁸⁸ Readers of this genre expect artifice and suspend disbelief, whereas with biography, the enforced either/or genre categories influence, in this case negatively, readers' expectations. Genre categories enforced by publishers, bookshops and libraries need to be updated to accommodate texts that cross borderlines and blur boundaries, but perhaps readers also need to be more flexible and forgiving of texts that fall between traditional genre divides.

²⁸⁶Holmes, *The Historical Imagination*, 11.

²⁸⁷Holmes, *The Historical Imagination*, 11.

²⁸⁸Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010) 4.

Susan Vreeland, an American historical fiction author, describes what she sees as the main differences between biography and the historical novel as follows:

Historical fiction shows rather than reports. It gives us the voice and attitudes of the characters, not the academic voice of a narrator. It invites us into the privacies of a person's soul. Its value lies in its revelation of what it felt like to be a particular person at a particular place and time. Conversely, biographers are rarely able to say what their subjects felt about what happened, even though what we feel about what happens is often the most important thing about it.²⁸⁹

While this is a fairly simplistic and traditional binary view of biography and the biographer, it does serve to highlight the role of fiction and techniques of fictionalisation in biographical writing. In the article Vreeland sets out four steps for writing historical fiction. These steps correspond quite closely with my own creative process for this project. Step one is described as discovery, 'finding the story one wishes to tell buried in known history' and asking yourself questions such as 'is it my story to tell? [...] Is it played against a huge historical event or is it more private, domestic?'²⁹⁰ This leads to step two, finding a focus – identifying conflict and main themes and deciding upon an entry point. Step three is selection and elimination, because 'narrative sprawl can be avoided by selecting only those people, events and aspects of a figure's life that contribute to the themes and focus.'²⁹¹ The final step is that of invention, arguably the step that can potentially draw the text further from the traditional biography category and further towards that of fiction, though as has been demonstrated, many texts, whether labelled as fiction or non-fiction, more accurately inhabit the borderlines. As Vreeland states, invention is the 'important aspect that distinguishes historical fiction from biography'²⁹² with the creation of characters, scenes and dialogue. Vreeland feels that using fiction to aid biographical and historical representation 'presents to us a truth more human.'²⁹³

Sally O'Reilly offered ten top tips for writing historical fiction on her blog following the launch of her novel *Dark Aemilia* (2014) based on the life of poet Aemilia Lanyer and her possible relationship with Shakespeare. Tip number two is of particular relevance here, as O'Reilly advises the writer to 'be bold. Don't be intimidated by the facts, or the personalities that you discover. The facts are a starting point, not a straitjacket. Remember that even biography is an inexact science.'²⁹⁴ Once again we return to similar themes – the facts are the foundation on which the story is based, even in biography. I found myself becoming increasingly

²⁸⁹Susan Vreeland, "Dip into the Riches of Historical Fiction" in *Writer*, Dec 2011, Vol. 124, Issue 12, 1.

²⁹⁰Vreeland, "Riches of Historical Fiction," 1.

²⁹¹Vreeland, "Riches of Historical Fiction," 2.

²⁹²Vreeland, "Riches of Historical Fiction," 2.

²⁹³Vreeland, "Riches of Historical Fiction," 2.

²⁹⁴Sally O'Reilly, "Top Ten Tips for Historical Fiction," *How To Be A Writer*, 3 February 2014, <http://how2beawriter.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/top-10-tips-for-historical-fiction.html>

comfortable with filling in gaps and illuminating, while still being governed by those underlying kernels of truth that effectively ground and shape the story, maintaining an authenticity and deeper truth if not an exact, verifiable truth. In the words of Rhona Martin in *Writing Historical Fiction* (1998), and equally applicable to biography, “extrapolate [...] if you can, stretch if you must, but don’t distort it and never resort to lies.”²⁹⁵

5 Conclusion: implications for practice

Historical fiction is a genre that specialises in combining fact and fiction, the real with the imaginary. Its reasons for doing so are very similar to the justifications given by those biographers who have used techniques of fictionalisation in their work, yet unlike biography, this is rarely met with contention as it is anticipated by the reader. The aspect of historical fiction that has met most often with outrage is, unsurprisingly, the subgenre historical biography, notably texts such as Oates’ *Blonde* as discussed above and Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) about Lee Harvey Oswald and the John F Kennedy assassination. Criticisms levelled at these texts are much the same as those aimed at various works of biographical fiction. Historical fiction can, however, potentially offer a helpful model for a life writing practitioner aiming to negotiate the boundaries between auto/biography and fiction for various ends. By taking advice from critics and theorists of historical fiction, it is possible to find models, such as the biographical narrative continuum proposed by Keener in section 4.4, that more accurately reflect and find room to situate postmodern and/or contemporary biographical narratives that cross generic borderlines. From historical fiction writers themselves it is possible to gain useful insight and advice on ethics and process, without getting bogged down by weighty, contradictory and often outdated absolutes that clog life writing theory and criticism but are of little use to the practitioner. The most incisive advice comes from Jolly, who believes that ethics and process, including decisions regarding levels of fictionalisation and the need for such – whether this be to offer protection to the story’s owner or to craft a more immersive narrative for the reader, to illuminate a life or to fill in history and memory’s gaps – need to be renegotiated for each new subject by the writer despite how neatly critics and theorists believe these concerns have been tidied away previously. This reaffirms the idea that, when it comes to representing real people in a narrative, one size does not fit all. While it would be easier to follow a strict, clear set of rules or guidelines or find consolation in the notion that you could just make it all up, to be able to effectively render a life on the page in narrative form, to capture and represent subjective experience and therefore avoid reducing a life to stereotype, to capture the complexities of a life and enable the beneficial

²⁹⁵Rhona Martin, *Writing Historical Fiction* (London: A&C Black, 1998) 49.

sharing of life stories, the writer must be flexible and adapt his or her toolkit, while keeping a steady moral compass and obligation to the truth, however one conceives of this (objective, literal and verifiable or subjective, imaginative and multiple). This is a daunting undertaking, and requires great skill in terms of achieving balance and control.

My creative project offers an exploration of the question of biographical truth, along with a testing of the boundary between fact and fiction. Throughout, fact, verisimilitude and fiction were used to varying degrees based on the requirements of the six individuals whose lives were being creatively reimagined and represented. Ethical concerns were negotiated and managed in a manner that examined both legal and moral implications. Structure, tone and style, and other narrative techniques were used to best reflect the uniqueness of the life being rendered. I hope to have enabled the telling of life stories by those who would not have thought to share them or who would not have been able to share them, and to have creatively reimagined existing narratives in order to open them up further, to illuminate the extraordinary life experiences of this group of seemingly ordinary lone older women.

I also hope this critical commentary can serve to aid other writers embarking on a project that involves the narrative rendering of a real life, particularly the life of an older female, especially those who are conscientious and looking for models of best practice but have been disappointed or confused by the wealth of contradictory assessments offered by traditional life writing theorists and by the disparity between theory and practice more generally. The recent increase in texts that blur boundaries and exhibit reflexivity, along with the fact that more critics are becoming practitioners and practitioners are becoming more critically informed, is encouraging, and is perhaps indicative of an emerging new territory for those writers working at the intersection of fiction and lived experience.

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Appendices

Appendix A: sample from The Burnett Archive Index

			elizabeth
Relph, Winifred	Through Rough Ways (c. 63,000 words)	2:657	b. Edenbridge (1912); Surrey; London; Edenbridge. Written in 2 parts: childhood years following death of father; life as domestic servant. Ends with enrollment at Hillcroft College for Women in 1940.
Rice, Stanley	The Memories of a Rolling Stone: Times and incidents remembered (c. 33,600 words)	2:661	b. London (1905); Worthing. Childhood dealing with poverty, includes memories of home life, General Strike, military service.
Rignall, Elizabeth	All So Long Ago (c. 60,000 words)	1:586	b. London (1894) Childhood in late Victorian and Edwardian London and in Haworth, incidents and people in later teaching career.
Robinson, Claude	J'Accuse (c. 27,000 words)	2:670	Sequel to earlier biography, not held by Brunel Library. Discusses author's long career in education.

Appendix B: sample extract from Vol. 1 No. 586 from The Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies

ALL SO LONG AGO.

by

ELIZABETH RIGNALL.

CHAPTER ONE.

Beginnings

It was a gracious house that London onw where I was born in 1894; a semi-basement with three floors above; and spacious high-ceilinged rooms which had seen more opulent tenants in the past.

At the time my parents could afford ~~only~~ the basement and the ~~fl~~ floor above, and this was a